When Rules Change (working title)
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Summary

Thor and Loki are sent to Earth to negotiate a peace treaty and alliance with humans. To princes amazement, earthlings seem to favor Loki over Thor for some reason...
“What is war good for if you can not assure peace that should follow?”

“But father, why do we have to negotiate with them?!”

Loki winced as the voices grew louder, echoing from the arched walls of the Throne room and aggravating his migraine.

It's been a good couple of hours since the All Father announced that Thor was going to Midgard as a head of a diplomatic mission to negotiate a treaty and form an alliance with humans.

Loki chuckled at “diplomatic” part.

He loved his brother dearly and knew that Thor possessed many commendable talents, but diplomacy wasn't one of them.

One wrong placed word by a dull-witted person and Thor would unleash his wrath on unsuspecting humans, weaving a tracery of death with his mighty hammer.

The negotiations would end before they had a chance to begin.

Then Odin said Loki was going with Thor since both crown princes should be well informed in terms of foreign politics and all pieces of mosaic came into place.

The order was clear, as was the part that had been left unsaid : Go with your brother and make sure he doesn't fail.

Of course.

As Odin's heavy palm came down on Thor's shoulder Loki's lips twitched at the memory.

It felt delightful to have that heavy weight resting on your arm as a rare sign of approval, to linger secretly into the touch before the father would notice and remove his hand, although it had been ...a while since Loki had experienced a pleasure of it.

The emerald green eyes followed the All Father as king of Asgard made his way out of the room.
A hug would be nice...or a pat on the shoulder. Or even a caress on the cheek even if Thor mocks him afterward...

He didn't even get a curt nod.

Loki let out a soft sigh and turned on his heels, mentally listing all the things he had to pack before the departure.

“Brother, wait!”

Loki stopped just in time to avoid colliding with Thor’s armored chest that was now blocking his passage.

“Weren't you going to say something?”

“Father was pretty clear on the matter.”

Thor's voice boomed through the space, revealing his barely contained displeasure.

“Why do we have to descend to negotiations with them? With humans! The race we've saved so many times! It is unspeakable- for us, the mighty warriors of Asgard, to ask for allegiance with them?”
- Loki had to duck once or twice to evade another broad gesture as Thor continued to throw his arms up in frustration.

“What is a purpose of this? They should welcome us as heroes and bow before us, not waste our time on meaningless talks!”

“Thor,”- Loki suppressed an urge to roll his eyes. “Just stop and think for a second. Asgard helped them on numerous occasions, indeed, but it was a long time ago.”

Thor's brows furrowed and he pursed his lips in frustration and Loki smiled to himself, watching, as his brother's brain slowly started to work.

“The time that passes does not diminish the value of our aid.”
“No, but it belittles the memory of it.”

“Are you saying that humans had simply forgotten of us? Then I shall refresh their memory!”

Loki pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose and massaged it a little bit, battling the dull throbbing pain.

“Should I remind you, my dear brother, that their live spans are nothing compared to ours? What is a day for you is a generation for them. They remembered us, of course, and praised and honored, and told their children of our glory, but as time passed by, the witnesses perished and the history became stories, and then turned into legends. And now...I bet that now we are nothing more than a fairy tale to them.”

The Thunderer growled and leaned into Loki's personal space, looking ready to kill.

“I am not a fairy.”

“You surely don't smell like one.”

Loki grinned at Thor's scandalized face and continued, “Do me a favor, my prince, take a bath before we leave to Midgard. I don't want to be the one to tell father that we ruined the negotiations because humans simply suffocated.”

Thor tried to keep his face straight but did not succeed, as his mouth split into a huge smirk.

“One more word, my dear sibling, and I will shave your head.”

Loki shrugged dismissively. “Then I'll just go to dwarfs and get a new hair, long and luscious, and make you choke with envy.”

“Oh, I tremble in dread and fear!” - Thor's body shook with laughter and Loki smiled, realizing, that his migraine was suddenly gone.
“What length would you prefer? Up to your shoulders? Or waist? You will surely make a fair maiden!”

“All the way to my heels.”

Thor's mouth formed “o” in mocking surprise.

“Be careful, Loki, I will not be burying you if you tangle in your locks, fall down and break your neck.”

“Oh, I wont, have no fear. I'll make you braid it.”

The brothers parted their ways and Loki stopped on the terrace to enjoy the warmth of the sun and a sound of Thor's laughter still reverberating from the hallway.

The question Thor asked still bugged Loki although with a slightly different meaning.

The negotiations themselves didn't bother the prince, but he mused on the purpose of Odin's decision to form an alliance with humans.

They were a faithful race, indeed, but a rather weak one.

They did not possess a physical strength even slightly compared to one of Asgardians, or Jotunns, or even elves. They weren't known for their talents in magic or craftsmanship.

Their only advantage was in their numbers, but it was not a suitable reason to seek their help on the battlefield should the time come- they would prove not much of a help, but only a burden to worry about.

But then again, it was the All Father's order an Loki was not in the place to question the king’s wisdom.

Humans had wandering minds and perhaps they've advanced far beyond everyone's expectations.

May be even learned how to forge the steel that doesn't break from contact with wood.

Loki chuckled and left for his quarters.
He didn't know that he and Thor were in for a big surprise.
Chapter 2

“Tell me again, agent Coulson, what am I doing here?”

Steve Rogers tore his gaze away from the night sky and glanced at a short sturdy man standing beside him.

Coulson flashed him a toothy smile.

“As I’ve said before, we are making contact with extraterrestrial life form and in case of unfavorable outcome we would like to have among us a man of your level of...expertise.”

“I see.” Rogers chuckled and turned back to cloudless blackness above him.

The desert was still and quiet, disturbed only by purr of agent's car.

“Looks like your aliens are getting late.”

Coulson checked his watch and fixed his tie, then reached for the comm link,

“All agents on stand by, any time now.”

All of a sudden a whirlwind of lightning slashed through the sky and hit the ground behind the dunes to the south of their present location.

Coulson barked a short “Move out” and dashed for his car, Steve hot on his heels, wondering silently how the superior alien life form that had traveled through space and stars could miss a simple ground target.

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“So much for the warm welcoming party,” Loki muttered quietly, frowning and swiping the dust off his cape as he looked around the vast midgardian plain. The place looked remote and desolated, no signs of human settlements in sight or any trace of people's presence whatsoever.

Thor growled in anger somewhere beside him, “How dare they mock the mighty Thor?! Those pitiful humans dare to provoke my wrath?”

“Thor...”

“Don't thwart me, brother! They asked to meet us here, so where are they? They can't be trusted if they break the promise so eagerly!”

Loki rolled his eyes in frustration. His brother's temper was quicker then his hammer and far quicker then his brain. The fact that he got used to it while growing up didn't make it any less irritating.

“We simply might have missed the right location.”

“It is unheard of for Bifrost to miss, so stop excusing them, Loki!”

“Oh, is it now?” The younger prince let sarcasm seep into his tone. “Should I remind you of unfortunate event on Alfenheim when I ended up in a swamp thanks to Heimdall's foul aim?”
Thor waved dismissively at Loki and kept looking around, swinging his hammer threateningly in his arms.

"Don't blame the Guard for your bad luck. You seem to find yourself some mud wherever you go. It might be just a trait of yours.”

"It was not my fault," Loki let out a barely audible snarl at Thor's armored back. The elder prince ignored him and finally stopped pacing, motioning to the distance.

"We should go that way, through the dunes, I swear I saw a light behind those hills...”

"Thor."

"Don't interrupt me, brother!"

"Thor, look."- Loki nodded to his left and continued to speak as Thor strained his eyes to see through the darkness.

"There seems to be a paved road not far from here, we should go...”- Thor didn't let him finish.

"Why would you defy the way I chose?"

Because I don't want to drag myself through the desert just to give you a chance to show off how brute you are.

"Because it would be wise to follow the wide road since humans surely will chose the easier way to catch up with us.” - Loki soothed Thor's disapproval with a silken response, and his brother eagerly took the bait.

"Fine, so be it. But they must do so quickly for I swear by my father's name, I'll teach them some respect.”

"Of course you will.”

The brothers glanced at their landing spot for the last time and briskly headed for the road.

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The pavement consisted of myriads of tiny stones binded together by some sort of hardened tar. The material itself did not interest Loki, but the amount of work and skill required to assembly it seemed quite enormous.

That fact alone made Loki wonder if he had underestimated earthlings.

Loki forced himself awake from musings and fastened the pace to keep up with Thor.

The road ahead made a sharp turn and disappeared completely behind a moonlit hill, hiding away from the wayfarer.

A great spot to make an ambush.

He shrugged the ridiculous idea off. No one in all nine realms would dare to attack the princes of Asgard when they came in peace.

A loud rumble made Loki jump.
The sound came from behind the hill. The source of it was still hidden but sound itself was unfamiliar—it was not of an animal origin, but rather of some sort of machinery...

A second later two bright lights rushed around the corner and charged at them with a speed of enraged bull.

Loki instinctively darted out of the way, but Thor was not as fast.

The clash was hard, the metal carcass of the carriage front hollowed and took a shape of Thor's figure. The right light instantly died out, the left was shining irregularly, and the top front of the vehicle scattered into a shower of glass slivers, covering Thor's head and shoulders and making him sparkle in the dim illumination.

Thor stumbled back a couple of steps and bellowed, “What kind of sorcery is this?!”

Loki sprang forward, sword ready in his arm, when a high-pitched female shriek pierced the air, “Oh my god!”

At least she recognized Thor, Loki thought, taking his place at brother's side and holstering his weapon.

Thor was furious. He swung his hammer high to unleash his wrath and Loki caught his arm just on time to stop it from connecting with an unfortunate criminal's head.

A small good looking maiden head.

With huge brown eyes and hair of forest nut color. And skin pale as ghost's.

Thor looked dumbfounded and lowered the weapon, surprise and shame filling his face.

The girl strangely enough ignored the hammer part and started babbling apologies, trying to touch Thor's chest as if searching for injuries.

“I'm so sorry, I didn't see you, I...goodness gracious, are you all right?”

The look of desperation on her lovely face made Loki chuckle.

“Do not trouble yourself, milady, my brother is all well. Tell us better, what are you doing alone in this late hour in a place like this?”

“Well,” maiden's eyes kept swinging between brothers' faces and she looked more and more confused with each passing second.

“I'm astrophysicist, I've been tracking down unusual space phenomena, like...have you seen that lightning storm like an hour ago? I was looking for the place it stroke the ground. I've never seen anything like that before...”

“Brother, I think she speaks of Bifrost.” Thor sent Loki an explanatory look and Loki rolled his eyes.

“Bifrost? What is Bifrost? Never heard that name before...Are you guys tourists or something?”

“Bifrost is a bridge we use to travel between the realms,” Thor tried to clarify but only confused the woman further.

“Travel between realms? What do you mean?”
“We are crown princes of Asgard, the Realm Eternal, we came here...”

The girl frowned and took a step back.

“Oh, I see...Guys, I don't want any trouble, I...”

Thor extended his huge palm and the girl jerked away from the friendly gesture, leaving the elder prince frustrated.

“Fear not, fair maiden, we mean you no harm, we came in peace...”

“Jane, is everything all right? Holy shit!”

Another woman emerged from the back of the carriage and stopped dead at the sight of damage from the collision.

“What the hell is that?”

Jane turned to the newcomer and saw the disfigured metal. That obviously shocked her greatly as she gaped in horror, glanced at the brothers and then ran to the second woman seeking comfort and protection.

“Darcy, I think...” Jane, that was the maiden's name, wasn't it? Jane leaned to the second woman and whispered into her ear. “I think those two are aliens.”

“Aliens? Are you out of your mind?”

Jane frowned and made a wide gesture towards the collision side. “Then how would you explain this?”

Darcy briefly examined the Thor-shaped imprint in the front of the car and shrugged, “Oh, I don't know...steroids?”

Loki glanced at Thor and bit his tongue from saying anything that could ruin the precious look of confusion on his brother's face.

“Jane, should I taze him? He freaks me out.”

“Why would you doubt my words? I speak no lies, we are from another world, why won't you believe us?”

Darcy took a step forward, shielding the smaller woman with her own body.

“Well, I don't know, dude, may be because you don't look like an alien? Or perhaps because if you were an actual alien, this whole desert would be crawling with government agents by now?”

That very moment Loki heard a familiar sound of quiet rumbling and two, three- no, four identical black carriages appeared from behind the hill. Both women followed the procession quietly, their faces going blank.

“Oh...”, said Jane.

“Oh,” Darcy echoed a bit louder.

They exchanged glances and turned to face the brothers in unison.

Jane's loss of words clearly didn't apply to her companion, as Darcy just shrugged and smiled. “Well,
"I guess, welcome to Earth, guys."

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"I'm agent Phil Coulson with the Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement and Logistics Division, I am in charge of your accommodation and will be at your service the whole duration of your stay. I'm hereby authorized to greet you on behalf of the humanity and express a wish that our negotiations will be successful and your time on Earth will be pleasant. Welcome to Midgard, your royal Highnesses."

The man in dark costume bowed before Thor shortly, then motioned the prince towards one of the cars.

Thor looked pleased with the respectful greeting as the man accompanied him through the formation of soldiers who were saluting to him as he walked by.

So easily fooled by flattery, my dear sibling, Loki thought, letting his sharp eyes travel through the crowd and collect every tiny piece of information undetected as the older prince absorbed everyone's attention.

The younger prince followed Thor quietly, analyzing and calculating.

Humans had always had a taste for gold and silver when it came to decorating officials and those of power, a predisposition not easily abandoned.

And yet, all the guards were dressed in identical black costumes and helmets impenetrable for opponents eye, masking their faces completely. Their weapons mirrored their exterior – light, easily carried, barely visible in the darkness and most likely efficient.

This is not a honor guard, this is a group of soldiers ready to kill if we misbehave.

Detracting but very wise approach.

Interesting.

"He is a very good looking for an alien..."

The women's compliments to his brother didn't interest Loki at all, but he knew that a woman in love would be a very good source of information. Especially if she is a woman of science. Loki strained his hearing to catch the fragments of conversation.

Those two maidens he and Thor met moments earlier were crowded out of the princes way and were emotionally exchanging words on the side of the road.

"What? Just look at him!"

"Well, I must admit, he has a very nice bone structure..."

"Oh, I would definitely bone his structure."

"Darcy!"

Loki chuckled as Jane maiden sounded clearly embarrassed with her companion's dreamy words.

"Remind me why did I hire you?"
“Because I make amazing instant coffee?”

“Uh, fine. But still, don't you think he looks a bit too...slim?”

“What?”

Loki silently agreed with Darcy's question. He looked at Thor's retrieving back and huffed, his
brother was almost twice the size of lady Jane, and he was the tallest of all of the warriors present.

“Just look at him- pale skin and eyes gleaming with hunger...”

“You make him sound like a vampire. C'mon, it's just the hair- dark hair always makes a man look
paler.”

A dark hair?

Wait, what?

He sharply turned and flinched as two girls saw his movement and silenced, trying to hide
embarrassment, like they didn't want him to know they were talking about ...him?

Loki caught himself gaping.

It was not...unexpected, really, and surely nothing to be excited about.

Any warrior from the Realm Eternal could easily compete with any earthling, and the attention of the
maidens was something rather predictable, but still...Loki couldn't stop a warm feeling blooming in
his belly.

“Ahem...”

He turned and found himself face to face with a blond man in an old brown leather jacket.

Oh, the curious one...

The blond man held Loki's gaze without averting his eyes.

“So, um...how do you find our planet so far?”

Loki tilted his head and let his eyes wonder over the man that caught his attention before.

The blond man with luminous eyes stood a far from the formation, cautious expression on his young
face, calm and steady, watching other soldiers salute the Aesir.

He was the only one that didn't bow.

The man lacked fearless authority that son of Coul emanated, and yet approached Loki without
hesitation. The prince didn't mistake the man's inelegant speech for fear- no, it was rather a manifest
of his shyness.

He clearly differed from the other soldiers. Loki couldn't feel any fear or hostility from the man, only
guarded curiosity towards unexpected guest.

He was the only one to pointedly ignore Thor and speak directly to Loki.

Hm, a hidden plot perhaps? Attempt to befrend me, calculated bevorehead?

Fascinating.
The prince finally replied, “Dusty.”

The man smiled and Loki found himself mesmerized by sincerity of that smile.

The man extended his arm and smiled even wider, “I'm Steve Rogers, nice to meet you.”

Loki eyed the arm for a second, then shook it.

“Loki Odinson, and I believe the feeling is mutual.”

The palm was warm and dry and unexpectedly strong for a human.

Somehow the common gesture of acknowledgment only made Loki feel even warmer.

Very strange.

“May I inquire why were you late to meet us?”

Steve shrugged, “It took Coulson a good 20 minutes to get here from the rendezvous point.”

“What rendezvous point?”

“The one you missed.”

Loki couldn't help himself and laughed. Steve's smile blossomed as he motioned forward.

“So, shell we go?”

Loki nodded, “Indeed we shell.”

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“Do you realize we were the ones who made the first contact?”

The women surrounded agent Coulson in an attempt to secure their own right to communicate with aliens.

Coulson seemed unflurried.

“And we are grateful for your assistance but it is no longer needed.”

“You can't just take them away and leave, it is unfair!”

“I assure you your work here won't be left unappreciated. Say, in sign of gratitude I won't suspend your drivers lisence.”

"Suspend my...why would you do that?"

"Should I remind you that you just run over a pedestrian?"
Jane shut her mouth for a second, Coulson used the momentum to escape.

"Now if you'll excuse me..."

“No, we won't excuse you! Listen,” - Darcy caught the agent by the elbow and conspiratorially whispered into his ear, “that Thor guy—dude, he is like a knot of nerves, you should have seen him when we met him, he was so angry he got me scared...”

Coulson cautiously detached himself from the girl's grasp, “I do believe he had all reasons to be frustrated— you hit him with the van, which is not so easily forgotten.”

“Well, yeah,” Darcy paused for a second, then grinned, “but you should have seen how Jane calmed him down! He was so ogling her and just...relaxed at once. You should take her with you for real, you know, to ease tension.”

Coulson considered the girl for a moment. “You do realize that you are trying to pimp out your boss right now?”

"Is it working?"

Coulson considered his options for a second. Civilian presence at the negotiations was greatly undesirable, but the implications of letting those two scientists go free outweighed the problem. It would be much easier to keep a low profile and prevent information from leaking if all the parties involved are under S.H.I.E.L.D.'s constant surveillance. Plus there were not nearly enough females in his division.

“ I believe it is, ms. Lewis. ”

The agent made a quick motion to the soldier near him and the man immediately guided Jane to one of the cars. When Coulson turned to leave, Darcy shouted, “Wait, what about me? You can't leave me here, take me with you!”

“And why would I do that?”

Darcy shrugged, “Because I'm awesome?”

Coulson tsked and pointed to the SUV.

“Get in the car.”

And the procession moved out.
The humans never ceased to surprise Loki.

As the procession left the twilight desert, agent Coulson joined Aesir in the main carriage and talked them through the main principles of negotiations.

Aside from anticipated “based on mutual respect” and “willingness to cooperate on important topics”,

Coulson asked them to follow one most important guideline- discretion.

Discretion.

What an interesting choice.

Coulson explained that his troops needed time to ease the main population into the state of things. Since the Aesir haven't visited the Earth for quite a long time, their sudden appearance, no matter how peaceful their intentions were, could be perceived by people as an act of aggression and cause massive panic.

“To avoid those undesirable consequences we humbly ask you to refrain from displaying any sort of “magical” powers in public, unless you are in imminent danger.”

A rather provocative request from Loki's point of view, but son of Coul managed to convince him in the importance of it after a short debate.

Thor got rather pissed when he realized that he was not going to get a royal welcome he waited for.

There were no plans for any ceremonial feasts or acts of praising, no gift exchanging or even balls thrown in the name of the honored guests.

The visit would be kept simple, fast paced and down to business, at least until the sides would reach an agreement.

Loki on the other hand was secretly relieved.

He hated all those burlesque and honey-mouthed displays of mutual gratitude. He shunned away from those in Asgard, preferring to slip into the shadows and disappear to the library or the garden far from noise and flows of mead and flattering lies.
May be it was because he could see through those masks of insincerity and lies the foreign diplomats put on and see their sulked and feral faces when they lied to Aesir. Or may be because those lies were never directed to him. The ambassadors chose to shower his father or Thor with songs of adulation, usually overlooking the second prince.

Was it because they knew he wouldn't fall into their cajolery? Was it because they knew he was only a second in line to the throne and hence not that important? Or was it because he simply didn't have anything to be praised for?

Whatever reason was it was no longer important. Now though, Loki thought, I have to be grateful for son of Coul for saving me from that ordeal.

He would rather prefer to bypass all the formalities and get straight to business, especially since he had so many questions swirling in his head, so many things he wanted to learn, so many things he wanted humans to show him...

They have progressed enormously. Not only were they able to make a high-quality steel, they managed to make it move in any direction without applying their own force or using horses to drag it.

They still lacked knowledge on many secrets of the universe, of course, but judging by the lady Jane's tales they didn't just make a step, they leaped forward.

Loki felt like he was a man in a desert under the scorching sun, looking for the spring of water, only his water was knowledge.

Thor, however, was not at all excited. His displeasure grew and he was not gentle in displaying it. Loki silently commended agent Coulson's patience, because Loki himself was fuming at his brother's misplaced and mistimed tantrum, while Coulson didn't even twitch an eyebrow.

The agent instead asked lady Jane to accompany them into their next carriage- the one that flew through the sky, when the procession stopped.

The maiden was rather inspired by the invitation and immediately started bubbling with Thor, asking questions, telling stories about Earth and its people and its science. Thor immediately eased and diverted all his attention to the woman.

A very smart move from the son of Coul.

Loki would have been worried if he didn't see how sincere Jane's emotions were. She was clearly
interested in all that was happening around her and wasn't hiding anything behind her facade.

It was still incredibly concerning turn of events though.

The woman got into the process by fortuity only, and yet she managed to completely divert Thor's attention away from negotiations themselves.

Loki feared what would have happened if her place was occupied by someone sent intentionally, some woman who was specially trained in pleasing the men, a sort of smart and cunning courtesan perhaps, bound on mission of deceiving and spying in favor of the earthlings.

Oh, that would have been bad, very bad.

If Thor was a king, he would have been already duped and Asgard would fall by the swing of earth woman's hips.

Speaking of deceiving...

Loki agreed on Coulson's elucidation for the need of discretion, though he was assured that something more was behind that request.

Loki could feel that humans didn't trust them even in slightest.

An extremely wise choice for the race considered inferior by all other eight realms and expected to be able only to fall to their knees and worship at the first sight of Aesir.

Humans might not have been that stupid after all.

As the flying carrier landed- helicopter, as humans called it- Loki realized the true reason for asked discretion. It was used as an excuse to hide the guests from the world in a secluded location, away from the civilian population, somewhere, where they could be tested and if humans didn't like the response, dealt with.

With the first rays of dawn they landed on a military base.

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“What do you think?”
Agent Coulson glanced briefly at Rogers who stood at his side silently, enjoying the morning sun, then turned back to watch their guests walking through the main alley while a crowd of assistants were busy explaining basics of earth weaponry to the princes.

Both men had shed their flamboyant costumes from the previous night, including their breast plates, chain mails and capes. All for the sake of discretion, as they were assured by the agents.

In reality though, Coulson just thought they looked completely ridiculous and therefore needed to redress.

Now both princes were in the earth-stylized apparel and blended into the crowd of civilians perfectly.

Thor wore light-blue jeans, plaid shirt and a red blazer that made him look like an American football star on mid-season vacation.

Loki spotted black jeans, dark green t-shirt and a black leather jacket with spots of aged gold metal.

The new attire made him even leaner and more elegant, accentuating his naturally graceful movements and lithesome walk. The younger prince looked like an exotic dancer, or like a sober rock-star.

Thor was constantly flocked by several S.H.I.E.L.D. Agents playing the role of bodyguards and/or babysitters, navy personnel as the guides, and ms. Jane as Thor's earthing.

She didn't want to go but had to accept the prince's insistent request through the clenched teeth simply out of consideration of hospitality, and now was hanging on Thor's massive arm as a dead weight with an expression of utter boredom on her face.

Her assistant bailed out earlier, declaring unconditionally that since she got to the base full of nice pieces of military asses, she should use her time in full and start enlisting staffers into her new harem.

Coulson chose not to press the matter, just confiscated Darcy's tazer and let her go in peace, thinking that the farther she is from the princes, the less damage she would inflict.

The blond prince moved through the street with indifference on his face, clearly enjoying attention more then the information he's been given.

Loki, at the other hand, seemed genuinely interested, but had a hard time keeping up with the guides because he had been constantly pushed aside by the crowd of his brother's adjutants.

The prince didn't seem to be bothered by it though, as he used every possible moment to stop and thoroughly examine another piece of equipment by looking at it, touching it and occasionally smelling it.
Steve took a moment to appreciate the spectacle.

“Amazing. I didn't know you had a talent of a personal stylist.”

Coulson let out a dramatic sigh, “Another career path I had to give up for my country.”

The agent paused for a second, “I don't remember getting prince Loki any leather jackets though...”, then continued,” Anyway, what's your intake on Thor?”

“I don't like him.”

“And why is that, Mr. Rogers?”

Steve shrugged, “just look at him, what kind of a diplomat is that? He is a pompous, self-absorbed boor who thinks of his mission as a joke.”

“I would say, more like a paid vacation. “

Steve chuckled.

“I wish we had only to deal with Loki.”

Coulson let a small smile curve his lips. “Oh, you favor the younger prince then?”

Steve blushed a bit, clearly uncomfortable with the topic. He was, after all, only a soldier, and not a politician, he had no talent or knowledge of international and more of that, interstellar relations and couldn't boast great experience in establishing personal connections. And yet when it came down to people's characters, his heart's judgment never failed him.

“All I'm saying is, Loki does seem to be a decent fella. He is at least respectful and compassionate.”

Both men watched silently as the cavalcade was interrupted by a small girl running through the street after a balloon that got carried away by the wind.

Thor stopped for a second as the blue ball flew into the nose of a jet-fighter and exploded, then
turned away and continued walking, motioning for one of the assistants to take care of it.

The man patted the child on the head and took off to catch up with the others, leaving a heart-broken girl standing in front of the plane, clenching her tiny fists in attempt to hold back tears.

That very moment Loki tore himself from the display far behind and tried to come up with his brother, but stopped dead in front of the girl.

He bended down and said something, and when the girl pointed her finger to the shreds of the balloon, smiled and nodded.

Then Loki cautiously glanced around, checking if anyone was watching, and an instant later pulled out a big pink balloon from behind his back.

The girl gaped in surprise, then took the balloon and giggled happily.

Steve felt a smirk crawl slowly onto his face, “I believe, that only proves my point.”

Coulson nodded in agreement and smiled, watching as the little earthling grabbed the startled Aesir by the hand and started shamelessly bossing him around the field.

The agent was the first to break the silence.

“We move out first thing tomorrow morning. I want you to accompany us to the shooting range.”

“What are you planning to do?”

“Nothing fancy, just a little demonstration of the power to show our guests what Earth has to offer. We, of course, expect the same from them.”

Steve turned to Coulson and tilted his head, “You are really not that excited about all this alien thing, are you?”

Phil nodded, “We simply need to make sure that Earth will benefit from this alliance.”

“Oh, c’mon, don’t tell me you weren’t amazed by that lightning yesterday!”

“I was.” The agent's poker face gave out no emotion whatsoever, “But not that much.”
“Who will be commanding the operation?”

“Captain Alex Iceman. He just got back from the Gulf.”

“Recalled?”

“Court-martialed.”

Steve felt his jaw hitting his chest for a brief second it took him to recover from surprise.

“He got into a dispute with a certain dim-witted admiral and said admiral ended up with several bones broken. US Navy of course was going to sentence and discharge the captain without honors, but we...provided them with suitable alternative.”

“Doesn't it concern you in the slightest, that he broke the chain of command?”

“Trust me, that disobedience was definitely called for.”

“Still, seems like a risky choice to me. The person of that character and Thor's arrogance is a dangerous combination, don't you think? The captain might just not be able to stand it...”

“Oh, I'm actually counting on that.”

Coulson smirked as Steve's mouth opened in surprise, then closed, then opened again.

“It not a test for our commander, my friend, it is a test for our guests. We will not bind ourselves by an agreement without proving first that our allies will not only be able to carry out their part of the treaty, but do it respectfully and according to our expectations.”

Steve shook his head, he felt quite uneasy with the whole situation.

“You know you are playing with fire.”
“We are simply doing our job.”

“But what if Thor freaks out? What if the situation gets out of control? It could end in a bloodbath.”

“That is exactly why the demonstration will take place in the open sea, away from the civilian population.” The agent paused again, letting Rogers absorb the information.

“By the way, your alien friend seems to have disappeared.”

Steve looked around the plaza but Loki was nowhere to be seen.

“I'd better go and find him then,” the blond man murmured, trying not to sound too worried, but failing miserably under the attentive gaze of the agent.

Coulson as usual was an ideal example of calmness and just gave Steve a curt nod.

“You do that.”

********

The Midgard lacked the glory and majesty of Asgard, its skies incrusted with myriads of stars and constellations visible even during the day, its imposing outlines and grand palaces that staggered the viewer by their eternal beauty; and yet, the human realm was warm and welcoming and Loki felt...as if at home.

The humans didn't seem to be bothered at all by a tall dark haired stranger in their midst.

At first Loki attributed that lack of attention to their natural low thinking capacity, but had to dismiss the idea almost immediately.

After all, the earthlings managed to reach incredible highs in all aspects of science and technology in a relatively short period of time without any help from outside. Of course, their inventions were rather crude and simple for his delicate taste, but they were nonetheless impressive.

Loki suddenly realized the urgency of Odin's decision to make the contact.

Asgard was old, the oldest of all nine realms, and the most powerful. It's strength relied on artifacts and knowledge of the universe, but they were all fruits of the past.

The Eternal Realm had grown and blossomed and reached the heavens of peace and prosperity, but at some point the movement stopped.

Loki had spent countless hours in the libraries of the Palace since he learned how to read, and always soughted information from the teachers his father sent to him, and all that time, all those years he hadn't...
come across anything new. The books were old and covered with dust of centuries, the teachers spoke of the past, and every time he tried to invent something or propose a fresh idea, his efforts were treated rather...coldly.

Loki knew the history too well to understand that that was a first sign of stagnation.

Every civilization followed a cycle of life and death, and now Asgard, the most glorious of all, reached the peak of its power that would be followed by slow but sure decline.

It needed a push, it needed a new source of energy like an old man needs something to continue living.

And what could be better reason to go on then taking care of a child?

It could be the purpose and means for Asgard to rejuvenate.

And even if not, even if that grand plan failed, Odin still had to ensure the life continued as it was his sacred duty as the Father of all, a protector of the Universe appointed by the Higher Powers.

The earth was puerile and didn't yet become bitter after thousands of years of existence like other realms of Yggdrasil, it still was a piece of wet clay ready to be shaped by a knowing hand of a master.

This realm would be the best choice for Aesir to inherit Asgard's knowledge and mission of leading the other realms when the time comes. But still, the earthlings are a rather bloodthirsty race, their best minds were set upon discovering new means of confrontation and waging war.

Loki chuckled, father clearly needs to ensure they won't destroy themselves before we can teach them anything important.

The mission was critical indeed, and Loki realized he prepared himself to do anything for it to be successful.

His musings were interrupted by the girl who climbed him as if he was a tree.

And here we have another wonder.

Loki never favored children because they were noisy and irritating and had a tendency to break things, but he didn't share his sibling's cruelty of indifference.
He couldn't simply stand there and watch a child cry her eyes out if he could do anything to stop it. He knew too well how much it hurt to be neglected by the adults in favor of someone they considered more important.

Thor would mock him into the old age for being such a softie - the elder prince had always stated that children were their mothers' business and not a responsibility of a warrior.

But at least Loki had a good excuse this time- as though the child was small, she was nonetheless - a woman.

“Mommy, mommy!” the girl cried out happily as her mother ran to them from the other side of the street.

Loki smiled at the reunion and turned to leave, when earthling caught him by the sleeve.

“Thank you, thank you so much for finding her!”

“Please, don't mention it, she is a precious little one.”

Woman's features relaxed and she let a sigh of relief escape her lips.

“Oh god, I was so worried...Thank you again for finding her!”

The woman quieted for a moment, then brightened up and smiled at him.

“Me and my husband were going to grab something to eat, would you like to join us?”

A very unexpected invitation that made Loki's skin tingle with unfamiliar sensation. He could have sworn he was surprised by this display of gratitude although he knew it was only a polite request and the woman didn't mean it. Perhaps another weird midgardian tradition?

Loki shook his head, “Forgive me, but I have to decline. I need to go and find my brother before he realizes I'm missing.”

To his great surprise woman looked sincerely disappointed.

“I understand. But thanks again!”

Indeed, this realm is full of wonders.

****

Steve rushed about the streets of the compound but Loki seemed to vanish without any trace.

He stopped for a second to think where the prince could have wondered off, when a splash of pink caught his attention.
It was the girl with her new balloon.

Steve sighed in relief – the girl was safe, wiggling in excitement in her mother's arms. But then he realized that Loki was no longer with her.

Dammit.

He ran towards the crowd and slowed down, hoping the girl's mother would know where prince had gone.

“Oh, I think he headed towards the dockyards.”

“Thank you, ma'am,” Steve said and immediately took off for to find Loki before he meddled into something bad.

Of course, the people were hospitable, but it still was a military base, and it was packed with danger.

*****

Loki found himself in the hangar of enormous size on the edge of the water, where huge hoisting cranes lifted machinery off the boards of cargo ships and mounted it onto a giant conveyor so the maintenance crew could finish the assembly.

He knew he wasn't allowed inside, but couldn't help himself and watched the process.

He almost drifted back into contemplative state of mind again when a rather rude voice hailed him from up above.

“Hey, dude, you are not supposed to be here!”

Loki lifted his head to face the speaker- one of the crew members on the crane spotted him gaping at the assembly line and didn't appreciate the sight.

“Oh, what's with the pouty face, beautiful? Have you lost your mommy or something?”

Loki frowned, trying to restrain his annoyance. Mission or not, he wont allow anyone to insult him.

“Do watch your tone when speaking to me!”
“Oh, I see.” The man's brows climbed up his sweaty face and lips curved into a grin as he heard Loki speaking, and a second later he bellowed to his fellas, “Hey guys, looks like we have a British here!”

Short barks of laughter sounded off from the top, but quickly died out as the senior engineer called it in on the radio.

“Watch the relay, you bloody idiot!”

The warning came a bit too late, as the jib carrying the cargo container missed the spot and started swinging away from the conveyor, slowly picking up speed. The momentum carried the container off the course and into the heavy brick wall.

The crash wasn't too bad itself, just a gentle smash, but it gave the handle enough shove to break the locks on the cargo open. The container tumbled down on the trench with thick metal cables that most likely were used to drag the ships into the dock for repairs.

The mechanism screeched and burst into cascade of sparkles, but continued moving, dragging the damaged container along towards the end of the platform.

Loki traced the trajectory of the movement till the ending point, where two enormous hydraulic wheels were putting the whole system in motion.

Well, that is unfortunate.

One of the engineers rushed to the transistor and killed off the switch, blacking out the entire compound, but apparently, it had a back up power supply, as the lights twitched a little and turned back again.

And then Loki saw the reason why humans faces were untransformed by horror- a designation plate on the top of the container that said “AGM-65” and next to it in smaller letters, “Maverick.”

Loki froze.

He wasn't too familiar with the code or the letters, but he remembered that nickname, “Maverick”, which humans preferred to call one of the armaments on their flying war birds.

He haven't seen it in action, but judging by the guide's excited story and abundance of gestures, it was pretty dangerous, a small metal cylinder packed with explosives.

If one of those gets crushed under the wheel, it's going to take out the dockyard. But with the whole container of those cylinders...The entire base will be leveled to the ground.

Loki cursed aloud, not even bothering to conceal his anger about human's neglection and stupidity, and called out an invisibility spell.

Several seconds later he, no longer detected by human eyes, was rushing forward to the dropped cargo, thinking on the way of the means to restrain it from falling under the wheels.
There were not too many options. Most of the spells he could use were accompanied by a release of energy, and he couldn't risk using them because he simply didn't know how those cylinders would react.

It left him with only one acceptable choice- to stop the container with his own physical power.

The prince ran to the trench and grabbed the end of the container, trying to shift it off the course.

The weight was enormous though not unbearable, and yet the more Loki struggled to lead it astray, the more his knees buckled from the strain and muscles screamed in pain, the more apparent it became that his attempts were futile.

His efforts delayed the advancement of the dreaded cargo, but it was too hard even for him to lift that weight and resist the dragging force of two giant wheels at the same time.

The container clearly had hooked on one of the cables as no matter what Loki did or where he tried to move himself, he still kept on being dragged with an unavoidable determination closer and closer to the end of the platform.

Loki started to consider the last option – to run away from the trench and lay a containing spell on the building, sealing the explosion inside.

He wasn't sure how strong it would be, but he was certain he would be able if not to keep it all inside the dock, then at least to minimize the damage.

That very moment he felt that the resistance of the mechanism eased and the box shifted, as if another pair of hands released it from the metal trap and now was lifting it off the trench in unison with Loki's own efforts.

How nice of you to finally show up, my dear brother, Loki thought both in irritation and relief.

He hissed his breath out, applying all his strength to mirror his helper's movement and shifted the container off the trench and on the ground.

Shaking slightly from the tiredness, Loki swept the sweat off his forehead with one swift motion and dismissed the spell, emerging back into the world.

“What took you so long?”

His question was met with silence.

Loki turned around the corner and tried to catch up with his brother, but saw only a glimpse of blond hair and a shadow that sneaked out of the docks through the small maintenance door.
What kind of a weird game is this?

Loki rushed after the culprit, darting out with his hand and grabbed the muscled arm, but stopped dead
as two blue eyes stared at him in shock.

Those eyes were not stormy blue with sparks of lightning, but gentle blue like the Midgardian sky resting in the warmth of the afternoon sun.

Steve Rogers gaped at the prince in surprise.

“Loki?”

The prince let go of the arm and took a step back, processing the information.

“I see, so that is your little secret, captain? You are a super human.”

Steve shrugged Loki’s sarcasm off, “it is not so much of a secret. I just...don't like to talk about it.”

“Oh, is it so? Are there more people like you? May be, all of you in the S.H.I.E.L.D.?”

Steve looked in Loki’s eyes without any hesitation, a shadow of something resembling pain crossed his features for a split second. “No. I am the only one.”

“Is that the truth?”

“Why would I lie to you?”

“Oh, I don't know, perhaps because I am considered an enemy?”

Steve frowned, confused by Loki's logic, “an enemy who just risked his life to save humans he doesn't even know? I don't think so.”
“Then why you approached me instead of Thor when we arrived?”

Rogers considered Loki for a moment, not sure where the conversation was going and why exactly the prince looked so pissed and disappointed. Of course, Steve didn't tell him about his special "powers" , but it surely wasn't the reason to be so angry with him, because- lets face it, even captain Rogers with his enhanced physique had a little chance in a fight with an Asgardian, no matter how hard he would have tried. It surely couldn't bother Loki that much...

“Because you were different, not like your brother...”

No, it couldn't be, how dares he? How dare they, those pitiful humans!

Loki snapped, “A weakling, is that it? You thought I was weaker then Thor and therefore would be an easy target?!”

Steve backed off a little, startled by Loki's anger.

“That's not what I meant!”

“Then what it is? Do entertain me, Mr. Rogers!”

Steve shivered a bit under the scrutinizing gaze of emerald eyes. He could have sworn those eyes were like daggers, piercing right through his body and into his soul, making his hidden emotions boil over and surface.

“You want me to be honest? Fine. I greeted you instead of Thor because I don't like your brother even in the slightest. “

Loki frowned, perplexed by unexpected answer.

“How can you be so sure? You haven't even spoken to him once!”

Steve held his ground and leaned forward, as if trying to support his words by the actions of his body, getting into Loki's personal space and unintentionally making the prince feel uncomfortable.

“I don't have to speak to him to see what kind of person he is. Remember how Coulson greeted him upon arrival? Yes? Now do you remember how Thor greeted him back?”
Steve had a jolt of a guilty pleasure looking at Loki's confused face.

“I bet you don't, because he didn't. Thor didn't even blink in response. He doesn't know what respect is. He treats my people like his personal slaves, but we are not slaves, Loki. He even treats you, his own brother, like dirt. I saw myself how he showed you out of the way without giving a second thought. He might be a first-born but it does not make him a better person. He is a bully, Loki, and I don't do well with bullies.”

Loki's features relaxed involuntarily as the captain spoke of his thoughts.

The prince watched the other man's face intently, looking for any signs of lies, but found none. He perfected the art of deception over the years and could detect any miniscule indications of insincerity, but there were none at all. Could he be wrong about this human? Could Rogers really be speaking the truth?

