Rotten At the Heart

by Coneycat

Summary

For a prompt at Norsekink, in which Odin raised Loki as Thor's brother... and then used him to force Thor to prove his loyalty to Asgard.

Notes

I wrote this in a hurry and it probably doesn't hold together very well, but I just wanted it out of my head. Please refer to the linked prompt for details, and also for a couple of much better fills!

The title is from The Merchant of Venice-- A goodly apple rotten at the heart:/ O, what a goodly outside falsehood hath! Which seemed to pretty much describe Asgard in this story.

See the end of the work for more notes
Loki was alone in his chambers when Thor came to deliver the summons to the throne room.

"Have you any idea what Father wants of us?" Thor asked, fidgeting in the doorway of the bedchamber as Loki changed into more formal clothing. He wanted to urge his younger brother to hurry, but in fairness Loki was dressing as fast as he could.

"None whatsoever," Loki answered the question. It had been a silly one anyway, as Thor well knew-- his brother had been engaged in some sort of magical study when Thor pounded on his door, papers and books spread across the worktable that served as his desk. It was evident Loki had not expected Father's summons any more than Thor had. "And I do not understand this business of forbidding us to wear armor."

"I expect we're in trouble of some sort," Thor said uneasily. He could not think of any reason for Father to be displeased with him, but it would not be the first time Father had been infuriated by some act that had seemed harmless to Thor at the time. And Loki, of course, might have been up to anything in the days since Thor had last seen him at the sparring grounds.

"I expect so," Loki agreed, his face settling into the impassive mask with which he met anxiety. It troubled Thor sometimes, that his brother did not trust even him with his fears, but this was not the time to speak of that.

"Well, no matter," Thor said, injecting heartiness into his voice. "You will soon talk him round, Silvertongue."

The glance Loki sent his way made Thor wish he had not spoken. "I think it would be best to leave our excuses to you," Loki said, his tone light and brittle. "There might, that way, be a chance of their being heard." He brushed past Thor to the outer chambers, leaving his elder brother floundering in his wake.

Thor shook his head. If only Loki could see, could accept, how mistaken he was in his belief that Father-- both their parents, really-- loved Thor best. It was wrong, and possibly dangerous, for one so sensitive and with such powers to have so little confidence in his family. It was bound to lead to trouble one day.

There being no reassurance Thor could offer-- and, in fairness, Father did have rather a tendency to assume Loki's every utterance was a falsehood to be met with his wordless, contemptuous growl, despite the fact Loki generally saved that skill for tactical purposes, on the grounds that no one believed a liar who lied all the time-- the brothers continued to the throne room in silence.

The formality of the summons had suggested to Thor that some sort of rebuke was in the offing, but he had certainly not expected the entire court to be assembled to witness it. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Loki tense beside him, and cursed to himself: clearly Loki had a guilty conscience, and clearly he too was being dragged into whatever trouble his brother had gotten himself into. There were, he thought, times when he would give a great deal not to have a sibling.

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The brothers each fell to one knee before the dais where sat the throne of the Allfather. Glancing up, Thor noted their mother was in her formal place to the Allfather's right, standing at the top of the steps. The look on her face was nearly as stern as Father's.

Odin rose to his feet, Gungnir in his hand. He wore his full armor, but instead of a sword there was,
tucked through his belt, what looked like a ceremonial dagger.

"My son," he said-- or seemed to say, but Thor must have heard amiss, because was Father not looking at both of them? Odin went on, "My heir. Prince of Asgard, who will be king. You will soon come of age, and the time has come for you to prove your loyalty to Asgard and your fitness to rule."

Thor dared not turn his head, but he was aware of Loki looking at the ground before him, of Loki taking this address as a slight. Aggravation rose within him-- did Loki not see it was only a slip of the tongue? Would he always take every opportunity to believe himself overlooked, to think himself unloved?

And besides, clearly nothing bad was about to happen. Obviously, Thor was to be given a quest to prove his worth--very well, it stung a little that Father still thought it necessary-- and Loki would go with him to offer what assistance Thor might need. When Thor returned victorious, his place as heir would be reconfirmed.

Father was waiting for an answer.

"I am pleased to serve Asgard, however I may," Thor spoke up confidently.

Odin inclined his head, then nodded at someone behind Thor, someone he could not see.

A moment later, Thor's own friends Volstagg and Hogun had moved to Thor's side.

No, not to his side. They stepped up to Loki, where he still knelt before the Allfather, grasped his arms and pulled him to his feet, actions more suited to the handling of an enemy prisoner than a prince of Asgard.

"My king?" Loki's question came out in a fairly steady voice, but his expression gave it the lie. He looked for a moment as though he might resist, might demand an explanation, but a glance at the faces of Volstagg and Hogun seemed to persuade him otherwise. It was as if he did not remember they were his lifelong companions, thought they might actually do him harm.