“I see, so, my brother is a bully and a brave captain decided to intervene and offer hopeless Loki his protection, is that what you are saying?”

“Well, I don't know, do you need my protection?”

Loki sulked, all his attempts to sabotage Steve's demeanor were unsuccessful so far, which could mean only one thing- captain indeed was speaking the truth.

“I do not. I just...”

Steve observed for a second as Loki faltered, not sure what to do next...

Steve made the decision for him.

“Look, all I wanted to do is...well, I don't know, make you feel like at home perhaps? I thought you might use a friend here since all of your own were left in Asgard...”

I don't really have any friends in Asgard, they are all Thor's.

“... and since I don't really fit here either so we might be...”

Loki stared at him at shock. “You really want me to be your friend?”
Steve blushed profoundly. “Why not? Our worlds are going to be allies so why can't we become friends?”

Loki felt like he was burning, but sensation was pleasant and he indulged in it for a second.

“I guess, we can.”

The prince smiled and held out a hand in a gesture Rogers showed him the day before, and Steve's face immediately split into the brightest smile Loki had ever seen.
Chapter 4

The seconds of scientific exploration merged into minutes and then an hour passed unnoticed, but the mystery Steve and Loki joined forces to solve didn't progress in the slightest.

The device the two were trying to make work refused to respond to any kind of outside stimulation.

Steve had tried pushing all the buttons and following the instruction he had been given earlier by one of the agents to the letter with no apparent results.

He at one point even resolved to hitting the object several times, meanwhile explaining to surprised Loki that sometimes human machinery just needed a good slap to start functioning properly. However, the ritual punishment didn't help. At all.

Loki had examined the device meticulously, took it apart and put it back together twice and yet failed to achieve any results as well.

Steve's patience was finally wearing thin and Loki- well, after the Prince had ruled out every possible explanation to why it didn't want to work, he simply took a step back from the table and proclaimed in a solemn tone that the object was cursed.

“Oh, it is not cursed, Loki, we must be doing something wrong...I think we should go and ask for help.” Steve brightened up, stretching a little. It felt good to let muscles on his back flex after bending over the table for almost half an hour.

“No, we can't do that!” Loki looked scandalized.

He didn't dignify Steve with the explanation of a sudden outburst, but none was needed. The captain observed the Aesir behavior long enough to understand that both princes had a superiority complex towards the human race, and while Thor's was based both on his regal status and on power, Loki’s relayed mostly on the supremacy of his knowledge and versatility of his mind.

The younger prince of course was much more subtle about it then his elder brother and usually did a good job hiding it behind the respectful manners, but it still surfaced in the moments like this.

Like a stubborn child.

Steve shook his head and set his foot to the door.
“Don't worry, I'll go ask myself. Just wait here, OK?”

The door closed behind him before a rather loud and vivid objection fell off Loki's tongue.

The prince made a mental note to strangle the captain upon his return and resumed glaring at the object.

He wished for a second his annoyed look could turn the little machine into a pile of ash, eliminating the problem and possible reason for later public humiliation, but the dreaded piece of equipment stood strong, completely unperturbed by Loki's infuriated stare.

Loki leaned forward and whispered in acid tone, “I will not be outsmarted by some stupid Midgardian toy!”

The coffee maker stared back at him in silence.

*******

Steve rushed through the halls searching for help. He knew he needed to find somebody able to honor the vow of silence for the prince clearly would not tolerate any gossip about their little and completely forgivable failure, so it really couldn't be an outsider like a military personnel or a civilian. It had to be someone from their delegation.

Besides, Steve had to act fast. Loki was rather annoyed when he left and something told Rogers, perhaps a hidden beneath the pounds of muscles intuition, that Loki getting pissed could lead to a major disaster.

The captain couldn't explain it. Loki seemed very reserved and fully in control of his reactions, a trait most likely cultivated through years dealing with his hot tempered brother, but Steve could sense a storm of emotions running deep inside the man. It was like a mighty gale concealed under the thin layer of ice, waiting to break free and engulf everything in its path.

It is always the quiet ones, somebody shared a proverb with him once, and while that person clearly implied sexual meaning, Captain knew that it was an accurate psychological observation applicable to all aspects of life.
That's why he had to be careful.

Besides, he honestly didn't want to risk a fragile sprout of their friendship.

It had nothing to do with his assignment or the mission itself, to Steve's shame the reason behind it was much more selfish. He was simply happy to finally find another strong and honorable person that didn't fit in the present day world.

Steve was an earthling, and a soldier, but a soldier of a time that had passed. He put on a bravado face and pretended to be at ease with the state of things, but in fact he was hurt, and hurt bad. He was frozen into the ice for over 70 years, and while he remained the same the world had moved on. His family and friends died, the things he loved gave place to something new, people changed, their believes and values shifted, and he became a relict.

Steve sometimes felt like he shouldn't have woken up.

But then he met Loki and saw a glimpse of a future for himself- the prince was adapting fast to new conditions, changing himself according to the circumstances, and Rogers hoped that may be one day Loki would teach him how to fit too.

Plus the prince was simply a very nice person to be around.

But, all the brooding aside, the captain was running out of time.

******

Darcy wondered through the long corridors waiting for the evening to come.

She didn't waste any time since arrival, and using her lovely brains and organizer talent managed to schedule a poker game in the enlisted club. The casting itself was a piece of cake since US Navy stood proud with some of the finest asses Darcy had ever seen, but still- the showdown missed a star, a leading character who could spice up the performance.

And than the Gods smiled at her and presented the best strike of luck ever.
Steve Rogers spotted her in the doorway and approached the girl with a very determined face.

Whatever reason of his interest in her humble persona was, Darcy was not going to miss the opportunity.

“Ms. Lewis? I'm sorry to bother you, but I am in need of assistance...”

“I'm all yours, Captain Rogers.”

Steve froze for a second to process the said figure of speech, then blushed a little.

“Well, prince Loki and me...we were trying to make the coffee machine work but it just, well..we couldn't. Would you mind to check it for us?”

“Sure...”

Darcy's chin jerked up as Steve's hand laid heavy on her shoulder, making the skin prickle with warmth.

“I just have to ask for discrepancy. Prince Loki doesn't want this to get on official record...”

The girl's lips curved into a sly smile, and she crossed her heart with a finger, “I'll take it to my grave.”

The happy coincidence just got happier, Darcy thought, if she could get Rogers convince Loki to participate... The girl had to swallow a limp in her throat.

Photos of topless Steve would make a hit in the internet, that she was damn sure of. Not everyday the world could get a snap of the famous Captain America's fabulous booty.

And as for the photos of prince Loki...well, she will keep that treasure to her private “pleasure” collection.

“Um, captain? May I ask for a favor in return?”
Steve turned to look at her over his aviator leather-clad shoulder.

“Anything.”

Gotcha.

“I'm hitting the enlisted club in an hour, there's going to be a poker game...”

Darcy had to maneuver her face out of the collision with Steve's broad back as the captain immediately stopped dead.

“Poker game?”

“Yes, no, don't worry, we are not playing on money, that's forbidden. It's more of a...friendly strip-down game.”

The walls around them seemed to turn into a shade of pink reflecting the captain's face that was glowing bright red from embarrassment mixed with indignation.

“Forgive me for speaking bluntly, but strip-down poker game in a navy officers club doesn't seem to be an appropriate pastime for a lady. Especially if you are playing with sailors. They can be rather...frivolous in their approach to women.”

“That is why I need somebody to accompany me to the game, you know, in case they behave badly.”

Steve looked at her sternly, as if was reprimanding a silly child for a bad prank, but Darcy wasn't fooled – she could sense his inner knight stirring, ready to protect the helpless maiden's honor. When the man's features softened in agreement, she let out a sigh. The captain was so trusting and gullible that she almost felt sorry for tricking him into this. Almost.

“Now, about the coffee maker. Did you plug it in?”

“Yes.”
“Did you put water in it?”

“Yes.”

“Coffee?”

“Yes.”

“Pushed the “on” button?”

Steve considered the girl for a second.

“We are not that bad, Darcy. I had a written instruction and followed it precisely, and the machine seemed to function just fine several hours before. I don’t know what could have happened...”

As they were closing in to the kitchen room, Darcy cast a glance on the wall and detected a small official-looking note on the fuse box near the entrance. God bless her vision correcting glasses!

“Light-saving policy in order.”

“What?”

Darcy almost forcefully dragged Steve to the wall, poking the note with her finger.

“The light-saving policy. It means you have to turn on the switch because the whole power line in the kitchen is off line, no wonder the coffee maker didn’t work.”

She took out the lock and opened the fuse box, studying the markings on the buttons.

“Let’s see...where is kitchen...oh, here it is. Now, let’s put this baby back on and check if the machine is working...”

Darcy clicked the switch into “on” mode and the lights flickered and illuminated the corridor and the kitchen with bright luminescence.

Steve started to smile as a shriek of horror all of a sudden sounded from the kitchen.
Darcy forgotten, the captain rushed to the rescue only to find Loki covered in coffee powder and water looking rather frustrated, with an evil coffee maker machine fuming black smoke behind his back.

"What was just that?" Loki demanded rather angrily.

“The room was cut off the power line...Is that a dishwasher cable sticking out of the microwave?”

Darcy looked around, assessing the scale of damage down by unauthorized remodeling, and damn it was extensive!

“You connected all the electric devises on the kitchen in one circuit? But what for?”

“I needed to test a theory...” Loki shifted himself from behind Steve's protective form and casually brushed off the grounded coffee off his shoulders. “Aren't you supposed to be assisting Lady Jane with my brother?”

He looked so cute and messy that Darcy couldn't help herself and snapped a pic on her phone, earning a rather infuriated look from the captain.

Don't care, had to do it, the girl thought, shrugging off promises of death and despair Steve non-verbally sent her.

“No, she'll be fine on her own. Plus I have a poker game in less then an hour. The Captain is going too. Care to join us?”

Loki stopped for a second to think. “A poker game? Hm, I've never participated in that kind of entertainment before.”

Steve shrugged his head, “no, trust me, it is not worth of your attention.”

Loki gave him a dismissive look, “Oh why, you are going, aren't you? So I bet it is at least a bit interesting.”
Well, it's not that I have any choice on the matter, all thanks to your royal stubbornness.

Steve didn't say anything aloud though, but tried to look grim.

Loki smiled at him, “All right then, I'll join you and Lady Darcy. Just give me some time, I need to clean up.”

Darcy shone up with a smile, “Awesome! I'll be waiting for you!”

With that she left, muttering “yes, yes, yes!” to herself.

Steve turned back to Loki, “You don't know what you just got into.”

the Prince considered him lazily, still trying to get the coffee out of his hair.

“And why is that?”

“I think...”Steve leaned forward and lowered down his voice, “I think Ms. Lewis has some hidden agenda in all this. It may be...ill advised for you to participate. Besides, she is so fond of her cell phone device that takes photos...”

Loki grinned and twiddled Darcy's I phone in his long graceful fingers, “You mean, this one?”

The blond man gaped in surprise, but his question was canceled by what Loki did next. The prince placed the device in his palm where it fit perfectly, made several motions with his fingertip and smiled again, looking rather satisfied.

“See, very simple. No physical evidence of our encounter, and if she chooses to tell anyone...Well, I'm pretty indifferent to gossip.”

He flickered the phone in his fingers again and it disappeared in a puff of green smoke.

Steve continued to stare.

Loki patiently waited when the human came back to consciousness.

His theory was right- the humans in most part needed to be introduced to magic step by step to
avoid...their cortex system overload.

Steve to his honor was one of the fastest to recover.

“OK, I guess, you are right...But what about this?”

He motioned around the kitchen that looked like a engineering battlefield with parts and cables laying all over the place and something horrendous in the center, featuring the dreaded coffee maker, blender, microwave and some other devices Steve didn't remember the names of.

Loki waved his hand, letting green sparkles flow from his fingers, and the mess reorganized itself, all the equipment assuming original positions and all the parts flowing back to their respectful places. "I needed to occupy myself waiting for your return."

“Wow...”

“Nothing to worry about. Now, if you excuse me, I'll go and change. This coffee powder feels rather uncomfortable on my skin.”

“Um....can't you just , you know...”

Loki arched an eyebrow, “Please, speak more clearly, I can hardly grasp the meaning.”

Steve blushed a bit, cursing his lack of self control, and made a wide motion over the prince's body, distantly resembling the one Loki did when he was performing the magic.

“Can't you use magic to fix this?”

The soft laughter made Steve feel like a foolish child.

“Of course I can, but is much more efficient to do it in normal way.”

He paused for a while, thinking something over. “Plus, I have to check on Thor. By all I know he might be breaking things as we speak.”

“All right, then I'll see you at the club. Wait, Loki.”
The prince turned his head and stopped at the entrance.

“How are you going to get to your quarters looking like this? You definitely going to be noticed.”

“No need to worry, my friend, I can sneak in without being seen.”

Steve gave Loki a doubtful look.

“How exactly?”

“Easily.”

Loki smiled again and snapped his fingers, dissipating into the thin air.

Steve's jaw hit his chest as a cheerful voice echoed through the hall, “See you at the game, Steve!”

The captain could have sworn Loki was barely holding back laughter.

Unbelievable.

Steve chuckled in amazement and made his way out of the kitchen. He stopped at the corner of the hall, mused for a moment, then turned back.

He paused at the fuse box and turned off the power in the kitchen compound. And only after that he headed to the enlisted club, feeling satisfied with himself for fulfilling his civil duty.
Chapter 5

Loki was approximately 48 midgardian minutes late.

He did all he could to be punctual, but that damned powder was a real challenge to get out of the hair. It seemed though that when the dark brown slurry came into contact with his body, it made skin much softer and smoother...

When royal locks were clean and clothes were properly fitted, Loki allowed himself a little pleasure of sweet revenge and went back to the kitchen to exploit the damned machine. Now, with power back on line it took the coffee maker only 3 minutes to produce the brew, and what a beverage it was!

Dark, almost black but with hint of amber to its color, earthy, slightly bitter taste that could compete with the best ales Asgard could offer, at least when it came to Loki's choice.

But the most importantly- its alerting effect.

It was as if an invisible hand took off a veil from the prince's eyes and made the world look much clearer and his mind work much faster, eliminating any signs of tiredness and alerting all senses at once.

The effect reminded the Prince of a herbal concentrate he managed to produce in the past, but that potion required about a dozen of herbs and hours of assiduous work, and this...this was so easy and simple and could be his open door into the days and weeks of productive learning without wasting precious time on sleep. He just needed to work out the perfect proportion.

But it was a minor detail. Loki had already sketched a plan for the machine he was going to build upon returning home, a bigger one that required only sun light to operate.

He also had to fix a constant supply of the powder as he wasn't interested in growing the plant himself.

Perhaps agent Coulson would be gracious enough to list coffee as one of the products subjected to import to Asgard when the treaty is signed?

And even if the negotiations fail for some reason, I could always acquire it from the ...independent sellers.

Loki smiled at the last thought, picturing his father's face at the news that the younger prince of Asgard founded a black market with Midgard to smuggle coffee.
Oh, the All Father would be pissed.

But the risk was worth it.

**********

To Loki’s slight disappointment, the club was nothing special, just a big by midgardian standards room furnished by a green table with several colorful balls put together in a form of triangle in the middle, a huge screen (TV, as Loki was told, a special device for producing moving pictures), several couches around it and another smaller table in the corner, where people were evidently playing poker.

Loki noticed Rogers the very moment he walked in, but it took him good several seconds to recognize the captain because Steve was for some reason completely naked.

Well, not completely, Loki corrected himself as he spotted Steve’s briefs. The captain had curled into a ball on one of the chairs and looked as miserable as he could ever be, face glowing as a crimson beacon of embarrassment in the dimly lit lodgement, staring at the players like a betrayed by the whole world puppy.

The situation called for immediate intervention.

Loki wasn't familiar with the game prior to lady Darcy's invitation, but he of course made himself acquainted with the rules and strategies before heading to the meeting as elementary knowledge of the activity was required by the common etiquette. He certainly didn't want the humans to waste time on teaching him the basics, nor he wanted them to think of him as an inferior adversary.

Poker at first seemed to be simple and boring, but in fact the victory required applying so many skills including that of trickery and deception, that Loki quickly changed his opinion.

As the prince navigated his way to the table, he took some time to scope the players.

There were five of them, lady Darcy, naked Steve, and three navy personnel.

The oldest one sitting to Steve's right was reserved, stem looking man with neat mustache and a camouflage color bandana on his head. He barely talked to other players, responding in brief short sentences and infrequently raising his eyes from the cards.
To Steve's left was a slender shorter man with messy black hair, huge dark eyes and a mouth that never closed. That might have been a distraction strategy, but it didn't work as well as in should have, because the man was flashing naked torso, covered with elaborate patterns of body ink.

On the opposite side of the table from Steve sat another sailor, most likely the leader of the group. He was a well built tall man with dark bronze skin, cunning smile and rather crafty hands as he managed to acquire Roger's leather aviator, t-shirt and the talkative man's sweatshirt.

But the most curious of all was sitting across Rogers with the biggest pile of clothes at her feet.

Apparently Steve was right earlier, Darcy indeed had not only a hidden agenda of getting the men naked, but all means of reaching her goal as well.

*Well played for a lady, well played indeed.*

Darcy greeted the prince first, smiling widely as he approached the group.

“Prince Loki, how nice of you to join us!”

Loki gave her a curt nod and looked around the table.

“Forgive me for the lateness, I hoped I didn't miss anything important.”

Darcy grinned, “Not at all, we are just getting started.”

Even in the dark Loki could see how the girls eyes kindled with hunger as her gaze wondered along his lean and regrettably fully clothed body.

The prince chuckled to himself.

Rogers had been too innocent to notice the hint of mischief on Darcy's face, but Loki was a professional in mind games and certainly was not inclined to let a human outsmart him.

“I see.”

He glanced across the wooden surface at Steve, who was thorn between an urge to hide beneath the table from Loki's inquiring stare and square his shoulders in respect for Loki's presence.

When the captain finally made up his mind, he straightened up, nodded in salutation, then established an eye contact and tried to mouth something that looked like“don't”. Loki smiled.

“Would you mind introducing me to the gentlemen?”
“Oh, of course.” The girl gestured to the man in the bandana first.

“Chief Medical Officer “Doc” Macmillan here,”

The mustache man nodded, “just call me Doc.”

“Yeah, he lost his first name after years of futile serving the country. US Navy does that to people some times.” The talkative one wiggled his brows at the prince.

Darcy nodded at him, “Now the chitchat here is Communications Officer Jay Cleary. Don't pay too much attention to him, he likes to talk and most of the time his vocal cords don't correspond with his brain.”

“Hey, Missy!” Jay grabbed his heart in mocking gesture of shock, “I'm very nice! Plus I like him,” - he shot Loki a look, “he called me a gentleman.”

“He called us gentlemen, not you, you dirty son of a trailer park prostitute!” the leader of the group hushed playfully at Jay.

Cleary pouted and poked a finger at the man, “she was a stripper, not a prostitute, know the difference, man!”

The man grinned, “Oh, forgive me for my incompetence. I'm Chief Warrant Officer Javier “Snipes” Espinoza. Care to join us?”

Loki turned to Steve, the captain looked like he was trying to stop Loki from moving with the power of his mind, but when it failed, he again tried to mouth “don't” to the prince, slower and more articulate this time.

_Honest and honorable Mr. Rogers, trying to protect me from the human web of deceit. How nice of you to be concerned for my sake so much, taking into account that you are the one currently sitting nude._

Loki winked at him conspiratorially.
“It would be my pleasure.”

The Doc considered Loki for a second, then warned, “Be careful, these bastards will strip you naked in no time.”

“Oh, I doubt that.”

Javier looked at the prince with approval, “Cocky, aren't we? We'll see how you'll talk when I'm wearing that fancy jacket of yours.”

Loki smiled wider without breaking the eye contact, “I don't think that's going to happen.”

Javier's brows shot up, “Oh, look at you, another pretty white boy coming to my land and saying that I cannot win, is that it?”

“No, I'm just saying the jacket won't fit.”

Jay snorted at the comment, “I told you, Javi, that you are getting fat!”

Javier fired a dignified glance at Jay, “It ain't fat, you bimbo,” he motioned over his body, “This is nothing but pure muscle!”

Jay snickered, “Muscle my ass!”

Steve hushed at him, “Do me a favor, watch your language!”

then turned to Loki, frowning and pursing his lips apologetically, “I'm sorry, they completely lack any manners.”

“Don't worry, Steve, it doesn't bother me at the slightest.”
Steve leaned on the back of the chair, deep frown never leaving his face, “But it still does bother me.”

Jay straightened up and put his palm to his heart as if to say an oath, “No more cursing, boy scout’s promise.”

Darcy gaped at him in surprise, “You were a scout?”

“Well, technically no, I got expelled...”

Javier cackled, “Let me guess, for teacher's harassment?”

“Word to the fucking command, – I was expelled for running around naked!”

Javier sneered, “I bet your teacher didn't appreciate the view!”

“Are you saying you would expel me too only for that? Only for my desire to be closer to Mother nature?”

“No, I wouldn't expel you, I would simply shoot you.”

Jay pouted, “Do you even know how good it feels when your cock flatters freely at every step you take and a light breeze tickles your balls?”

Loki rolled his eyes and chuckled, “Such a lovely imagery.”

The foul language should have insulted him but the prince knew the men meant no offense, and the whole conversation served only a purpose of entertainment.

Loki wasn’t usually fond of profanities, but this time found the exchange rather amusing as it showed not so much of the men illiteracy as the bond of brotherhood they shared despite great personal differences.
Refreshing.

It was almost impossible in Asgard to indulge in a friendship with one of another social status or race, a noble warrior would never make friends with a servant, nor an Asgardian would form a bond with an Elf. It was an unspoken rule of hierarchy.

A rule completely forgotten on Midgard.

Jay flashed him a smile, “See, finally a man smart enough to appreciate my talent.”

“It ain't no talent, bro, if you had a talent you wouldn't have joined.”

“You're just jealous, my Mexican friend, cause all you can boast is your skill in stealing car parts.”

“Yes, dude, and I am proud of it.”

Loki chose to interfere, “Why did you join if you were good at stealing cars?”

Javier grinned at the prince, “Because ship's parts sell at a higher price.”

Rogers rolled his eyes in desperation and buried his face in both palms, too ashamed for his clotheless position and for the misbehavior of his fellow servicemen to look at his alien friend.

Doc glanced at both men and shook his head, “You keep talking like that, the Captain will throw you both overboard.”

Javier turned to the Asgardian, “First rule of a thief, bro - never get caught.”

Loki acknowledged his advice with a tilt of his head, then turned to the man in bandana, “What about you, Doc? You seem like a man of great intellect, why did you join the military?”

Doc smirked, “I guess I just wanted an unlimited access to the live experiment material.”
Loki arched his eyebrow and Jay hurried to clarify to him, “Doc just likes to cut people.”

The healer's smirk widened. “Keep talking, and you'll be banished from med bay forever.”

“What? No! Your nurses need their Jay-Jay!”

“If you get your scrawny ass anywhere near my nurses again, I'll tell every breathing woman on the base that you have gonorrhea.”

Jay's mouth flew open in shock. “You wouldn't...”

Doc pointed a finger at him threateningly, “Gonorrhea, Jay.”

Loki positioned himself comfortably in the chair, letting his long legs fall apart under the table, and moved closer, eager to apply his acquired knowledge of the game.

“May I inquire?”

Javier nodded, “Sure, shoot.”

Loki looked at him questioningly, “Is there at least one decent officer serving in the Navy?”

Javier's face split into a toothy grin, “Of course there is, bro.” He paused for a second, then continued. “Just not on our ship.”

The three men burst out laughing, and Loki couldn't help but smile.

******

It took Loki two rounds to perfect his skills at the game and realize that everyone was cheating.

Well, almost everyone because Steve didn't count – the captain wasn't playing since he didn't have anything left to bet.
And it cost Loki his newly conjured silk scarf and a left boot to collect the data on how and why they were doing it.

The Doc was cheating against everyone but maintained a solely defensive mode, using his fraudulent techniques only to protect his own possessions.

Jay was cheating against everyone, but mostly Darcy in a loosely hidden attempt to get the girl naked, because a half-hidden view of her cleavage was not satisfying enough for him.

This strategy backfired quickly because he let his attention disperse and thus couldn't concentrate enough to keep his play at one level.

Javier was cheating against Darcy and Loki but mostly Loki, as he was obviously trying to establish his dominance over the prince.

Darcy was cheating solely against Loki, getting more and more frustrated as her efforts to get him shed his clothes failed over and over again.

After the Intel was acquired and the conclusions drawn, Loki's little quest for revenge was only a question of technique.

Seven rounds later the dignity was returned to Steve along with all of his clothes, and the brave captain finally wasn't looking as miserable as before, stirring back to life and suddenly displaying more and more interest in the game, especially when his opponents were getting closer and closer to sharing his previous unenviable fate.

Although for some reason the captain's interest was directed not so much on the Loki's opponents, but on the prince himself.

The Aesir could see the question burning at the bottom of Steve's eyes, and it was not the one about Loki's winning streak. Steve was well acquainted with the prince's abilities prior to the game, it wasn't too difficult to put two by to to conclude that Loki was shamelessly cheating with the help of magic.

No.

Something else, something a bit more personal was bugging Mr. Rogers and Loki wouldn't pride himself in character judgment if he didn't know what it was.
Oh, why, Mr. Rogers, why exactly do you find it so strange that I chose to direct all of my efforts to winning your clothes back first?

Of course I'm inclined to achieve unconditional surrender from all present at the table, but my plans could wait in the light of your misfortune. I wasn't going to pursue my goals blindly while you were sitting next to me, being publicly humiliated.

After a short exchange of glances, brow lifting and lip curving the captain seemed to understand Loki's order of priorities and now was wearing a smile of praise and gratitude. His happy face was lighting up the room like a well-polished shield shining in the summer sunlight, and Loki could have sworn if Steve grinned a little bit wider he would go blind from the brightness.

All as well that let Loki freely concentrate on the game he was intending to win which could be guessed by the state of his opponents undress.

Doc was proudly wearing his shorts and bandana and Loki itched all over from curiosity, from the burning desire to know what Doc was hiding underneath it, but Loki restrained himself from dominating the game against the officer as Doc turned out to be the nicest of all players, and the prince owned him some respect for that.

Plus the Asgardian wasn't completely sure Doc would choose to take off the bandana first and not his shorts. Prince had shared the company of naked men before, it was unavoidable especially in the palace baths, but he would always prefer forfend the spectacle if he had that option, because it tended to turn into measurement contest, quite literally sometimes.

Besides, he wanted to save Steve from further embarrassment.

So, instead of defeating the healer in the last round, the prince allowed him to gracefully back up and relinquish his cards, leaving the game, though Loki succumbed to curiosity and asked the question that was bugging him the whole time,

“Would you mind me asking why are you so attached to your head cover?”

That owned him a dirty look, “Yes, I would.”

Jay cheered up, “Doc, c'mon, tell us what you are hiding! Is it an embarrassing tattoo? Oh, is it a naked woman with big tits? Or may be, a small teddy bear?”
Javier grinned, “No, it is a Mohawk, bro, Doc is an undercover Cherokee.”

Darcy snickered, “Riiiight...”

Doc endowed them all with a look promising slow and painful death without any anesthesia, then turned back to Loki and pronounced in very official tone, “it's US nuclear launch codes.”

Loki couldn't help himself and laughed along with the others at the ridiculous idea.

He found it extremely pleasant to be able to display his emotions without disciplining himself or without fearing being laughed at.

He was so used to hiding his true opinions behind the intricate masks of lies that this new experience was very unusual and even more enjoyable.

Honesty was cherished and expected in Asgard, and he tried to live up to expectations, he truly did, but it earned him nothing but rejection, disdain and disapproval, even when he was right.

He didn't remember how it started, or why, or what was the trigger, if it was something he did or something he said, but as he grew older every attempt to speak freely or to show his emotions ended in pain.

He remembered the look in his Father's eyes one day he openly spoke his mind, a look of fear and disgust, and although Loki knew he was right, his confidence was shuttered beyond repair.

From that moment and on he swore to himself to hide his thoughts from the world. After many years of futile attempts to understand his family's unjustified attitude he gave up and resolved to trickery.

Sometimes the prince felt disgusted with himself for all that lying, sometimes he couldn't even look at himself in the mirror because the mask he wore made him sick of himself, but after a while in the stillness of the night he convinced himself again and again that it was better then constantly being hurt by others.

And now, on an alien planet, among inferior race, side by side with the humans he barely knew, he suddenly felt the walls he had so carefully built inside his heart cracking.

The feeling scared and exited him at the same time, and Loki balanced on the edge, not sure what to do.
“So, you want to finish the game or not?”

Darcy looked agitated. She lost most of her clothes and came no closer to getting Loki naked as she was before the game started.

The scarf and the boot didn't count because both items were lost to Javier for the sake of research.

Loki smiled slyly, “Lady Darcy, are you certain of your challenge?”

“Yes, prince, all or nothing.”

Javier and Jay exchanged looks and simultaneously threw cards on the table, “We give in.”

They both were already stripped down to their underwear, and in no way they were walking back to the living quarters in their birth suits.

Steve looked at Loki tentatively, concern written all over his gentle face, though Loki wondered if the captain was troubled about his well being or about saving lady Darcy's honor.

The Asgardian smiled and nodded to Rogers as if saying mentally, *Do not worry, my friend, everything is going to be just fine.*

And to his surprise Steve seemed to grasp the meaning of the look as he smiled back at Loki and visibly relaxed.


The word rolled silently off his tongue, leaving a sweet aftertaste like a fruit he hungered for for a long time but couldn't have.

*No, I can't give in to the urge of rejoicing, I can not allow myself to let my guard down, to believe that I found a person who wants to befriend me for me alone and for no other purpose. I cannot get my hopes up, because it will end in nothing but pain again.*

*Though I still could play around and enjoy the show while it lasts...*

Loki turned his attention back to the game.

The last five-card deal was given out, and he watched merrily as Darcy stealthy reached for the
hidden slack of cards in her decollete and changed two of them.

It was one swift motion, almost undetectable by human eyes, but Loki was no human, and little tricks of the woman couldn't outsmart him.

Javier bellowed, “OK, lads, cards on the table!”

Darcy smiled triumphantly, “I'm sorry, your royal Highness, but, “ she laid out her cards open for everyone to see, “it is Three Queens over a pair of nines. I win.”

Javier whistled in appreciation and Jay patted Loki's shoulder in sympathy.

Loki just grinned foxily, “Oh, milady, there is nothing to be sorry about.”

He twitched his fingers, letting the magic flow and change the cards in his favor.

Then he opened up his set to everyone's surprise- an Ace, a King, a Queen, a Jack and a ten of one kind.

“I do believe it is called “Royal flush”, isn't it? Which means,” he held a dramatic pause for the sake of the moment, “That I win.”

The men burst into whooping and clapping and Loki even felt a sting of sympathy for lady Darcy, but it instantly passed. Steve deserved to be avenged and the prince was absolutely sure ms. Lewis was the main culprit.

Though again, his respect for the ladies couldn't let the girl be humiliated in the presence of other males.

“Lady Darcy, I would very much appreciate if you choose to get the gentlemen here some beer instead of shedding your clothes.”

Darcy nodded shortly and excused herself to the bar, cheeks burning with indignation and eyes...obviously planning revenge.

Loki smiled.

When the laughter and excitement slowly faded, Doc stood up to leave.

“Aren't you going to stay and celebrate my victory with us, Doc?”
Doc’s face showed nothing but concern.

“No. I have a lot of work to do for tomorrow, not every day you get aliens on board.”

Loki froze in shock, eyes darting back and forth to all the face’s on the table. Steve frogot how to breathe.

Javier smiled at Loki’s predicament and waved it off, “Aw, c’mon, don’t worry, we all know you are from another planet.”

“Well,” Loki was surprised he could speak at all, “You all seem to be taking the news rather...serenely.”

Snipes grinned, “Well, yeah, considering that we all are aliens here. I mean, I’m an illegal alien, well, was, you are an extraterrestrial, Jay...” The man paused for a second. “No, Jay is not an alien, he is a freaking mutant.”

At that Jay sent a wet kiss to Javier, the other grinned wider. “Anyway, all said, this is by far not even close to the weirdest shit we've seen on our duty, ain't it right, Doc?”

Doc nodded, “you mean, like that time when Jay striped himself to the watching tower completely naked and sang “My heart will go on” for two damn hours until you dragged him down?”

Jay snickered, “Hey, I was drunk, and it was totally worth it.”

He turned to Loki, big dark eyes displaying nothing but tranquility and friendliness. “Trust me, dude, its not a big deal. Well, it is but not that much...I mean, don't worry, we'll be gentle.”

Loki couldn't decide at that confession if he should be relieved or shrieking in horror.

“We are pretty used to it, cause seriously, our captain is totally an alien.”

“I recall being a vampire last week,” a quiet low voice echoed from behind Loki’s back and all the players instantly rushed to stand up at attention.

Steve and Loki stood up as well to face a very tall man with blond hair swiped to the side and icy blue eyes revealing no emotion whatsoever.
Jay was the one the Captain addressed.

“Permission to speak, Sir? That theory didn't...check out.”

The captain considered him for a second and Loki noticed how Jay tried to suppress a shiver.

“How so?”

“Well...you don't seem to sparkle in the sun.”

“Lovely.”

The expression on the captain's face didn't change, but Loki felt the air warming up in the room as the other men visibly relaxed.

“Now, gentlemen, the party time is over. I believe, you all have some work to do.”

The chorus of voices shouted, “Yes, Sir,” and all three men immediately left the room, Jay and Javier crashing into each other in the doorway as they tried to go through it at the same time.

“I'm Captain Alexander Iceman, I'll be commanding the fleet group for tomorrow exercise. Prince Loki, would you mind taking a walk with me?”

“Not at all.”

Loki nodded to Steve and followed the Captain through the corridor.

*Now that should be interesting.*
Chapter 6

As Loki followed the Captain he couldn't shake off the feeling that something was very very wrong.

The Asgardian couldn't pinpoint the exact feeling, it was something almost unnoticeable, like a shadow lurking on the dark wall, but it still made Loki's nerves tingle.

The Captain was very tall and strongly built, challenging Thor himself in size, boasting the austere beauty of Nordic warriors from the long past, those who were on the front lines aiding Aesir in the war against the Frost Giants, the warriors who most closely honored Aesir and worshiped Odin.

It might have been the aura surrounding the Captain- a sense of strength, honor, bravery and danger.

Not of equal measure of course, no human would ever be able to threaten Aesir equally with any other dwellers of nine realms, no. More like danger which one would feel looking on a big guardian dog who seems perfectly calm but can strike as soon as one makes a wrong move. The dog wouldn't kill, but a bite could be rather unpleasant.

Loki got his answer the moment Captain stopped and turned to face him.

The prince's inner voice screamed in shock when he saw a familiar glint in those blue eyes, something he noticed so many times while he was growing up, something he saw...in his family's eyes.

The captain's blue irises lacked the electricity of Thor's storm-filled ones, lacked the warmth of Frigga's summer afternoon sky ones, more like deep waters of north sea, always moving and concealing, making one feel small and insignificant.

Just like the eyes of his Father.

Could it be that Odin's connections with humans expanded vaster then only a war alliance? Could it be that the All Father's interest in human world was rooted not in the possible profit for Aesir but in something much more personal, like illegitimate children?

Loki mentally slapped himself for the ridiculousness of the idea.

His father would never disgrace himself with such liaisons, he would never betray Loki's mother in such a shameful manner.

Besides, the human was way too young to be an offspring of Odin's – the All father didn't set a foot
on Midgard for centuries and all of his possible children would be long dead and rotten in the ground by now.

But Odin's blood can manifest in generations for as long as Yggdrasil stands.

No, it is not possible, Odin would've never abandoned his children, even bastard ones.

Plus, there are seven other realms of probability.

The Midgard was a battlefield for all realms at one point of its history or another, and Loki bet not all if none of the warriors ever gave an oath of celibacy. Nor they always asked for consent when laying with humans.

Aesir were of course, chivalry and respectful as befitted the Realm Eternal code of honor, but they didn't ever have to use force- the earthlings were more than eager to show their gratitude to the saviors by any means possible.

If Loki's suspicions were right and the Captain was indeed a half-breed, his bloodline would trace either to other Aesir or to dwellers of other realm, but not Odin himself.

Loki let his gaze linger a bit longer, investigating, calculating, picking up smallest details of Iceman's face and body, searching for any similarities between him and Loki's fellow Aesir that could serve as an evidence to their kinship.

Iceman emanated unusual vibe of authority but it differed from that of Odin or Thor, it wasn't something granted by the royalty of blood. Instead it was a quality of character, impermanent and always changing, like ripples on the water surface, acquired through the years of hard work.

Iceman didn't seem to possess any sort of super human power that could be attributed to his Aesir heritage, but he definitely stood out of the other humans.

The prince's first impression might have been wrong after all, those human bloodlines seemed to absorb anything from outside of their world as a sponge, creating a mixture the Norns themselves would have trouble understanding, don't mind the prince.

Loki mused on that fact for a while.

The Yggdrasil had other realms besides Asgard and Midgard, and Loki's take on his father's participation in human procreation must've been a mistake, but that only concluded the Captain was not of Odin's blood. It didn't mean he was not Aesir. Or elf. Or Jotunn.

Uncertainty meant only one thing- the Captain required a lot closer attention then Loki had
“How do you find Earth so far? Seen anything you liked?”

Iceman's voice didn't falter at that innocent question but Loki could feel the undertone beneath the facade, like a underwater current in the open sea.

“A lot of things actually. Your planet seems to be rather fascinating.”

“Good to hear. What exactly you find the most fascinating, the nature, the scenery, the machinery?”

“Mostly people. Your race seems to be very welcoming to the newcomers.”

“I see.” The Captain went silent for a moment, scrutinizing over Loki’s face and he'd be damned if that gaze was not unnerving.

“Any preferences in weaponry you'd like to explore tomorrow?”

“I'm afraid I haven't reached the level of expertise in knowing human weapons as good as required to have a preference.”

Loki watched with barely concealed fascination as Iceman's face grew darker and darker with each said word and he practically resembled a huge thunderstorm cloud ready to fulminate in any second.

It was a magnificent view and the prince decided to poke that cloud, just a little bit.

“I hope you are equally excited for tomorrow as I am.”

“Oh, I can't wait.”

If the steel in the voice could cut, Loki would be a bloody mess by now.

The prince considered the human for a moment and decided to take pity on him.
“Captain Iceman, you have a question that's burning you and we both know it is not about the weather, so why don't we skip the pleasantries and start talking honestly?”

“Can I be sure my honesty is reciprocated?”

“Of course. What would you like to know?”

“Why are you here.”

“Pardon me?”

“Why you, Asgardians, are on this planet? What's your real purpose here?”

“Why would you consider us to be insincere in our intentions?”

“An ancient race comes to the world that is clearly far behind them in technical development and wants to form an alliance for no cost from our part and no benefit for themselves? Excuse me, but I'll call it a bluff. Either you want something from us and you want it bad enough to degrade to our level, or you are not as peaceful as you say.”

The tone was perfectly calm and measured, but the human's eyes burned with a challenge.

The Captain's gaze was scrutinizing Loki's every movement, looking for the signs of deception that the prince was not inclined to give.

Loki had to give it to Iceman- the human had some guts to dare the Aesir so boldly and openly.

“I thought we have made it clear that our intentions here are strictly peaceful.”

“You speak of peace and yet carry weapons on you all the time.”

“Most of them are elements of decoration as an honor to our traditions.”
“Even your brother's hammer?”

The Prince barely suppressed a sigh.

“No, that's a real weapon. Though I do not understand your concern. There are only two of us here with no guards or security to come to our aid if danger arises, don't you think we have a right to keep something for our own protection?”

“You said you came in peace, who would you need protection from? The race you want to be allies with?”

“I can see even now not all of humans are happy about our arrival, and some might not be as civil about it as you are.”

“I have all rights to be cautious. I don't easily trust outsiders.”

“A very wise mindset, and not only for you. Plus who knows what danger we can encounter on route to our goal. I've heard you have those....grizzly bears that might be rather dangerous if disturbed in this time of year?”

“Oh yeah, very dangerous. And very grisly.”

Loki cursed his damned love for teasing and prepared for a long and tedious quarrel with the Captain because Iceman looked like he was ready to kill, when the prince's eyes shifted over the officer's shoulder and caught a glimpse of something on the wall.

It was a set up of small portraits of different officers and enlisted, all united by one weird feature-small black stripes on the bottom of the pictures. It didn't take Loki long to understand what significance the stand bared- it was a wall of fallen heroes, the realization that made Loki shiver uneasily.

“I apologize, I should have been more respectful in this hall.”

Iceman followed Loki’s gaze and tilted his head, “Don't worry, they can't hear you.”

Loki looked up at him solemnly, “You can't be sure about that.”
“I guess, not. But it doesn’t matter, this is meant for the living, not for the dead.”

“As a reminder of your loss?”

“As a reminder of what we will do to protect those who we care about.”

The Captain stepped closer, invading Loki’s personal space much to the prince’s unpleasant feeling.

“You Asgardians, live for thousands of years. We are given only a hundred and only if we are very lucky. It makes our perception of priorities differ.”

“May be it makes your emotions more urgent then ours, but priorities remain the same. We, as you, above all value life. And therefore, peace.”

“Is that so?”

“Captain, I give you my word, I came to this planet as an ambassador of peace and seek nothing but friendship. If my superiors have other objectives, though it is highly doubtful, I’m unaware of them.”

Loki surprised himself with the sincerity of this outburst more then the one it was directed on.

The prince didn’t doubt for a second the All Father’s decision or his own intent to do everything in his power to carry out the order, but the more time he spent with common humans, the more he got to know how weak and yet strong they were, the more fiercely protective of them he became.

The realization scared Loki.

His fascination with earthlings was anticipated as a sign of curiosity towards the unfamiliar race, but in no way it could have been allowed to grow into something so big that it could interfere with the prince’s carrying out his orders or influence his loyalty to Asgard.

Loki felt all those emotions stirring inside him suddenly, brought to the surface by simply being on Midgard, surrounded by humans, which made him wonder if it was in fact a well-planned strategy to separate him from Thor and throw him off the balance emotionally so later he would be in no condition to assert Asgard’s interests.
Were all those warm welcomes and offers of friendship just another elaborate plan to gully the prince into siding with earthlings?

It hurt deep to think that earthlings accepted him so eagerly just because they were playing their parts in the great scheme of deception. Even Steve. He seemed so genuine, so sincere...

*The best way to convince a clever opponent in forged truth is to send him a fool who doesn't know what role in the game he is playing.*

*So much for Rogers and his lie-rooted friendship...*

“We’ll see about that.” The Captain considered him suspiciously.

Loki felt his insides sizzle with fury.

*How dare they play with him like that?*!

“You humans seem to be so preoccupied with your own importance that you forget one thing- we came here to negotiate but not to cringe before you, and if you want to be treated as equal you better show you have something valuable to offer besides your inflated self-conceit.”

Loki hated himself instantly for letting his emotions slip through the mask, but the boiling anger sipped through the barrier until it was too late and the damage was already done.

All he could do was to stand there and wait for the captain to choose the method of retaliation.

To Loki’s great surprise, Iceman's lips curved into a blinding smile.

“Finally, some genuine response! I was starting to doubt I could ever shake you out of that diplomatic stupor.”

Loki stared at the human in silence.

How one of the best liars of Asgard falling spectacularly into the trap one puny earthling had prepared was beyond explanatory.

*Unbelievable.*

Damn this race of half breeds and their talent to pull emotions out of him.

“What games are you playing with me, Captain?”
“No games if you do the same. I asked you to speak freely, you kept on repeating your memorized pamphlet, so I had to ...give you a little push, so to say. But now, since we finally opened up and made our positions clear,” Iceman smiled at the prince slyly, “I will ask you again, “

The Captain's smile grew wider even if it was hardly possible, “What exactly would you like us to show you tomorrow?”

The soft sigh leaving Loki’s lips was the acknowledgment of defeat.

“Um, the airplanes I guess...Though why are you asking me of my preference? You know that I am not the head of the delegation.”

“The head of your delegation seems to be completely disinterested, so why waste my breath?”

Loki chewed on his lip for a second, considering whether he should feel insulted, concerned, grateful or simply unperturbed by the announcement.

He settled for vengeful.

“Do you know you actually might have some Aesir blood in you?”

Iceman stared at Loki as if the prince told him he could fly by flapping his arms.

“I will skin him.”

That was clearly not the answer the prince anticipated, and his look of surprise gave that away.

Witnessing the prince's bewilderment, the Captain cared to elaborate, “Jay, that little screwball. I'm fed up with bullshit he spreads around with his never stopping tongue. I bet he'll be better without it.”

Loki felt a jolt of compassion for the fellow game opponent even if the captain's fury was well deserved.

“Isn't it a bit of an overkill?”

“No, it's just enough kill. Why, got too attached to him?”

“No. But an innocent man should not suffer for no reason.”
Captain barked out a short laughter, “Innocent? Are we talking about the same person?”

Loki let his lips form a grin, “I've met only one Jay who perfectly matches your description.”

Captain smirked, and Loki felt weird again, but pleasantly weird this time.

Iceman was still to his left like a monolith of bone and will ingrown into the cement floor, only he wasn't looming over Loki, nor he was invading prince's personal space trying to intimidate him. The Officer was still too close to the Aesir, but only because he felt comfortable that way.

Loki's mind buzzed with confusion.

If the captain was playing with him, why would he be non-verbally accepting Loki as one of his own?

That didn't make any sense.

The Prince of course could surmise Iceman had a special training in deception but that was way over his head and bounded on paranoia.

“It was solely mine theory, about your heritage, based on your physical appearance. Don't blame Jay for that.”

“Fine, I wont. I guess he deserves a pardon. At least he got Rogers socializing again.”

Again?

Loki couldn't help himself and chose to develop the question, “Why again? Was he recovering from some traumatic event prior to our encounter that prevented him from communicating with comrades?”

That earned him a confused look, “I'd say so, if you consider being frozen into the ice for 70 years traumatic enough.”

Iceman missed two steps then turned back to look at Loki, who stopped dead behind him.

“He didn't tell you? Hm, and I thought you were all buddies now, after that docks incident.”
Loki didn't have enough time to speak his mind as Iceman continued, “Yes, I saw the security camera's recording. Nice job with that vanishing act, you should teach me one day.”

The Captain kept on talking, striding in well measured steps through the halls and towards the exit, but it all merged into a hum in the background as Loki’s mind rushed through the facts.

*Seventy years in the ice.*

*Considering a normal human's lifespan, all of Steve's friends and most of his close relatives were either dead or senile by now, leaving him completely alone.*

*Plus the changes in the Midgardian culture must have been rather shocking to Rogers as he clearly wasn't too well adapted to them, take even the glitz with the coffee maker.*

Loki's mind momentarily provided the prince with picturesque memories proving how uncomfortable Steve seemed in the company of most of the humans, and how relaxed he was with the Aesir.

Evidently Rogers chose him for some unexplainable reason from the all of others, which meant there was a true interest in his actions.

*That changed everything.*

Loki was mercilessly pulled out of his revelation by the Captain who sounded rather frustrated.

“You aren't listening, are you?”

“My apologies...”

Iceman waved him off, “Don't bother. Just make sure you aren't daydreaming tomorrow, you might actually see something you like.”

“Oh, I'm more then sure I will, Captain.”
“Loki!”

Loki turned towards the voice and saw his brother motioning him from afar.

“Come here, brother!”

He turned to the officer to take his leave as Thor bellowed, “At once!” more impatiently.

To Loki’s surprise, the captain instantly looked murderous again.

The human’s mood was indeed unpredictable and swiftly changing as the open sea.

“It is time for me to leave, I would love to talk to you some more...”

*Considering you've been such a valuable source of information,*

“But...”

“Loki!”

Loki cursed his brother mentally for such disrespect but didn't risk waiting any longer,

“But I have to excuse myself as my brother awaits...”

A heavy palm rested on his shoulder, pinning him down in mid step.

“A word of a personal advice, your Highness.”

Iceman leaned closer and whispered to Loki, “Grow some balls. You'll never be a good leader if you can't even stand up to your own brother.”

With that the Captain nodded curtly and left, and Loki set his feet towards Thor who looked rather pissed at the younger prince for making him wait.
Loki threw a last short glance at the Captain's retreating back and wondered why the words put so vulgarly straightforward hit so close to home.

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“You should never abandon me like that, brother.”

“What could have happened that made you suddenly crave my presence?”

The noisy herd of Thor's followers had finally dissipated, leaving the brothers alone in the unpretentious but spacious quarters Agent Coulson and the US Navy had graciously provided for them, and as the silence fell on the hall Loki forfeited the rule of subordination and let his displeasure to manifest.

“I don't recall you ever being so emotionally attached to me.”

Loki's eyes glistened with irritation but the sight was disparagingly overlooked by Thor since the thunderer's attention was concentrated solely on himself.

It was a dashing change in his brother's behavior that stunned Loki the most- the moment Loki was with someone else Thor turned omnipresent, trying to overpower, overshadow or simply intimidate anyone who dared to catch the younger prince's eye, but as soon as Loki returned to his usual place slightly behind his brother, Thor immediately lost any interest in him.

“I'm aware that you can't help yourself, Loki, but you shouldn't forget that your place is at my side.”

*How can I ever forget if you keep reminding me all the time?*

“Why, afraid I might find a better side to be at?”

The growl of anger resonated from the walls and made the glass in the window shudder.

“Watch your tongue, Loki, I will not allow any form of disobedience on this mission.”
“Disobe...I am not your slave, Thor, and shall not be treated as such!”

The older Aesir winced at the sound of Loki’s voice, taken aback by the outburst, then glanced at Loki’s face distorted with irritation and sighed, all of a sudden looking genuinely concerned.

“Forgive me, brother, I meant no harm. I’m just worried you might get too distracted by the trinkets they showed us.”

Thor’s worried tone soothed Loki’s anger a bit, and the prince allowed himself to calm down.

“Trinkets? Thor, I am not that weak of will, and you...do not underestimate humans, they might be tougher then they seem.”

Thor’s delightful laughter boomed across the room, “Tougher? Yes, tough as wolf cubs.”

The older prince clearly resented any idea of allowing humans to prove themselves worthy, but the mission required diplomacy and display of respect, so Loki decided to press on the matter, though using another tactics.

“Brother, mind that our Father asked to treat humans as equals, we should not defy his will.”

Thor shot him an irritated look.

“Our Father is too sentimental when it comes to the earthlings, but I'm not blind. I will not allow Asgard to be binded by the treaty with this puny race unless earthlings acknowledge were true power resinds.”

“You are unwise in underestimating them.”

“I shall not discuss the matter further.”

Thor took a big gulp from the water glass on the small table in the center of the room and headed to the door, waving at Loki dismissively.

“Stay here brother, and take a good night rest, you will realize your erroneous ways in the morning. The strain of our mission is taking tall on your ability to think.”
It was Loki’s turn to growl, “My ability to think when I’m unconscious is better then your will ever be.”

“I’m starting to doubt that. I’ll escort Lady Jane to the observatory and immediately return, and I wish to find you here, reposing.”

“So I should stay here in solitude while you do exactly the opposite of what you just forbade me? Why exactly is that?”

Thor turned abruptly to Loki, scornfully frowning.

“You are way too affected by interactions with midgardians.”

“As if you are not.”

“So it would seem.”

“I wonder what Lady Jane would think of that.”

Thor burst into laughter at Loki’s poisonous tone.

“Oh, brother, don't be jealous. I promise, as soon as we are done with diplomacy I shell put all my efforts into finding you a maiden, and if the powers of Luck are bounded in our favor, she might even be pleasing to the eye.”

With that he exited, shutting the door behind him with a loud smack.

Loki ground his teeth in fury, “You will pay for this,” and strolled towards the table to plan his revenge.
Loki was crouching over the table, irritantly scribbling down theories and schemes and everything even remotely connected to the field of science Lady Jane specialized in, everything she could be interested in discussing. The Aesir was dead sure Thor could never provide her with enough information to quench the girl’s thirst for knowledge, and that was exactly the loophole Loki could step in.

He knew he couldn't be a match for Thor in maiden's eyes because he lacked his brother's good looks and strength and power, but his sharp mind could catch the girl's attention for at least a brief moment, and that was all he needed.

Thor will be angry, no, he would be furious at Loki for even attempting to steal the attention of the lady he fancied. But it at least will remind him that Loki exists and not as his personal dog on the leash, that he is worthy of being taken into consideration.

Even if Loki's little moment of triumph will last for a second, it would still be worth it.

And so, the prince took another piece of paper and contemplated another schematics, when a big shadow flashed past the window.

Loki's head jerked up in surprise and he waited for a moment, wondering if the bright light in the room and darkness outside were playing tricks on his eyes, but then the shadow flit in the opposite direction and the prince realized it was not only real, but assumed a human shape.

Loki rushed to the window, his work instantly forgotten, and cracked it wide open only to freeze in shock as Jay's smug face came into his sight.

“Dude, check this out, I'm a dragon!”

The human stretched out his arms and made weird motions with his feet that likely were supposed to resemble the movements of the flying reptile.

Loki took a moment to appreciate the view.
Jay was swinging side to side along the window, suspended in mid-air on a thin steel cord one side of which was locked on his belt, and the other stretched through the opening in the drainage in the building's roof, twisted into elaborate pattern along the fire stairs and ended up on the ground where another shadow was counterbalancing Jay's weight.

Loki couldn't be completely sure, but judging by the choreography of the second figure’s movements, it was Javier.

The prince prided himself of his mental capabilities, but at that very moment they were spectacularly failing him as he couldn't think of even one plausible explanation for the scene.

So he decided to ask.

“What exactly are you doing?”

Jay flashed him a pearly smile, “We brought your scrawny alien ass some food!”

To prove his statement, the man reached into the inner pocket of his uniform and pulled out a pack made of brown paper and a bottle of beer.

Loki in futile attempt to conceal his perplexed state of mind pointed a finger at Jay, “My ass is not scrawny, it is well-toned.”

He then ignored Jay's snort and a sly remark, “You are so gay” and continued, “Why would you even consider that I might need sustenance?”

Jay waited a bit until he swung closer to Loki, then shrugged, “Oh, I don't know, dude, may be because your BFF from Brooklyn was whining the whole freaking evening that his pal Loki missed the dinner and should be starving to death by now?”

Loki fixed his eyes on Jay's swinging form and wondered, “BFF?”

The man rolled his big dark eyes, “Best friend forever? Big, blond, blue eyed, named Steve as I recall?”

He didn't wait for Loki to process the information, just reached forward and pushed the pack and the bottle in Loki’s arms.

“Here, just take it. It tastes like horse shit, but I got you some booze to wash it down.”
Loki acknowledged it with the eloquent “Oh,” then tried to force his mind to work
“How do you know that?”

“What? That the food is bad? Its a navy base, dude, bad food is a given!”

“Now, how the horse shit tastes like?”

Loki wasn't sure why did he ask that, but he welcomed a moment of silence that followed his question to brace himself out of the stupor he had fallen into.

The prince was hard to surprise and even harder to shock, so he attributed the loss of words to the outrageous preposterousity of the situation and to the hypnotizing rhythm of Jay's body swings.

Although the rhythm seemed to go off bit, as the trajectory of movement grew longer and longer.

Loki wasn't the only one to notice that, as Jay shouted down into the darkness,
“Yo, you are supposed to keep me steady, Snipes!”

The answer was short to follow,
“it is called an ocean breeze, you motherfucker!”

Loki felt his lips stretching into a smile on their own accord.
“Where is Steve?”

“He...” Jay took a second to swing back into the sight, “he is creating a distraction. You have some crazy shit dudes guarding you, you know that? Especially that ninja fucker Coulson, he kept popping up every single time we tried to sneak in closer to your quarters.”

“And he will be very pleased to show you some of his ninja moves should you choose to return to the ground.”

Jay's eyes doubled in size and mouth formed a perfect “o” as Coulson's calm voice echoed in the
Loki just kept on staring at the man.

“Um...can I please stay up here?”

“I'm afraid you can not, officer Cleary.”

Jay only had time to whisper “Shit” before the cord went slack and he plummeted down to the ground.

There was a moment of silence, then quiet commotion and something that sounded like Jay's complaints and then silence again after Coulson hushed both men away from the building.

And Loki just stood there, a pack of hot wings in one hand and a bottle of beer in another, watching the midnight sky and thinking...of nothing really, because his mind, to put it simply, for a moment went blank.
The rays of the rising sun had barely touched the sky when Loki was woken up from his peaceful slumber by quiet knock on the door.

It took him a moment to become fully alert and another moment to stroll to the door, making himself presentable at the same time.

The prince didn't remember falling asleep, nor did he intend to – the outlines of scientific knowledge he planned on sharing with Lady Jane were yet to be finished, but the flabbergasting demonstration of Midgardian hospitality by his newly found acquaintances had him properly distracted.

The Aesir spent a good couple of hours contemplating the reasons of their aforementioned behavior, and the more he thought of it, the more he became assured their escapade had nothing to do with implementing a careful strategic plan of pushing him off balance he had suspected was in progress that day, because no planner in nine realms could hit upon an idea so ridiculous.

It was a noble impulse of their hearts, Loki realized, and that made him grateful and strangely warm inside.

The prince's first urge was to share the story with Thor, but he knew his brother all too well to anticipate how the Thunderer would react - laugh at him and tease him and diminish any value the deed bared, calling Loki weak and crazy for being so fascinated by puny humans and their stupid tricks, telling Sif and warriors three that his brother is so dim witted he belittles himself to befriending earthlings so they could humiliate him together.

No, he would keep this memory private and recall it each time he has to endure yet another story of Thor and his friends drunken adventures. They will laugh and see him return their excitement and wont bother him, thinking he is truly astonished by their tales, unaware of the real reason behind his smile.

When Loki finally reached the door, he was surprised to see Lady Jane standing in the door frame.

She looked tired and weary, dark circles casting unfitting shadows beneath her warm brown eyes and her face spoiled by the frown of displeasure.

“I'm sorry for waking you up, but...Agent Coulson asked to tell you to get ready, they will pick you up in half an hour.”

Jane's petite frame was visibly shaking with tiredness, and Loki pitied her for a second for having to
endure Thor for so long.

The girl nodded and turned to leave, not willing to waste any more time on the aliens, when Loki reached out and caught her by the wrist.

“Milady? Is everything all right?”

The sincere concern in Loki's tone instantly soothed Jane's irritation like a cool breeze when it washes over the sun perched skin.

She stopped and turned to address the prince,

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you. I just...It's been a long day and I'm a bit tired.”

She wondered for a second how could it be that last time she saw the prince his eyes were emerald green and now, in the light of dawn they turned blue, clear and bottomless like the morning sky, framed with heavy line of long dark lashes that came into sharp contrast with his pale skin.

Jane suddenly became aware of Loki's strong fingers still wrapped around her wrist and her body flushed hot at instant, because the touch was burning.

Loki kept watching her attentively, and it only made Jane more frustrated, because she felt naked under his lingering gaze.

*Why would he even do that, why is he staring at me like that, not blinking?*

*And why is he licking his lips at the same moment, those soft luscious lips..Oh my god, I have to stop!*

“You seem displeased, Lady Jane, had my brother wronged you in any way?”

Loki released his tender grip on her arm and took a step back, and Jane finally felt she had some air to breathe.

“No, no...he is just...overwhelming sometimes. I hoped he could ...well, help me with my theory and stuff, but he doesn't seem to be even remotely interested, which I totally understand, and mean no disrespect, I was just a bit disappointed that he is so concentrated on himself and can't even explain simple things and...I'm sorry, I really should shut my mouth right now.”

Loki watched with barely hidden amusement how Lady Jane's lovely cheeks burned red with shame
and how she actually bit her lip to stop blabbing.

“Forgive him, Milady, Thor means no harm, he just...genuinely lacks manners.” Loki’s head suddenly jerked up as if he remembered something important, “Speaking of,”

he trailed back into the room and came out moments later, carrying a pile of papers in his hand.

“I've prepared those for you and I didn't get a chance to finish, but...um, I'll try to finish after the exercise.”

Jane accepted the papers and gave Loki a stunned look.

“What is this?”

“Schematics of Yggdrasil, description of Bifrost, some other information you might find useful for your research...I have to apologize beforehand, I am not familiar with Midgardian scientific terms so I used common language, but you have my word I will elaborate anything you find difficult to understand as soon as we return from the demonstration.”

The dumbfounded look on the woman’s face was the best reward for the evening Loki spent on scribbling.

The time wasn't wasted if in result he could make a lady smile, like Jane was smiling right now, her face lit up with pure emotions of joy and gratitude.

“Just one inquiry, milady- why exactly were you sent to wake me up? Doesn't Coulson have enough agents to do his bidding and not exploit the kindness of your heart?”

Jane blinked twice before responding, then blushed even more, “Um...actually, it was my idea. Thor was telling me something about his adventures when agent Coulson came to discuss some security details before he would come here and wake you up and ...”

“And you volunteered to come here so you could finally break free from my beloved brother?”

The teasing undertone of Loki's question forced Jane to lower her eyes and pick at the papers nervously.

Loki just laughed at the poor woman,
“Don't worry, milady, I'll keep it our secret. I know from personal experience Thor could be rather difficult to deal with. Now, if you'll excuse me, “ he caught her wrist with his fingers again and bowed down to plant a swift kiss on her hand, “I'll depart to prepare myself for the day ahead.”

Jane smiled awkwardly, turned on her heels and practically run away from him, casting a quick look back when she thought he wasn't watching anymore, when in fact he was, realizing she had been caught and running even faster.

The notes surely had the planned effect, the prince concluded – he was careful to monitor Jane's reactions and even allowed himself to check her pulse twice while he was holding her hand, and was rather stunned that she didn't faint because her heartbeat was skyrocketing.

It was very pleasing to meet someone who got so exited by the prospect of gaining knowledge.
At least Loki had a chance to challenge Thor's good looks with the superiority of his own mind.

Loki allowed himself to grin for a moment, stepping back into his quarters and thinking quietly that the day promised to be interesting.

******

“I've practiced the whole breakfast.”

“What?” Steve's fist stopped inches from the door as he turned to look at Jay.

The smaller man seemed to embody pure joy as he held up his arm and produced a gesture vaguely resembling one of peace, only with fingers divided between the middle and the ring one and the thumb pointing outwards.

“It's a Vulcan greeting.”

“Vulcan?”

“Alien race from Star trek.”
Steve wasn't familiar with the said trek of stars, but he was damn sure Loki wasn't a Vulcan, “Loki is Asgardian.”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious.”

“It's Captain America.”

Jay rolled his eyes, “You of course know the official Asgardian way of saluting? “

“Um, no...”

Jay rolled his eyes in the opposite direction- he must have been born with the talent, “All righty then, I'll stick to Vulcan. “

The door opened before Steve got a chance to knock, and Jay repeated the gesture, this time accompanied by the official “Live long and prosper.”

“Peace and long life,” was the response and both men blinked in surprise when Loki's long fingers mirrored the gesture.

Rogers was absolutely sure Jay would have hit the floor if he hadn't been lazily leaning on the door frame. This way he limply scrambled down the wall and bounced back when his military training finally kicked in.

“Wow, just wow, dude, how did you know that?”

Steve imagined if Jay was a puppy, he would be beating the floor with his tail mercilessly and probably jump on Loki to lick his face in the upsurge of endless love and happiness.

Loki seemed completely unnerved.

“A successful diplomat must know of perception of his race by local population. So, I made inquiries and acquainted myself with your cultural traditions.”

“Can I marry you?”
Loki smirked at the proposal, fixing his newly conjured silk scarf loosely on his neck, “I believe, the appropriate colloquialism will be, you are so gay.”

The prince managed not only to repeat the phrase, but to mimic Jay’s intonation precisely, the fact that amused Steve the most.

Jay giggled shamelessly and sent Loki a kiss, “I stand my case. Nice wear, by the way. Where did you get it?”

“Went shopping.”

“But you told us at the club you have no money!”

Loki smiled smugly at the man’s playful indignation,

“I paid with gold, horses and women.”

“Hey, I’m going to be your guide today, are you going to pay me too?”

“I can give you five dollars.”

“Well that’s more than my weekly allowance, thanks, bud!”

Steve’s accusingly pointing finger interfered Jay’s trail of thought, “Stop teaching him bad things.”

“OK, mommy, I’ll be good.” the man nodded to Steve and slyly winked back at the Aesir.

Loki’s eyebrow elegantly arched in response, “He looks more like “daddy” to me.”

Jay waved him off, completely ignoring red as tomato Rogers, “No, Steve is the Mommy. The Big Daddy is on the ship assembling the crew to hit the water.”

He looked at the watch and cursed, “And he’ll slap me till the beginning of next week if we are late, so, ladies, lets roll.”
An elegant hand stopped the man in mid-turn.

“I have a favor to ask of you, Jay. Would you mind to refrain from familiarities when we are in presence of my brother?”

Jay's face instantly became serious and calm as he politely nodded, “Do not worry, your Highness, I've got your back.” And then he winked.

As the trio left the barracks, Loki wondered why exactly he felt so relieved when Jay didn't seem offended by his request.

When the men made their way through the base, Steve wondered how was it possible for Loki, dressed in simple civilian clothes, to outshine every single officer in a parade uniform and in full regalia.

And as they approached the quarter deck and saw the commanding crew of the capital ship, Jay mused why exactly nobody had told him that the Big Daddy Iceman decided to change most of the officers on board to the platoon of fucking Navy Seals.

Loki winced at the morning sun that was lazily crawling up the horizon.

It was very strange to feel so at ease when he was so far from home.

And even more strange, since the sun itself differed from the Sun of Asgard. There, in the Realm Eternal, the brightest star on the sky was as magnificent as the world it illuminated, and it pierced everything and everyone with its light, unforgiving, revealing all the imperfections, making Loki crave for the dark shadows it created.

Here, the sun was different, warm and gentle, embracing everyone like a loving parent, making one yearn to be in the light and yet making impossible for one to hide in the dark as it cast all the shadows away.

Thor, by his royal tradition, was late, and Loki's nerves tingled because with each passing minute Captain Iceman and the officers around him were getting more and more pissed.
Steve upon their arrival had assumed a position to Loki's right and the prince smiled to himself, silently enjoying the company.

Jay was engaged in rather heated discussion with a group of female officers on the side of boardwalk, who from time to time cast quick glances at Loki, and the prince wondered if he was the subject of the quarrel. Finally, the man managed to break free and almost galloped to Loki and Steve, cheeks flushed, wild look in his eyes.

When he got closer, Loki realized, that the man's frustration was for some reason directed at him.

“I am not taking you anywhere with me ever again,” Jay hissed, glaring at the prince.

“Have I wronged you in some way? If so, it was unintentionally.”

Jay let out a sigh of despair, “Sorry, man, I shouldn't have snapped like that...it's just...you just came here and all of a sudden all the women seem to have hots for you, and it's really frustrating.”

Loki glanced sideways at Steve, whose eyebrows seemed to reach the same high as his own and disappear in the hairline.

“Pardon?”

“They want to get into your pants. Have sex with you. Breed like bunnies. Fu...”

Steve stopped him in mid-sentence, “OK, I think it's enough, we've got the meaning.”

Loki was dumbfounded, “I...um...I'm afraid you've misunderstood the ladies, they were perhaps referring to my brother...”

Both Steve and the Aesir had to take a step back as Jay started gesticulating uncontrollably, “Oh my fu...dear Lord, what's wrong with you and your self esteem? I did not misunderstand them, how could it even be possible, if all I've been hearing this morning is Lokilokilokiloki, I'll mutter it in my sleep for crying out loud, this Lokilokilokiloki. Loki this, Loki that. I've asked them if I could hook them up with Thor, because obviously you're just one and can't...you know, multiply or something, to be with all of them at once...”
“I can multiply...”Loki blurted for some reason and momentarily regretted the slip of the tongue since Jay's eyes went rabid.

“Well, keep it to yourself, mate. I don't want to be lynched for keeping you out of reach of their grabby hands. What was I about to say...oh, you brother- you know what they told me? I quote, “if we wanted another meat head, we would have gone to Marine barracks and pimp some dumb blond out there, they have a lot of good looking dudes who in addition to their muscles are clean shaved.” So yeah, here we go.”

Loki threw a careful glance at the group of females Jay escaped moments ago, and found out to his amazement they were attentively watching his every move.

The way they looked at him, playing with their hair, licking their lips, hungry looks playing on their faces, Loki could only describe as outrageous flirting.

It should have appalled him, or frighten, or deeply embarrass, but it actually felt...pleasant to be in a center of attention. Those sorts of glances were always directed at his elder brother and Loki himself was mostly overlooked, so...

He gave the ladies a curt nod of gratitude, and watched the effect, mesmerized by all the giggles and blushes and coquette glances the women responded with.

His observation was interrupted by Jay pushing a stack of small papers in his hand.

“What is it?” Loki inquired with a dreadful feeling.

“Their phone numbers.”

“You are overstepping the boundaries of appropriate.”

“Why...can't you just take them?”

Loki started to get irritated.

“For what purpose exactly? I'm an a diplomat and will not spend time fornicating with midgardian maidens I've never met!”
Jay suddenly looked very miserable, “your Highness, please? As a token of our friendship?”

Anger boiled inside Loki’s veins, and he would have probably do something stupid with this annoying little pest if Steve wasn't looming over his shoulder and if Jay didn't lean in and whisper, “Please, it's a question of life and death.”

Loki stepped even closer to the human, hovering above him like a thunder cloud, almost seeing the reflection of his own eyes sparkling with emerald green flashes of anger in Jay's dark ones.

“And how is that, exactly?”

Jay pouted, “Those furies promised to cut off my balls and feed them to me until I choke if I fail to pass you the numbers, and I felt very vulnerable...I always do when it comes to my testicles.”

Loki straightened up and growled with frustration, anger immediately leaving him like a whirl of mist evaporates in the rays of the sun.

He looked at Steve, and Cap only shook his head and smiled.

Jay reminded Loki of a puppy that kept misbehaving constantly, but kept putting on a face so innocent and adorable that everyone just kept forgiving it for all mischief it had caused.

Indeed, the that human harbored great many talents, and for that reason alone Loki didn't want to be pissed at him. Nor could he.

The pleading look in those huge dark eyes didn't allow him to harbor any ill emotions for long.

The prince reached out and tore the papers out of Jay’s grip, catching the fragile human's wrist with his fingers and squeezing tightly, not strong enough to break the bones, but hard enough to make the point.

“I'll save you this once, but keep in mind- if you try to sell me again, and I will personally castrate you.”

Loki leaned so close, his and Jay's noses were almost touching. “And I'll be very thoroughful.”

He wasn't sure if his threat had the intended effect, as Jay just flashed him a blinding smile and whispered back, “You are gorgeous when you are angry.”
Loki had nothing else but growl in defeat.

That very moment the captain's patience wore thin. Iceman motioned to the officers to move out and bellowed, “All aboard, time to move.” The officers immediately broke their lineup and started to board the ship.

The same second Thor chose to finally grace the quarter deck with his presence.

As the Thunderer realized that the humans were going to leave without him, his face became an epiphany of confusion and anger.

“What is this? You leaving without me?”

Iceman turned to face Thor in the middle of his way up the ladder.

“Excuse me? Are you a woman to make us all wait for you?”

He didn't raise his voice, but it nevertheless echoed like thunder in the silence as everyone stopped immediately to listen to him.

“If so, you should have told me, I would’ve brought flowers.”

Loki rushed to his brother as soon as the words left captain's lips, he knew all to well that Thor never took insults lightly, especially ones questioning his masculinity, and if Loki was even a split of a second late, it would've resulted in a bloodbath.

He was just on time.

Loki's pale hand gripped Thor's bicep right when the Aesir was trying to charge at the humans.

“Thor, do not.”

“How dare you stop me now, brother? They've just insulted me greatly, and you are siding with them?”

“I'm siding with no one, Thor. You were late and so disrespectful, and...”
Thor bellowed at him in barely restricted fury, “I shall not listen to you preaching on how I should behave...”

Loki’s patience was not endless either.

“Very well, brother, do as you please. But I warn you I will not be the one to tell Father that we failed because you couldn’t control your temper.”

The sharpness of his voice hit Thor like a whip across his face and the Thunderer winced.

It must have been a deep frown that convinced Thor in the truthfulness of his younger brother’s intentions and made him forcefully calm down.

“Fine, I will let it go, but only once. “

“Thank you. Now, let's not let them wait any longer, shall we?”

Loki smiled at his brother in reconciliation and guided him carefully towards the ladder.

Steve and Jay immediately assumed positions close to the princes, Jay played a guide and a distraction for still gloomy Thor, the mission he fulfilled spectacularly, talking without a break and fully occupying Thor’s attention; and Steve assumed his position of a self-appointed body guard for Loki.

Through all the commotion the younger prince stole a second to glance at the captain, who was still looking at him, dead calm, and grinning.

*This is going to be a very long trip,* Loki thought sadly and wished to the High Powers that it would go smoothly, without any other hiccups.

He rarely got what he wished for.
Chapter 8

Loki was captivated by the austere beauty of the ship.

She was incredible, primitive by the Aesir point of view and yet- sturdy and dependable.

The prince wondered why was he so impressed by the tour, why he enjoyed every second of being inside the ship in her tight and narrow corridors, listening to the sound of ocean waves beating on the hull from outside and feeling the walls vibrate with the steady hum of the engine. He even took a second and put his palm on the wall, feeling the low almost imperceptible sound of her heart under his skin.

Humans had long abandoned the belief that world around them was alive and sentient, a regretful mistake from Loki’s perspective, because each time a question crossed his mind and he addressed her, he could feel the ship responding to his polite inquiries. It was never words or sentences, more like feelings and undercurrents, but Loki could sense every single halftone of the ship's mood, her curiosity, her solemn promise to protect those inside her, and a warm welcome to the prince.

However inconceivable it might have seemed, the war ship was genuinely trying to be as hospitable to the newcomers as she could.

And for that Loki was enormously grateful.

His brother, though, was equally disappointed, bored and infuriated as Loki was captivated.

The elder Aesir didn't care to display any interest in the ship whatsoever, most likely because the technology was so outmatched by the Asgardians. His derogatory assumptions of Midgardian inferiority had gotten their physical evidence and Thor didn't have any motive to be even politely attentive.

Perhaps though it was also caused by the fact that he had a hard time navigating through the ship's passages. They were rather narrow even for smaller-framed humans, and Thor was more massive then most of them. He kept constantly bumping into the walls or hitting his head on the low-rise door frames and that made him angrier with each time.

Loki wondered if this was an elegant and very discrete revenge from the Captain Iceman for Thor's earlier arrogance- surely the crew could have chosen another, easier and more ...spacious route for their guests.

Instead the Chief Executive Officer, a young pleasantly looking man whom Iceman delegated to assist Jay in entertaining the princes, was leading them through passage ways so meandering and tight Loki wondered if he should have stocked some of the weapon lube he saw seamen using on ordnance to squeeze himself easier through the halls.
When the procession finally emerged back to the surface on the flying deck, Loki's knees almost buckled under the feeling that rushed over him. It might have been the light, blinding and incapacitating after a long time in the darkness, or perhaps a gush of ocean breeze, filling his lungs with fresh air, making his head spin with the taste of freedom it brought.

The US Navy Carrier Victoria was heading to the open ocean on full throttle, slicing the bottomless waves with her mighty body, only slightly holding back to let the other two convoy ships catch up with her.

Those were a cruiser US Monterrey, which primary designation was reconnaissance and tactical support of the exercise, and smaller but faster heavily armed destroyer US Santa Ana, tasked with providing cover fire and amphibious support to the carrier.

Loki could quote all the technical details about all three ships, their weight in tons, speed capacity and armament they carried on board- not because he was so interested in data so specific, but because he knew he would be the one to report to the All Father upon their return to Asgard. So he was obliged to memorize everything, no matter how insignificant it might have seemed.

To speak truthfully though, Loki was much more interested in airplanes.

Those little birds nesting on the carrier's aircraft platform were captivating- the way they operated was pretty simple, and yet those birds were capable of rather astonishing performance.

Thor would never understand Loki's fascination with the metal that made a man soar in the skies like an eagle, but how could he- he already had his own means of flying, the rest was unworthy of his attention.

Loki on the other hand dreamed every night of being able to fly so freely among the clouds, far from the boundaries of earth, defying gravity and leaving behind all the burdens and judgments.

Loki could appear in the skies by himself if he chose to, but it was teleporting- jumping continuously from one place in space to another by the means of magic, it was only for practical purposes and never for pleasure.

He would ask Thor to carry him, like the did so often when they were children, but that time was long gone and that childish request was unbefitted for a true warrior. He would not give Thor another reason to think of him as a weakling.

The younger Aesir sighed, it would be lovely to find something...or someone who could take him flying again...but that was only a dream, a means of recuperating for a tired mind, and he should think nothing more of it.

The prince had to shake his head a bit to get rid of those obsessive idea.

He had more important things to concentrate on.
For example, how to prevent Thor and Iceman going after each other the second they meet again.

Iceman clearly wasn't planning to go easy on Thor, and Loki's brilliant brother was too bull headed to maneuver out of the tricky situations. Of course, the fight between them would be short, but Loki seriously doubted the rest of the crew would take the demise of their captain lightly, especially that group of assassins who were impersonating the officers at the moment.

Loki wished agent Coulson was with them so he wouldn't have to deal with those two all by himself, but the bastard excused himself from the exercise a night before, justifying it with some sort of emergency in Latin America he had to be present at. He promised to be back in time for the main show, but as the ship carried the Aesir further and further away from the shore, the agent's promise became more and more improbable to fulfill.

While the younger Aesir was musing on the important life questions, the group ended up on the Vultures row- a small platform above the flying deck, designated solely as a observation point.

The officer motioned to the crew beneath them and Loki's heart beat faster when two Raptors started their engines, crawled lazily on the runway and took off to the skies with deafening roar.

“As the fighters reach the maximum speed they will drop the altitude and return to show us some of their best manoeuvring capabilities...” Officer didn't bother to hide the pride in his voice, which made Thor huff with disdain.

“So proud of your puny weapons, is this the best you can do?”

“I can assure you our planes are among the best in the world...”

“You speak loud of your technological development and yet had not offered us anything worthy to challenge Aesir's magic.”

“Sir, I understand that your technology is much more advanced then ours, but...”

“It will last not even a second in a combat shall there be one between you and another realm.”

Loki wished at that moment he could throw Thor off the deck and be done with the uncomfortable situations for the rest of the time on Earth, but on the other hand...falling onto his head wont do Thor any harm, just piss him off more.
So he instead kept his mouth shut for a moment and watched the officer's reaction.

The man must've learned the art of the “Poker face” from agent Coulson because his features betrayed nothing, and only the eyes were storming with anger.

“What permission to inquire, how old is your civilization?”

Thor automatically straightened up, voice booming with pride. “As old as the universe itself.”

“Well, our is only 3 thousand years, which kinda puts us in disadvantage position here.”

Thor glared at the officer gloomily, “That does not explain why you shy away from the battle. A real warrior seeks his foe face to face, and all you do is hide behind your machines.”

“And a smart warrior finishes the battle from afar to avoid casualties.”

*And a supreme warrior wins a war without fighting.*

Loki thought of revealing his intake on the matter, but was stopped by Thor's growl of anger, as the Thunderer didn't take kindly the disrespectful remark.

Though something else made Loki a bit more tense- it was a movement behind the prince's back, where Steve was shifting in frustration, deep frown on his face betraying internal turmoil.

The least thing Loki needed at that moment was for Steve to get involved in the argument.

Loki reached out and caught Rogers' arm but failed to stop the man from interfering.

“What have you ever seen our men fight? How can you even think of an accusation like that if...”

Steve's indignant inquiry was interrupted by Thor's grunt of displeasure, “The men are only as good as their leader and your leader chose to hide away from me like a witless coward.”
"He is not hiding, he has a ship to run..."

"And here I thought you wouldn't miss me."

The Captain Iceman's calm voice cut the air from behind and Loki felt as the temperature around them fell for at least several degrees. He suddenly had an urge to hide behind the Chief Officer's back, but it was impossible because Jay was already hiding there.

Thor barely restrained a sneer of fury at the sight of the Captain.

"I warn you human, I will not allow you to disrespect me."

"I'm merely treating you as you treat us. If you don't like it...well, you'll have to reconsider your behavior."

"You dare lecturing me? I am Thor, the prince of Asgard!"

"But you are not on Asgard, and we are not your servants! Let me remind you we did not ask you to come here, you invited yourself. So do me a favor and behave how you are supposed to – as a guest."

Thor advanced at the captain, eyes stormy and teeth grinding, ready to strike any moment,

"You certain you want to challenge my power?"

Iceman instead of stepping back lazily strolled forward, obviously confusing Thor with the lack of fear,

"I don't doubt your qualifications as a warrior. It is your lack of diplomatic talent that worries me."

Now their noses were almost touching and Loki aside from feeling very much uncomfortable felt a sting of jealousy for the Captain Iceman, because the officer stood face to face with a raging God of Thunder and didn't even flinch.

For a second Loki was grateful Iceman was a mere human, otherwise he would be very worried for his brother.
“I'm well suited for diplomacy, you simply are too blind to see that.”

Iceman quirked an eyebrow at Thor, and Loki realized he was not the only one holding his breath on the deck.

“Oh, am I? All right then, prove it, and I will fall to my knees and praise you.”

Thor grinned, he was always up to the challenge.

Iceman grinned back and Loki felt his stomach sink.

“How many people are on this ship?”

Thor stared at him in utter shock.

“What's the ship's fastest speed?”

Again, silence.

Iceman sighed, “Fine, I'll go easy on you. What's the name of the ship you standing on, the Prince of Asgard?”