Whatever was happening, it was clear Thor's friends knew more of it than he did: they escorted Loki to the very base of the steps to the throne, where they forced him back to his knees. Both knees, this time, again like a prisoner. Thor, appalled, could only wonder what in the Nine his brother could possibly have done to earn this, and guiltily hope it would not yet rebound upon him.

Odin looked down at his younger son with an expression of grim intent. Even Thor swallowed hard. Then he looked at Thor, his face once again that of the father-king, and spoke.

"This is a test many years-- nearly your whole life-- in the making. From the time you were a child, with a good trusting heart." Odin looked up at the assembly. "Hear me. You see before you my heir, the prince of Asgard." There were a few cheers, but they were more puzzled than anything-- it was apparent the two brothers were not the only ones present who did not understand what was happening.

The Allfather went on, "You also see before him the one raised as his closest dear companion, his brother-- " Again, it was as though Father did not realize what he was saying, that his words could be taken to mean Loki had merely been raised as Thor's brother, rather than his brother in truth. There was a time when Loki would have complained bitterly about that to Thor, after the fact. Of late he had finally learned to swallow such imagined slights, but though he did not speak of them to Thor, Thor was quite sure his brother still brooded over them.
Well, no matter. Thor was beginning to see the shape of the upcoming test: Loki would be taken away somewhere, and Thor would have to rescue him, like a damsels. The thought of his brother's affront, of the merciless teasing to be administered later, was nearly enough to bring a smile to Thor's face.

And then all smiles stopped together as Odin said,

"Raised as his brother, but not. Raised as a prince, but not.

"Raised as Aesir, but not."

There was a buzz through the assembly, but Thor could not make out individual words. He was too busy looking at the way his brother's wary face went slack and vulnerable, with shock and with dawning horror.

Odin went on, "In the final days of the War, when I led our troops into Jotunheim and sacked their capital, I found a child in the ruins of the temple. Abandoned, left to die by the creatures who bore it. The son of Laufey, our greatest enemy." Out of the corner of his eye, Thor could see Loki shaking his head. He did not look away from his father, who was still speaking:

"My first instinct was of course to kill it, to rid the Nine of the spawn of that tyrant. But then I thought of the age of peace that would surely result from the destruction of Jotun power. I thought of my heir, who would need to prove his loyalty to Asgard, his fitness to rule, and who might not have wars to test him.

"And so I decided to keep the child, raise it alongside my own son, and when the time came use it, to allow my heir to prove his worth. I placed a glamour upon the Jotun whelp, and brought it here. And so it grew." For the first time, Odin seemed hesitant, looked at Loki with a puzzled expression. "Grew to be clever and loyal, and perhaps even capable of love. At times I even thought I might love it in return. But such is the price asked of a king, to do what is right for his realm-- whatever his heart might say."

There was, now, dead silence in the great hall. The only sound was a muffled sob from Loki, who was staring at Odin as if--

-- As if every fear he had ever entertained about his place in Asgard, in his family, was finally coming true.

The Allfather gestured toward Frigga, who made her stately way down the steps to where Loki knelt. He looked up at her, eyes pleading.

"Mother-- " he began, in an urgent undertone.

"Shh," she crooned, in her soft warm voice, and Thor felt himself breathe more freely. Surely she would not allow… whatever it was Father intended. Loki was her favourite, whatever he claimed to think. How often had Thor and his friends teased him as the daughter she never had. She must love him best, would not let anything terrible happen--

Frigga placed both hands on the sides of Loki's head, cradled it, leaned down to place a kiss on his forehead. "Think of what you have told me, so many times, of your wish to do something great for Asgard, for your brother, to really earn your place. Think of all the times I reassured you that your father had a purpose for you, and one day you would fulfill it. That day is come. Be happy."

"Mother-- ?" Loki tried again, his voice faltering, but she turned away and stood at the foot of the dais. The king descended the steps and now Loki tried to struggle in the grasp of his...
captors. At a nod from the king, Hogun produced a set of shackles, and a moment later Loki's hands were bound behind his back, and his magic bound with them, the transformation from prince to prisoner complete.

And then Odin, too, cradled Loki's head in his heads, looking down with his one stern eye into the now tear-filled green ones before him. His lips moved, and then there was a glow in his hands. Loki screamed, reeling backward on his knees, and suddenly--

Suddenly, cowering before the Allfather, was a blue-skinned creature with crimson eyes, and reddened markings raised on his face, like scars. There was no way Loki could see what he looked like now, but he must have known-- perhaps the world now looked different through these eyes, or perhaps he could simply see the way the watchers recoiled from him. Thor thought Loki was crying, but apparently Jotun eyes could not produce tears, and the hum of shocked chatter in the hall drowned out any sounds he was making as he was dragged back to his feet.