The question was so easy it was insulting, but what was even more ridiculous that Thor just stood there, face distorted by attempt to think, and didn't give any intelligent answer whatsoever. The realization must have hit him too, because the shock and anger morphed into frustration and something resembling shame, but then it was gone, replaced by fury.

“How dare you...”

“How dare I?” Iceman never raised his voice, but nevertheless let others feel his anger as his words vibrated with rage and reprimand.

“My men here just spent two hours telling you everything about the ship and you can't even remember her name. You know what it means?”

Iceman leaned even closer and stared into Thor's eyes, unblinking. “That you are nothing, but a failure.”
Loki closed his eyes for a second. That was it. That was Thor's breaking point, and no words in the universe could stop Thor from attacking the Captain...

The scene was interrupted by the loud announcement over the ship's intercom.

“This is an emergency. Captain Iceman, your presence is requested on the bridge immediately. I repeat, this is an emergency.”

The Captain frowned and threw a confused look at his Chief Officer, who just shrugged in return.

What could have happened over those 5 minutes the Captain was absent from the bridge?

The Universe itself decided to give him an answer, as the grave cry sounded off from the Forward Watch Standard, “Incoming!!”

The men only had time to look up at the skies and notice huge trails of fire going their direction when the world around them turned into burning inferno.

**********

The first thing Loki realized was that he was pinned down to the floor by a heavy weight that obviously belonged to a person since that person's hair was annoyingly sticking into Loki's eyes. The mop of blond tresses looked suspiciously like Roger's and when Loki's eyes came back to focus, the suspicion turned out to be correct.

“Steve?”

The human grunted in pain and slowly raised his face from Loki's chest, “Are you alright?”

A lot of questions flashed through Loki's mind, differing from “what had just happened?” to “what the hell were you thinking shielding me with your own body, you brave idiot!”, but the prince just nodded and helped his friend get up from a rather compromising position.

Around them was chaos.
The air burned with heat, heavy black smoke and smell of melting metal, and there were fire flies everywhere, and screeching of the ropes, and moaning of the abused hull, and screams.

Loki searched for his brother immediately, and found him to his left, unharmed, along with the Chief commanding officer and Captain Iceman who looked equally surprised and murderous. He couldn't find Jay though, and a jolt of fear ran cold through his veins when a moan came from underneath the debris behind them.

Steve rushed forward and lifted what was left of a heavy door like it was a sheet of paper, and Loki was there to pull Jay back to his feet. The smaller human was hurt- apparently the explosion greased him, scorching right side of his face and almost completely burning away his eyelashes and eyebrows, making the skin bright red and covered in blisters.

That wouldn't kill, Loki was assured of it, but it could hurt as hell, and it obviously did as Jay's muttered “Thanks” escaped through his clenched teeth, his dark eyes full of tears betraying his pain.

Loki wasn't good at healing injuries of others as he could only assist himself, but at least he could ease the suffering. And so, the Aesir reached for his silken scarf, muttering spells of acquiring water to make it wet, of summoning cold to keep it cool, and of conjuring an ointment to soothe the pain and promote healing.

When the satin fabric touched Jay's cheek he winced and shot a questioning look at Loki, trying to push his hand away, but the prince just tightened the hold, giving magic a moment to flow from his fingers into the burnt human skin and repair it.

As the pain retreated under the sparks of the spells and Jay's features relaxed, Loki withdrew his hand and turned to another urgent matter- identifying the attacker.

The problem was, there was none. The prince looked around the deck for remnants of armaments or shells or pieces of weaponry used by assaulter, but there were only shatters of melted rock, still sizzling from the impact.

Very interesting rocks, actually.

Loki stepped closer to the fence and strained his eyes to get a better look at the debris- he could see those stones shining here and there among the devastation, glistening through the smoke. Different in size, but all alike- dark, metallic matrix with bright yellow crystals suspended inside.

They were beautiful in their unexpected way and definitely alien to Midgard.

At least, to its surface.
They might have been igneous from a blast of an active volcano, but in that case Loki would've felt the shock wave from explosion...

And since he didn't, it left only one plausible source – the outer space.

*Meteorites? How weird is that.*

Loki looked up at the skies and involuntarily stepped back in fear.

The skies were dark, heavy storm clouds casting shadows on the seething ocean all the way to the horizon, sliced from time to time not by the lightning, but by the fire trails of meteorites burning in the atmosphere as they made their way to the ground- majestic and horrifying scenery to the eyes of the beholder.

That wasn't however a reason for Loki's dismay- a burning F-22 Raptor on a straight collision course with the carrier's flying deck was.

Apparently, one of the birds that earlier took off decided to come home but was hit by a fireball in midair, loosing one of the engines and maneuverability in the process.

As the machine twisted and turned, responding to the pilot's desperate attempts to stir it away from the ship, Loki thought that perhaps it was a good time for Thor to wake up and call upon Mjolnir, summoning the lightning or take any other action, not just stay there, looking pretty.

The pilot must've realized he couldn't do anything and ejected- and that very moment a round of fire burst from behind Loki's back and hit the fighter, blowing it up moments from hitting the ship and showering all the men beneath it with a hail of splinters.

Loki shielded his face from the blast and whirled on his heels just in time to see a black helicopter rising slowly from behind the masts, casually shooting down incoming meteorites big enough to cause damage to the carrier.

It was big and black with a big stylized eagle emblem on the side- just like the one that got Loki and Thor to the base a day before.

*I see, the Son of Coul kept his promise after all.*
Loki smiled as the helicopter hovered almost perfectly still right above the flying deck and Agent Coulson jumped out of the open door and charged towards the Vultures Row, calm and elegant among the waste, motioning the pilot to take off.

Iceman extended his hand and helped the agent up as the latter short cut his way up the levels.

“Captain, we have a situation.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“I suggest we come inside and discuss it.”

“Coulson?”

The agent turned around to look into Steve's eyes, “Yes, Mr. Rogers?”

“Were those things... meteorites?”

“Indeed they were, we just hit the asteroid belt, captain. Now come inside, we need to plan a defensive strategy.”

“Defensive... why?”

The agent's face looked grim, “Because we haven't entered the main impact zone yet.”

"Red Alert! Red Alert! All men in hand to general quarters! This is not a drill! All men in hand to general quarters!"

The intercom echoed through the chaos and Loki watched for a second as people aboard jerked their heads up, as if coming out of a trance, or more likely shock, and started moving, faster and faster, in all directions, hurrying to their battle stations.

He heard a sound of volley and realized the US Santa Ana had opened fire on the bolides, shielding the carrier from the impacts with a veil of fire.

A firm grip fixed on Loki's elbow and he didn't get a time to protest as Steve dragged him inside.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for reviews and kudos!
Sorry I didn't update earlier, it's just ...the month was super-eventful. First I've got
Avengers'ed, then I got sick, then I got distracted...XD but I'm back on the right course
now, and promise to work faster!

“What is the meaning of all this?”

“Please, follow me, it is for your own safety,” Coulson's calm voice soothed Thor's unease as the
group pushed its way through the narrow corridors up to the captain's bridge.

As soon as the door opened, the chain of humans and Aesir dispersed in the room. Jay rushed to the
console and forcefully dismissed another seaman out of the communications chair, immediately
occupying it himself; First Officer took his post near the navigation charts with binoculars in his
hand, and Captain Iceman...stopped dead and turned on his heels to face Coulson and the
Asgardians.

“How dare you accuse us of such treachery?!” Thor's voice boomed over the chaos like a burst of
thunder, reverberating from the metal surfaces and echoing through the hallway.

“How shouldn't I? You've been treating us like shit since you first stepped on our soil; I bet you
won't give it a second thought to rub our faces in your superiority again, no matter the
consequences!”

“I will not have you speaking to me in such manner, you petty human!” Loki managed to wrap his
arm around Thor's chest just in time to stall the Thunderer from launching at the captain.

“Quiet!” Coulson's commanding voice stopped all movement on the bridge, freezing humans and Aesir alike in their respective places, some in mid-movement.

Loki had wondered for a while how the agent Coulson would look and sound when he finally lost his patience- and yet he had to wonder a little longer, since the agent was as calm as ever, just slightly louder.

“Gentlemen, please. I know in a moment like present emotions could run high, but I urge you to stay calm.”

“You are asking me to ignore the insults?”

“I'm asking you to prioritize and not let personal issues get in the way for our common goal.”

Thor growled in frustration, cheeks burning with anger, but took a step back, pinned to his place by Coulson's light eyes, fury slowly leaving him as his mighty shoulders relaxed.

Loki instantly felt a flash of jealousy and righteous indignation.

How could it be possible for a mere mortal, a human who wasn't even aware of Asgard's existence a week before, to be able to tame Thor's temper so easily, a skill that Loki exercised for hundreds of years and yet had not perfected enough?

“Captain, “- it was Iceman's turn to be soothed, “I promise I will debrief you on the matter, but only when we are out of the danger zone. All I can say right now is that our guests here have nothing to do with this unfortunate turn of events.”

“And you seriously want me to believe you?”

“Yes.”

Iceman's temper took a bit longer to pacify, but even he submitted to the overwhelming power of son of Coul.
The Captain shot a control killer look at Thor and refocused his attention.

“Cleary, set course to shore, let’s put some distance between us and the rocks.”

“It won’t help.”

Iceman and all the rest turned back to staring at Coulson. The agent didn’t even blink, but Loki’s sharp eyes caught a miniscule twitch of the man’s fingers- the only indication he was rather uncomfortable in the spot light.

*How weird.*

“How strange.”

“How?”

“The hit will impact whole eastern seaboard. We won’t outrun it, sir, no matter how fast we go.”

“Well, shit.” Crude choice of words by Jay accurately reflected the mood on the bridge.

Loki watched with fascination as the storm in human captain’s eyes drained into non-existence, leaving space for calmness and determination.

The Aesir admired Iceman for that rare ability to control his temper by the power of will.

*That’s what a true leader should be like – unnerved and resolved in the face of danger.*

Loki felt anger sipping through his veins like light venom, angry at himself for being jealous of a mere human, but it was well deserved- Loki knew both him and Thor were not in full control of their emotions which often sabotaged their missions.

A foul realization, but yet- he had indeed a lot to learn from Midgardians.

“Damage report.”
Although Jay turned his head away from the console to address Iceman, his dexterous fingers never stopped flying, switching the comm links and channels.

He had put on the headphones and stuck the scarf Loki gave him earlier between the plastic and his cheek, but the silk kept slipping away, baring the burned skin and making him wince every time headphones met the wound. All until the Chief Officer lost his patience and tied it up around Jay’s face, finishing the composition with a neat bow on top, as if the injured man was a gift wrapped for a party and ready to go.

Jay didn’t mind.

“We’ve got a black eye for sure, several surface fires, but they will be put out pretty soon, so... nothing serious. Except for the killed bird, of course.”

“Pilot?”

“Alive, Santa Ana fished him out two minutes ago.”

“Tell them to seize fire. I need everything prepped and loaded when we hit the hot spot.”

“Javi says he can maintain low intensity cover…”

“I said abort that, they are wasting ammunition on low-priority targets, and I don’t want to go into that naked.”

“They have triple load of ammo on board.”

“Excuse me?” Captain forgot his binoculars for a moment and stared at Jay. The smaller man shrugged and smiled smugly,

“Javi always comes prepared.”
Judging by the intensity of Iceman’s pursed lips, triple load of ammunition on board of the vessel was both a breach of a protocol of conduct and common sense, but due to emergency situation the Captain let it slip for the time being.

For some reason Loki was assured that when the company would get back ashore, Iceman would have a long and serious conversation with Jay and Javi. The one that likely involved a lot of slapping.

“Monterey?”

Jay took a moment to listen to the voice in his headphones, frown deepening with each passing second.

“Sir, they were hit pretty badly, there is fire in the engine room and they run on 30% power capacity…” Jay put the palm over the microphone and shot Iceman a worried look, “Sir, Monterey’s cooling system sucks a bag of dicks, if they don’t put fire out in the next 25 minutes, it will collapse. We are facing a full scale engine explosion here.”

“Rescue team deployed?”

“They don’t have enough man power.”

“Coulson, how much time do we have until the red zone?”

“30 minutes, sir.”

Iceman turned to the Chief Officer, 
“Send a team to help with repairs.”

“But sir?”

“I need their engine intact. If they can’t out fire the hit, they should at least be able to outmaneuver it. Team is in, fix, and out.”
“Aye, captain.”

“Permission to join the rescue mission, Captain Iceman?”

Steve’s resolute inquiry sounded from Loki’s behind, sending sudden shiver through Aesir’s bones, filling his gut with a gloom sense of foreboding.

It was queer.

The prince had never relied on intuition since he was certain it was not a true manifestation of foresight, but rather a reflection of one’s fears. One could only get a glimpse in the future through careful planning and tedious preparation, and even then, with all the spells and potions at hand it promised nothing more but one of the hundreds of possibilities.

Intuition, premonition, and the rest of the “foresight gifts” many boasted to possess had been either carefully calculated conclusions, or suppressed emotions coming to the surface.

It was a wrong time to indulge in self-reflection, but Loki could not help himself.

What could it be that frightened him so much in the prospect of Steve leaving his sight?

Fear to lose his only true friend to the force of nature?

Absurd.

No mind to the wishes, a human cannot become a friend of the Aesir, at least not that fast. He is honorable and humble, qualities anyone would cherish, but what more than that.

Perhaps, the fact that Steve will be protecting somebody other than you?

Loki’s heart skipped a bit.

The thought was so outrageously preposterous, that it might as well have been the truth.

And it hurt.
What a pathetic creature you are, to hunger for attention so much that you would value a mortal as an equal?

No. No, it is not that, Loki kept repeating to himself. No.

Humans are weak. This one, well, he is stronger than other men are, but weak nonetheless. His untimely demise would simply leave Loki without a bearable companion.

A minor inconvenience, but unwanted.

Loki had always resolved to the solitude. By necessity mostly- his interests were uncommon and methods…unconventional, other Aesir either despised them or simply got scared away. Even closest of all- Thor’s dearest friends- would rather have Loki locked up in the tallest tower, crushed under the piles of ancient books, then to have him accompany them in the adventures.

The prince got well used to that attitude and over the years resigned himself to the obvious answer. Loneliness was essential, but never truly desired.

A horde of worshiping Midgardians is pleasant, but attracts too much attention.

For what I have planned, I need discretion, and a smart servant at my side would suit that much better than a crowd of cheering fans.

Definitely not jealousy.

Loki turned to Steve, reassured in his reasoning, only to hiss out a breath as another wave of fear washed over him.

Whatever that feeling was, Coulson’s horrified face just fueled it up.

“I advise you against this course of action, Captain Rogers."

“I’ve asked you to call me Steve. And please, don’t object.”
“Should I remind you of your…”

“No, you shouldn’t. Those men need assistance, and you know I can help them. It will not be long, I promise. Just as Captain said, in, fix, and out.”

“Rogers,” Iceman decided to intervene, “You have 15 minutes.”

Steve smiled as Coulson sent a glare of doom at the Captain for backing him up. Iceman shrugged in return, teasingly more then apologetically, and Loki huffed at Midgardian taste and talent to converse through body language.

Then a heavy palm came resting on his shoulder.

Steve did not say anything, just curtly nodded to his friend, and exited the compartment.

As the heavy door closed behind him, Loki barely suppressed an urge to rush after the human and drag him back inside.

***********

The storm was coming.

Steve could feel it in the air ringing with electricity, in the sea trembling in feigned calmness, in the darkness that enveloped the world from horizon to horizon.

The blackness of heavy clouds afar shone with sparks of lightning, rare at first, but becoming more and more often with each passing minute. It was not lightning though, he realized, it was a hail of stones rushing down the atmosphere, burning away and meeting their end on the surface.

The sight was magnificent and terrifying.
Steve involuntarily remembered an old preacher who used to come to the orphanage each Sunday and scare the children with fervent prophecies of doom.

The kids would later gather in the corners of the mass hall and cry quietly, fearing the wrath of the Lord and cuddling together to fight off the shiver. And Steve would go to them and tell them that the Lord is merciful and will not call upon an end of days when there is still so much goodness around.

Steve threw one last glance on the carrier.

In the past two days, he learned as much as he would have learned in a lifetime. The planet has moved on without him, and old Steve did not like the change, he craved the past, the world he knew—but it was forever gone, buried in the ice of the time.

A distant roar of thunder made his heart beat a bit faster, adrenalin rushing to add to the excitement. For the first time since he woke up, Steve felt truly alive.

He was lost, yes, still out of place, but the new world around him was so interesting, so full of wonders, so limitless…

The grief held tight in his heart, but its’ deadly grip was weakened by hope and a spark of curiosity.

Captain Rogers smiled reassuringly at the men on the boat, and nodded to himself as a strong gust of wind splashed salty water on his face.

The God is merciful; he will not end the humanity when it still has so much potential.

The Judgment day will come, by the power of divine or by hands of people themselves- but it will not be today.

***************

The situation on US Monterey turned out to be a disaster. Or, more accurately put- chaos.
When the armada was hit, both the Captain and the First officer had been incapacitated and rendered unfit for duty, so the chain of command followed to the third in charge, who...well, who clearly had no idea what to do.

Steve fumed with irritation as the crew escorted him through the ship- he knew that particular type of people- his fellow soldiers liked to call them “office rats” - untalented bureaucrats swollen with the sense of self-importance but capable of doing nothing but crumbling if placed in a real life situation. The worst part was that their incompetence put their subordinates’ lives in perpetual danger.

Steve’s resentment, however, evaporated at once as he finally came face to face with the acting captain - a boy not older then 19, 20 at most, with despair bordering panic written all over his young pimpled face. As the boy’s eyes, full of hope and courage found suddenly at the sight of someone who could help, met Steve’s, Rogers hated himself for the prior moment of false judgment.

“How can we be of assistance?”

Two minutes later Rogers assumed the commanding position for the time being and went on to relocating maintenance crews to the places of highest priority, bringing as much order in the disarray as he could.

As the downpour began, battering the ship outside, he called off the firefighter squads from the upper decks and ordered them to refocus on problems below, moving out with his original crew to the mother of all problems- the engine room.

*****************

“Don’t you dare to stop me again!”

“We are here to create an alliance, not to wage war.”
Loki was glad he managed to maneuver his brother out of the bridge room into the corridor, away from the crowd.

The shouting match with Thor was going to be difficult and very loud, and things they were about to say to each other were not intended for human ears.

“Why are you so eager to aid the humans, Loki? They ought to be taught obedience!”

Loki rolled his eyes,

“By the Odin’s beard, Thor, can’t you see how much they’ve developed? They are no longer uneducated peasants we thought them to be. The Earth became a power to be reckoned with.”

“You’ve lost your mind! Now you are telling me they are equal to us, their gods?”

“Don’t twist my words, you know they aren’t. But that doesn’t make them our enemies, Thor, or our servants.”

Thor growled and grabbed Loki by the collar of his jacket, shaking him in the attack of rage, nostrils flaring, and eyes squinting with suspicion.

“What are you saying?”

Loki twisted out of Thor’s grip and pushed him back, broadening the space between them.

As much as he was used to sibling quarrels, he always liked to have a reasonable distance from his brother. He was not afraid of Thor, no- but the older prince’s spitting image right in front of his face was always a bit unnerving. And unsanitary.

“I’m saying that we can forge a closer bond with them. Political alliance is only strong while it benefits both parties, but if we are their friends…”

Thor’s laughter rumbled through the hallway.

“Friends? I don’t need friendship of this kin, I just need their obedience!”
“And you plan to achieve it through force?”

Thor glared at Loki, eyes burning with anger.

“I shall do as I please.”

Loki shrugged indifferently, “As you wish. But beware- I will not step in to clean up another one of your messes.”

Thor’s frown laid deep wrinkles on the strong forehead.

“Another one? And when exactly have you aided me before, I can’t recall?”

Loki grinded his teeth in irritation,

“Should I concoct a spell to sharpen your memory, perhaps?”

The answer was a disdainful roar,

“I need none of your pitiful magic, I’m not that weak!”

Loki burned from the inside, the smothering heat of the fury and pain melted him from within.

“Is that what you truly think of me, brother? That I’m a miserable weakling?”

Thor’s eyes were locked on Loki, but his lips were pressed tight and unmoving. That just angered Loki more,

“Answer me!”

Thor looked away,

“We are done here.”

Loki snarled,
“We will be when I say so! Do you really think I am weak?!”

“Oh, but you are!” Thor’s self-restrain was never his strongest talent, “Any of our friends, even Sif, can beat you in the sparring, as they always had!”

“Had a thought ever crossed your mind that I might have been restraining myself?”

Thor laughed again, genuinely amused.

“Don’t take me for a fool. You won’t last a day without my help!”

Loki half-laughed half-hissed in return, battling away the tears,

“Oh, I think I’ll do just fine!”

“Is that so?”

“Do you wish to find out?”

“Is that a challenge?”

“Do you want it to be?”

Thor’s jaw moved relentlessly as the prince was making his decision.

“Fine then. Rely on your tricks. We shall see how long you will last until you crawl back wailing for my help.”

“So be it. I shall not seek your help, and you won’t have mine.”

Thor threw the last angry glance at his little brother and stormed out of the hallway and back into the command room.
Loki took a moment to follow Thor with his eyes, sly smirk curving up corners of his lips almost unnoticeably.

*My beloved brother, always so eager to fall into my trap.*

Thor has always been blind, Loki thought to himself.

He surely didn’t notice how weak the All-father was when they left, how fatigue crawled and settled under his skin, how his hands trembled slightly when he was speaking. He had put off the Odin sleep for far too long and it is taking its toll…

*The Father wants to proclaim Thor as his rightful heir and new King of Asgard, but…Thor isn’t ready. Not yet. He will rush into war the day the crown is placed upon his head, dragging all the nine realms after him.*

*No. Father has always turned his blind eye on your faults, his fierce love for you has always clouded his judgment, but…I cannot do the same. I cannot risk having you as a king of Asgard, for my own sake and for all the worlds of Yggdrasil. You are the one who needs a lesson in humility; you are not yet fit to be a king. You are selfish, and arrogant, and…cruel, even to the ones closest to you.*

Thor’s words echoed in Loki’s mind. He always knew the truth even if he chose not to believe it, but now…Now the truth fell from his brother’s lips and cut into his heart like a knife, and the heart started bleeding.

Loki bit his lip and inhaled, slowly, deeply, trying to calm down, but it didn’t work.

The pain from Thor’s words was blinding, excruciating, making every nerve scream.

Loki closed his eyes and concentrated, calling upon meditation techniques, but they failed him too.

And then his pain turned into anger.

*Father intended this mission to be your final exam, brother, the one I will make sure you fail.*

Loki’s trail of thoughts ended abruptly as the door to the bridge swung open and Jay’s bow decorated head popped out,

“Come on in, sugar pants, the show is getting started!”
And I might as well enjoy the process.

The smirk on Loki’s lips turned into a full-blown smile as he followed Jay inside and closed the door behind him.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I've put the names of the ships before each scene so it is easier to navigate through what is happening.
small reminder:
USS Victoria- the flagship, the carrier, biggest ship in the group, also temporary residence of Thor and Loki
USS Santa Ana- the destroyer, ship under command of Javier, the main goal is to provide cover fire for the carrier.
USS Monterey- the smallest ship in the group, the one where Steve is currently providing assistance.

Also- thank you all so very much for the kind response to my work! <3

USS Monterey

Steve found it amusing how his very presence had such a stabilizing effect on the crew morale. With as little as some words of reassuring and a slap on the back the young terrified seaman turned into the acting captain of USS Monterey fully capable of handling the emergency situation without supervision or direction from anyone else.

Being a living legend had its upsides after all.

As the joined team of technicians from both ships made its way to the machine bay, the problem became more and more obvious. Steve strained his ears to the limit, but there was no usual hum of the engine, no low and steady growl of the machinery- instead there was screech and irregular bursts of rumble, as if the ship was an elderly suffering from onslaught of inveterate cough. It apparently was contagious too, since the men around him were sneezing and coughing with increasing regularity and Steve himself found it extremely hard to breathe.

The corridors were so full of smoke, that it felt like Steve was not inhaling the milky white air, but drinking it, burning his throat and lungs in the process.

The group stopped at the open hangar door and peered into the compartment to assess the damage before going in.

The impact must have been of enormous power, as the meteorite had crushed through the deck and three lower levels before it hit the engine room. A part of the ceiling right above the engine compartment collapsed, leaving a huge opening decorated with intricate pattern of torn wires, severed cables and smoldering metal.
The engine itself was lucky to suffer only surface damage and was merely on emergency shutdown, but the rotation wheels that put the propulsion vanes of the ship’s into the motion were completely blocked by the main culprit - a huge fragment of the meteorite that didn’t burn out or disintegrate during the crash. It was stuck right in the middle of the mechanism, ceasing all the motion and causing the engine to overheat from the friction.

The Monterey firefighter teams had scattered around the bay and put all their efforts into preventing further damage, mostly by flushing the meteorite with the fire extinguishers to cool down its surface. Apparently, the tactics paid off since the cosmic rock did not melt its way through the engine into the ocean below. However, the foam produced huge amounts of chemical induced fog that caused terrible itch in the throat and irritation in the eyes.

Steve turned to the mechanics from USS Victoria, tears streaming down his face,

“I’ll help here; see what you can do with the ventilation.”

The group nodded and took off to the adjacent bay to check what was wrong with the cooling compound, leaving Steve to deal with the meteorite.

The rock looked heavy, but its weight was not the problem - it was still extremely hot since each time the extinguisher foam fell on its surface it boiled and evaporated in the matter of seconds.

That was unfortunate.

Serum provided Steve with superhuman healing ability, but burning his hands to the bone would render him useless for the rest of the exercise.

Finally, he noticed the heavy-duty maintenance gloves discarded by one of the crewmembers. They were covered in molten and frozen metal mixed with rubber and plastic - nasty brew that made them rock-solid and unusable for regular repair, but provided extra isolation from the heat.

“Just what I needed,” Steve smiled to himself and reached out for the gear.

*****

USS Victoria
“Anything from the US Space command?”

“Still giving us the silent treatment.” Jay shot the Captain a questioning look.

“Sir, have you upset them lately?”

“No, but I’m about to.”

The Captain rolled Jay’s chair to the side, forcing the other man to grip firmly to the table to stay in the reaching distance from the panel, and grabbed a spare set of headphones.

“USAF Patterson, come in, this is USS Victoria, how copy?”

After the third call, someone finally had a decency to respond, and the heated exchange that followed made Loki tilt his head to hide a smirk forming on his lips.

The prince shone away from anything that lacked refinement or was so tastelessly indecent, at least unless he was extremely anxious or angry, but Captain Iceman’s loquacity made it sound like music.

A good distraction from the taunting revelation he had several minutes ago.

The mere thought of what had transpired melted Loki’s insides with rage for being scorned.

He might lack Thor’s might or his flamboyant character, he might prefer the solitude of the library to loud bragging in the company of drunken friends, but in no way his difference makes him lesser then any of the Aesir.

*Where physical strength lacks, the knowledge prevails, and where short temper troubles, the patience is victorious.*

*Wise words from a long dead king – a feeble consolation Loki repeated to himself after every lost fight with Thor or his friends since he was a child.*

And yet. The mind kept whispering that Loki was truly his brother’s equal, no matter how different, but the heart kept bleeding from the merciless words the ears heard.

Was it because Thor had spoken the truth? Or was it because it was Thor who had spoken?
Loki noticed Thor glaring at him sulkily and turned away, averting his eyes, deliberately ignoring the older prince.

Oh, how pleasant would it be to slam a fist into Thor’s face, letting him feel a share of pain that was surging inside Loki, eating his heart, poisoning his mind, if only for a brief moment. But it would gain him little profit- Loki was well aware he was no match for his brother in a fight. It would only grant Thor another proof of Loki’s inadequacy.

Thor frowned and leaned in, whispering words into Loki’s ear angrily,

“Do you still wish to side with the folk that treats its fellow soldiers in such disrespectful manner?”

Loki shrugged indifferently and moved away,

“Oh, why? He means no harm. Besides, I find this interaction extremely entertaining.”

He was telling the truth.

The dialog between the Captain and the person on the other side of the phone did not reveal much since Loki was unfamiliar with most of the technical terms Iceman used. However, he was well acquainted with the rest of the Captain’s vocabulary, which mostly consisted of profanities. All of them were either morally or physically impossible, but that was not the most amusing part- the depth of Captain’s knowledge on the matter was.

Such obscene eloquence was uncommon among the folk of Aesir- in fact, Loki could recall only a single pleasure of encountering such a broad lexicon in his whole life- when he was a child and happened to pass by the Blacksmiths workshop late at night.

He spent the rest of that evening in the library, looking up unknown words in the dictionaries. It earned him a day of confinement to his quarters when the library keeper found out what the young prince had been up to. Loki later executed his revenge on the old geezer by turning his clothes transparent during the breakfast in the great hall. It tripled the length of Loki’s punishment, but the moral satisfaction was worth it.

Iceman motioned to his First Officer, “Change red zone ETA to 5 minutes and wake the birds up. They are to return to the base and provide cover fire for the coast.”

The First Officer stared back at his Captain, “Sir?”
Iceman waved him off, “they are of no use for us here, and the base needs airborne surveillance to
direct missiles.”

Jay stared at Iceman in confusion, “Don’t they have satellites and radars and all the fancy army and
air force stuff?”

“Not anymore. The rock shower had decommissioned most of the military satellites in the region.”

Jay’s eyebrows disappeared in the hairline, “All of them? Even the secret CIA ones?”

First Officer intervened, “but you’ve just moved the ETA time, so they must have some eyes in the
sky then?”

“Well, technically, they have one satellite still functioning properly, but”- Iceman looked over the
men on the bridge, “You aren’t gona believe this,” he made a dramatic pause to emphasize what he
was about to deliver –“it belongs to the Russian Military.”

Jay looked at the Captain, then at the first Officer, then back at the Captain.

“And Russians just let us take the control of their satellite out of the generosity of their hearts? Were
they drunk or something?”

Iceman shook the finger at his seaman, “No to both questions. They didn’t release their satellite to us
per se; they are simply feeding us coordinates of the biggest targets.”

A collective eye roll and groan filled the air, followed by picturesque exclamations of disbelief and
irritation.

Loki suddenly realized why Midgard gave him such a strange feeling of hidden meaning, what the
planet reminded him of- not Asgard, and not any other realm- but the whole Ygdrassil itself. Huge
living being with its parts separated by vast amounts of space, with races dwelling on it, so different
and yet so alike- fighting most of the time but in face of a major disaster joining forces and yet
harboring ill feelings and thinking themselves superior of others.

How otiose Allfather’s peace undertakings must have been if there is no unity even between one
realm’s kin? But if diplomacy fails, what else could bring all the people together?
Again, Loki’s contemplations were harshly disrupted when a meteorite hit the windshield on full speed, bursting into small burning pieces and slowly rolling down the glass like a weird firework.

The glass intended to withstand direct artillery strike did not crack but the sudden impact made Jay jump up and away from the chair.

-Where the first rock stroke more soon followed, and in the matter of seconds the ship’s exterior was under constant hail of the stone fireflies.

The ship’s alarm went off and the crew assumed their battle positions. Agent Coulson glanced melancholically in the direction of USS Monterey then turned around and gently guided both Aesir princes into the most protected part of the bridge- the inner corner.

Loki didn’t protest much as his attention was riveted by the situation at hand.

“Sir, the birds are asking permission to take off?”

“Abort, it’s too late.”

The hail intensified, and Loki could now not only hear the constant battering sound, but actually feel the ship shake from time to time when the hull suffered big impacts. The sky outside grew almost pitch black, and the biggest meteorites now left trails of bright fire making their way into the ocean.

When the huge rock hit the waves right in front of the ship’s nose, sending a shower of splashes across the deck, Iceman turned to Jay and smirked, “Light them up.”

Jay grinned like a loon and turned on the commlink, “Open fire.”

***************
The piece of the meteorite was heavier than Steve had anticipated, but joined intellectual and physical effort of the seamen resulted in constructing a slide under it and over the side of the rotation mechanism. Steve, now equipped with gloves, positioned himself on the side of the rock and started pushing. At first, it did not move even one bit, as if glued to the surface and Steve honestly deplored Loki was not around to give him a hand, but after several futile efforts, it finally shifted enough to be pushed onto the sliding construction and rolled over the bridge and dropped on the floor.

Steve got a split of the second to duck and roll away from the rotary mechanism, as it burst into sparkles when the block was gone.

When the fiery cascade ended and the engine started slowly to pick up rotation speed, Steve got up from the safe comfort of the floor and turned on the radio.

“Engine is back online, what’s the status of cooling system?”

There was a moment of static in the radio, than a very irritated voice of chief mechanic replied, “Main line FUBARed, we’re trying to clean up the reserve airway but there’s too much shit inside.”

Steve looked around the engine bay - the mechanism was working perfectly, but the excessive heat started to accumulate, he could already feel it in small droplets of sweat forming on his forehead.

“But we need something …”

“Oh, genius, what do you want me to do, chew a new one through the wall?”

A sarcastic remark drew Steve’s attention to the opening in the ceiling. It was too high up for a person to get through, but close enough to relieve the cooling assembly should the pipe be parted from the system and lifted vertically.

The Cap motioned the crew to help him get the pipe up, cutting off the steam flow before lifting it, and asked one seaman to stay at the door, making sure there was at least one ventilation exit, otherwise they were in danger of getting cooked alive.
It wasn’t that hard to get one side of the line up into the opening, letting the steam flow outside of the bay and dissipate into the ship’s corridors on the upper level, but there was nothing the men could secure it in the position with.

Only there was.

Steve smiled as the idea formed in his head, and waved to the crew.

The space rock was still smolderingly hot, but its’ almost perfect round shape made it easy to roll by giving hard but short pushes.

Finally, the meteorite was positioned exactly under the ventilation pipe so that the tube could stand still and rest its upper end in the hole in the ceiling without shifting.

He took a moment to appreciate the monument to human ingenuity, when a wave smashed into the hull and rocked the ship, making Steve stumble.

“Wow, that was a close one.”

“And a big one too...I thought we had 10 more minutes?”

“Might’ve been wrong…C’mon, let’s get to the bridge, see what’s going on.”

Steve ordered the crew towards the exit, checking the stability of the construction and tightening the closure, when another blast, loud and heavy sounded off through the chorus of salvoes and the wave followed, rocking the ship so hard it sent Steve and his men flying through the bay.

When they came back to senses, the alarm turned on.

“Hands brace for impact, hands brace for impact...”

Steve only had time to look up when a huge meteorite times bigger than the last one hit the ship, tearing through the hull, crushing the walls by its sheer force, melting metal and incinerating everything it met on its way. In mere seconds the part of the stern was gone, baring the insides of the ship and igniting some of the ammunition, inflicting further damage on the burning boat.
Steve couldn’t know that, it was too far from his sight, but he knew it was bad as the floor hilted, sending him sliding into the wall along with his fellow crew members.

Steve tried to get up, grasping for air, but another explosion shook the ship and the meteorite near the engine shifted from under the pipe, making the whole construction collapse and bury the Captain under it.

**********

USS Victoria

The storm was eerie treat for the eyes of a witness. The world had fallen into total darkness, black clouds merging with the black ocean in one, enveloping everything, swallowing up all light but the fire from the falling rocks and the alleys of bullets ripping the air.

Loki would have thought this occurrence was wrath of Midgardian gods, if only he was not one of them.

As the hellish hail intensified, the tension on the bridge grew.

Finally, Thor snapped.

“A mighty army frightened by the falling rocks like a group of fearful maidens! Is that how you will protect your realm in the hour of danger?”

Iceman motioned Jay to carry on the tasks and turned to Thor, “And how do you know that I’m afraid?”

Thor bared his teeth for a split of a second then stepped closer towards the Captain.

“Your eyes are full of fear, I can see it even in the darkness.”
Loki’s eyebrows met the hair line, since when exactly his oaf of a brother acquired talent in deduction?

Iceman mirrored Thor’s movements and advanced so that two men now were standing face to face.

“It is not fear, it is anger. If it were fear, my pupils would be blown a little bit more. Remember next time to pay attention to details.”

Thor growled, “Desert your mentor tone, human, for that you showed clearly that you are unfit for command. You should abandon your place at once and submit to those who have a true knowledge how to lead their people.”

“And that someone would be?”

“Me.”

Loki rolled his eyes, suppressing a groan. Of course, the whole situation was less then comfortable, and it was far from pleasant to watch the humans- even on the other ships- getting hurt or killed by the fire or impacts, but there was truly nothing either Thor or Loki could do.

Yes, Loki could resort to magic- but to what end? He certainly couldn’t raise a shield large enough to cover all three vessels, nor could he fight off the meteorites for that there were too many of them.

And Thor himself would be rendered useless- he could summon the lightning, he could call upon Mjolnir’s power and crush plenty of the meteorites- but where one rock was turned to dust, ten more would follow.

The best way to assist humans was to refrain from interfering and let them do their job.

Aesir or Midgardian, military is military always- the troops are trained and bred to fight and to die for their cause, excessive sentiment would only do them harm.

But Thor was never known for calm temper, even now- he allowed his heart to rule over his head. Yes, his intentions were dictated by compassion- but that didn’t make his deeds any less harmful.
Iceman gave Thor a long calculating look.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, you want me to relinquish the post of the commander of active military group in favor of an alien entity without any bonds to us on basis of his – and solely his- opinion that my actions are unsatisfactory, without taking into account legal rules and procedures?”

Thor smiled triumphally, “That would be appreciated.”

Iceman tilted his head, “Should I take it as official declaration of war then?”

Loki choked on his breath.

Compassion, anger, fury or not, the last thing he needed is a conflict with the Midgard. Even if the disaster was Thor’s doing, Loki too would be held accountable, and the failure he had no part in was far from useful for his ultimate goal.

The prince unstuck himself from the corner and stepped in to interfere, but his mediation wasn’t needed.

Apparently, Thor came to realize what his behavior would cost the realm- both realms, actually- Loki could see the titanic struggle between the temper and the common sense going on his brother’s face.

The latter seemed to get the upper hand, and Thor growled through the clenched teeth,

“No.”

Loki breathed out.

“I meant no offence, it just pains me to watch your people die.”

“And your concern is very much appreciated, prince, but I would prefer you not interfering. You are welcome to express your censorious remarks when we are back at the base, right now just let us do our job.”

*And keep your opinion to yourself.*

The last phrase was left unsaid but everyone grasped the meaning.
Loki would applaud his dear brother on making the right choice for once, but even more applaud Iceman for giving Thor a slap on the face. Too bad it didn’t happen often.

The very moment Loki felt the tension ease from his sore muscles, the biggest ball of flame hit USS Monterey and ripped the ship open, like a savage beast, tearing the metal flesh and baring the insides.

The prince watched in silent horror as several minor explosions rocked the mutilated body of the ship and it slowly began to sink.

Iceman shouted the order into the commlink, but all Loki could think of was Steve.

***************

USS Monterey

Steve groaned in pain, crushed under the weight of the pipe and opened his eyes, only to see the lights flicker and die out. The reserve generator should have kicked in immediately, but nothing happened, and the bay fell into total darkness.

Steve crawled from under the pipe and tried to feel his way around, looking for the rest of the men. It was extremely hard thing to do, since the floor was covered with debris and splinters and, as if that wasn’t enough, it was slowly but steadily tilting to one side.

As Steve’s palm found one of the crew members and the captain checked his vital signs, the intercom went back online, with single message, repeated over and over,

“All hands abandon ship, all hands abandon ship…”

Steve didn’t have to be a sailor to understand the ship was sinking, the only question left was how much time did they have left?

Suddenly a dim beam of light appeared in the hallway, and someone called Steve’s name- it was the
Victoria crew coming to the rescue.

He called out the team and helped them gather the crew members scattered across the bay. All of them were injured, but all of them were still alive.

As the men prepared to carry the wounded out, Steve heard a screech of metal and felt more than perceived with his eyes, that a single massive door guarding the entrance to the bay slowly started to close.

One of the men still conscious cursed aloud- the sea water must have hit the electronics bay and corrupted the wires, sending glitches all over the ship’s systems- and forcing the emergency shut down protocol to begin.

That meant they had seconds before the hydraulic system would shut the door closed to protect the engine from the water, immuring all the men inside the bay with no way out.

Steve rushed to the door and struggled, forcing the metal to slow down, allowing the other men to escape. There still was time, but as Steve freed himself from the burden and tried to get out, the ship shuddered and tilted more, sending Steve flying back into the pitch black engine room.

He jumped to his feet, forgetting about injuries and excruciating pain they caused, but it was too late- the team struggled to keep the opening but their strength was of no match to his. The door shut close, leaving Steve alone in the total darkness, inside the sinking ship and near the overheating engine.

He heard valiant efforts of his men to re-open the door and override the protocol, as the shouts and knocks echoed from outside, but there was nothing they could do- so he crawled to the door and morzed them to get out.

The shouts intensified, and Steve morzed them two more times to get out of the ship before it was too late.

Then he slid off the door tiredly, and sank to the floor, catching his breath.

The heat started to accumulate immediately, Steve’s skin was already burning and he closed his eyes as the sweat streamed down his face.

It was all about to end soon, the question was how- would the engine explode first or the ship sink to her demise?

Steve smiled to himself, collecting his thoughts and remembering the words of a prayer- he wasn’t asking for salvation- no, he was just getting ready to meet his God...
A sudden movement in the air made his nerves tingle—it was strange indeed—a gust of ice-cold wind in the overheated room.

But there was nothing or no one there, and Steve let it go as an image, birthed by his baking mind.

Oh, the irony, Steve thought. And here I am, yet again about to die in the ocean.

Though this time the death would be certain.

Perhaps, that’s how it should have ended 70 years ago, perhaps…that is my destiny.

I’m not afraid, I’m ready, though...

The only thing I regret is that I had no chance to say good bye to Phil and Loki.

But, they will have to forgive me for that.
Chapter 11

USS Victoria

As the casualties and injured reports flowed in from the USS Monterey, Loki listened to every word, every syllable, waiting to hear the familiar name – but it never happened.

On Coulson’s inquiry of Steve’s whereabouts Jay could only shrug and say that the brave captain was MIA, which in current situation was as good as dead.

That would not suffice, not at all.

Over the short time of being on Earth Loki unwillingly, but unavoidably came to think of Steve as his friend. His true and so far, the only friend. The one whose interest in Loki was not based on any possible profit, or respect, or fear, but rather on personal preference.

Captain too had attracted Loki like a magnet. Was it his innocence and righteousness? His heroism and willful spirit? Or maybe the fact that Steve took interest in Loki with no regard to Loki’s status, even showing disdain towards regal superiority- and that fact alone made Loki think that there was something more, concealed beneath the façade of born-to-be-but-never-destined-to king of Asgard, the trickster and the shadow of Thor? Something even Loki himself had never known existed?

Whatever the reason, the prince was sure he had to intervene. That was unsuitable moment for a force demonstration, even planned one, but if Loki ever learned anything from Thor, it was that a true friend is the one whom you help in time of need and later hope he would do the same for you.

Loki dimmed his senses and concentrated, breathing slowly, letting magic flow through his veins freely and manifest itself in his perfect image, only not on the bridge, but further away, on the deck of USS Monterey.

He took some time to adjust his vision and hearing. The projection was weightless and transparent, it bore no strength or physical presence as it was designed solely for watching.

And watching he did.

Loki navigated through mostly deserted corridors, full of smoke and ocean water and flickering lights, evaluating the extent of devastation at the same time.
It did not seem too comforting. The ship was harmed beyond repair, at least while she was in the open sea, and it was a matter of time—minutes most likely, before she sank or exploded—whatever would happen first.

While looking for his friend, Loki took a liberty to whisper words of reassurance or correct directions into the ears of several seamen, making sure they remained calm enough to perform or follow the instructions, since the quality of their actions in a moment of chaos was a difference between life and death.

Finally, when Loki was about to conclude that Steve had left the ship. Though it seemed extremely doubtful, hence, the captain is insatiable need to insure everyone else’s safety before his own; the Aesir heard shouts and noise of struggle in a corridor that should have been abandoned long ago.

He speeded up only to see a group of people desperately trying to get a heavy door open.

That did not make any sense since the ship was doomed, unless they were trying to help a person. Loki slid through the wall into the adjacent bay only to find out that the person was, of course, Steve.

The human was sitting near the door, face redden with heat and exhaustion, reciting some sort of a prayer.

Loki cursed at him.

*You fool; words are not going to open this door for you! Get up and find another way out before it is too late!*

But Loki’s own words were of no help either. He looked around searching for alternative route, but found none, and hit the door in desperation.

Steve’s head jerked up and blue eyes wondered through the darkness as if he felt Loki’s presence.

The prince took a breath to calm down and stepped out.

Steve most likely saved the men at his life expense, but that sacrifice was about to go to waste since the men were still there, battling with the metal, already submerged up to their hips, and they were not leaving.

Loki snapped his eyes open and in that, instant he was back to the safety of the Victoria.
“I need to go there, now!”

Iceman reacted with delay, turning his head only after he finished adjusting something on the panel, “Go where?”

Loki stepped into the center of the room, ignoring questioning looks his brother shot him.

“To USS Monterey. I saw Steve, he needs my help.”

Iceman threw his hands in the air in a mocking gesture of desperation,

“Oh my god, are you shitting me right now? Have you two made a bet…”

Loki tensed – how could the human now of their interaction with Thor, when the Captain continued, “a bet on who could piss me off more?”

Loki stepped closer, hissing through his teeth, “It has nothing to do with you, I wish to help and I know how, I just need your permission…”

“Permission for what? Go outside and be disintegrated? Have you lately looked out of the window, your highness?”

Loki thought of a smart retort, but glanced out of the window involuntarily, only to witness the burning Monterey deepen her tilt further, stripping Steve and others on board of time they already didn’t have.

He felt his anger fueled by despair overtake his blood in a second.

“Your people are dying out there and I know exactly how to help them and yet I’m standing here, wasting time on idle semantics while you are trying to determine whose cock is bigger!”

Loki’s voice certainly sounded loud enough to get everyone’s attention, but he secretly hoped it also was regal and intimidating, and may be a little vulnerable, just enough for Iceman to understand that all Loki wanted to do was help.
The prince could see with the corner of his eye Thor’s jaw dropped in shock but now he did not give a single damn about his brother dearest.

Iceman kept silent for a moment, then leaned in so close the tip of his nose was almost brushing with Loki’s, and whispered, as if betraying a secret,

“No one’s is as big as mine.”

Then he straightened and sighed in resignation.

“But if you have a death wish – fine, be my guest, go on. But I will not be held responsible if you get fucked up.”

Loki gave the captain a curt nod, “I have no plans on dying today.”

Iceman waved him off, “And I had no plans on having any hiccups on today’s exercise, and look where it got me.”

“Condolences.”

Loki nodded again and vanished into the corridor.

Iceman smirked to himself, “Smug bastard. Jay, tell Javier to turn around, I need him to pick up Monterey’s crew. What?”

The Captain was pinned dead by the glare of Coulson’s icy blue eyes and one raised brow of doom.

“What?! It is your boyfriend he is saving right now, isn’t it?”

The glare continued.

***************
As Loki made his way through the busy corridors of Victoria, he sorted out multiple spells to use in present situation- he needed to physically get to the Monterey, and do that so that he actually could come back- with Steve. Thor’s hammer’s flying capability would certainly prove useful, but Loki could never wield it- he was never good enough for the damn bludgeon, so last resort was his own magic.

When Loki pushed himself out of confinement onto the flying deck and ran through the rain of fire right to the edge of the ship, he smiled and concentrated, and started to concoct.

What a weird sight would it be for humans- to see him, standing on the edge among the ruins, smoke and fire, the raged wind tousling his raven hair, green light of magic flowing from the tips of his fingers and enveloping him in the cocoon of sparkles...

However, the humans were too busy to pay attention to artistic detail.

The magic condensed and slowly formed a bridge below the edge of the platform. Shiny, glistening bridge that stretched far from Victoria to Monterey, solid to walk upon but completely nonexistent when another meteorite struck it.

It was a petty copy of the Great Rainbow Bridge of Asgard, fished out of the memory and recreated with the finest detail- not that anyone on both ships would know that…

Thor would, but he was too preoccupied with nurturing his injured self-esteem to notice.

Loki gazed through the burning darkness and jumped up onto the fence, balancing atop of it while conjuring small balls of light and scattering them across the rainbow bridge, marking the way. Then he leaped, swirled through the air and landed graciously onto the gleaming surface.

A small sigh of relief escaped his lips.

*Good thing my magic did not fail me. It would be an embarrassment of riches to drown before my rescue part had even had a chance to begin.*

He almost flew over the bridge, feet barely touching the surface, in such a hurry he was. It did not stop him from turning for a second a moment he felt additional pressure falling on the bridge and making it bounce.
Loki’s eyes pierced through the smoke only to find Dr. Macmillan leading a group of corpsmen ahead to help the injured on Monterey.

The uninvited humans seemed startled by sheer strength of Loki’s magic, but moments later their amazement had been forsaken in favor of helping fellow crew.

*Brave fools,* Loki thought as he conjured another spell, fortifying the bridge to sustain all their weight. *It must be epidemic- this burning need to risk one’s life for someone else.*

Loki thought for a second, *and it certainly is contagious, as even I had fallen ill from it.*

The prince glanced one more time at the humans running in single file, whose lack of grace was complemented by stubborn determination, and charged ahead.

*************

USS Monterey

Steve’s lungs reached the boiling point- or so it seemed to him as blinding pain sent every nerve in his body on fire.

The noise outside the door suddenly stopped, and Steve feared for a second that it was just his hearing giving out, but the roar of the engine was yet deafening, and the captain realized- the crew must have finally given up futile attempt to rescue him and abandoned the ship.

There was a loud crack and screech of tearing metal and then the cold ocean water rushed into the room, engulfing Steve.

He welcomed it with a smile playing on his lips, a thought of comfort echoing through his mind, that everyone else was safe, that everyone else survived.

For a split of second he felt a presence- a familiar and somewhat comforting, making fear and pain drain away from his body.
It must be presence of my guardian angel…

Then there was nothing.

***************

Loki ran through the familiar corridors, ignoring smoke and heat that burned his eyes, just fighting for the balance as the ship’s hull tilted more and more with each second.

When he finally reached the blasted door, the humans were still there, fighting with the mechanism, spitting and cursing as the water lever had risen almost up to their necks.

The prince pushed through and snapped at them,

“Get out!”

They stared at him for a brief moment, then turned back and resumed their petty efforts.

Loki’s patience began to wear thinner and thinner.

“I said, get out, until it is too late!”

Again, it was to no avail.

Loki’s temper reached the breaking point, fueled by fear, excitement and intoxicating rush of blood cast by his crazy beating heart,

“GET OUT, OR I’LL RIP YOUR BLOODY HEADS OFF!”

His roar was so mighty it overlapped the growls of engine and Loki smiled in sadistic delight as humans backed from him, terrified.

A second passed, than they finally obeyed, vacating the place for him to stand.

Loki grabbed the door’s handle and examined the structure briefly.
The lock was automatic, powered by the ship’s hydraulics. There was no way to open it in time, unless…

His muscles screamed, as deed the metal, when Loki let his anger loose and simply tore the door off its sockets.

The wave of water pushed him inside, knocking off his feet for a second, but then Loki regained his posture and strained his eyes to search for Steve.

It did not take long- Steve had never moved aside from the door, he only slid to the floor when heat and pain made him unconscious.

Loki rushed through the water towards his friend, ignoring for a second ominous hiss and steam sipping from the engine as the waves had reached it.

The prince had scooped Steve in his arms and rushed back to the surface.

**********

USS Santa Ana

- 

Javier’s gaze darted from the radars and panels to the window, where a tiny strand of glowing magic bridge hang over the raging ocean.

His team had deployed several rescue boats and half of them were back, flooding the ship with scarred and burned men from Monterey, but small part of the crew still remained unaccounted for- including Captain Rogers and that sassy Loki.

Not that Javier had suddenly become enamored of both those men, but Steve was a decent fellow of rare qualities and courage, and Loki…well, he certainly was smart and cunning- and brave, as he chose a fiery chaos over the relative safety of the Victoria’s bridge to save his newly found friend.
A deed worth of notice.

Finally, the forward looking spotted Loki carrying unconscious Steve away from burning Monterey, and pointed the direction.

Santa Ana was going on full throttle, but Javier could not help asking his First Officer,
“Can’t you go any faster?”

The officer snapped, “What do you want me to do? Go outside and give it a push?”

Javier growled irritably, “A, cabron!” and turned back to watching the consoles.

*******

Loki took a moment to catch his breath as the rescue boat slowed down near the bridge and a seaman reached down to help the prince. The moisture gathered on his cheeks, soothing the molested skin and bringing comfort. He looked up- the skies were gray now, clouds dissipating in many places, leaving openings through which the light reached down.

The hail subdued and now the air, past scorched and smoky, was cooling down, and small droplets of rain condensed in the atmosphere.

The meteorites still fell now and then, but it was an aftershock, no more, and did not seem to bother all those who just survived the disaster.

With a bit of an effort the crew dragged Steve aboard the ship, securing him in his place, and came back to help Loki up.

But as much as Loki wanted to finally set his foot on a steady surface and forget the whole ordeal, he chose to wait and help the last of Monterey’s orphaned men first.

He might have been exhausted, indeed-but as remaining sailor extended his shaking arm to help him up, disregarding his own paleness and buckling knees, Loki just rolled his eyes, scooped the human
into his arms and hurled him up, landing him into the boat with one well-aimed motion and smirking at the human’s whine of protest.

Loki’s humor, however, was ill fated since they all had just ran out of time.

The USS Monterey’s engine breathed its last breath and finally gave in, ferociously exploding, tearing its mother’s hull into tiny melting pieces and sending a huge shock wave through the ocean’s surface.

As one end of connection was lost, the bridge immediately collapsed, falling into tiny sparkles and soaring down into the ocean.

The very second Loki felt his feet lose the ground he reached up, desperately, and held onto one of the humans who rushed to grab him in return.

But the attempt was doomed to fail – as soon as the wave hit him, the human’s fingers gave in, too weak to secure the saving grip on Loki’s wrist and Loki fell, choking on the salty water, plummeting down into the depths.

He struggled to swim, to overcome the flow but lost his moment, the current was too strong even for a god, and the water column crushed Loki with its enormous weight, seizing his movements and dragging him deeper and deeper.

He fought the storming ocean, his tiredness and panic, and thought,

*I am weak, I need help, Thor, I need you now, brother, please!*

But nothing happened - the help did not come.

As the last bubbles of air left Loki’s lungs, he thrashed and threw his arm out in final attempt to grasp the boat which outline was looming over the surface.

His fingers grasped nothing and Loki’s eyes widened in fear, but then a strong hand grabbed his wrist and did not let go.

Loki continued staring at the hand for a second, ignoring burning eyes and lungs screaming for air, happy that his brother did not abandon him in his peril, and realizing after a moment that the hand did not belong to Thor…
Then he had to shut his eyes since the hand and the body it was attached to pulled Loki up onto the boat.

“Don’t tell me you decided to die on me today, highness.”

Loki smiled, trying to control his breath, “I learned from the best.”

Steve nodded in acceptance, muttered, “Thank you,” and fell down to the bottom of the boat next to Loki, gasping for air.

The Forward Seeing tapped the side and boat jumped a little, gaining speed and taking all the men away from the Monterey’s final moments.

***************

USS Victoria

“All aboard!”

The bridge met Jay’s message with cheering and clapping as all the people rejoiced after the rescue mission was complete.

Iceman clapped Jay’s back and ordered both Victoria and Santa Ana turn sail to port to get a more secure position and render assistance to all injured seamen.

Thor watched with disdain and indignation as the men around him visibly relaxed and started gossiping about his brother’s display of power.
All that human admiration of Loki did not please Thor in slightest-of course, his brother possessed many talents, but when it came to conflict, Loki chose to shy away or talk his way out instead of choosing noble fight.

Thor never approved the use of magic or tricks that his brother favored so fervently-they all were child games, unworthy of a true warrior.

Thor neither understood the humans with their lust for shine and show. Loki’s magic was pleasing to watch, but it was vain. The rescue of one person in human eyes bore enough weight to be considered as military prowess, but it was no match for Thor’s talent as a leader.

War is not won by personal heroics, nor by magical theatrics-it is won by overwhelming might.

Iceman continued switching between the channels, gathering reports of injured men aboard Santa Ana, when he got a distress signal from USAF Patterson.

Jay’s eyes rounded as he listened to the report—the Russians had just spotted a meteorite too big to be ignored, heading towards Pennsylvania.

Iceman suddenly looked worried.

“We have to shut it down.”

“Sir?”

“It might hit way too close to Peach bottom nuke plant.”

Jay nodded, then inquired, “should I inform the army?”

Iceman shrugged it off,

“They have no active presence there, we might ask the AF but I can’t risk their fuck up.”

With that he turned on the inter comm and contacted the nuke batteries, “Prepare to fire, we have a biggie heading to nuke plant in Penn state. Be ready to launch in 1 minute.”

Thor’s voice boomed through the bridge, “No need for that. It’s time I showed you, humans, what real power looks like.”
With that, Thor swung his hammer and soared in the skies, crushing through the windshield first and showering the men with glass splinters upon his majestic exit.

Iceman wiped his face from raindrops, carried in by gush of wind, and looked at Jay.

Jay made puppy eyes,

“Sir?”

“What?”

“Can I shoot him?”

The Captain’s grin turned feral.

“Batteries, prepare to launch.”

Agent Coulson chose to intervene,

“Captain, I believe Thor promised us assistance. I suggest you postpone the launch- perhaps, he would be able to stop the meteorite himself?”

Iceman glared at Coulson,

“What the Goldilocks is going to stop it with, the magic power of his luscious hair?”

The bridge snickered, but Coulson pressed further,

“I strongly advise you not angering or alienating the ambassadors no matter how bad they irritate you.”

“About that- since we don’t have a…outsider presence at the bridge any longer, I suggest you start debriefing me immediately. On meteorites and the rest.”

“I don’t believe it is a right time.”
“I do.” Iceman started to sound irritated, “And I suggest you make it quick.”

He stared at the agent, eyes darting to the timer with launch countdown.

Coulson decided to submit.

“Fine. The Aesir…are not the only extraterrestrial race we came into contact with willingly or accidentally, and all I can say now is that…not all of those races are as benevolent as Thor and Loki.”

The captain was not even close to surprised.

“Peachy. But- benevolent or not, I’m not risking lives of people on the ground for prince’s chance to prove himself.”

He turned back to Jay and switched the inter comm, “Batteries, launch on my mark.”

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USS Santa Ana

“What is he going to do?”

Steve’s puzzled look softened Loki’s concern a bit, and the prince smiled.

“Thor is going to call upon the power of Mjolnir and summon a lightning to strike down the meteorite. Your ancestors didn’t call him the God of Thunder for no reason.”

Apparently, the explanation was unsatisfactory, because Steve’s puzzlement immediately morphed into deep frown.

“But if he is so incredibly powerful, why then he just stood there and watched people around him suffer? He is supposed to be a hero, is he not? Or perhaps his bravery extends only to his own
Loki grinded his teeth. As much as his heart secretly rejoiced at Steve’s clear discontent with his brother, Thor was of his kin and, what mattered more- a representative of Asgard, and thus had to be referred to with higher regard, or it would set a bad example.

“I would have you to show more respect towards my brother, Steve. Besides, his power has a…well, a side effect.”

Steve stared at him with eyes shining with curiosity.

“What side effect?”

“Are you fucking kidding me??”

A growl of uncontrollable anger immediately attracted Steve’s attention,

“What’s wrong??”

As the First Officer continued to profoundly curse, covering his face with his palms and rocking his head back and forth, Javier turned to Steve and Loki.

“Your dear brother flew to stop the rock, right?”

“Yes??”

“Well, he did. He made a grandiose lightning show above some remote farm in Penn state. Scared lots of innocent cows, that is for sure. And may be some sheep too. And fried all the radars in the area and that damned Russian satellite with his little firework as well.”

Steve whispered, “Is this the side effect you mentioned?”

Loki frowned. “He damaged the satellite- regrettable fact, I admit, but he stopped the meteorite’s advancement as promised, did he not? What is the reason for your anger?”
Javier shook his head, “Oh, no reason at all. Well, may be the fact that meteorite was not the biggest one! We were tracking a much bigger piece of shit with our Russian comrades but guess what- we can’t do it anymore because all the equipment is fucked up now!”

Loki felt his blood chill with dreadful feeling.

“Where is the bigger one heading?”

“To New York City.”

The prince threw a quick glance at Steve and felt a limp of ice form in his stomach- Steve stared at Javier with sheer horror on his face.

“And what if it hits this New York City? What is estimate on casualties?”

Javier shrugged, “Thousands.”

Loki closed his eyes.

_Damn. Damn you Thor and all your insatiable thirst for power display, damn you! Why are all of your deeds driven by impulse? Why don’t you ever think of the consequences? Thousands, Thor, thousands- and all endangered because you could not keep your hands of your damn hammer!_

Loki’s mind raced through most of the possibilities of outcome and none of them was in Aesir favor.

Even if the humans managed somehow to get rid of the meteorite, Thor’s reckless actions and complete disregard of authority already brought irreversible damage to their image.

Though Loki might still manage to make amends if only there were no victims.

Which means he has to make sure the rock does not reach the city.

_Now that would be nearly impossible._
He could not however just stand there and leave the outcome to the chance- the fortune did not seem to favor them at present moment.

Loki started to concentrate, calling upon the inner reserves of his magic, searching for it in the deepest parts of his body, in every cell, in every drop of blood.

“Javier, have you ever set foot to the city in danger?”

“Um, no, why?”

“I did, I grew up in Brooklyn, one of the City’s boroughs.”

Loki nodded in acknowledgement and commanded, “Describe it to me.”

“Why?”

“Just do it. Describe it to me in every detail, and please, do it quickly.”

Steve did not waste another second.

“Tall buildings made of glass, steel and concrete, piercing the sky. Bridges hanging over the river that glistens in the sun. Busy streets full of life, and people, and…”

“Please choose something more specific.”

Steve concentrated.

“Um…An island, upon it a tall bronze statue of a woman wearing a crown and holding a torch and a book in her hands…”

Loki’s eyes snapped open.

“Found it.”
And with that, he vanished.

Steve stared at the empty space beside him with his mouth open.

Javier cursed again and turned to the console, “Screw this magic, I better stick to missiles.”

********

“Gentlemen, we are fucked.”

Captain Iceman put down the headset and put missile launch switch on “off.”

“Jay, what's the impact ETA?”

“5 to 6 minutes, sir.”

Iceman frowned, “Why so long?”

“It is on a gliding trajectory, sir. So…any chance that some AF pilot notices it on the way or something?”

Iceman huffed in disdain, “Right, hope for the miracle.”

All the men, even Coulson, stood there, waiting for the news to come.

Suddenly, Jay started to fidget.

No one would have noticed if the bridge was not so silent- so Iceman immediately turned back around,
“What is it?”

Jay shrugged, looking flabbergasted.

“I don’t know… I … um… I’m getting some sort of weird interference…”

“What sort of interference? Jay?”

Jay’s confusion grew with each passing second, “It is … I don’t know, it sounds like… Black Sabbath?”

Coulson immediately rushed to console and grabbed the vacant set of phones.

The music was distinctive now, and volume grew with every moment.

That could mean only one thing.

“Mr. Stark?”

“Agent,” a familiar voice echoed through the mike, “You’re throwing a party and I am not invited? It hurts my feelings!”

Coulson’s lips curled up in a smile, “Why bother, Mr. Stark, if you always invite yourself?”

“True that.”

“How long have you been listening to our channels?”

A burst of static, then “Long enough.”

“Then you are aware of…”
“Yeah, yeah, a big space rock heads towards New York, yes, I’ve heard. Don’t worry, Coulson, I will take care of it.”

Another burst of static, and the signal was gone.

“Stark? Stark, can you hear me?”

“Sir,” Jay tugged on Coulson’s sleeve, “He just went MACH 3.”

Coulson discarded the phones carefully and turned to the men on the bridge,

“Well, gentlemen, I believe we’ve just got us eyes in the sky.”
Chapter 12

It was extremely hard to breathe as the air was freezing cold and lack of oxygen made the lungs ache, but Loki ignored his bodily protests and continued strenuous work on a set of protective spells.

He was stranded very high up in the Midgardian sky, right on the border where the planet’s atmosphere ended and vacuum of space began. Beneath his feet were kilometers of open air and if he looked down it would have seemed he was standing on the carpet made of clouds.

Over his head stretched the limitless blackness of space, ogling the prince with its myriads of eyes and going on around him infinitely.

Down on the planet, where the day turned into the night, a nature spectacle continued, grandiose in its beauty- Loki could not resist casting quick glances at the northern Aurora from time to time, bright and colorful splashes of liquid light firing up the darkened skies where the highest layers of atmosphere collided with solar winds.

It was truly a mesmerizing sight- fairly reminding Loki of Rainbow bridge, also radiant and majestic amidst the darkness of space, only Midgardian version of it was much …wilder, like a gust of freedom.

Loki shivered.

He was literally hanging in the middle of nowhere by sheer power of his will and strength of his magic. Since he never possessed Thor’s ability to levitate, he had to think his way out of the predicament- and so, he was teleporting himself between several almost identical locations each passing second. To a witness it would have seemed that Loki was “flickering”, as if he was a projection suffering from interference. Not that he could get any witnesses there, of course.

The plummeting temperature in the upper atmosphere crystallized all the moisture into the ice immediately, turning Loki’s clothes, still drenched in the ocean water, into the wood hard mess. He had to triple his efforts just to be able to move, and that was when he needed all power he had left to complete the task.

Loki flexed his rigid fingers.

Sparks of greenish energy flowed from his fingertips and weaved into intricate ornaments that glistened in the sunlight and then dissolved without a visible trace.
One spell for initial impact, one layer for the deep freeze, one to crush the rock into pieces.

The humans miscalculated the time of the hit, though this once error was in their favor- Loki could see the approaching asteroid as it grew bigger and bigger, locked on head on collision course from the depths of the space, glowing brighter with each moment and already almost outshining the Sun.

However, there still was time- seconds before it enters the atmosphere, not enough to create something elaborate but just enough to set up a number of traps to slow, cool, and break down the culprit.

As soon as his first set of spells was complete, Loki re-positioned himself deeper into the atmosphere.

This area was quite remote from the sight of earlier disaster, and bore no traces of the meteor shower that hit the navy party.

That did not seem to matter from the first thought, but when new wave of cosmic boulders, turned into fireballs by friction, started showering the space around him with fireflies, he did shortly appreciate the fact.

They were small, only the outriders for a larger missile hurdling through space, but the air already started to warm up.

Loki called upon his powers with triple force, fastening the speed.

He was in the middle of conjuring another barrier when a particularly large asteroid lunged past him, slicing the air with a streak of fiery tail.

Loki paused his spell for a brief moment, musing that the size of that asteroid was too large to let it fall down and perhaps he should have done something to stop it...The moment was short, but the prince got distracted long enough not to notice the airborne missile coming into the asteroid from down below.

The very next second the rock exploded into Loki’s face, scorching his skin and knocking lights out of him. He instantly forgot about the spell and threw his hands to his face, cursing and moaning in pain, and plummeted down.
Tony Stark slowed down right at the predicted crossing point of the asteroid. His personal satellite allowed Jarvis to calculate the passing window with the highest accuracy and all Tony had to do now is to wait for the rock and blow it up.

Tony put the thrusters on hovering mode and switched the visor to the scanning mode.

“ETA of the asteroid?”

“Two minutes forty seven seconds, sir.”

“Estimated amount of ammunition needed for take down?”

“Three rockets and two dozen missiles to shut down the residual debris. Sir, I am reading lots of preliminary satellite stones coming ahead of the main body, what are your plans on that?”

Tony smirked, “Well, we came well packed, didn’t we? I bet I have a bit of ammo to spare, so… Let’s see if we can practice a little.”

Iron Man swirled in the air, locking sensors on the biggest pebble approaching and sent out the missile.

The rock blew into pieces rather spectacularly, covering Tony with a cascade of burning rubble, but it was not the shower of debris battering on his suit that got Tony’s attention- the sensors wailed about something unusual, an anomaly picked up by the radar higher in the atmosphere.

“Jarvis, put it on the home screen.”

The AI complied and Tony gaped, not believing his own eyes and the data displayed on his visor.
“What the hell?”

“Sir, it appears that a human is falling down through the upper level of the…”

“I can see that, but what the hell?!”

“I conclude that was a rhetorical question.”

“Ugrh,” Tony pushed repulsors on maximum and bolted through the air towards the falling figure.

He already dismissed inconsistent- but nonetheless funny- thought about Con Air, and was desperately searching for a plausible explanation through his memories and logical assumptions.

There were none- the upper layer of atmosphere was never used by commercial airlines, sometimes by military, but even if so- the aircrafts were usually unmanned.

An astronaut, perhaps?

Possible, but then again – if there was a space crash, all victims would become morbid satellites on the Earth orbit rather than fall down, besides, anything that comes from the outer space ignites on impact with the atmosphere and the person Stark now was certain it was a male- was not on fire.

Moreover, his vitals were normal- heart rate was a bit elevated, but other than that – nothing out of the ordinary, which was borderline insane considering the circumstances.

That was weird- even for Stark.

And it only got weirder, when right before Iron Man dived under the falling man and caught him, a flash of bright light enveloped the body and the “normal” clothes transformed into something much more…pretentious. A full-blown leather jumpsuit with leather overcoat and tons of intricate golden and green ornaments to be exact.

When the man fell right into Iron Man’s open arms, Tony expected anything- but not a fully conscious and very angry someone burning holes in his suit with a pair of emerald eyes.
“What did you think you were doing?!”

Stark struggled to overcome initial shock and a sudden sensory overload from the stranger’s voice—despite being so angrily loud and filtered through the acoustic system, it washed over Tony’s body as a touch of velvet.

“What? Why…”

The stranger wriggled in Iron Man’s arms, trying to assume vertical position.

“You’ve just blown up the asteroid right into my face!”

Tony blinked several times, coming to terms with the outrageousness of the encounter and the furious face staring at him right through the visors.

To his surprise—pleasant this time—the stranger was rather good looking. Not super model sugary cute type, but more of refined aristocratic beauty, one that was harder to acknowledge but that lasted for ages.

“I’m sorry; I didn’t know you were on my asteroid…”

The stranger exploded, “Your asteroid? Are you mad?!?”

Tony grinded his teeth, “Hey, I said I’m sorry, pal, so cut it!”

The stranger’s handsome face distorted with a big frown and pout mirroring it.

Tony blinked couple of times, appreciating the view, then inquired, “How did you end up here anyway? And who are you?”

Burning storm in the stranger’s green eyes subsided and they suddenly turned colder, a color of cloudless sky.

How intriguing.
“Oh, now we are into pleasantries, aren’t we?”

Tony did not have a time to respond since another huge boulder closed in on them. In a split of a second Iron Man fired another missile and flipped, shielding the unidentified man from the hail of fire.

“Stop it!”

The man protested again, as Tony not very gently manhandled him into position that is more comfortable- for Tony-. Stark chose to ignore the outcry.

Carrying the man by the waist with one of the arms, Tony looked up, only to see the main asteroid approaching the atmosphere.

“Jarvis, I need exact spot of impact for a rocket launch…”

His trail of thought was cut off by derising comment from the stranger,

“Oh, splendid, not only you are a churl, you are a downright lunatic, talking to your imaginary friend in a moment of danger.”

Tony pointed an accusational finger at the man, “Enough bickering.”

The latter arched his eyebrow.

“Enough or what? You shoot another missile into my face?”

No, it would certainly ruin it, although I am not that certain at this point…

“No, but I’ll give you a good slapping, may be that will teach you some respect.”

The stranger grinned, baring his pearl-white teeth.

Tony cursed silently as the warmth from that grin spread all in the wrong places.

Last thing at the moment was for him to get excited …

“Truly that? I wish to see you trying.”
“No, you really don’t.”

Not the best time to argue, really, hanging in midair with a huge piece of space shit hurling down at you, but Tony just could not stand when someone tried to out dispute him.

Nobody ever could come on top in the argument with Tony Stark- that was an unspoken law of nature. Except for Pepper- but that was solely out of respect for the woman.

And Coulson- now that was out of self-preservation instinct developed after agent made good on his promise and tazed Tony. Which was absolutely not Tony’s fault.

But this son of unknown species didn’t show a slightest inclination to back down.

“And why is that I wonder?”

The man casually leaned on Iron Man’s shoulder, tilting his head inquiringly, and Tony could have sworn he felt waves of heat radiating from the man’s body, even though the layers of the metal and wires separated them.

“Why exactly are you wearing this metal can? Are you hiding something? Or is there simply nothing to show?”

All Tony’s excitement instantly converted into anger.

“Oh, you are a cheeky one, aren’t you? Skilled with words, huh? Is there anything else your tongue is good at?”

Stark was delighted by the ashamed expression on the man’s face but it immediately backfired- the slightly open mouth that truly looked very…kissable and those huge bottomless eyes forced Tony’s blood to boil.

“Not that I would let you know.”

*Oh, what a stubborn sample this one is.*
Tony would have loved to open the helmet just to frown disapprovingly at the man he was holding in his embrace, and may be punch his blushed cheek a little, just to tease him, but it was not wise since he would suffocate in the matter of seconds and they both will fall and die.

At least he will.

Therefore, the staring contest had to wait.

Besides, the time has run out- the asteroid came closer to the atmosphere and accelerated, as the Earth gravitational pull became stronger.

Tony did not see it but the sensors showed abrupt rise in temperature.

“Listen, Alice from Wonderland, I’d love to continue, but it’s not a good time- so, how should I put it gently? One more word and I’ll drop you.”

“Here is one. And one more. So why are you still hol…”

Iron Man released his grip and waited couple of seconds as the man plummeted down through the air.

Then Tony swirled and dived after him, catching him in his arms just as he did the first time- like a damsel in distress. Needless to admit, Tony started to like it.

When the man was once again secured in Iron Man’s grip, Tony finalized, “Do not tempt me again.”

The man’s eyes went ablaze with fury, turning bright emerald again.

Oh, so there is a correlation between his eye color and his mood…Fascinating.

Speaking of fury…

“Are you one of Fury’s freaks?”

“You belligerent fool; I am not a fre…Wait.”

Tony stopped a question forming on is tongue just to watch, yet again, how the man’s eyes changed
their color back to pale blue, as the man looked up, then around, then stared right into Iron Man’s visors.

“Did you see the green flash when you shot me down?”

Incorrect structure of the question, but Tony let it slide this once.

“What?”

“The green flash, did you see it? Above the explosion?”

“Um…” Tony suppressed an urge to massage the bridge of his nose, not that it was physically possible, but the urge still existed, “You were glowing, but nothing green, why?”

The man closed his eyes and whispered, “Damn.”

The asteroid slammed into the atmosphere, igniting instantly and heating up the air around it, turning it into white-hot plasma.

The blast came first, throwing Iron Man off the balance until he shifted and repositioned the repulsors, then the sky kindled.

The light was so intense it made the man’s flesh almost transparent, burning flash flames onto the suit and letting Tony see the man’s bones for a split of a second.

Iron Man shielded his companion and prepared to fire all weapons, when another – blinding green blast came.

The explosion rippled through the space and matter like a giant shamrock tsunami. Stark did not know what it was- he had never seen anything like it before- akin to lightning, though going in all directions at once. He only got a glimpse of it before it hit him and his burden and everything went black.

Whatever the blast was- electro-magnetic, gamma or something else- it fried all the circuits in the suit
instantly, killing the power and cutting off Jarvis in mid-sentence.

A moment later Stark felt the suit relax and plummet down as a dead weight, useless.

Tony tried to fight, to turn on the backup system to no avail, and he was running out of time. Falling down from such altitude meant certain death but it was not the fall Tony was worrying about.

As the asteroid descended, it burned brighter than thousands of suns- Stark couldn’t see it, immured in the tight darkness of his suit, but he could feel it- searing heat from the air set on fire, turning into plasma with each passing seconds, and transforming the atmosphere into an overheated oven.

Sweat was flowing in thick streams down Stark’s face, burning his eyes as he descended, and he knew- he is not going to make it to the ground, by the time he hits the dirt he will be broiled alive.

Tony counted to ten, trying to stop his heart from thrashing in his chest and control his breathing- not so much to conserve oxygen then to prevent lungs from burning with the hot air.

Then a thought flashed through his mind- his arms were empty.

His heart sank.

Although it might have been for the best – the guy have gotten mercy of a quick death, incinerated in a split of a second, without even a chance to realize what was happening, all moisture vaporized from his body and flesh turned into dust in a blink of an eye.

Than something heavy collided with the suit.

Tony thought absently that it was a plot of imagination of his brain that started to boil from the heat, as the asteroid would’ve hit him and bounce off and this weight clang on, dragging him down faster.

Then he heard knocking on his helmet.

It was clearly a hallucination.

The knocking intensified, and something- someone- tried to shake the suit into consciousness.
Tony frowned, not fully believing what was happening.

When the power of will took over the panic, he tried to answer, shout something through the helmet-not that it would help, of course- the sonic wave from the asteroid might have created vacuum around it’s trail, rendering any communication by sound impossible.

Then the lightning stroke.

Or so it seemed- a blinding burst of light shot through the suit, reviving all the wires and turning it back to life again.

Seconds later Tony put thrusters on full and balanced himself upright, when his visors finally started working.

The glowing had lessen now and Tony could actually see what was happening around him- first and foremost, he saw the stranger- disheveled, but almost unharmed, shouting something into the visors.

Tony motioned to his ears, trying to explain that the sound does not travel through the vacuum…and then he heard the voice.

“We need to go, now!”

Right in his head.
Like an echo. Or his own thoughts, but pronounced with less delicacy. Like a brush of velvet on his cortex.

“What was that?”

Tony thought, wondering, if the communication went both ways.

“My spell. I didn’t finish it because of you, but …”

The man turned away, and Tony followed his example just in time to see the asteroid split in three parts with a bright explosion, each part going on its separate marry way.
Well, magic or not, it worked after all.

“Not as it supposed to.”

Stark’s eyes jerked up, “Can you read all my thoughts?”

The man glared at him, “Is privacy of your thoughts really the primary concern for you right now?”

Tony pursed his lips- the person had a point.

“Did you just turn my suit back on?”

“Yes, I woke you up, indeed, now tell me – can you shoot it down?”

Tony fastened his grip on the man’s waist and swayed his arm- nothing happened.

He tried to manually lock the missiles onto the targets, but the only response he got was a shower of sparkles bursting out of his ports. Whatever the green thing was, it destroyed the weaponry system.

Tony called Jarvis several times, but nothing there too.

He shook his head, “No, systems are fried.”

“Then fly me after it. Come on, onto the chase, at once!”

Tony stared at the guy, “What are you going to do, convince it to turn around?”

The man actually growled, “Well since you are impotent at the moment, I am the only one who can stop it!”
“I am not an impotent…”

“We are wasting our time!”

Tony finally obliged, accelerating to the full speed in pursuit of the asteroid—all three parts of it. Thanks god, or, more likely, thanks the man that at least the basic systems were still working—thrusters, conditioning, power.

Moments later Tony had to make a choice on which boulder to follow.

He quickly calculated the trajectories.

One of the parts was heading to the open ocean, that part he did not care about—no matter how big it was, the deep waters would absorb most of the impact.

The second one was falling into the shallow waters of the bay—he did not care about it either. The boom would be bigger, certainly, but as the water evaporates, the damage will be minimized.

And the third part headed straight to the middle of Manhattan.

Tony tilted the suit and locked on pursuing course.

“What is your plan?”

“Just get me there!”

Tony obliged, and swung around, outrunning the asteroid on the curving trajectory.

While closing onto the city, Stark took a moment to notice that the part of the rock was flying way slower than it was supposed to.

It had lost most of its initial momentum, and was propelled towards the surface only by the power of gravity, which made it incredibly less destructive.
As the Iron Man swooshed between the skyscrapers towards the impact zone, casting his reflection upon countless windows and leaving a fiery tail behind him, the man twisted from his grip and jumped onto his back, straddling him as if he was some weird sort of flying surfboard. He stood on Iron Man’s back, balancing with each turn without even holding onto the surface.

Tony didn’t see the man muttering spells under his breath, nor he saw long delicate fingers writing invisible ornaments in the air, calling upon the last bits of the magic— but he certainly felt the blast when the man sprang off of him towards the falling asteroid and spread his hands, letting bright green sparks fly from his fingertips, twirling in the air into a shield.

Tony lost his balance and collapsed into the building, crashing through the glass and steel on full speed. He could not get up from the wreckage soon enough and only turned his head to see the asteroid closing in onto the shield.

The only thing he could do at that point was pray that the magic barrier would endure.

**********

Loki called upon the last scraps of his power.

He was exhausted, he was scared, he ached from head to toe and yet he refused to yield to the damned rock.

He landed on the pavement and threw his hands out, forming a massive shield up in the skies, blocking the way of the asteroid.

The impact was unbearable. It came crashing down, bursting through the shield into Loki’s body, cracking his bones and setting his veins on fire. He screamed in agony but held on, digging his heels into the ground to stop the shield from moving.

Sweat streamed down Loki’s face, and the blood boiled from the pain and the heat and he saw as the rock slowed down but kept moving, melting the glass and steel and the concrete around itself,
leaving a trough in the buildings on both sides of it.

Loki’s legs buckled as the enormous pressure buried them deeper and deeper into the asphalt, ripping it open, and his skin burned from the scorching heat streaming down the asteroid’s core.

Yet he held on, not on his power but on his sheer stubbornness, until the asteroid stopped and the fire went out and the melted rock almost gently sank onto the street.

So close that if Loki wanted, he could just stretch his arm and touch it.

The Aesir was shaking violently, gasping for air and trying not to black out from pain and exhaustion. Skin on his hands was burned and now began to peel off in flakes, his face was red and spotted, and he had no powers left to even attempt healing himself.