And now, finally, the Allfather turned his unwelcome attention back to Thor. Came to a halt before him, brought all sounds-- except Loki's muffled sobs-- to a halt by crashing the butt of Gungnir onto the marble floor.

And from his belt he took the elaborate ceremonial dagger, and extended it to his heir.

"The time has come to demonstrate your loyalty to Asgard above all, to the throne above all."

"Father-- " Thor began, and to his horror his voice sounded no stronger than Loki's.

"A king must put the needs of his kingdom before all, must not falter, must not fall victim to misplaced mercy or sentiment. You swore an oath to protect Asgard, to destroy the monsters who threatened her--"

"I was a child--" Thor protested, remembering his own words, how Father had encouraged him, patting his head with one hand and holding Loki's with the other. "He is loyal to Asgard, Father. He is my brother. You cannot mean--"

"-- and now you will show these were not empty boasts," his father went on, as though Thor had not spoken-- but his tone was a warning. "Show where your loyalties lie, and kill the creature. Your people are here to see you choose. Do not betray them for a Jotun runt."

Thor looked around, finally realizing the mood of the room had turned ugly. Loki had never been as popular as Thor, as well-loved, but surely the people did not hate him? Not even Loki had ever claimed that. He had done nothing, Thor knew, to earn it.

And yet, now, the buzzing hum began to grow into a threatening growl. Thor could make out individual words: "Monster," "Kill it," "Traitor," "Do your duty."

For the first time, it began to occur to Thor that, if he refused, Loki might not be the only prince of Asgard to die this day.

"Thor, you know what you must do," Volstagg's deep voice cut across the noise, the familiar steady rumble, reassuring and honest. "For Asgard." Loki twisted in his bonds, trying to look at Volstagg, to get his attention, perhaps hoping for mercy from the one of Thor's friends who had always shown him the most patience. Volstagg did something to Loki's wrist, and the prisoner's knees nearly buckled.

Thor looked around at the blurring sea of faces surrounding him. A very few stood out: Sif and Fandral, grim-faced, waiting for him to prove himself a worthy leader. His mother, resolute, as
though she had never held the hand of either of them. The weapons-master who had taught him, the healer who cared for everything from childish scrapes to broken bones. All these people Thor had always sworn to protect, to defend, when he was king, with his own life if necessary.

What was the life of one, measured against all of these?

He took the dagger and turned toward the prisoner, who tried to retreat, scrabbling backward in panic, crimson eyes wide.

"Thor, please. Don't." The voice sounded familiar, but it jolted against his hearing like yet another cheat: Loki would not beg. He would fight or trick, but he never begged. Thor knew that well enough, had reason to know it, had seen him in trouble, in pain, in predicaments anyone else would try to plead their way out of. Even when sparring, when he was small enough to be no match for Thor or Volstagg, he never asked for quarter.

Not of an enemy. Not ever.

"Thor--?" Loki wavered.

Thor struck.

The dagger entered the thorax below the ribcage, and whatever Loki was trying to say turned into a bubbling cry. Despite everything he still looked surprised, when he coughed and dark blood sprayed out of his mouth. He looked down at himself, though the blood did not show on his dark clothing, then back up at Thor. Once again, his feet tried to retreat. He backed into Volstagg, who shoved him forward, Hogun gripping the collar of his tunic to drag him back into Thor's reach.

And then he was fighting in earnest, struggling against the shackles that bound his hands and the warriors who held his arms. Hogun went down first, feet kicked out from underneath him, and the Jotun twisted in Volstagg's grip, a maddened creature, teeth bared, monstrous-looking as its black blood trickled down its chin.

"Thor--" Volstagg cried out. The creature kicked back at him, and Thor struck again, the blade entering the top of the shoulder just by the collarbone, and the creature screamed in anger or pain, and then Thor was upon it, one hand burning on the cold blue flesh of its throat, the other striking again and again with the dagger. He slashed wildly, desperate to end this-- Volstagg roared once as an unlucky blow sliced his arm-- maddened himself by the shouts of encouragement from those assembled to witness this and the cries from the creature under his hands.

He hated them, hated all of them, hated the squirming struggling being underneath him, hated the pain in his hands and Volstagg's encouragement and every single one of those roaring odious faces at the periphery of his vision when he was king he would kill them every one of them there was nothing before his eyes but a red mist--

The thrashing thing under his hands weakened, twitching more than fighting, its chest rising and falling rapidly. Thor looked down, blinking, suddenly able to see.

The creature looked up, ruby eyes going out of focus, breath coming in short gasps. It shivered--

-- and Thor was looking down into the pale, bloody face and teary green eyes of Loki. His Loki.