But Loki was proud. For the first time in his life, he was proud of himself.

Yes, he used magic, but still- he stopped the disaster and saved the innocent people, and why should it matter how exactly did he accomplish it?

*Father too will be proud of him.*

And then it hit him.

All around him, hiding behind the cars and buildings and windows, were humans.

Hundreds, even thousands of them were watching his every move, his every step with eyes and mouths wide open and horror frozen on their faces.

They saw everything, which meant…he failed.

He had broken the promise to conceal himself from public and showed himself to the whole world not 3 days past his arrival.

He just broke the negotiations between two worlds and rendered the peace treaty impossible.
He, not his brother, was responsible for the failure.

Failure, as usual.

Loki’s heart sank.

He would have wept but there were no tears left in his eyes, so he just bit on his scorched lip, drawing blood and cursing himself.

He failed, again, failed in only chance the fate had given him to prove himself worthy.

He failed.

Loki dropped on his knees and lowered his head.

He wanted to through himself into the fiery pit, to be buried under this rock just not to face the consequences.

He could not bear it any more. No more disappointment, not again.

And then the humans around him started to applaud.
Loki slowly woke up, tensed and stretched every muscle in his body, from the shoulders down to the tip toes of his feet. It felt refreshing.

“Good morning, sir. It is 7 am Eastern Time, the weather in NYC is 71 degrees Fahrenheit, partly cloudy, with 30% of precipitation in the afternoon. “

The voice was definitely male, had nice tone and accent, but with strange echo to it, as if it poured from all the sides at once and bounced off some metal surface, and was clearly unfamiliar. Whoever it was, Loki was certain the person must have watched him closely and noticed change in his breathing as the greeting sounded before he actually opened his eyes.

Loki pushed himself up on the elbows and looked around.

The room was spacious with high ceilings, sparsely placed pieces of furniture, light walls lacking any decorations but some sorts of accomplishments memorabilia, and a huge window stretching from one wall to another, opening an incredible view on the city below. The residence was located on the top of a very tall building, overlooking other skyscrapers and basking majestically in the soft glow of the morning sun, leaving all the dark shadows down below. Loki would have admired the view for quite a while if not a single small problem- he had no memory of this place.

To add a bit to his grave embarrassment, he realized that under a soft purple wool blanket he was absolutely, as at the day of his birth, naked.

Deep blush crawled on the Prince’s face. The situation was not only uncommon, but completely unacceptable by all reasons, and demanded some sort of reaction. He just couldn’t decide which.

Loki concentrated. Last thing he remembered was humans applauding him after he stopped that dreadful asteroid, but after that- only blur and blackness. No matter how hard he tried to recall the events of the last night, he failed over and over again. So, Loki postponed it for a while, deciding to allow nature to take its time.

He slowly stood up from the sofa, leaning on the small glass table for support, and gave himself a moment until his head stopped spinning. He was still tired and hurt, but mostly thirsty and hungry- a good sign that his body had recuperated overnight.

“I will inform Mr. Stark of your condition immediately.”
Loki jumped in surprise- by now he had completely forgotten about the person. He looked around once, then twice, but saw no one.

“Who are you, where am I, show yourself at once!”

“Pardon me, sir, I should have introduced myself. My name is Jarvis; I’m an operating system of this penthouse. The residence you are currently staying in belongs to Mr. Antony Edward Stark, you were brought here yesterday after the incident with the asteroid, unconscious, but in the short moment of clarity gave full consent to stay here until you recover and receive necessary medical help.”

With that Loki looked down to his hands, discovering that they were carefully dressed in some sort of Midgardian bandages. He removed the cloth carefully, expecting excruciating pain or at least great discomfort, but there was nothing- his hands were healed, with new light pinkish skin covering his palms. Loki smiled to himself, checking new skin’s sensitivity to the touch - his body’s healing powers had never let him down.

“As to your last request, I’m afraid I am unable to comply because I do not possess physical body.”

Loki dropped discarded bandage and stared at the point on the wall where he believed the man’s face should have been. Now that is an explanation why the voice was freaking him out every single time.

“You are a ghost then?”

He stood in his place, unmoving, waiting for a gust of ice cold wind or a feel of fingers crawling up his body, or anything else that according to legends ghosts were supposed to do, but nothing happened.

“I am not a ghost, sir. I am an Artificial Intelligence unit, created and solely owned by Mr. Stark.”

Loki felt his shoulders relax, “So, you are some sort of a machine.”

The voice thought for a second, then “Yes.”

“Um…Could you be so kind and tell me- briefly- what exactly happened last night?”
“I will gladly demonstrate you visual rendition of the events, sir.”

With that a part of the wall detached itself and slid to the side, revealing a skillfully concealed screen. It reminded Loki of similar screens he saw at the base, those that showed moving pictures of men and women and sometimes animals engaging in all sorts of activities, only this one was completely invisible when in off mode, and was enormous.

When it flickered and electricity brought it to life, Loki thought for a second that once in the future he would love to acquire one of those - not for himself, no, he would barely find any use for it, but for the guys at the base. Not that it was of outmost necessity for them, of course - but he would give a lot to see Jay Jay’s reaction to the new toy.

The pictures on the board started to move and Loki realized with weird fascination, that he was in fact staring at himself of the past. He watched silently, as the meteorite on the screen passed in slow motion through the city, leaving a trail of devastation and debris, descended onto the streets and stopped, meeting a green energy shield that Loki constructed an evening before.

The prince gazed at the action, mesmerized, reliving the moments and almost feeling the heat of the rock burning skin on his face.

Then came the applause and when the dust and smoke settled a little, he saw himself, completely lost and disoriented, shaking like a leaf in the strong wind. He was surrounded by the crowd of humans, who stared, applauded and were using their mobile communication devices to take pictures of him.

Loki blinked rapidly, remembering the irritating flashes that bothered his dried and itching eyes to no end.

And then the man in the suit appeared. Simply landed right in the middle of the crowd, as if shielding Loki from the people around him. The man glanced around slowly, and threw his hands up in a gesture of peace- or victory- Loki wasn’t sure, Jay showed him once but they seemed completely identical, and the crowd around them cheered.

The suit was badly battered, ruined in some areas, in other strewing sparkles or leaking dark viscid liquid, all covered in cracks and dimples, and yet the man inside it carried himself around as if the suit was a regal clothing.

The man continued to communicate with the people- mostly through gestures, petted some arms stretched out to him, waved to the parts of the horde, and even blew a kiss or two to the women. The way he moved around, the way he handled the attention meant only that he was no stranger to fame.

And that his ego could challenge that one of Thor’s.
Suddenly Loki’s image on the screen stumbled and collapsed, exactly at the moment of Loki’s last existing memories faded- but the unconscious body never reached the ground, as the man in the suit’s reaction was fast as lightning - he dashed to the prince and caught him in his arms. Several moments later the man- Iron Man, how the Midgardians called him apparently, ballooned up into the sky with dead weight Loki scooped in his arms.

The screen blackened, as the recording ended, and Loki was about to protest when the screen came back online and showed another picture, less colorful and taken outside the terrace of the penthouse.

As soon as Iron Man landed on the balcony, Loki came back to senses and a short argument followed. It was mostly about Loki’s necessity to get medical help from one of Midgardian healing facilities. Loki ultimately won the argument, as Iron Man walked him through the hall and lowered onto the sofa, then threw hands in the air as a sign of resignation and disappeared from the screen. Two minutes later- Loki could actually see the time countdown in a small row of digits in the lower right side of the screen- the door in the room opened and a woman ran in, tall, slender, with reddish golden hair flowing down her shoulders. She rushed to the prince’s bedside and made what looked like an attempt to assess the prince’s physical condition.

To Loki’s surprise, the image was accompanied by a series of iridescent blue circles and rounds and graphics that seemed like calculations of his heart rate, breathe rate and other vitals. The prince’s assumption was confirmed when he saw a model of his own skeleton in the upper left side of the screen. He heard Jarvis’s modulated voice announce that the prince’s charts looked normal and required no emergency medical attention. Soon after that the woman sighed and redirected her efforts to the Aesir’s burned palms.

After the palms were properly cleaned and bandaged, the woman collected all medical supplies and exited the room.

Soon after that the screen went blank and turned off.

Loki breathed out and thanked Jarvis. He only had time to collect his thoughts that much when he smelled the aroma of coffee and heard footsteps outside of the room. He fled to the cover of the sofa, wrapping the big blanket around his shamefully naked body just in time for the door to open.

Two humans entered the room- a woman from the recording of the night before, still beautiful with her shiny golden hair and slender figure, holding two cups of simmering liquid in her hands, and a man who seemed completely unfamiliar.

His voice though Loki recognized in instant.

“Good morning, sunshine, how do you feel?”

Both humans stared at the prince in question, who did his best to look regal and dignified while
wrapped in the blanket and strategically hiding himself behind the sofa.

Then the woman frowned.

“Tony, why is he naked?”

“What?”

“Why is he naked? He was fully clothed when I left.”

“I don’t like what you are implying and I have nothing to do with it…”

“I am not implying, I’m simply asking a reasonable question…”

“Well, your question is implying and I…”

Loki cleared his throat.

“Forgive my appearance, but I might have overstrained myself yesterday so much that I am yet unable to perform magic again.”

He saw puzzled looks on the people’s faces and felt necessity to explain, “My armor is mostly procured by magical means, so right now I am…”

“Does this mean that you are actually naked most of the time?”

“Um.”

While Loki mused on the plausible answer to the woman’s inquiry, Tony silently thought whether he should love or hate Pepper for that- the conclusion was very logical and thus even more arousing. This of course was unacceptable in his lack of suit coverage. Thus Stark decided to distract himself.

“Performance issues? It happens. You know, one out of every five…”
“Tony!”

The man shrugged, pinned to the parquet by the woman’s exasperate glance. “What? I’m just saying…”

While Pepper gave Tony both cups in not so well concealed attempt to shut him up, Loki left an offensive innuendo unanswered and cruised from behind the sofa towards the humans, holding one arm around himself protecting a fragile construction of the blanket, and extending another arm towards Pepper in a greeting gesture.

How did the guy manage to look elegant in such ridiculous situation completely escaped Tony’s understanding of the universe, but he surely started to like and envy the guy even more.

“Loki Odinson, at your service.”

Pepper smiled and handed out her hand for a hand shake, “Pepper Pots, nice to meet you.”

Loki tilted his head and caught Pepper’s hand into his, bringing it up for a swift kiss.

“My lady, I don’t know how to express my eternal gratitude for the kindly assistance you offered to my injuries yesterday.”

Pepper blushed and lowered her eyes, fighting away a smile, “You are welcome, Loki.” Then she suddenly gasped and stared at his hands, “My god, your hands, they are…”

Loki demonstrated the almost healed skin, “They are all right, thanks to your troubles.”

“Hey, want to kiss my hand too? I helped.”

“More like got in my way.”

“In the way of free falling to the ground?”
“And whom do I owe that favor in the first place?” A perfectly well arched eyebrow made Tony growl in irritation, but before he could argue, Loki extended his arm, “Antony Stark, I presume?”

Tony had no choice but to shake it. “You presume right. Loki, isn’t it?”

“Indeed.”

Tony lost himself for a second in those bottomless icy blue eyes, and with delay realized that Loki was still holding his hand.

The grip wasn’t as bone crushing as Tony would’ve expected from the person who alone handled an asteroid, but it was strong enough to demonstrate Loki’s power- and send waves of heat through Tony’s body. Stark had no other choice, but to retaliate.

“See anything you like?”

Loki kept staring at him, unblinking.

“Well…” He took his time to give Tony a good look from head to toes, than tilted his head and smiled. “I never would have thought that without the suit you are so short.”

Tony’s chocolate eyes lit up with fury as he withdrew his hand from Loki’s grip.

“I’m not short. I’m highly portable.”

The prince gave Tony a look of mocking surprise, “Oh, forgive my incompetence.”

“Loki, would you like some coffee?”

Pepper turned back to the two men who finally broke their stare down and shifted attention to her.

Loki met woman’s inquiring look and nodded, unable to refuse the tempting liquid. Pepper took a cup from Stark’s hand and Tony instantly protested, “Hey, that’s my coffee!”

“Your coffee is in your other hand, this is my coffee, which I will gladly share with our guest.” With that she held out the cup to Loki and smiled when he nodded in gratitude.
“Jarvis, place an order for a set of clothes for Mister Loki, please.”

“Already done, miss Potts.”

“I will have to leave you for a while, I’m holding the board meeting and be back in two hours, meanwhile, Loki, please, feel yourself at home and rest well. And you, Tony,” she gave Stark a long meaningful look, “Behave.”

Tony didn’t get a chance to express his thoughts on the matter when Jarvis turned on the intercom, “Sir, Agent Coulson is on the line, and he wishes to speak to you.”

“I’m sleeping and not to be wakened. Tell him to call back in three hours. Or better tomorrow.”

“Sir…”

“Agent Coulson?” Tony watched how Loki suddenly started fidgeting and how color drained his face.

“I need to address him promptly, I need to…”

Tony’s hand on Loki’s shoulder silenced the prince. “Whoa, whoa, wait. You know him?”

“Yes, we are acquainted, he is in charge of the negotiations, and I need to…Why am I even explaining myself to you?”

Loki turned around and took a step, but Tony’s hand stopped him.

“Don’t even think of going there like that! You need to wait until your clothes arrive. Last thing I want right now is for Coulson to see you a la carte, he’s already been waiting for a chance to taze me.”

“But…”

“Give me some time, when you get fully dressed you can talk to Coulson as much as you want.”
Without second thought Tony turned around and strolled out of the room, silently praising himself for his self-restraint. Because god only knows how hard it was to stop his hand from tugging onto that blanket long enough for it to fall. That Loki guy’s reaction would have been to die for.

Tony sipped his coffee and chuckled. But then again, that sassy bastard might have gotten offended and done something bad to Tony, like throwing him out of the window or something.

Tony’s irritation flowed back. Loki was pretentious and infuriating, and in any other case Tony would’ve followed the golden rule of kicking out a stranger- no matter how pretty he or she was- on the morning after, not even bothering to remember the name. Only this time the morning after didn’t count because nothing happened the night before, plus Odinson (what kind of name was that anyway?) had incredible abilities and thus required further thorough investigation. A completely logical conclusion, on which Loki’s physical appearance and level of intelligence had no effect whatsoever.

None at all.

Speaking of, what exactly was the connection between him and Coulson? Anther of Fury’s secret perfect soldier serum projects Stark wasn’t notified of perhaps?

Tony stopped in the corridor, glancing around to make sure he was alone. “Jarvis, did you test the specimen I provided yesterday?”

“Yes, sir. The blood and tissue analysis is complete.”

“And?”

“I can conclude with 99% certainty that Mr. Odinson is not human.”

“Incredibly astute observation.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Tony rolled his eyes. He knew Jarvis was perfectly aware that was not a praise but sarcasm, and responded accordingly.

Oh, yes, Tony programmed him well.
“I again repeat, Mr. Odinson is not human. In fact, he is not indigenous to this planet.”

Stark stopped and stared ahead and slightly upwards. “What do you mean?”

“I ran a number of tests to single out DNA structure and genetic abnormalities but couldn’t find any because the sample is not present in my database. I compared Mr. Odinson’s DNA with all known species on the planet and found no match. After assuming that he is of unknown humanoid species I cross referenced mineral and chemical compounds of his blood with all the locations on the Earth in attempt to determine the place of his origin and again found none. Therefore I with high certainty conclude that he was not born and neither grew up on the planet Earth.”

“An alien? Jarvis, I’ve got myself an alien?”

“I believe you did, Mr. Stark.”

Tony felt a bright smile involuntarily split his face, “How exciting.”

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Loki walked to the window and put his hands on a cold glass separating him and the outside void. The city was buzzing with life, scurrying humans, honking cars, even birds nesting on the roof tops. All of them busy with their petty every day errands, completely unaware of Loki’s inner turmoil.

He strained his eyesight- when the sun passed over the buildings and hid itself behind the tallest one, he could actually see the exact spot where the asteroid landed. There still was a barely visible whirlwind of light smoke and steam coming from the sight, but the trail of destruction already cooled, crystalized and turned into a massive scar on the city’s glass and concrete face. The spot was sealed off by cordons of firefighters and police cars, but that couldn’t stop the curious crowd that grew bigger with each passing second.
Loki sighed.

It was a great pleasure and satisfaction to see the city still standing, and mortals, those illiterate and irritating mortals protected from the certain death.

He just for once listened to his heart and not his head, played brave and noble and saved many lives— but at his own cost.

If it was Thor who had broken the rule, the whole problem would have been forgotten in a split of a second. Or shouted out and forgotten nonetheless. But with Loki…

The younger Odinson was well aware of his imperfections. He was not good enough. He wasn’t strong enough, aggressive enough, stubborn enough… He was imperfect son of the perfect family, always shadowed by his luminous brother, the whole realm thought so— from Thor’s dearest friends to the peasants and servants of the palace, no matter what Mother had been telling him.

He had many weaknesses and thus needed to be perfect in everything else.

He already thought of several strategies and explanations, but before he could start implementing them he needed to know the reaction of parties involved.

Not that he felt any guilt towards the humans— no, he certainly held no desire to apologize for breaching the protocol especially after what he had done for them— but resolving the issue with Midgardians quickly would free his hands in dealing with his own family reaction.

Right at that time the door in the room opened again and an unfamiliar man came in, face almost hidden behind a pile of different size boxes.

“Sir, I’ve brought you some clothes Mr. Stark had ordered. “

“Thank you, you can leave them on the table.”

The man put the weight down and sighed in relief. “My name is Happy, I’m Mr. Stark’s driver.”

“Thank you, Happy, I shall try the clothes on now.”

“Sure.” The man stared at Loki for quite a while, as if a question— or something else was rolling off his tongue but he was desperately fighting it back, then smiled uncertainly and turned to leave.
“Happy,” Loki called out just in time.

“Yes?”

“May I inquire…You’ve been outside today, correct? Have you seen the streets of the city, have you talked to the people? What do they think of me, of what I did yesterday? Please, I need to know.”

“Well, um…” The man’s face suddenly lit up brighter than the sun, and Loki looked at him, startled, not sure if he for real was seeing a look of complete admiration on the Midgardian’s face.

“You are a new national hero, sir. “

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Stark lazily positioned himself behind the office table just in time when agent Coulson entered the room.

“I don’t remember letting you in.”

“I invited myself.”

Tony sipped coffee and smugly smiled at the agent, “What brings you here today? Oh, let me guess, you missed me infinitely and finally gave in to your feelings and decided to finally pay me a visit?”

Coulson didn’t even flinch, “I’m afraid you are overestimating my fondness of you, Mr. Stark. “

“Uh, thought so.”

“I’m here to see your guest.”
“You have to be more specific, Coulson, I have many guests- in fact, 20 stores of this building are all my guests.”

“I think you are well aware what guest I’m talking about.”

“A, the alien one?”

Coulson arched an eyebrow.

Tony urged to ask if this brow arching was a part of special agent training.

“What? Didn’t expect your old buddy Stark to figure it out by himself?”

“You don’t follow the news, do you?”

“No. I usually make them.”

“Of course. Here, “ Agent reached out into his inner pocket and handed a fresh newspaper to Tony, “Take a look.”

“First man to ride Tony Stark. A bit tacky for my taste.”

“Two paragraphs down, please.”

“Umm…Oh, while Washington officials keep silent, the anonymous source in the armed forces says that the mystery man is in fact not a man, but a member of an alien diplomatic mission that arrived to Earth several days ago to negotiate a treaty with the human race. While the information remains unconfirmed, the evidence supports that it is, in fact, true. Meanwhile New York waits to greet his new hero. Wow, Coulson, cover up by telling the truth? Whose crack pot idea was that?”

“Mine. And it is not an idea, it is our new tactics. We withheld the information from the general public to prevent massive panic, but in light of events the best way is to use the publicity in our favor.”
“And you think your bosses will take it lightly?”

“At the present moment I am more concerned of organizing appropriate accommodations for Prince Loki.”

“Prince?”

“Yes, he is of royal blood, and is a part of a very important mission.”

“If he is so important, why it took you so long to come here?”

Coulson sighed, “We had an emergency in New Jersey. A Hulk kind of emergency, to be exact.”

“Oh.” Tony twisted the coffee in his hand, suddenly interested in the label. “Did you…take care of it?”

“Lets just say, it disappeared on its own.”

“I see.”

“Meanwhile my highest priority is taking care of the prince. And I would insist you be a good host for him for a time being.”

“Oh, I see, first you keep me in the dark about everything important, and now, when you are short on budget, you instantly remember of me? You can’t just order me to do something, it is not going to work that way.”

“I wasn’t hoping it would. In fact, I’m planning to relocate the prince to another residence.”

“Where?”
“Just an hour ago Mr. Wayne expressed a desire to help us in hosting the delegation, and was very generous with his offer.”

“Wayne? He is in Gotham, you want your prince to be stuck in Gotham?”

“No, I need him here. And Mr. Wayne has recently purchased a large property upstate New York.”

Stark started to fume, Coulson smiled almost invisibly.

“Basically, he has a more suitable residence for our guests.”

“And I have a foot up in his ass. The alien stays with me. I found him, I picked him up, I brought him here. Wayne is not getting him.”

“Prince Loki is not a trophy that you two can’t share, he is a person. Besides, the delegation doesn’t consist of Loki alone, he also has a very… flamboyant older brother and several other people accompanying him.”

Stark shrugged, “That’s fine. I might have some spare space in the garage.”

“Stark…”

“Loki stays with me.”

“Why is that sudden change of heart, Mr. Stark? I thought you couldn’t wait to get rid of me.”

Both men simultaneously turned to face the new comer. Loki was standing in the door frame, freshly dressed and pimped in his usual royal style. The clothes fit perfectly, hugging his slim figure with all the important places. Jarvis did a marvelous job picking up the style- the ensemble bore a striking resemblance to Loki’s royal clothes. Besides, all the dark colors and metal embellishments looked gorgeous, bringing out the contrast between pale skin, raven black hair and bright sky color eyes.

“What? No, never. I was generously concerned about your wellbeing, that’s it. “

“Just so? Was said concern the main consideration when you chose the clothes for me?”
“Why, are they not satisfactory to your taste, your highness?”

“Oh, satisfactory indeed, in fact I was about to express my gratitude and say that the artistic vision of these garments is incredible. Although I do find them a little too tight for my taste. You see, I feel disruption in blood circulation in my lover limbs.”

“Really?”

“Indeed, all three of them.”

Coulson chocked, Tony wiggled his eyebrows, “Perhaps you require a massage?”

Loki shot back a blinding smile, “I think I’ll manage.”

Tony turned back to Coulson, “He stays with me. “ And walked out of the room, already talking to Jarvis about necessary arrangements.

Coulson watched Tony’s retrieving back for a second, than turned to Loki. The prince smiled apologetically, “Forgive my indecency, but I just can’t help it. Mr. Stark bestirs in me a relentless desire to tease him, I just can’t help it.”

Coulson nodded, “He bestirs some desires in me too, though they are rarely that benevolent. How do you feel?”

“I’m well, though I have to offer my sincere apologies about the breach of protocol. I should have been more considerate …”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand what you are talking about.”

Loki looked flabbergasted. “The request you made before the negotiations started…”
“No, I know what you are referring to, I just don’t see any reason to apologize. Through the course of one day you had aided us a number of times and saved countless lives while risking your own. For that alone we—and I mean the people of this planet- ought to express our gratitude, not to accept your apology. And as to the blown cover up- we might overlook that minor detail- the unplanned publicity might actually aid your cause.”

Loki felt his mood lighten up and all the worries disappearing, and smiled, wide and genuine.

“All is well, then?”

“All is well.”

“Agent Coulson, what about my brother?“

“He is unharmed. Transporter will arrive in about an hour. He got stuck after striking down the smaller asteroid over the forest, took us a while to find him.”

Loki frowned, “Why didn’t he use Mjolnir and fly back?”

“He was aiding the locals.”

The prince smiled, “Of course he was.”

Coulson eyed a cup with cold coffee in Loki’s hand, “We still have some time before the carrier arrives, would you mind joining me for a breakfast?”

“I would be delighted.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I’m sorry I haven’t updated for so long- it was not because I lost inspiration, no - I just got buried under college stuff and full-time work, so I physically didn't have time to write. I'm still caught up, but I'll do my best to post asap. <3

“You shouldn’t laugh at me, Mr. Odinson.” Phil’s tone would have passed as reprimanding if not for obvious humor tones hidden underneath the seriousness.

“I’m not; I am simply observing your struggle.” Loki had to bite his cheek to conceal a stubborn smile crawling on his face, then quickly asserted, “With great sympathy, of course.”

“I don’t need you to sympathize; I need you to help me with the choice.”

“I’m afraid I am not knowledgeable enough to assist you in question of such tremendous importance.”

Agent Coulson gave Loki a long look full of doubt at only then turned back to ogling the display of donuts through the glass reflecting the light of the midday sun.

Outside the donut shop streets basked in the summer heat as people hurried away from the offices and to the snack stops to get their share of lunch break supplies. The sky was spotted with only two tiny spots of clouds, and even through the glow of sunshine in the air Loki could still see the silhouette of the Stark’s resident skyscraper towering in the distance.

Loki closed his eyes for a second, feeling the sun glints lick his cheeks, enjoying the pleasant warmth they brought with the touch, and then turned back to Coulson.

“Why don’t we start with eliminating the least attractive options?”

Coulson gave it a quick thought and nodded, noticing the desperation on the store assistant’s face as he lost his hope of finishing the transaction fast, rolled his eyes and resume playing Tetris under the counter.

Five minutes later Loki held the door open while Coulson carried the acquired variety of donuts in a firm grip and said good bye to the greatly relieved cashier, stepping outside.

“Here, take one” – before continuing Phil took a good mouthful of a Boston Crème donut and stretched his free arm to Loki, offering another untouched one to the prince.

“And I should indulge in this extraordinarily healthy looking human treat, why?”

“Ugh, just try it, it is delicious.”

“I am grateful; however… I don’t understand why people from Earth have such an unstoppable desire to feed me?”

Loki eyed the chocolate-glazed pastry with suspicion, then accepted and brought closer to his mouth,
smelling before taking the first bite. The taste was rather delightful to his great surprise.

Coulson chuckled at Loki’s reaction, “Well, for one, sharing food is a custom when welcoming guests. Plus, you do seem a bit malnourished.”

Loki pushed the last piece of the puffy ball into his mouth, indulged into the sweetness for a moment, and then licked his fingertips.

“I see no fault in not sharing my brother’s taste in day-long meals and banquets. I prefer how I shall put it, mind food over the sustenance for the flesh.”

Coulson nodded, smirking, “Your preference is noticeable. Now, back to business. S.H.I.E.L.D is releasing the information about your true origins and mission on Earth by midnight. When New York wakes up tomorrow, it will be in every single newspaper and on every TV channel. There will be a bit of panic, then, by lunch time, The UN will call an emergency meeting of General Assembly and the Security Council to address the issue. Now, I strongly recommend you to attend it and deliver a speech, it will be the best chance to introduce yourself to the people of the Earth and disclose your agenda.”

Loki fidgeted his fingers while fully concentrating on Coulson’s words, then realized with the back of his mind that his fingertips were still irritatingly sticky from the donut he had previously consumed, and brought them up to his mouth to lick away the remaining sweetness without giving it a second thought.

Coulson watched prince’s movements intently, than added, “The first impression is very important. You might want to prepare well for it, your first public appearance is the best chance to win the people’s hearts over and make your and my job a lot easier.”

The prince nodded, already laying out a plan for the speech in his mind.

“You can count on my full involvement.”

Coulson pulled out another donut out of the bag and took a bite, “You are not my concern, but your brother is.”

“You doubt he will perform well?”

Phil tilted his head a little, “He is too easily offended and hot tempered- and when you face the politicians they will do everything to throw you off balance.” The agent looked around, evaluating the influx of people from both directions, and positioned himself in the shadow of the building, tugging Loki along from the busy middle of the street closer to the walls.

“There are two main groups of people you will have to deal with in the government, whether it is UN or any national one. One group will see you as a threat and treat accordingly. Usually they have either military background or strong roots in religion,” – Loki involuntarily smiled when Coulson mentioned military.

While the prince’s new human acquaintances had been rather lovely and hospitable, he couldn’t have helped but noticed the commanding staff was weary and suspicious of the Aesir. He even wondered for a while whether all those clashes between Iceman and Thor were in fact carefully planned before head with one simple purpose in mind- evoking negative response from the older prince and seeing how he performs under the pressure.

Loki pouted.
Planned provocation or not, Iceman shouldn’t be allowed anywhere near Thor for the sake of all realms of Yggdrasil- not because he was inferior only to Loki himself in his skill of pissing older Odinson off, but because he derived great pleasure from doing it.

“Just don’t let them offend you, remember- that is exactly what they are aiming at.”

“Your concern has a reasonable ground. I will surely make Thor aware of this to avoid unnecessary complications. However, do you truly believe all of them will be so hostile?”

“No, not really. The rest of them will be alarmed but mostly favorable. Do not full yourself though- it will interest them as another way to make more money.”

Loki considered Coulson for a moment, “you seem to be depreciative of the system of governance on your planet, Phil.”

“When you are my age, you’ll understand.”

“Should I remind you that by Asgardian standards you are but an infant?”

Coulson smiled at Loki’s remark, “I might be an embryo, but I still have more experience with the human politics than you do. Perhaps, when your kin last visited our planet, the population indeed treated personal traits, honor and strength as basis of power, but now- no, now the only power everyone recognizes is money.”

“How exactly money can compete with the brutal force, like military potency or weaponry?”

“It can’t if it comes to face-to-face confrontation, but weapons deplete and force diminishes in time, and in the long run the winning side always is the one with more money.”

Loki shook his head, “This isn’t right. And nothing can be done about that?”

“Not really. If established order crumbles, the whole world will be plunged into chaos, and nothing good ever came out of that. It is unfair, but it’s something you just have to accept if you want to succeed.”

When the prince lifted his chin and shot Coulson a glance full of emotion that agent couldn’t identify, Phil decided to play safe and apologize,

“Don’t take it as offence- I simply am trying to prevent some nasty surprise from throwing you off course and derailing the negotiations. Just keep that in mind.”

“I will.”

“I see.”

“Now, the general population…”

Coulson didn’t get a chance to answer because a sequence of loud gun fire echoed through the air and a cloud of smoke burst through the huge doors of a building on the opposite side of the street.

The agent pushed the donut bag into Loki’s grip and ordered the prince to wait for him in the safe distance.

“Stay here, I’m going to check this out and come back.”

“I can be of assistance.”
“I’ll take care of it, please, do not get involved. “

With that Coulson nodded Loki quick good bye and ran to the sight of the mayhem.

The prince contemplated his options for a brief moment, than concluded that restriction of involvement did not prohibit him to peek. If only just a little.

Loki looked around at the panic- stricken crowd rushing in all directions away from the sight of danger, put the paper bag down on the concrete and headed after the agent.

*****

“Where is he?”

“Where is who?”

Tony lazily sipped the hot coffee from the mug proudly carrying “I heart Stark” print as the Pentagon representative burdened with heavy decorations on his official uniform and excessive weight around the waist challenged him into staring competition.

“Do not play games with me, Mr. Stark.”

“Do not threaten me in my own house, Mr. what was your name again? “

“Hand him over to us before it is too late. We do not want any problems or any unnecessary information leaked to the public.”

“Information like what? Like “oh, we’ve got an alien in the house?” – Tony tsked and shook his head, putting the mug down. “They already know, my dear, I suggest you for a change tell your people the truth, they deserve it.”

“We will not allow that!”

“We, we, who’s we? We, King Henry the V?”

The representative came forward and put his heavy meaty palms on the Stark’s table with a loud thud, sending ripples through the coffee’s surface. Tony observed them vanish and turned his attention back to the visitor.

“You will not discuss past evening events or any knowledge gained since with anyone outside of this room. You will surrender the man you brought here yesterday into our custody and you will call a press conference where you will deny any allegations of his extraterrestrial nature.”

Tony bended over the table, stretching his back and getting face to face with the official, their heads so close tips of the noses almost touching.

“Not going to happen.”

“Why?”

“Why?!” Tony threw his hands up in frustration, making the man back down hastily in attempt to prevent his very important face from colliding with Tony’s gesticulating limbs. “Because yours overinflated stupidity will look bad on me! People already know that we have an alien presence here, you can’t deny, you can’t cover it up, it’s just not going to work!”
“Worked before, will work now.”

“Before… what do you mean, before, there was before? You knew… for how long has the government being covering up alien existence?”

“This is none of your business, Mr. Stark; I suggest you keep your long nose to yourself. Now, where is the person in question, did you put him under surveillance?”

“You must’ve mistaken my home for a prison.”

“You don’t seem to understand what chaos it will unleash, what social upraise it will cause…”

Stark pulled himself out of the leather chair and stretched. “I understand everything perfectly, but my coffee is getting cold and I want another creamer. So why don’t you save your pleasantries on me and explain all the problems directly to the public?”

With that Tony pulled out a remote control out of the desk and pushed the button. That very second shades across the room disappeared, revealing a huge crowd or journalists standing behind the glass doors, listening to every word the representative had said through the providently provided by Tony speakers turned on maximum and looking downright murderous.

The Pentagon man froze in horror, “You’ve said there are no reporters on the premises.”

A smug smirk flashed through Tony’s face as he shrugged, unlocking the doors, “I lied.”

******

Coulson moved swiftly through the crowd, collecting bits of information from smells, sounds, scraps of words and shouts of the panicking citizens, trying to combine everything into one big picture that could shed some light at what was happening and reveal the possible ways of resolving the problem.

It wasn’t that hard after all.

The building in question was easily recognizable- the biggest bank in New York city, eight stores of brick, glass and concentration of countless money planted in the center of Manhattan, standing strong and proud among the shiny skyscrapers.

The attack on the wealthiest bank in the country meant only one thing- robbery.

Unless they are filming a movie.

Coulson frowned at the thought,

Which they are obviously not, judging by the horror-stricken faces of the people running away from the entrance.

Heavily armed group of bandits attacking the biggest bank in the city in broad day light… Either a statement of power for all competing crime organizations, or a downright stupidity and teenage bravado mixed with the poor planning.

If it was the first scenario, Coulson would rather stand back and do not intervene, as the culprits would have a wide range arsenal of weapons and means of suppressing the opposition- and last thing he needed was starting a shootout with all those hostages in the building.
But if it was the second scenario…He wouldn’t have any choice. Unless those attackers have some miraculous means of escaping the growing with each second group of police, the finale of the story might turn rather gruesome, and that Coulson could not allow.

The agent closed in to the main entrance, trying to steal glances of what was happening inside, but it was almost impossible with the wall of smoke shielding the interior from the bystanders.

Phil crossed the small alley separating the stairs to the central doors and turned left, into the shades and passage hidden among the trees, curving around the corner and looking for another way in, stealthy and quiet, away from the screams and sirens.

Soon enough he noticed a small open window right above the broken fire stairs, a gaping hole in the wastness of brick and stone, inviting him in.

Phil fastened his speed, pushed off the ground and with the last step jumped up and caught the edge of the stairs. The rusty metallic construction whined from unusual strain but endured, giving the agent enough time to pull himself up and sneak inside.

*****

Loki watched with weird fascination how the emergency response teams came flowing from all directions, hushing away the crowd and encircling the bank into a tight ring of cars and live force, holding the entrance and the windows at gunpoint.

Abundance of lights, sirens and humans reminded him of the events of the recent past, when instead of the bank there were him and the meteorite in the middle of the frenzy. The prince didn’t give it a second thought right after the rock was stopped, as he literally lost ability to intellectually function, but now, safe and rested and nourished back to his full power, he recalled every minor detail- him, pale and shaking, the melting rock fuming with heat, and the humans- looking at him with wide eyes, shocked and mesmerized by his deed.

All eyes on him, and him alone.

No Thor in his shiny armor, no Odin in his regal gown, just Loki, burned and tired, in the focus of everyone’s attention.

It felt rather strange to be so suddenly and brutally pushed out of his father and brother’s shadow into the spotlight, but to say the truth…it felt like heaven.

Loki found himself smiling as if in foretaste of a special treat he has been craving for his whole life. He took the negotiations so seriously in strenuous attempt of proving himself to Odin and his brother dearest, that he completely forgot how outrageously pleasant it was to receive worship from the humans.

Not that they were going to treat him as one of their gods and raise temples and make sacrifices-those times had long passed, but human nature hasn’t changed – people around him still loved display of wit and power, and Loki was going to give it to them in fullest.

The prince hurried through the emptying street to the entrapped building and stopped for a moment in a small opening between the trees and bus stop, morphing his civilian clothes into a police uniform.
Once done, he put on a face as serious as he could do and charged to the cordon.

“Hey, rookie!” An officer called him out and motioned to the left, “Take place on your ten.”

Loki mentally frowned, *my ten what? Toes?* But obliged, as he was sent in just the right direction.

As soon as the trees hid him away from the police, Loki called upon magic again, this time changing his garments to the costume he assumed was traditional to servants of this public institution. Once done, he overlooked his outfit captiously, brushing astray leaf from his black pants, smoothing away wrinkles from the snow white shirt and fixing his tie. Last thing Loki conjured was a name tag on his left chest pocket, a small green rectangle with calligraphic letters “Odinson” on it.

The moment later Loki darted up and pushed off the wall, charging for the same window Coulson used to sneak in not long ago, threw last glance on the street and disappeared inside.
Hey Ya all, sorry it took me that long to come back to the story- RL is a bitch sometimes...Now I'm back on track and hopefully will update more often :) 

Update: XD I see everyone is trying to guess who the bold man is, well, I'll give you a hint :P 
(and yes, he is not from the Marvel Universe, but he does have a special place in my heart )

Coulson slithered through the long corridors towards the main hall, looking for surveillance spots and civilians in distress. The ground floor was deserted in a rush, lights flickering and papers flying in the wind like confetti after a parade.

Police outside won’t be much of a help at least until the robbers declare their demands. Ask for backup? Possible. But the closest on call is Stark, and he is anything but subtle. High risk of collateral damage is unwanted. I should proceed with caution and gather additional Intel.

Suspicious noise from the janitor’s closet pulled Coulson out of his calculations. The agent drew out his gun and approached cautiously, keeping the shelf door at the point, only to jump back when the lock cracked and the door swung open. That’s when the janitor came out of hiding and launched a desperate attack with a battle cry.

The agent’s hand darted out to stop the loud shout while the other blocked the mop in janitor’s grip from reaching its target. The struggle was short, poor man immediately subdued, shivering in horror, and Coulson motioned him to keep silent, petting his shoulder in attempt to offer comfort. Their little commotion, however fleeting it was, had unfortunately alerted the gunmen.

Coulson had to act fast. He grabbed the trembling mass of the cleanliness devotee and dragged him back into the closet, pushing the breath out of them both while squeezing the door shut.

The echo of steps grew louder as the gunman walked to the doorway. He was armed to his teeth and then some, with two handguns, automatic rifle, stripes of ammo and at least two knives sticking out of his boots, and judging by the lazy stride sported at least 5 to 7 years of service in the military or, more likely, in a pack of mercenaries and assassins and thugs somewhere in the Earth’s smelliest armpit.

One second was all it took Coulson to conclude that he was completely and hopelessly outgunned. At this point all further course of action depended solely on the gunmen’s intentions, which Coulson had yet to get himself acquainted with. As all the employees had already been herded out to the main hall, the agent needed a plausible explanation for even being in the building. Luckily for him, his hiding companion just had given him an idea.

As soon as the footsteps subdued, Coulson sprung from the shelter and motioned the janitor to undress. The man gave Coulson a weird look but complied. He was getting a new, custom made and tailored suit in exchange for a worn dirty uniform, so that was a fair trade after all.
Coulson smoothed the clothes on himself, feeling the fabric, its weight and tug and movement constrains it brought, and reached out for the name tag when the man withdrew it and shook his head. The picture ID with someone older and darker and smiling brightly didn’t look like Coulson at all. The agent nodded in agreement and guided the man into the corridor, explaining the escape plan.

When the man was gone for good, the agent pulled himself up to the ventilation shaft and pushed in.

And he certainly did not think he had one too many donuts when his rear stuck in the opening for a split of a second.

***

“Bring him to me.”

Two armed men grabbed Coulson by his arms and dragged him across the lobby, through the line of terrified hostages’ face-sweeping the marble floor.

Coulson was forced on his knees before a tall man with a small laptop in his hands. The man’s fingers flew over the keyboard for a brief moment before he shut it closed and turned to face the agent. So this is the alpha.

“Now, what do we have here?”

The man’s eyes scanned Coulson from head to toe and fixed on the agent’s face, unblinking.

“Janitor? With perfect hair, shiny designer boots and a Swiss watch?”

Coulson shrugged, “I’m that good.”

The leader glared at him for a second, then leaned forward close enough for their noses to be almost touching.

“Don’t think me a fool. I don’t know who you are, but if you try to do something stupid, I will shoot a hostage. And then you. Just to set an example. Understood?”

Coulson remained inscrutable and sharply nodded, “Yes.”

“Keep an eye on him. I don’t need any hiccups.” The leader waved Coulson away and returned to his computer.

The agent’s ribs squeaked when he collided with the floor alongside with other hostages, but Coulson just breathed out and kept his cool as the assailants spread out throughout the hall.

The situation unfolding before Coulson’s eyes made his nerves tingle. While being simply outnumbered fourteen to one were the odds he could live with, one small detail about the gunmen screamed that something much worse than a heist was about to go down: with all their preparation and professionalism, they were not wearing any masks.

“Me, why does it always have to be me?! I didn’t even sin that much! “

The man lying next to the agent was rather lavish in his expressions. His bold head shone with small drops of sweat as he stared at the leader of the criminals. While other hostages shivered with fear and fatigue from keeping their arms over their heads, that man looked downright murderous.

“Invest your retirement with us, the safest bank in US. Safest bank my ass.”
The guy grunted and reached down to scratch his unshaved chin only to stop in mid-movement. His eyes were now fixed on the back of one of the gunman standing a mere foot from him. Or, rather, on a spot slightly lower- where a gun was tucked into the pants, and left unguarded. The man tensed and pulled himself up, ready to lash out, but Coulson’s firm grip on his leg stopped him.

The agent met the death glare with calmness and simply shook his head.

The man mouthed, “Let go of me.” Coulson obeyed, but the moment was lost: the gunman moved to another location way out of reach.

The guy turned back to Coulson, lips pursed into a thin line.

The agent sighed, “I understand your frustration and resentment, but now is not a good time for heroics.”

“Touch me again, and I will kick you in the face.”

“And it will help with the situation?”

“No, but I’ll enjoy it.”

“Before you attack one of them, think of the consequences for all of us.”

The death promising glare turned patronizing, “Son, I know what I am doing.”

The agent was slowly losing his patience. “If you start a brawl many people will die.”

“And if I don’t, we all die. So we are fucked anyway.”

“And what makes you think that?”

The man tsked, “They are not wearing any masks, so they are either termlessly stupid, too full of themselves or they just know there will be no witnesses to id them. I bet on the third, cause why else would they drag a pet kamikaze along?”

Coulson shot the man a questioning look and shifted closer, widening his line of sight, only to realize to his great displeasure that the man was right. The aforementioned kamikaze was standing near the grand staircase, fidgeting and watching the people around him with unconcealed hatred. The long dirty trench coat barely covered a vest-bomb underneath.

Coulson reached for his watch and pushed the emergency button, sending a message to the operator, Inform Stark.

While the situation continued shifting from bad to worse.

The Alpha who was monitoring the process on his mini laptop suddenly sprang to his feet and sent two of his men running up the stairs. Likely something has interfered with the wire transfer (it was a wire-heist, Coulson was sure of it- those guys wouldn’t burden themselves with bags of money that is traceable when they could steal millions in much more efficient way). As two minutes passed, the boss didn’t get a response he wanted from them- he didn’t get any response at all, the radio spilling out only white noise and static, and that stripped away his calm and determination. He barked two code words and the gunmen swiftly gathered around him, guns upholstered.

That put the boss and the kamikaze on the collision course.
Coulson couldn’t decipher in detail what the two men were arguing about, but he heard the end of the heated conversation as it resonated through the arched ceiling and reflected from the walls.

“You promised me glory, and I shall have it!”

With that he grabbed a young woman from the floor, sticking a gun in her temple and shielding him from the group with her trembling body. The assailants held him at the gunpoint but the boss lifted his hand up and ordered them to stop, letting the man climb up the stairs and disappear into the second floor. And then commanded to move out.

The man near Coulson was first to improvise.

“Hey, you, pretty boy, I am getting really tired of this bullshit.”

The boss snapped his finger and one of the gunmen detached from the pack, taking out a big knife and rushed towards them.

Coulson threw him another glance and introduced himself, "I'm Phil Coulson, by the way." "John McClane. Know how to shoot?"

The agent nodded.

“Good.” The man watched as the criminal approached him and tensed, preparing for the fight, but the killer never reached his target- he slipped on the clear surface inches from the man and hit the floor hard, the back of his head made a sickening cracking noise as it collided with the marble.

McClane cackled in disbelief.

And then he pounced.

*****

Loki observed with mild fascination a stream of numbers and symbols rushing through the screen as fingers of a man sitting in front of him danced over a keyboard. Loki was new to this computer thing, but those symbols were of highest importance, since the whole heist was planned so this man could perform his wrongdoings away from the main center of events, unnoticed, and unbothered.

Loki didn’t trouble himself with running through the floors to find the craftsman- he simply called on a locator spell when realized that the leader of the marauders was talking to someone outside of his pack.

The room on the fourth floor served as both guards stronghold and information centerpiece. The office was filled with surveillance equipment, weapons and computers, to one of which the culprit had attached his laptop in the very beginning.

Loki bent over the man’s shoulder, keeping himself invisible, and watched a little longer. The whole concept of interactive money was so alien to the Asgardian that he could hardly bring himself to understand how and why humans would put such a value in something you can neither see nor touch. The money was gold, silver, diamonds, horses and jewelry, books and ancient scrolls- but not numbers on the screen.

Loki sighed.

Throughout his rather long by Midgardian standards life he had come across many incomprehensible things, and this encroached to be the worst.
Loki threw a quick glance on the surveillance screen and noticed Coulson on the floor interacting quietly with another human.

Weird concept or not, it was his time to interfere.

With a tip of his foot Loki hooked a cord supplying the main computer with electricity and tore it out of the socket. The screen scintillated and went black.

The craftsman gaped as the flow of the numbers abruptly ended. He jumped to his feet and drew out a gun, pointing in all directions at once. Loki smiled and revealed himself.

“Surrender now and no harm will come to you.”

The man screamed in horror and fired. Loki brushed the bullets off and threw a spell. Magic seeped through the skin and cracked the bones, forcing the man to drop the weapon and fall to his knees, face distorted with pain.

“Do seize your wailing. I offered you a choice graciously, and you refused. The fault is all yours. Now,” Loki strolled forward a bit and leaned on the table, watching the security video with the corner of his eye. “Who is your warden? The one true master who ordered the operation? “

The man just stared at him through the veil of tears and kept his mouth shut.

“Do answer me promptly, for I shall not ask you again.”

The man unclenched his teeth with unconcealed effort and growled, “I don’t know.”

Loki arched an eyebrow and lifted his hand to cast another spell.

The man backed away and shielded himself with his good arm. “I swear, I don’t know! Please!”

Loki stopped. The man was telling the truth. Well, a minor upset nothing more- Loki would easily find the puppet master once he traces the flow of the money to its final destination. But it could wait.

The prince glanced at the security screen again. Apparently, his little intervention didn’t go unnoticed.

He stood there for a moment, watching the battle unfold and summoned his magic, assisting Coulson and his newly found comrade-in-arms as they fought their way through the Grand Hall.

Once the combat shifted out of his sight, Loki turned to the man and cast another spell. Three cords swirled over the floor and twined around the man’s limbs, keeping him tight in place.

“Do not leave anywhere. “

With that Loki left the room.

****

The fight went down easier than Coulson had anticipated.

McClane turned out to be rather skillful, incapacitating two of the gunman in a hand-to-hand combat
and energetically beating down the third one with a trash can. The agent even considered offering him a position in SHIELD when the man knocked out another gunman with a precise throw of a calculator.

And then the criminals had enough and decided to shoot them.

Coulson ditched the first round and threw himself behind the counter, looking around as the bullets shook the wood and showered his head with splinters.

A second later came a loud thump and somebody moaned in pain. The agent rolled out of his shelter just in time to see how the older man took down two of the criminals while sprinting from column to column and spicing the action up with a stream of obscenities.

The little distraction provided Coulson with enough time to grab a gun from one of the scuppered assailants and open a second line of fire.

The hostages obviously took it as a sign and started running towards the exit.

Coulson threw a quick glance at the older man and the other one nodded in wordless understanding. The very next moment their little attack turned offensive as they both tried their best to keep the gunmen occupied to buy the people more time.

And the time had just run out.

The biggest man of the pack reached down into a huge black backpack and pulled out a machine gun, aiming at the group of retreating hostages with Coulson standing in the way. The agent saw with his side vision John bolting towards him in a daring attempt to clear him out of the harm’s way, but it was too late.

The agent heard the round and took the time remaining until the impact to calculate the outcome of the heist. All of the hostages had left the hall and he was to be the only casualty up to the date, which was good. There was of course the last hostage- a woman that the kamikaze had dragged away, but Coulson was certain that if not his new friend, then Stark will take care of her.

The agent waited for pain, a sound of metal hitting flesh, for anything- but nothing happened. He thought it was something he saw in the movies- a brain going into a sort of slow motion before death, as he watched a swarm of bullets whirling in front of his face. But while the bullets froze in their mid-motion near his eyes, the rest of the world seemed to move at its normal speed. Coulson watched the older man stop in shock and a second later pull the gun up and put a bullet right through the gunman’s head.

“Well fuck you.” McClane took a double take at the body and then shot the dead man again, for certainty. “Twice.”

Coulson turned back and frowned- the bullets were still swirling, slower and slower still, heating up the air around them. He tried to rationalize the situation somehow but it proved to be rather difficult. And then, the moment he finally gave up and blinked, the bullets fell to the ground sending a ringing echo through the hall.

Coulson tilted his head and looked at the handful of metal lying motionless at his feet. The pattern resembled some sort of a letter. Or a tree. Or a simplified image of a man holding up his arms. Or a rune.

The older man’s sternum colliding with Coulson’s side brought the agent out of the stupor. Coulson opened his mouth to ask him why when the windows exploded, bursting into the hall in a rain of
The SWAT team signaled the assault.

While the gunmen numbers went spiraling down with the help of SWAT boys, both Coulson and his new friend hurried through the hall towards the spot where the Alpha was hiding. They were a bit late- the leader grabbed his laptop and ran away from the shout out towards the fire staircase.

McClane didn’t hesitate, “I’ll get that son of a bitch, and you go get the girl.”

Coulson nodded and charged up the grand staircase, hearing shots and swears in the distance as the bold man chased the leader of the pack. A sudden girl’s shriek sent Coulson flying over the stairs when he suddenly collided with something.

Right in front of him, floating silently in mid-air, was a pair of the gunmen who went missing earlier. They were suspended with invisible straps above the floor, arms and feet widely outstretched and seemingly frozen, as no sound was leaving their mouths. Coulson navigated around them and looked at their motionless faces, when one man’s eyes twitched and stared at the agent.

The hair on his neck stood up. That was too weird even for his level of clearance.

“Don’t move! Stay where you are!”

Well, you’ve just made it much easier for me.

The agent watched the kamikaze drag the poor girl across the hallway, pointing his gun at Coulson.

“Look at it, look!” He pointed the gun to the two poor bastards and spit out a curse, “This is a work of a demon! The judgment day is here! We angered the god, he abandoned us to slaughter and defilement!”

“Well, I wouldn’t put it that way…Why don’t we all get together and discuss it in a less stressful environment?”

The man twitched and took a step back, “You are a demon, and you listen to the devil’s whispers! I can see through your mask! Don’t come closer, you hell spawn!” The girl shivered in his grasp and whispered inaudibly, “Help…”

Coulson aimed but had to jump to the right when the man opened fire. It had cost him precious seconds and gave the kamikaze time to drag the girl through the metal gates towards the bank vault. Coulson put all his effort into running but was too late- the gates closed in front of him with a loud slang. He pounded at the bars in powerless fury while the man on the other side smiled triumphally.

But what the kamikaze didn’t know was that when he locked Coulson out, he had locked Loki in.

*****

Bang!

Loki blinked at the sudden sound and sped up his steps.

He got a glimpse of Coulson behind the heavy metal door before the man locked it shut. Loki could
tear the door off the hooks if he wished so and then do same with the man’s spine, if not one little problem:

A terrified girl in the man’s hands with a gun to her head.

“See, all those people there?” The man pushed her closer to the window, forcing to look at the street.

The sun was pouring its light onto the city, casting shadows on the bank office’s walls: two short ones and one long and dark, following slightly behind.

Loki watched the man carefully. The human was not sick for gold or power, rather he craved something of more inner nature, something that ate away his heart and poisoned his mind. Thor, for all the quick temper and loud threats, was merciful even to those who wronged him. He would have spared the man and even, out of the softness of his oaf mind, give the man a chance for redemption. But as Loki looked into the man’s eyes he saw chaos and madness and he knew that there was only one cure for that.

“Sick and tired and rushing around like rats in the sewage, eating each other away for worthless trinkets. All in the end die and rot and become food for worms.”

The girl wiggled in the man’s grip, gasping for air. “Please, let me go.”

The grip tightened, “Let go for what? This world is doomed! It’s ruled by lust and greed and false prophets! Do you really want to live in it?”

Girl wheezed, digging her fingers into the captor’s arm, “I just want to live! Please…”

The man growled, “Live? For what? So you can spread your legs and birth another filthy pig to disgrace our god? Don’t you see, he abandoned us because of those like you?”

The man slapped the girl hard across the face and she fell to the floor, whimpering.

“Do mind your manners!”

Sudden movement of air stopped the man’s hand from hitting her again as he turned, “Who’s there?”

The Prince came out of the shadows.

“My apologies, I meant no disrespect.” He held his hands up, trying to look scared and powerless. His attire mirrored that of the bank servants: black pants, white shirt and a tie.

“Where did you come from?” The man pointed his gun at Loki and took one step away from the girl.

Loki suppressed a smile.

“Who the hell are you?”

Loki dramatically shivered and cringed under the man’s penetrating gaze.

“Please, I am just a …” The Aesir paused for a moment, looking for the right word, “Accountant. I mean no harm.” Loki held his head down and slithered closer.

“It’s just…If you wish to continue, take me instead, release the girl, I ask of you...Kindly.”

The man looked at him with contempt and grinned, “I think I have a better idea.”

The girl screamed as the bullet hit Loki in the chest and he dropped to his knees, head bowed low
and hair falling over his eyes. She twitched towards him but the man caught her arm, dragging up and closer to him.

And then they heard the quiet laughter.

Loki raised his head, smiling, and reached for the bullet caught up in his shirt. It lay as a dead weight between his fingers and he twisted it slightly, catching the sunbeam. And then Loki sent it back with a swift flicker of his thumb.

The man shouted in pain and shock as the metal tore through his skin and muscle and crashed into a bone in his shoulder. The arm instantly spasmed, dropping the gun and that gave the girl courage to finally break free. She ran several steps but her legs gave out, and she froze on the floor watching as the Prince stood up and stretched in his full regal height.

He strolled forward watching the man with disgust. The human spit out curses and tried to reach for the gun with another hand, but the handle glowed red hot, burning through skin and almost reaching the bone.

The man screamed in agony,

“You are a spawn of Satan!”

Loki growled and stepped closer, allowing Midgardian garments to morph into his royal dress.

“I am no son of Satan, I am son of Odin the Allfather, and you will pay for your insolence.”

The man backed away, leaving the dirty traces on the floor with his own blood.

“You are the Devil, the beast walking the earth! God!” The man looked up at the ceiling and threw his hands in the air, “For what have you abandoned us? Where is your savior?! Why do you allow the abomination befoul your creation?”

Loki’s patience snapped and he prowled. The man backed even more and activated the bomb, eyes darting with panic and sweat pouring down his face. He opened his mouth to say something but couldn’t as the Aesir’s fingers linked up on his throat.

Loki’s pair of iridescent blues burning with fury stared for a second into the man’s eyes, roily with fear and madness, a bogging darkness of chaos and lunacy.

“If you have so many questions to your god, “the Prince threw a quick glance and the timer on the bomb and lifted the man off the floor, “You should ask him personally.”

As the madman crashed through the window the timer went off, disintegrating the human and blowing up the windows right into Loki’s face. The Aesir didn’t move, watching with satisfaction as what was left of the human sank to the streets in a form of a bloody snowfall.

Than Loki turned around and reached for the girl, “Time to get you to safety, milady.”

She stifled a cry as he pulled her up into his arms and fainted.

Loki sighed.

“The son of Coul is going to kill me.”
The fire staircase trembled as the Alpha collided with the wall trying to ditch the bullets. He shot back but missed, and threw out his gun to free one hand to pull up onto the roof. His other hand was clutching the laptop. He got a grip on the brick rim of the roof when the stairs under his feet went shaking like in earthquake.

“How do you like that, huh? You like it?”

Alpha looked down and saw the bold man two levels lower. Another swing of the stairs and Alpha let go of the computer, throwing the second arm up to hold the balance. A moment later he was on the roof, running to the helicopter that had already being waiting for him.

As the helicopter rose slowly into the air the Alpha saw the bold man jumping onto the roof and pulling something from behind his back. A machine gun.

McClane smirked, aimed and shouted into the wind, “Yippee kai yay, motherfucker!”

And shot three rounds.

The helicopter without a pilot started spiraling down, leaving a thick trace of black smoke around its tail. The bold man cursed and darted back to the staircase, but the machine was falling way too fast.

Until it stopped.

The hull of the chopper froze in the mid-air for a brief moment and then slowly and gracefully, like a ballerina, lowered itself down onto the roof.

McClane stared at it silently.

And then the door opened and Iron Man walked out of the hull engulfed in fire.

“Nice shot.” Stark walked to the man and stopped for a moment while Jarvis ran some checks.

The man chuckled tiredly, “Not bad yourself.”

“What is going on? I got a distress signal…”

That very moment something blew up on the other side of the building.

“I better check it out.” Tony sped up on full thrust and rushed away towards the explosion.

The bold man watched him disappear behind the wall and sighed, reaching for his cigarettes.

“I can’t even retire as a normal human being.” The pack was badly creased and all the cigs inside were broken. McClane cursed and threw it out, than looked at the watch. “Oh, goody, I just missed the plane. Un-fucking-believable.” He stretched his sore back, put the machine gun down and plodded away from the exploding helicopter.
“What are you doing here?”

Tony’s demanding tone made Loki quirk an eye brow. “Sightseeing.”

Iron man walked inside, crushing shattered glass under his feet, and pointed a finger at the girl in Loki’s arms.

“And what’s that, a souvenir?”

Loki pursed his lips but remained silent.

“With the speed you are doing the good deeds you might become almost as popular as me, darling.”

“Why, Stark, do you feel threatened?”

“Disturbed.”

“Perhaps I should assist you with that.”

Loki waltzed lazily to the Iron Man and handed over a still unconscious girl, completely ignoring the incredulous look Tony was giving him under the helmet.

“I have a favor to ask of you.”

Tony lifted his face plate and frowned at the prince.

“I need you to keep my involvement a secret.”

“Why?”

“I gave my word to Agent Coulson.”

“Seriously? Ok, fine. But I would want something in return.”

Loki’s eyebrows reached the hairline and Tony silently cursed- there was no telling if the Aesir was truly incredibly amused or simply that good at mocking him.

“Are you already blackmailing me? Show some decency, Stark, at least wait for a day or so!”

“You know, being a hero and what not especially for someone else is no easy task, it puts a lot of strain on my nervous system.”

“And you put a lot of strain on mine.”

Tony smirked, “Do you mean it in a good way or in a bad way? “

Loki sighed in resignation, “Fine. You can ask anything of me, in sensible limits, of course. But later. Now I should leave.”

“Where are you going? Don’t worry, I’ll tell Coulson I don’t know. C’mon, you can tell me.”

“Or I can ignore you. And that way you won’t even have to lie.”

“Oh come on. “

“I’m going to the public library to see North myths and literature display. To get acquainted with you Midgardian perception of us, of course.”
Sudden change in Tony’s face made Loki wondering. He had no intention of going to the museum-only searching for the orchestrator of the heist. But Stark’s curious reaction made him wondering.

“Not your best idea, might get …weird. Seriously. Unless, of course, you are into horses.”

Loki shot Tony a disapproving look, putting as much irritation in it as it was possible.

“I think you have more pressing matter on your hands right now, Stark. Literally.”

Tony considered the girl in his arms, who was now twitching and coming back to her senses, ”Don’t worry, she is fine, just blacked out. You might have dazed her with your awesomeness.”

Loki smiled slyly, “I might have,” and walked away.

Tony stared at Loki’s retrieving back, equally pissed and amused, “Show-off.”

The girl whimpered in his arms and opened her eyes, slightly disoriented. Tony smiled at her reassuringly,

“Hey there, I’m Tony Stark. Don’t worry; I’ll take care of you.”

The girl frowned, stared at his face for a moment, took double take, and fainted again.
“Do I look like an idiot?”

Tony’s eyes darted from the ground and back to Coulson, “This is a test question, isn’t it? I really
don’t like when you do this, it creeps me out.”

“Do what?”

“Stare at me unblinking. There, you are doing it again.”

Agent Coulson grinded his teeth and waited until Tony got his accusational finger out of his face.

“You are telling me that the men were suspended in mid-air by a magnetic field disturbance caused
by a solar flare and you think I’m going to buy it?”

“No I don’t, but you know what? I have no idea how they stayed like that, okay?”

_I might know who did it, but I don’t know how he did it, so I am at least semi-honest._

“But I am going to find out. I just need more time. Meanwhile, why don’t we discuss a more urgent
matter? Like, how many times did we get attacked by aliens this month and why I wasn’t told?”

Coulson felt corner of his left eye twitch, “Those files were classified.”

Tony just waved him off, “I declassified them.”

“Of course you did.” The Agent mentally sighed, watching Tony moving closer, leaning into him in
the Iron Man suit.

“Listen, I know it is a secret, but don’t you think I should be informed? If there is going to be a
major boo-boo, who’s going to clean it up? After all I did for you I think I have a right to know.”

Stark stopped for a second, waiting for any reaction from Coulson and when he got nothing, started
to fidget.

“C’mon, just tell me as a friend, we are friends, aren’t we? Besides, I will find out sooner or later.”

Stark took a moment to consider and added, “One way or another.”

That earned him a dirty look.

The staring match continued until the Agent shook his head, hooked smirking Iron man on the elbow
and navigated him away from the eavesdroppers.

“I advise you keep this conversation confidential.”

“Or you will taze me and watch a Super nanny while I drool on the floor?”
“No, I will shoot you, burn the body and say it was an accident.”

Stark gave the agent a sly smile, “I am still wearing my suit, remember?”

Coulson didn’t even blink, “I’ll wait till you fall asleep.”

“It’s that bad, huh?”

“There have been … accidents, involving hostiles with weaponry of unknown origin and unmatched by our own technology. We might be facing a large scale invasion soon.”

“And then Loki and his brother pop up, offer help, and you send the biggest bag of dicks to oversee the party?”

“Captain Rogers is almost twice your age, show him more respect.”

“I wasn’t talking about him, but since you’ve mentioned it, did you really think Rogers would be an equal match for them in a fist fight?”

“You’ve misunderstood. Captain Rogers has fought in the Second World War; he had seen things both you and I have only read about. He’s quite an expert in judging the character.”

Tony tolled his eyes, “And yet with all his terrifying experience he seems a bit naïve. Besides, Loki saved his life and now I call all Capsicle’s opinions a bias. Oh, wait, that’s why you invited that Iceman dude? So he could tickle the guys in all the wrong places and you and Cap could just stand close and assess?”

“We had to make sure they are not enemy insurgents.”

“By pissing them off?”

“True enemy spies would not let their negative emotions sabotage the mission. And the brothers demonstrated theirs on multiple occasions.”

Stark paused for a second, “Well, strange logic. Whatever. Now I am stuck with babysitting them.”

“You are the best choice.”

Tony’s eyebrows shot up. “Flattery?” Then the corner of his mouth twitched.

“I guess you just can’t afford them. What else do I need to know?”

Coulson threw a quick glance around, making sure the crowd and its constantly flashing phone cameras was far out of reach. Last thing they needed was a conspiracy scandal.

“We need a constant surveillance on both Loki and Thor and your mansion has the best means to do it…discretely. We desperately need you to get as much info out of them as possible. Weaponry, defense systems, transportation, communications, energy- anything.”

Stark scratched his goatee, absorbing the info.

“What about that Thor guy, is he as bad as his brother, a full of himself diva?”

“Worse, he is like you. Just more…chivalrous.”

“Hey, I am a gentleman.”
“Less promiscuous then. I suggest you play nice.”

“So you are selling me out for the good of mankind without remorse?”

“You volunteered.”

“What if they try to seduce me and turn me to the dark side?”

“You’ll manage.”

A quiet beep ringed through Coulson’s bracelet, transmitting the message from the base. Tony tried to pry into the message over the agent’s shoulder but Coulson defiantly covered it with his palm. Then the Agent smoothed his costume and turned to leave.

“Thor and the rest of the group are three hours away.”

“Fine, I’ll see to it.”

“Thor is royalty and expects a royal welcome.”

“Who do you think you are talking to? I’m the best party-thrower in New York.”

“I’ll send the backup.”

“What? Whom? No, wait- I don’t need back up; I need detailed reports on those accidents!”

“It’s above my pay grade.”

“I don’t care, I want my files!”

“Ask Fury. Oh, and Stark- please tell the solar flare when you see him not to disturb any other magnetic fields, it can influence his public image.”

With that Coulson turned away and headed towards the dark grey sedan that stopped at the corner of the street.

Tony took a moment to look around, watched the last ambulance leave and police start to clear the street to give way to criminal investigators. Now that the crowd was booed from the spectacle, its attention shifted and the wall of people started to slowly surround the Iron Man. If not for the smiles and camera flashes, the movement would have looked like a scene from a zombie apocalypse movie.

It was time to leave.

“Jarvis, upload the hacking codes for S.H.I.E.L.D. interface, I want to see what they are hiding from law obedient citizens.”

“Sir, I believe Agent Coulson said…”

“I know what he said, but it is easier to beg for forgiveness then ask for permission. Besides, if Coulson says “desperate”, it is time to panic.”

Iron man looked around the street, waved one last time to the people and soared away.
The captive craftsman was complacent enough to reveal the hand that was guiding the heist; Loki
didn’t even have to break his second leg for that, although he wanted to. The prince let him go after
the human shade tears of remorse and swore to all gods and devils he didn’t know it would’ve
ended in the bloodshed. The fear was a good punishment for the weak of heart.

Loki took a second to lay out all of the evidence on the floor of the room before he left: pictures,
plans, video recordings, all the police had to do was to collect. He stood there, towering over the
mosaic of facts until the voices of the guards resonated up the staircase, and then took his leave.
With some spare time on his hands, the prince had only one other business in mind- meeting face to
face with the man behind the heist, the very owner of the bank.

The trip was swift, two blocks from the building now entrapped into a moving crowd of police and
bystanders. However, Loki froze for a second when he saw Stark dragged away by Agent Coulson.

The prince’s fingers twitched and heart picked up a bit as he watched the two men talk aside from
the huddle. Coulson was gifted in interrogation and did not extend gentle affection he showed to
Steve on to Stark.

But, it was doubtful the agent would resort to torture, the country they were in did not favor those
kinds of methods…

*Not that he would need any method.*

Loki’s lips curved down into a pout.

Coulson was nothing but an idiot, and Loki was nothing but subtle. Most likely the agent had long
figured out Loki didn’t keep out of the action as he was asked to. The only hope was that Coulson
would take into account that Loki’s involvement, although indirectly, helped save the lives and
capture the misdoers.

*Stark on the other hand…*

Loki felt light shiver running down his spine and straightened up, taking a deep slow breath.

The dark brown eyes stared at him again, going ablaze with the thought of Loki indebted to him.
Stark would never miss a chance to get something at Loki’s expense.

*As many would.*

Loki rushed in the heat of the moment and made a bad bargain and now had to face the
consequences.

Then the grim foreboding gave place to curiosity. Loki had already concluded Stark completely lacks
a sense of shame, but he would like to know how far this human’s depravity can go.

*Whatever Stark dares to ask of, I will be ready for the challenge.*

***

The man rushed through the papers on his desk, crumpling and pushing them into the briefcase. The
helicopter was warming up on the roof, only waiting for its primary passenger, when Loki stepped
into the office and locked the door behind him.

The prince stood concealed behind the veil of shadow, watching the human stumble around the room, big body lurching with each step, taking short puffing breaths and leaving a trail of sweat droplets along the way.

Loki puckered his lips in disgust. The human was sickly weak without even a trace of physical vigor. Not a warrior who left his duty after a wound or severe loss, no- Loki saw many of those in Asgard. They might have been mutilated, missing limbs often, stricken by pain, their knees buckling and hands shaking as they stood before Odin in the Great Hall during the annual celebration- and yet each one of them still had their heart burning beneath the clothes.

This one was nothing like that.

But if he wasn’t strong, he should’ve been shrewd – the only other possible explanation of how he could reach such a position of power.

The human did have lots of books on display and yet they all remained unread and untouched.

That baffled Loki. How could it be that a weak pitiful man occupied a seat of power? Was he in Asgard, the human could’ve only hoped for a servant role in a household, the missus of which left him in out of pity.

When did it go wrong, when humanity became so twisted that they allowed their people to be governed not by worthy, those either strong and valiant or wise and righteous, but by worst kind of all- sneaky cowardly thieves and liars? When did they turn money into an idol that controlled all of their lives? And why?

This insatiable thirst for riches was not unlike another race of Yggdrasil- the dwarves. But dwarves sought gold for one reason only- their magic, their whole world sprung from the earth and took its magic from it. Gems and precious ores made them stronger. But humans?

“I am afraid you can’t leave just yet.”

Loki emerged into the light, tall dark figure taking shape in front of unsuspecting human.

“Who …who are you?” The man’s head jerked up and he froze in mid-movement, ripples of shock going through his second chin.

“My name will do you no good. But, you could address me as …my Lord.” Loki’s chuffed smile morphed into a frown as the man wobbled around the table, knocking stationary off with his belly, and started slamming his finger into the phone.

“Security!!”

“Don’t waste the air, they will not come. I made sure they remain occupied.”

“What do you want?” The man cowered back, shielding himself with the briefcase from Loki’s cold steely gaze.

“Merely to satiate my curiosity. Did you think you could kill so many people, get the money and yet escape punishment?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”
“Do not try my patience.” Loki let his voice drop an octave and was rewarded with a visible shiver running through man’s body.

“Look, I am a man of business. Tell me how much do you want for your silence, and we will roll from there.”

“So easy to appease me, you think?” The prince arched an eyebrow, watching as the man’s little piggy eyes darted back and forth in search of salvation.

I might have overestimated the modicum of his potential, guess I’ll have to speak simpler from now on.

“I have no care or use for your money.”

“Well, maybe you will care for this!” The man pulled a small gun out of his briefcase and fired, laughing hysterically as the bullets hit Loki in the chest.

The laugh died at instant when Loki growled at the scorched holes in his clothes and turned back to the human, baring his teeth.

“You’ve just ruined my suit, you stupid pest! What are you planning to do now?” Loki’s face darkened and eyes glowed bright green as he shifted his gaze to the gun and made it candescent hot, burning off skin on man’s palm.

The man shrieked and tossed his weapon away, hissing in pain and pulling the injured arm to his chest as the sweet smell of burned flesh blossomed across the room.

“You are thought to have planned the heist of your own bank but…you don’t seem to have strength of character nor wit for such endeavor, you are a thief, but poltroon one of that. Who guided you into this? I would have a name.”

“There is no name.”

“Perhaps you require more incentive? “

The energy flowed from Loki’s fingertips, fueled by his anger, ripping the air and swirling around, tightening around man’s limbs. The magic threw the man into the air only to stop abruptly several inches away from the ceiling.

The man spit and cursed in hopeless rage, face red from strain and sweat pouring all over the collar.

“Screw you and your cheap magic tricks!”

“Hm, interesting, you don’t seem surprised…You have seen magic before! Where? Did your master show it to you?”

Loki watched as the man struggled to break free, still refusing to give any answer, until his patience ran out.

“Very well then, I will resort to my brother’s method of persuasion this only time.”

Loki thought to himself as he dragged the man to the window, that it was weird. This was not his interrogation technique of choice. He would rather intimidate the man into submission, trick him, scare him, confuse him to reveal the answer. But this time the use brute force was somehow … extremely enjoyable.
That didn’t work out well though, because instead of responding to Loki’s questions, man was simply screaming his lungs out as he hung head down 80 stores above the streets, supported only by Loki’s iron grip on his ankle.

Loki waited for the man to run out of air, absently watching creeks of cars gaining speed on the roads below as the emergency services navigated them away from the bank.

“You can choose to deny my offer and choke on your own blood, or cooperate and live a little longer. What would your answer be? Do tell me promptly, for my hand is growing weary.”

The man finally stopped screaming and crooked his neck to face Loki.

“Mandarin.”

“Mandarin …what? Is that all you can tell me?”

The man wheezed between the ragged breaths, “Mandarin. That’s his name. That’s all I know. Please!”

“Fine.”

Loki swung the man around and threw him back into the room as a ragdoll. The man gulped for air while Loki meticulously brushed fragments of the broken glass off his shoulders.

Thor would probably break couple of bones in this man and give him away to authorities to be judged, even be merciful with him- if he pleads for mercy, Thor does have a gentle heart after all. But Loki can see that will only turn into more problems in the future. This kind of people doesn’t learn if mercy is shown to them, they have to be punished. And what’s the better way to punish an animal if not taking out his sharpest teeth?

Loki’s lips formed into a smirk.

“You know, your people will punish you but it will be gentle. And I crave something else, for my personal satisfaction. That money you spoke of, I will have it before I leave.”

The man crawled up, leaning on the table and stared at the prince.

“How much?”

A sheer horror on human’s face made Loki’s smile widen, showing all of his teeth.

“All of it.”

“Are you mad? I can’t, it’s not mine, you can’t! You must be joking!”

“Do I look like I am in a joking mood? And if this displeases your master, he will have to address me personally.”

Loki might’ve been new to the Midgardian money concept, but he was a quick learner. Whether or not he personally cared about earthling’s currency mattered not- possessing it meant power and respect and broader…opportunities, and Loki wasn’t going to miss out on them.

The prince produced a small bank card out of his pocket and handed it to the man.

The card was black and green with intricate gold ornaments entwined into the carcass. No name, no number, just empty space.
The man stared back at him.

“I cannot transfer anything if I don’t have a bank account number.”

“Just open the flow up, it will find its way where needed.”

And it did. The man watched in horror mixed with total disbelief as all the funds from his personal and business accounts streamed away to somewhere unknown, leaving no trace.

When finished, Loki twirled it between his fingers. It was all the same, but seemed a bit heavier.

“I start to appreciate this system. I just got all of your riches and yet it all fits into a palm of my hand! Brilliant.”

The man slid down to the floor, defeated.

“We are both dead, you and I. He will destroy you for what you did.”

Corner of Loki’s mouth twitched up as he towered above the man and finally turned to leave. “I highly doubt that.”

The moment Loki left the office a group of armed men in civilian clothes burst in the hallway from the stairs. A sound of quarrel followed with shouts no and don’t standing out; then three gun fire rounds thundered and everything went quiet.

Loki stopped for a second, and then entered the elevator without looking back. He had enough of getting his hands dirty with pawn blood for one day.

The puppet master, Mandarin, must’ve learned that the police got a hold on the evidence and ordered his dogs to dispose of the main witness.

Should’ve done it faster.

Loki grinned.

If Mandarin wants to know where his money went, he will find a way to contact the prince.

And then I will have a little bit of entertainment before I leave this planet.

As the elevator slowly descended, filling the Aesir’s ears with quiet soothing music. The prince made a mental note to himself to be more discrete in the days to come, looked at his reflection in the elevator’s wall and fixed the collar on his suit. He couldn’t allow the earthlings to get advantage in negotiations because of his dealings.

Late afternoon colored the skies in peach and yellow, pouring the warm sunlight over the busy streets. Loki still had a couple of hours to kill before his brother would arrive.

Nordic culture exhibition banners loomed in the distance and Loki made his way to the library.

Not that he held any interest in remnants of human culture so undeveloped they worshiped Aesir as gods, but Stark’s reaction alone made Loki reconsider. He would not have that human make jokes that Loki didn’t understand.
“Jarvis, where are we on those files?”

Tony bit a mouthful of a donut and powered up the screens around the floor.

He just flew through Brooklyn to get a snack, scared the living hell out of two teenagers trying to steal a car and got a dozen of donuts for free because the shop owner was a huge fan of Iron Man.

Life was good.

“Sir, I now have full access to all Shield database, however there is no trace of any alien activity data of any kind.”

“Well they couldn’t have just evaporated.”

“Since they are considered a top secret priority they might have been moved to a secure external drive which I have no access to.”

“Jarvis, I will have none of that. I need those files, buddy, so we will have to try harder.”

A moment of silence followed and Tony chuckled to himself: the more time passed since Jarvis went live the more AI started to behave like a real human. It made Tony proud.

And sometimes scared.

“Sir, may I inquire, why are you so determined to get the files Agent Coulson specifically requested to stay away from?”

Tony shook his finger onto one of the screens and tsked,

“I might have to reprogram you after all, dear, you seem to be a bit naïve. I know exactly what is going on. Think about it, Jarvis. Doesn’t it seem suspicious to you that over the course of human history the aliens were considered a rumor, a legend, an anecdote, and turns out they were always here, right in front of us, but we somehow failed to notice? It is government conspiracy, a brilliant cover up that spun over several millennia. I want to know how long did our government lie to us. But what’s even more important, why Fury decided to drop the info bomb now? “

Tony turned on his heels in the middle of the room and paced back, fingers twitching.

“What happened that made him reconsider? The arrival of his royal sassiness? Doubt that. I think, shit is about to hit the fan, and I want to know how bad exactly it is going to be.”

The room fell silent as Tony stopped his expatiation. Stark waited for a moment, then put his arms on his hips and frowned,

“Jarvis? Are you even listening?”

“Sir, I have copied all the secured operation logs off Shield’s servers. Since I cannot find access to the files you need it might be useful to perform a cross reference with outside indicators of activity.”

Stark grinned,

“That’s my boy. Ok, let’s try another tactics. Give me all 911 calls for the past two months.”
“Accessing emergency services database and creating the event map now.”

A holographic projection of the United States hovered over the center of the room, flickering as Jarvis was analyzing the data. Myriads of small yellow dots decorated every inch of it, turning the hologram into multi-colored puzzle.

“Good, now correlate those with Shield’s first response log and remove everything else.”

“Done.”

The net of the yellow dots thinned, revealing wide spaces empty of activity.

Tony eyed the map and took another bite of a glazed donut, only to stop, look at it, put it back, and reach for the chocolate one instead.

“Now leave only big ones with allocation of 10 people or more and cross check it with injuries and death log.”

“Unrelated response logs deleted, sir.”

“Ok, what do we have here, hm…?” Tony walked through the lines of light, looking at each dot.

“Look for any inconsistencies, like a huge body count and log register of kitten attacks, don’t forget to check local news feeds.”

“Cross-referencing.”

“Ok, show the final result.”

The hologram blinked one more time and froze with one hundred and twenty three gleaming dots scattered throughout the country.

“This can’t be right.”

123 possible alien related events in two months in US alone?

Tony frowned in disbelief. He danced around the lights, magnifying some of them and skipping through the data. The reports, witness accounts, pictures—everything pointed to activity from the outer space.

The evidence was still inconclusive, but even if 90% of it was a bogus, it still left 12 episodes of extraterrestrial encounter.

He stopped at a blurry picture taken on one of remote military bases in Mojave dessert. Burning structures, blown vehicles and charred bodies spoke for themselves.

So far only Loki and his brother willingly came into contact with humans. The rest chose to sneak into the shadows, leaving a trail of bodies behind. Whoever they were, their intentions were far from friendly.

Stark forgot about his sugary treat and focused, running multiple scenarios in his head. He had to access the real data somehow to eliminate any chance of error.

“Sir, Shield helicopter ETA 5 minutes.”

“Save and collapse.”
If his suspicions were right, humanity was about to find itself in the middle of an extraterrestrial attack. And if so, Tony would know every detail of it.

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Loki had never understood the humanity’s unquenchable thirst to dig out graves and put the departed and their belongings on display. What was dead should stay dead. The history and legacy should be preserved by the living, not by putting graveyard bounties for gapers to gawk at.

The prince took his time to read through all the texts, waving most of them off as a manifestation to the earthling priests favorite pastime- abuse of ale. And ritual herbs.

Peasants had no idea how Aesir magic worked. It was powerful, but even it had its limits. Giving birth to a horse? Transforming into a mare? No one could assume a form of such great difference.

Loki cringed. He has a strange suspicion that the voice of reason would have no effect on Stark’s taste for sultry jokes.

The prince mused on a course of action while he lazily prowled between the glass stands, ignoring herds of humans around him. The exhibition was tawdry and yet somewhat entertaining.

Until he found himself facing a stand about mythical Loki’s birth and demise.

The prince froze as he read the story before him, and then shook his head and read it again, again, and again still, bitter bile forming up in his throat with each passing minute.

Those little pests had made him a monster.

Out of all who came down to Midgard he, the prince of Asgard, the son of Odin, was made into a laughing stock.

Named not a prince, not even an Aesir- an ice giant, son of Laufey, that pitiful ogre who didn’t deserve to be among the living!

The fact that king Laufey was portrayed as a female served no consolation.

Loki towered in front of the glass, his reflection staring back at him, dark with fury. He leaned closer, pushing his fingers into the cold surface and making it crack under pressure.


When did it all go so wrong, what did he do to deserve that? Was it his preference for magic? Was it his disdain for mindless brawls?

The rage rushed through Loki’s body and his blood boiled. A reckless flicker of his finger, and the glass would crash into smithereens, spreading fear and chaos. He took a deep breath and stepped back. The floor was bent where he stood a second ago, a web of cracks running in all directions away from the dent.

That had never happened before.

“Incredible, isn’t it?”
The prince suddenly found himself in a company of a man almost as tall as himself, which annoyed Loki greatly, because when exactly earthing midgets suddenly grew up to be as tall as Aesir? But even more disturbing was the mop of unruly dark blond curls crowning the man’s head. Loki’s fingers twitched with strain as he barely stopped himself from reaching out and smoothing that wobbling monstrosity down.

“Indeed. “ The only word seeped through the clenched teeth. Loki was in no mood for company, and made no effort to hide it.

But his animosity was bluntly ignored.

“Such an interesting character, Loki. Too bad his end was so tragic.”

“He was a monster, and he got what he deserved for his treachery.” Loki almost spit the words filled with spite.

“Oh, I am afraid I have to disagree. He was simply too smart for a society that valued brutal strength above all. He was different, he was innately predisposed to mischief, and that made him difficult to control.”

Loki mused on simply gagging the human and leaving, but he couldn’t resist getting into an argument.

“You sound like it was Asgard itself that brought the destruction upon Loki and the Aesir.”

“And I believe so.”

“He was a monster and a liar, he poisoned everything around him with envy and knavery and hate – and paid for it with his life.”

The human listened carefully, tilting his head to the side and eying Loki with huge blue eyes.

“But…if you read carefully, you will see that it was, in fact, the truth that ultimately got him killed. How many times did he caused trouble and yet the gods forgave him? He managed to get away with everything, until he spoke the truth. As I see, the Aesir had created a perfect world with no foul in their minds, and tried to protect it by setting up a set of rules. Even their deaths were dictated by rules. And Loki enjoyed tinkering with those rules to see what would happen. And he would not be shy of breaking them in need be. But Aesir could not extend compassion for his predicament and set their judgment upon him instead.”

“He was a harbinger of chaos.”

“But chaos is change. In a way. It is uncontrollable and perpetually shifting, but it is a driver of life. If something is not changing, it becomes static and after some time, decays and dies. That violent end of Asgard could have been averted if only its people were not so adamant about following the rules.”

“One born a monster will be a monster, not a hero. It is in his blood, and it makes his destiny, rules or not.”

“Circumstances of our birth are irrelevant; it’s our life choices that make us who we are.”

“You cannot escape your destiny if it is written at the moment of your birth.”

“Then you just have to flunk the written.”
Loki gave a man a long evaluating look.

“You are very sentimental. And naïve. Do you truly believe that a devil thirsty for blood and destruction can be a hero? Someone weak and pitiful and full of hate and envy, save the world?”

“I do, actually, yes. All heroes are flawed. They are lonely, vain, arrogant, proud, envious. But what makes them heroes is that they overcome their frailties for the sake of greater good. And the unlikeliest of heroes make the greatest heroes of all.”

"And how do you possess such deep knowledge of the subject, if I may inquire?"

The man fidgeted and blushed a little, rubbing his neck.

"Well, ehehe, I majored in literature, and Norse legends were among my favorites. A world birthed in blood and murder and ended in fire. Incredible."

The silence stretched for a good minute as Loki was dwelling in his own thoughts. Although unwillingly, but the conversation made the prince wonder if human was at least partially right.

And the said human watched Loki brooding, and grew more and more concerned, thinking he had just offended the prince with his expatiation. So he leaned in and whispered conspiratorially,

“Some believe Norse gods were actually extraterrestrial travelers, who used an interdimensional wormhole to travel between worlds. “

Loki rounded his eyes in a mock surprise, “Really? What a preposterous idea!”

The human remained completely oblivious to Loki’s blatant mockery and beamed with a blinding smile.

“I think it would be very exciting to meet with a being from another world.”

“What makes you think you haven’t met him already? You can never be sure whom you are speaking with.”

“Oh, dear! How inexcusably rude of me! I’m so sorry; I got so uncontrollably excited that I forgot to introduce myself! My name is…”

The tower clock in the middle of the hall filled the exhibition with nine bell strikes, making the glass vibrate a little as the sound reverberated from the surfaces.

“Oh dear lord, have mercy!”

Loki arched left brow, eyeing an extended hand that stopped in mid-movement as the human turned to face the clock.

“That is a very unfortunate name.”

The man jerked as if waking up from a trance. “Oh, I am so sorry, friend, I have to go, I am late for a meeting…I am so sorry, I wish we could talk more, but…So sorry.”

“Stop apologizing and go already, you are just wasting the time.”

As Loki watched the tall blonde navigate through the crowd, unceasingly apologizing, a different feeling of dread rose in him.
Nine hits of the bell meant nine o’clock.

Which meant Thor was going to arrive at Stark Tower at any minute.

A show Loki certainly didn’t want to miss.

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“So, did you go?”

Stark gave Loki a brow wiggle as they walked out on the helicopter pad on the roof.

“To where are you referring, exactly?”

“Don’t play a silly, princess, you know what I am talking about.”

Loki gave Tony a hard look and sighed.

“Your lack of respect appalls me. And yes, I ventured there. Found nothing to my taste though.”

“Really? What about some raunchy myths?”

Loki stopped and turned to Stark, hiding a smirk.

“If you mean the one where I gave birth to a horse, well, I found lack of accuracy …disappointing. You see, magic can’t change the essence of things, only their physical manifestation. In simple terms, when I turn into something, I remain a male. I’m afraid your ancestors had botched the action.”

The prince silently jubilated watching Tony’s face go through a wide range of expressions until it settled on, as Jay would’ve called it, “Unyielding to bullshit.”

“Wait a minute, are you saying that you really…”

“What, mated with the horse? I truly do not understand your amusement. In my short stay on Midgard I’ve already seen some things that make my …endeavor pale in comparison.”

Stark stared at the prince for a moment, eyes wide open and unblinking, but recovered quickly.

“I call you a bluff. You won’t let one hair on your head to stick out of place. There is no way you could have slept with the horse.”

“Svadilfari was one fine mare. Besides, you see, Aesir live for thousands of human years. When you live that long, one day you might get bored. And when I get bored, I tend to ….experiment.”

That rendered Tony speechless.

Loki’s heart filled with glee, messing with this particular human might become his favorite pastime.

A sudden gust of wind and a sound of thunder on an almost cloudless sky made both men look up.

“ Weird.”

“That’s my brother.”

“ Wha…”
A mere second later Thor came bolting through the sky and landed on the platform, Mjolnir gripped tightly in his hand.

Stark looked at him for a moment, then at Loki, then back at Thor, leaned to the younger prince and whispered, “They are not feeding you well, or something?”

“Brother!”

Thor’s voice boomed over the landing pad as he stomped towards the welcoming party. Loki’s heart swell with joy as Thor crushed him in a bear hug.

“It is good to see you, brother. You did well with that rock.”

“You weren’t bad yourself, as I’ve heard.”

Thor just waved that off, “There was nothing to tell.”

The older prince’s gaze shifted as he finally noticed Tony. The human held out a hand,

“Tony Stark.”

Thor shook it, and smiled, “The man of Iron? Son of Coul said you aided Loki in saving the city. I would see the armor Agent spoke so fondly of.”

“Yeah, later. By the way, aiding would’ve been much easier if your baby brother wasn’t nagging me all the time.”

Thor’s large frame shook with laughter, “Loki is like that sometimes, isn’t he?”

Loki fumed with irritation. For all the possibilities he surely didn’t think those two belligerates would bond over mocking him!

“Why did you fly like that? I thought Fury sent a helicopter.”

“It was too slow.”

Tony’s grin widened. Thor seemed like a decent fella, though he would use a wardrobe overhaul. Tony wasn’t sure if brothers had some special dress code or regal garments, but the tall blonde in plaid shirt with a hammer looked more like a plumber than a god.

The air filled with a sound of propellers as two helicopters approached the Stark tower.

“Jarvis, light up the pad.”

The rows of lights flamed up into a pattern, marking the landing way for the pilots above.

Stark stepped aside, preparing to snatch Fury away at the first sight.

“Tomorrow, brother, we will speak to the rulers of Midgard and be done with it.”

Thor looked around, just now noticing the night city below.

“You think it’s going to be so easy? You think that humans simply fall to their knees upon seeing us?”

“I do not require worship, Loki, but this realm has always been under Asgards protection and
guidance. All the earthlings have to do is acknowledge that. They would be fools not to.”

Loki pinched the bridge of his nose, “It is not that simple, Thor. They aren’t worshipping us as gods anymore. That time had long passed, they evolved, they now have advance technology.”

The wind played with princes’ hair as helicopters landed on the rooftop.

“all their technology is no match for us. I will not hear about it again, I am tired and require sustinence. I hope the man of Iron prepared a feast for us.”

“Yes, it’s in the ballroom eight floors below. Who else is coming?”

Thor beamed, “Lady Jane.”

“And there I thought we shouldn’t mingle with humans as it would impair our judgement.”

Thor glanced at Loki in surprise,

“Lady Jane is different.”

“And how is she….Wait, is it because you fancy her?”

“No, I don’t fancy her, I…”

“You fancy her!”

“Brother, speak quieter, we can be heard.”

“Do you plan on courting her?”

“I don’t…I don’t know, I will be living soon. And all those Midgardian traditions, they are so weird and different. “

“So you will let someone else court her.”

“No! Do you know of someone?”

“Well, Stark might be interested. She is beautiful and a woman of science. He is rich and spends his riches on science.”

“I will not have that.”

Oh, father would be very pleased with that. The crown prince of Asgard courting a mortal woman, what a scandal.

Loki mentally grinned. Thor without knowing was digging his own grave.

Though again, the golden prince got away with much worse.

A group of people, servants, most likely, emerged from the elevator and moved through pad to great the guests.

As Loki watched the roof swarm suddenly with so many people, Jane almost ran to Loki and awkwardly shook his hands, “I’m so happy everything is fine, we were worried sick. “ And then she rose on her tip toes and placed a brief kiss on his cheek, “And that’s for New York.”

Loki was stunned. He stood motionless for a moment and watched as Thor and Jane were guided
inside, wondering if someone had noticed what had happened.

“Duuude!” Something collided with Loki’s side and he felt as if he was attached by an octopus, or a large snake with several heads. Something- or someone, has not only climbed him like a tree, but was successfully blocking all Loki’s attempts to break free from the grip.

“Disattach yourself at once!”

With a tremendous effort Loki managed to tear Jay off himself and hold him down at a stretched hands distance. Luckily Loki’s hands were longer than Jay’s, and he succeeded in preventing any further attacks. Scandalized and dishivored, Loki about to shout how dare you and why and we could’ve been seen, but settled for shorter “What is wrong with you!?”

Jay pouted and widened his puppy eyes,

“I missed you. And I hadn’t been hugged enough in childhood so now I overcompensate. “

Loki smoothed his hair and fixed his clothes, minimizing the damage. He growled at Jay with barely concealed irritation,

“Remove yourself from my sight, at once!”

The pout deepened.

“Ok.”

The man’s shoulders sank as he dragged his feet away from the prince. Loki rolled his eyes.

“Stop.”

Loki caught Jay’s chin between his fingers and gave the human’s face a look. The skin healed perfectly, the burns were all but gone, leaving the cheek smooth and pink.

Jay stood motionless as Loki examined the fruits of his spell, but the dark orbits darted frantically from side to side. When the Aesir released his grip, the man jumped and started swirling around.

“Oh my god, oh my god, it is Tony Stark’s tower!”

“May I inquire, what is so special about this Antony Stark? You reacted calmly when learned that me and my brother were aliens of royal blood, and yet you scream and jump around at the very mention of this human’s name?”

Jay tried to hang on Loki’s neck but was promptly stopped by a firm hand.

“No, oh don’t get jealous! You are totally awesome, and cool and badass and I love you. But this is Tony Stark!!”

“He is a lost case of a fangirl. Good job, bro.” Javier materialized out of nowhere and gave Loki a strong shove.

“You know, your struggles and protests will not keep him away, he likes you too much.”

Loki turned to the human, “Do you have any other ideas, then?”

Javier shrugged and flashed Loki a smile, “I bet a tazer would work.”
The crowd started to melt away, slowly clearing the helipad.

Loki turned to leave when he noticed another familiar face.

The doctor clapped Loki’s shoulder briefly, and when Loki tried to return the gesture, caught prince’s wrists and inspected the palms. “Hm, healed. Any symptoms, pain, burn, itching sensation?”

Loki wriggled out of the grip and clenched his hands behind his back. “I assure you I am totally healed.”

“You should teach me that. Oh, and that trick you pulled off on Jay.”

“What, peeling him off?”

“No, that I know how to do. Healing him. He had some deep second degree burns and now has fully recovered and not even sporting a scar. That’s some very cool stuff.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Suddenly Loki’s nerves tingled, he turned around and, well, of course, there he was, towering over the platform.

“What are you doing here?”

Captain Iceman cut the distance between him and the prince in five long strides.

“We came to testify in Security Council about your stellar performance. Well, I, Javi and Doctor came to testify, Jay just dragged along. But I’ll just use him as my demon monkey to annoy the shit out of politicians. He is skilled in doing that.”

The silence stretched, becoming uncomfortable, until Loki inquired, smirking,

“Why are you looking at me like that? Are you going to manhandle me too?”

Iceman’s monolith face suddenly split into a smug smile.

“Well, if you insist.”
Chapter 17

Loki stood near the stairs leading down from the roof and watched. The reception was a rather modest gathering even by human measures, whilst in Asgard it would’ve been considered intimate. Loki almost felt offended for the lack of grandeur befitted a royal. Almost.

Humans mixed and mingled, constantly shifting between the couches and tables covered in snacks and glasses filled with bubbly golden mead. He has been on Earth for quite a while now, and yet still had to learn of those new traditions and rules or, more likely, lack of thereof, as he surely was not accustomed to this.

On Asgard, there would’ve been one humongous table in the center of the room, bursting with regales and delicacies, roasted animals and bottomless goblets of whine, and carts of fruits for those who choose to dine lightly, all wrapped in candlelight and glory. And each guest would know his place and his seat. Nobles and heroes of war close to the King, all others - further away. And in no time would anyone dare to speak out of term or bother the king with a question unless spoken to.

Here there was no order, just complete chaos.

It would have irritated him immensely- to have all those low people come and bother him with questions. But what irritated him even more was that he was not the one most of their attention was directed on.

All his golden brother had to do is come down that staircase, hair shimmering in the light and muscles flexing, and immediately everything changed, shifted back to the way it was in Asgard. Even Stark, who earlier embarked on a mission to bombard Loki with all sorts of inappropriate questions was now fully preoccupied with discussing something with the older prince. The human rendered something with his arms, which made Thor throw his head up and laugh, brawny shoulders shaking and booming voice echoing through the room.

Loki growled, itching to go there, grab the human and throw him across the room, away from Thor, make pay attention only to Loki himself.

The people gravitated around Thor like he was the sun, and all that was left for Loki was shadow.

The prince was about to give in to bitter sulking, when a familiar presence tickled his nerves and the hair on his neck stood up.

“Steve?” He whispered to himself, turning around on his heels right in time to see Captain Rogers burst into the door. The man hovered on the doorstep for a moment, a formidable silhouette against the dark stormy sky. The night air washed over Loki’s face with a cold whiff and he gulped at it in relief.

He didn’t realize the atmosphere in the hall turned suffocating so quickly.

Finally, Rogers’s eyes locked on target he was searching for.

“Loki!” A luminous smile flashed over the man’s face as he charged down the stairs.

Loki caught himself on a thought that Steve in his dramatic entrance was desperately missing a cape.
“Where were you?”

Steve ignored irritation in Loki’s question, closed the distance and caught the Asgardian in a bone crushing hug. The prince made an effort to look displeased, but couldn’t help himself and returned the gesture. The human total disregard for personal space was something Loki could get accustomed to.

“I can’t breathe.” Steve choked out with the mocking difficulty, and Loki put him back to the ground, releasing the grip.

“You know, you are heavier than you look.”

“I had a big breakfast.”

Steve’s smile went even bigger, but the corners of the eyes stayed crinkled, giving away the concern.

“I was worried.”

“About me or the city?”

“Both, actually.” Steve opened his mouth to say something, but stopped.

The prince arched an eyebrow, “I find your lack of faith in me offensive, Steven, you should know by now that I am more than able to take care of myself. “

Steve’s voice broke a little, “I know I’m just…not ready to lose any more friends.”

Loki’s smirk softened, “Well it will take more than a flying rock for you to lose me, if that’s of any consolation. “

“I’ve heard you’ve stopped it with your magic?”

“You haven’t seen the footage?”

Steve gave him an apologetic shrug, “Sorry, I had to assist the injured first, and when all was done it was time to leave. But I bet there are a lot of recordings.”

“I’m sure Stark’s discarnate butler can fetch you one.” A proud smile played on Loki’s lips while Steve furrowed his brows trying to understand the reference. The prince looked up to the ceiling to call out for Jarvis but stopped, and considered it for a second.

“Not here though, way too noisy with all those …common people. Speaking of, why such a scandalous lack of punctuality?”

Captain run his hand through the hair, looking around the room, “Ms. Lewis and Director Fury had a disagreement about your upcoming public appearance.”

“Director Fury?”

“The head of SHIELD”.

Loki’s eyes lit up, “Oh. Did it get physical? I bet Lady Darcy is a nifty hair-puller.”

The prince was rewarded with a toothy grin, “Fury is bold.”

Loki’s face fell in disappointment and Steve snorted,
“I’m sure that would’ve been a show to die for. She argued it is too soon, and the world is not prepared. And you are too, not prepared.”

“I would object that a rock in the middle of this city proves that our timing is impeccable.”

“She said you have to be coached on how to deal with the politicians, eased into our diplomacy to avoid mishaps.”

“I thought she was as Lady Jane, a woman of science?”

“Political science, it turns out. “

“And you think we should seek her advice?”

Loki saw something with the corner of his eye. A young waitress was walking by them with a tray full of glasses, but her eyes were dangerously glued to Captain’s lower back. The prince waited, waited some more, and then, just as he thought,

“Oh!”

Steve swirled back in a split of a second, neatly catching the waitress, the tray and all the shaking glasses in mid-fall, spilling almost none of the drinks.

*You should look where you are going, darling, not drill holes in Steven’s arse.*

Loki ogled her, unblinking, as she apologized to Steve, muttered thanks and hurried away, burning red as a fire garnet.

“What?” Steve looked completely clueless.

Loki sighed.

“You were saying?”

“Oh, right, right. Um, dealing with politicians can be tricky, and Darcy’s vision is sound, plus she has some insight into modern politics. I wish I could be of any use but I am way out of date.”

“You don’t seem too fond of your government officials.”

“I’m not. It is all intrigues and shadow playing and trickery, hidden agendas, and a whole downpour of lies and propaganda. I prefer to meet my enemy in the open battle, face to face.”

“I should treat politicians as my potential enemies then?”

Steve’s chin jerked up, “No, that’s not what I meant. It’s just…subtleties of political games and diplomacy are not among my strongest talents. Anyway, Darcy was insisting your public coming out should be postponed.”

“And Fury managed to convince her? How? Was any weaponry involved?”

“Mostly bribery. And some threatening here and there. She is to advise you on your actions.”

“Very well. My brother dearest however will require a bit of convincing.”

The pair looked to the bar in unison and Loki’s posture visibly tensed. Steve suppressed an urge to give him a pat on the shoulder- family or not, but dealing with people like Thor required immense
amounts of patience. Self-centered egoistic pricks who won’t take no for an answer—yes, he had a fair share of meeting those in his lank years. Most of those meetings ended up in blood and bruises. And death glares from Bucky after he dragged Steve out of yet another rat shitted alley and cleaned up the wounds.

Bucky.

Steve’s heart skipped a bit and he had to try hard to swallow a cold lump in his throat, trying to keep on the stoic façade. All the fleeting joy drained out of him leaving behind only emptiness, as if it was sucked out of his heart through a straw by someone very, very hungry.

While Steve regressed into a flashback, Tony got bored of Thor’s unending boasting, detached himself from the older prince and made his way to his younger sibling.

“So, I see you traded me in for a tall muscular blond? My enigmatic personality and plasma hot charisma isn’t enough then?” Tony wiggled his eyebrows suggestively and shot Steve a sly smile, “Captain.”

Steve nodded the greeting, “Mister Stark.”

Loki folded his arms and nodded towards Thor, “Consider it retaliation, for you’ve done just the same.”

Tony leaned in towards the prince, brusquely invading his personal space, dark eyes gleaming with challenge, “Did I make you jealous?”

Loki returned the gesture and tilted his head so their eyes were on the same level, noses almost touching, “No.”

And then withdrew.

Stark grinned from ear to ear.

“But I will have you know that I do not like to share attention.”

He couldn’t explain why, but he didn’t even try to hide his irritation at Stark’s sudden deviation of interest.

Tony put an empty glass on the tray of the passing waiter and gave Loki a look full of disappointment, “So, no threesomes than?”

“What…” Loki shot a quick glance at Steve who looked just as lost in translation as the prince felt.

The Asgardian decided to shake it off, “I need to speak to my brother. Steven, I am going to request the footage from Jarvis, join me later.”

“You are planning fun, why I am not invited? In my own house?”

“Indeed, it is your house. And you have guests to entertain. Excuse me.”

Loki swayed his way through the crowd when familiar mop of dark spikey hair flashed in front of him.
The prince’s hand darted out and caught Jayjay by the elbow, making him jump in surprise.

“Hey, aw, I dropped my olive!” the man pouted, watching as the little green ball bumped off the floor and disappeared under the couch. Then he gave Loki a glance full of condemnation and extended his arm with the glass as far from the prince as length of his limb allowed, “What?”

“What is a threesome?”

Jayjay’s face went blank for a moment, eyes darting to his sides and around the room until staring back at Loki as he stood perfectly still, without even trying to wriggle his caught arm out of Loki’s grip.

“Why do you ask?”

“Stark said we won’t have this “threesome” since I don’t like to share attention. I am not familiar with this colloquialism. So?”

Jayjay took a deep breath, “Well…Oh, god, how should I put it”, the prince could swear he heard the gears in Jayjay’s mind turning.

And then the human birthed, “Threesome is a social gathering of people with the similar interests to exchange their life experiences and increase skill levels in the subject of choosing. “

Loki’s eyebrows crawled up and he turned to Javier, who appeared by Jayjay’s side out of nowhere looking as usual completely disinterested. The man wolfed down another canapé and shrugged, “That’s one way to put it.” And walked away.

Loki released Jayjay’s elbow and nodded, secretly harboring a suspicion. “Thank you.”

*What is it with these humans? The longer I stay in Midgard, the weirder it gets. As if there is a pandemic of nonsense spreading around. Though Thor seems to enjoy it. Maybe it’s just me…*

The prince made a mental note not to get distracted again and set his foot to the bar with grim determination, when Lady Jane called his name, shadowed by Lady Darcy.

“Loki?”

He abruptly stopped and gave the women a curtesy nod, “M’ladies.”

“I was wondering…If you have time of course, could you help me with some calculations. I created an interdimensional matter transmittance formula based on the information you gave me but I have some irregularities…”

“I am afraid it will not be possible in a foreseeable future, Lady Jane, as me and my brother have to address the people of this planet and ensure a treaty first.”

She did her best to hide disappointment, but Loki still felt a sting of guilt. “If it would bring you a peace of mind, once the negotiations are concluded, you, Lady Darcy and I may engage in a threesome for as long as it is needed to satisfy your curiosity.”

Jane choked and spilled a bubbly drink she carried in her hand, hurriedly trying to clean up the expanding droplets from the oversized Navy t-shirt she was drowning in. All while avoiding looking Loki in the eyes. Her cheeks were burning with a lovely shade of pink that was slowly creeping up
into the hairline.

A cold lump of dread sank into Loki’s stomach.

Darcy gave him a long lascivious look from under half–closed eyes and smirked, “I don’t know what hit you but I am totally in!”

“Darcy!”

“What? He offered!”

The lump of dread in the prince’s stomach melted and gave way to a spark of righteous fury.

While Darcy explained in full detail what really the term meant, Loki’s eyes chased down Jayjay among the crowd. The very second Jayjay caught Loki’s eye, human’s face went into a habitual “o, shit” expression as he pushed through the crowd and escaped into the corridor.

“I am going to kill him.”

Thor continued to boom with laughter at the bar, forgotten.

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“So, how do you find the new world, must be pretty different, huh?”

Steve studied Tony for a moment. He was truly Howard’s kid: same oval of the face, same pampered look, same sly half-smirk playing on the lips, even the same damn mustache.

*What was it with Starks and their fixation on ridiculous facial hair?*

But there was something different to him too- the dark eyes were too piercing, the web of wrinkles around them gave out worries, the tension in shoulders betrayed alertness, as if he was constantly waiting for attack.

*PTSD and a ton of emotional baggage, that’s what it is.*

Steve has read Tony’s file on the way to the tower- some things shouldn’t happen to good people. Like being ambushed, kidnapped and tortured. Like a father figure trying to kill you over the money.

Rogers forced out a smile,

“Well, the food is much better. No polio is good. Internet- very useful. Still no flying cars though.”

“Yeah. We compensate with other things,” Tony quirked an eyebrow and gestured to a passing by lady. Needless to say, her skirt looked more like a wide belt than an actual skirt. Steve averted his eyes and chuckled,

“Some things are a bit too much for my taste.”

“Oh, you haven’t seen nothing yet! You should go with me some time, fly to Bahamas or may be Ibiza- you’ll see that that,” – he gestured back to the girl with the glass, “Was actually a royal gown compared to what ladies wear there. Or not wear.”
Steve barely suppressed an urge to laugh, “You are so much like your father”.

“I am nothing like my father.” Tony recoiled, his tone suddenly darkening.

A shift in Tony’s mood got Steve like a sudden slap on the face.

“I don’t understand…Howard was a good man.”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, Captain, but He was a selfish prick that didn’t care about anything or anyone except for his legacy.”

“I am sure you don’t mean that.”

“Oh, I mean every word.”

Steve shifted from one foot to another, fighting growing displeasure.

“Whatever quarrel you had with your father does not make him a bad person.”

“You knew Howard for what, six months? I lived with that bastard for half of my life, you don’t know him as well as I do.”

“He was my friend…”

“Of course he was your friend, considering he made you into what you are now.”

That made Steve’s blue eyes burn with fury so cold and bright that Tony took a step back.

“He didn’t make me”

“Well I’m sure he helped a lot.”

*It would be a shameless disregard for hospitality to break something in you…*

Steve slowly exhaled through the nose, clenching and relaxing his fists. This has always worked; it always helped to calm him down after a fight.

*Only there also was a strong arm around my shoulder…but not anymore. I have to be on my own now.*

Steve’s rage expired, making room for exhaustion.

“He passed away, you should show him more respect”

“Are you going to teach me how to treat my father now?”

“If I have to.”

“Captain, can I borrow Mister Stark for a moment?”

Coulson materialized out of thin air like a jinn out of a fairy tale and dragged protesting Tony away from the Captain. Steve suddenly was alone in a crowded room, full of unfamiliar people.
Lonely in a crowd, go figure.

Well, Thor is still at the bar and I could probably go and say hi...

Captain shot a glance in direction of the older prince and immediately shook his head,

“Nah.” He muttered under his nose and set his way to the snack table. It was a long day and the food looked delicious.

You are an emotional eater, Rogers. Soon your ass won’t fit on Coney Island. Steve could hear Bucky’s mocking voice in his head, and felt his lips twitch into a smile.

“Well, Barnes, I am a stress exerciser too. So I think I’ll be just fine.”

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“What is up with you two?”

“Your favorite hero is a dick, that’s what”

Coulson’s jaw was far less dramatic than Steve’s but it didn’t make him any less scary. There was something terrifying in his quiet resolution, as if he was going to lash out at any moment and smack Tony into oblivion, all without raising his voice.

“You’ve just met him.”

“One minute was more than enough.”

“I thought he was one of your childhood heroes too?”

“Yes, he didn’t live up to the legend.”

Quirk of an eyebrow, “Did you get up from the wrong foot?”

“If you furry your brows a bit more the crease will split your face in half.”

The agent all but growled, “This isn’t funny, Stark.”

And Tony snapped, “You know what? Fine, I’ll tell you what the problem is.”

He threw his glass away on the table, spilling the drink, and sprung back closer to Coulson, tensed like a taut string.

“I kept hearing how perfect he is all of my childhood! My father never stopped complimenting Roger’s inexhaustible list of virtues when he never even once told me, his own son, that I did a good job. I thought it was my fault, I was not good enough, and that I was just another disappointment.”

Stark was spitting out words with such bitterness, that Coulson shivered.

The whole situation was getting out of hand. Tony-smartass-Stark with eyes glistening as if he was on the verge of tears? Way above the level 7 agent’s pay grade.
“And then one day he told me he would switch me for Rogers in a heartbeat if he’d given a chance. Totally ruined the fan boy mood.”

“People say nasty things in the heat of argument; many times they don’t really mean it.”

“Well, I never got a chance to ask him if he meant it, he died two days later.”

“Yes, but he still left you the element to discover, among other things.”

“He didn’t leave it to me because he loved me so much; he only left it for me because the bastard knew I would be the only one with the right technology to do the job! And now this grandpa from the forties comes over and starts singing how good of a man my father was. Not going to listen to that!”

“I am sorry you had bad relationship with your father. If you want to blow some steam off you might scream on me, even throw a couple of punches- though I might have to retaliate. But don’t involve captain Rogers.”

“He started it.”

Coulson gave Tony a stern look, “Let me put some things into perspective. We thawed him out of the ice less than three weeks ago. While you are enjoying life, surrounded by pricey toys and drowning your sorrows in obscenely expensive liquors, he is still living in the war, all while the world he knew is forever gone and all his friends and family are dead. But he had to put all that away and deal with aliens who he was sure never existed. And now some rich dude gets all snotty on him and insults his friend, a person he knew as a good man, he snaps. Anyone would. I’m just surprised all your bones are still intact.

Consider this a great opportunity to learn how to behave like an adult.”

That seemed to calm Stark down a little.

“Fine. I suppose you got me there. When do I present our alien royals to the public?”

“You don’t.”

“Excuse me?”

“Captain Rogers is presenting them tomorrow on the Security council meeting closed to the public. You might be invited if they need a consultant and a witness.”

“So you are giving that to that old man with love for spandex? You do realize you’ve just ruined all effect from your previous speech? It is my honestly earned right…”

“Now this is nothing more than your ego going through the roof. There is no place for feelings in it, it is politics. And you have a tendency to piss off all politicians who venture into your vicinity. I am not here to discuss this.”

Tony threw his arms apart, looking at Coulson incredulously, “Then what?!?”

“We know you’ve hacked into Shield database, and Director Fury didn’t like that.”

“Director Fury can go and suck my….”
“I would be very careful with your actions; you don’t want to make him angry.”

“Is that a threat?”

“A fair warning, stop poking around into something that is none of your business. Might sleep better at night.”

“And if I don’t? What are you going to do? Send one of your pet assassins to kill me?”

“No. You are not a threat yet, more of a constant annoyance. But we still can make your life very unpleasant. Considering your long record of breaking the law.”

“Tony.”

A melodious voice cut through the stare down like a knife through the butter. Tony was ready to throw his arms around the woman and give her a biggest hug he could. Hopefully without his arc reactor poking up her cleavage.

“Pepper, you are just in time. Agent here is threatening me with a law suit.”

“Phil?”

“I wish it didn’t come to this. He hacked into SHIELD’s database.”

“You did what?!”

Corners of Pepper’s mouth slid downwards into a “Pout of doom”, as Stark liked to poetically call it. It usually ranged from “I am not paid enough for this” to “I will murder you in your sleep”, depending on what depths Tony’s depravity had dragged him to. Usually, the deeper he descended, the more flowers and chocolates it required to buy back Pepper’s good grace.

Tony immediately started calculating the expenses. *Flowers, chocolates- dark and milk only, and no strawberries please. May be a pineapple?*

“Director Fury is simply trying to keep him out of it, by any means necessary.”

Pepper straightened up and looked Coulson dead in the eye,

“Well Phil, would you please remind director Fury that if mister Stark faces a lawsuit, Stark industries will have to pull out all the financing we grant for Shield research in order to counteract the litigation expenses.”

“Yeah, what she said.”

“Tony, could you please bring me some water and aspirin?”

“I thought you’ve taken my personal jet to Los Angeles and back, was it not comfortable enough for you?”

“Oh, it was perfect. My headache started earlier, when I spent 8 hours trying to convince the governor of California not to cancel our multibillion contract. The one you’ve publically called a poo-brained dickhead.”

“Yeah I did that..”

“Yes, you did. Now, can you get me my aspirin, please?”
Tony rolled his eyes and mouthed “Fine”, before marching away.

“Phil, what is going on?”

“I am sorry, Miss Potts, I didn’t want to involve you in this.”

Coulson offered Pepper a chair and she slid into it with a sigh of relief, “This whole situation doesn’t give me pleasure. Well, may be a little. But director Fury insists Stark stops fondling with our security systems. Most of the Shield’s secrets are best kept secret.”

“I understand. But you have to remember; when you are threatening Tony he will do just the opposite.”

“Can you suggest an alternative?”

“The only method is to keep him busy and occupied and away from the trouble. Or to ask him very nicely. I will try both, but you will have to do me a favor in return.”

“I am listening.”

“Well, as you know I have to run a company. I don’t have enough time to babysit Tony and his guests, at least not full time.”

“Yes, looks like you’ve got your hands full.”

“Indeed. So I was wondering if I could have my assistant back. Just for a while, of course. Until the situation calms down.”

Coulson beamed with a sly smile, “You wouldn’t believe it, but that’s exactly what I was thinking.”

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“You are supposed to be a god of tricks and jokes for hell’s sake! I find your lack of sense of humor very concerning!”

“You should be more concerned about a forest where I will hide your body.”

Loki’s voice dropped an octave when he growled at JayJay hiding behind a sofa. The man smoothly lowered himself and disappeared completely for a moment, and then the spikey top of his head moved towards the end of the sofa and the closest escape route. Loki watched with pursed lips, then cut the way through the room and stood between the human and the door.

Jayjay looked at Loki from his crawling position and smiled,

“Uh come on, it wasn’t nearly as bad as you make it to be.”

The prince’s eyebrows made their way into hairline, “Is it not now? You’ve brought dishonor on me before…”

“Disho…No-no, what dishonor?”

Jayjay jumped upwards, “If anything you should be thanking me right now! Those are women! They
won’t think any less of you, instead their motherly instinct will kick in and they will spend more time teaching you Midgardian slang and customs so that in the future assholes like myself won’t take advantage of your innocence. See, I am your wingman here, dude, I’m looking out for you.”

“I fail to see any trace of logic. Oh, wait, have you been drinking?”

“What? Hehe, no, well yes, but not that much. So, what are you going to give me for my birthday? “

“Changing the subject will do you no good.”

“I’m not changing it. We’ve established that you have nothing to be angry at me for. So the case is closed. Now, considering you are a prince and dirty rich and I am your bestie, I am expecting a lavish present.”

The Asgardian had nothing else to do but pinch the bridge of his nose in utter frustration. Whatever was happening in this Midgardian brain, it clearly defied any logic.

“Surely, I will be most generous; I’ll grant you my forgiveness.”

“No, you’ll have to do better than that. Besides, I know you won’t actually hurt me.”

“Oh, is that your gift of clairvoyance manifesting?”

“I’m just a good judge of character.”

“Is that so?”

Jay shrugged, “Yeah had to learn, and had a tough childhood.”

Loki threw his arms up in desperation, “I...just...unbelievable.” Jayjay’s expecting stare made him pause for a second.

“If you want something lavish ask it of Stark, for I have little knowledge of Midgardian tastes.”

“Um, no, that would be inappropriate. I don’t know him that well.”

“And your acquaintance of me is most intimate.”


“Speaking of Stark, you know what I find the most amazing? You got all up in armor because of my little joke and yet he just openly stated he is considering have sex with you and he had an intention to have an orgy. Yet you don’t react to it or act offended.”

Loki stared into an empty space over the human for a moment, and then his face fell as he narrowed his eyes and hissed, “I haven’t thought of that.”

“Uh-uh. Anyway, I don’t want anything material. I want a wish.”

“What?”

“A wish, you can do magic, right? So, grant me one wish. Like a jinn in a fairy tale- I rub the lamp and get the wish.”

“I don’t understand what lamp you are speaking of and if rubbing it is yet another one of your sultry jokes. My magic doesn’t work like that, and even if it did, I would never make lives of all beings in
Tony sat at the bar and drilled two holes with his eyes in a whiskey glass as the ice cubes slowly melted away into the amber liquid. He didn’t expect a night of celebration of his heroic deed to turn into such a sour mess. Getting into a fight with two super agents certainly was not in his plans.

And then Pepper.

Oh, it will take a lot of effort to get back into her good graces.

That blasted one-eyed son of a bitch.

A flame of red hair behind him snapped Stark out of his reflections. Tony grinded his teeth and
turned, as the Black Widow slithered into a chair next to him.

“So I was right then? Fury’s patience ran out and he sent you to get rid of me for good? How are you going to do it? Slowly and painfully? No, not your style, you are an expert of deception, aren’t you. Strangle me in my sleep? No, something more befitting your name. Oh, how about poisoning my drink?”

Natasha’s lips quirked into a smile, “What makes you think I haven’t already?”

Tony choked and pushed the glass away.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh you are going to sooth-talk me? Tell me you are here for me?”

“I am not here for you; I am here because of you. So, what is wrong?”

“Fury is being a secretive manipulating dick.”

“He is doing his job. What else?”

“I bet you’ve heard America’s golden boy will be presenting the princes to the public tomorrow.”

“So?”

“So, I wanted to do it.”

“Why? You never seemed like a man interested in politics.”

“Well may be I learned a lesson from my father. I want it to be my legacy, I deserve to have a legacy, don’t you think? And not the one of being constantly drunk debouchaire.”

“You’ve invented many things, I’m sure…”

“Most of which have killed thousands of people.”

Natasha tilted her head and considered Tony for a moment,

“So you think presenting aliens to the Security Council is a way to make people remember you?”

“Rogers is already an undying symbol of all the goodness, he doesn’t need another star on his spangled banner.”

“You have a distorted impression of what is going to happen tomorrow. It will not be a public show off; it will be a meeting of politicians behind closed doors. Half of them you hate and the other half you despise, and I am pretty sure the feeling is reciprocal. There will be no cameras or reporters of any kind. Your desired legacy will not leave that room, is that what you are aiming for?”

Tony frowned at her, confused, “But I thought…”

“What, that it will be like one of your science fair presentations? There will be no showing off of the princes. If the council reaches some sort of agreement, then, maybe there will be a press-conference. Most likely without the alien presence. As to your legacy, you’ve already eternalized your memory in stone. Literally. I think it is still fuming somewhere on Broadway and Canal.”

“It will be removed in couple of days. Besides, I want to create a memory. Something that will
become sort of a legend…”

“Want a legend? Do what you do best. And make Asgardians participate.”

“What, you mean invent something?”

“No, Stark, throw a party.”

Natasha slid off the chair and tousled her hair, making it fall in soft waves around her face. Then she positioned herself strategically right between Tony and approaching Steve.

Tony wondered for a second if her curves would have any effect on the walking beacon of righteousness like they not so long ago had worked on him.

“Mr. Stark?” Steve looked, if nothing else, apologetic.

“I think we’ve got off the wrong foot.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Captain, nice to finally meet you.” The woman extended her hand and shook Steve’s, making him blush.

You really need to work on that, dude. Tony watched her unleash her charms and felt an unexpected sting of jealousy.

“Natasha Romanoff.”

“You are an agent of SHIELD?”

“Yes, but not today. Today I am Miss Potts’s assistant.”

“Oh, be careful, Captain, this woman is dangerous. She likes to stab people.”

That earned Tony a dirty look, “I saved your life.”

“You stabbed me in the neck.”

“I could have stabbed you in the eye.”

“Point taken. Let’s go find Loki before he breaks something.”

Steve followed Stark when Natasha’s hand gripped his upper arm, and she leaned in to whisper,

“Why so magnanimous? Tony can be a real prick sometimes, but he quickly bounces back. Don’t be afraid to put him in his place.”

“I’m not. But I might have overheard his conversation with Coulson. About his father.”

Natasha looked at Steve incredulously, “You were on the other side of the room full of people!”

“Super soldier, remember?”

“Remind me not to be around you when I’m hungry.”

“Are you two lovebirds coming or you gona be standing there gossiping about me?”
Tony pointed to the exit and waved his hand,

“Come on.”

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