Blood bubbled past his lips as Loki whispered, "Brother, please."

Thor dropped the dagger, lurched to his feet and staggered backward, retching. Loki tried to turn over onto his belly, might have still been trying to crawl away from his fate, like any dying
Thor looked around, at the sea of hateful faces, at the dais where the creatures stood who expected this of him, at the warriors who had connived at it--

The dagger spun away from his foot as he stumbled forward, lifted the bloody bundle into his arms-- Loki hissed in pain and tried to struggle, the glamour failed and Thor felt his skin burn again as he clutched at Jotun flesh through ripped clothing--

-- And then he was running, his gait awkward as he balanced his burden, ears ringing with shouts of surprise and anger and straining for sounds of pursuit. He called Mjolnir to him, and a moment later his hand closed around its handle, he whirled it and his feet left the marble floor--

-- And then he was entering the Observatory, shouting to Heimdall. The Guardian looked at him, at the limp figure in his arms, and turned toward the Bifrost mechanism.

"We need to go somewhere safe," Thor panted. "Where we will not be followed."

"None will follow you," Heimdall replied, and Thor had only time to think of course, he had failed his test, disgraced himself... the Allfather, his mother, Asgard-- none of them would want him anymore. He swallowed hard, and nodded. He had made his choice.

Heimdall spoke again: "Leave the hammer," he ordered. Thor looked down at Mjolnir, still gripped in his hand. He had just won her, had believed that to be his test, thought he had--

"Of course," he said quietly, and let the weapon fall. Heimdall nodded, and took hold of the mechanism that opened the bridge.

Loki whimpered, and Thor tightened his grip as the Bifrost seized them.

There was a moment of weightlessness, of light, of pressure-- and then Thor felt sand under his feet, and a cold wind on his face.

The stars were all strange.

He heard a noise, turned just in time to see two lanterns approaching at great speed.

There was a colossal blow.
Phil Coulson rubbed his eyes tiredly and passed a hand over his slicked-back dark hair.

"I don't suppose there's any chance of coffee?" he asked.

"On it, boss," Clint Barton replied laconically.

Not that any amount of coffee was likely to do him much good, after being dragged out of bed and flown halfway across the country because a truck full of scientists in the New Mexico desert had hit some cape-wearing nut case carrying a blue guy.

Put baldly like that it sounded like a frat hazing gone awry, nothing to concern either Coulson or his employers, but the case had a few points of interest. For one thing, the cape-wearing guy had come out much the best in the collision with the truck, demolishing the front end and scaring the daylights out of one Dr. Jane Foster and her research associates.

For another, the blue guy had been pretty much cut to ribbons. And he hadn't been wearing body paint.

By the time Coulson's team arrived to close down the scene and do damage control, cape-wearing guy was in orderly's scrubs, gory clothes bagged, his hands bandaged. The blue guy was on a saline drip to try to ward off hypovolemic shock, since it was apparent that human blood wouldn't do him any good. Coulson left Barton to keep formerly-cape-wearing guy calm until he could be interrogated again, and went down the closed-off hall to look in on the alien, or maybe mutant, patient.

Probably they were both aliens, or maybe mutants, but only one of them looked it.

The blue guy had been rolled onto his less-injured side, was lying halfway curled up and obviously out of it, and it wasn't until he was next to the bed that Coulson realized the position was because his hands were cuffed behind his back.

"What's this about?" he asked the SHIELD doctor monitoring the drip. "He get violent?"

"He was wearing them when he came in, and nobody's been able to get them off. We had a hell of a time getting his clothes off him." Coulson looked disapproving, and the doctor gestured toward the figure in the bed. "If you want to try your luck, go ahead. He's got enough morphine in him to sedate a rhinoceros-- seems to have a very high tolerance-- so I doubt he'll even notice you. Just be careful how you touch him."

"I'm not in the habit of poking at stab wounds," Coulson replied dryly.

"It's not that. His skin seems to be corrosive, or something. One of the orderlies got quite a burn earlier."

"Noted," Coulson said, walked around the bed, and reached into an inside pocket.

As he did, the blue figure stirred.

~oOo~

Formerly-cape-wearing guy, wearing blue scrubs and looking dazed, was sitting in a small office
across a desk from Barton. Coulson let himself in, nodded at Barton, and waited for him to leave before taking a seat himself.

"I'm Phil Coulson," he began. "I wonder if we could talk a little about what happened tonight." Formerly-cape-wearing guy didn't move, but his eyes cut upward to meet Coulson's for a second. "Can you tell me your name?" Coulson didn't normally do gentle, but he had a nice line in reassuringly businesslike, and most of the time people responded to it.

Formerly-cape-wearing guy-- who Coulson was only now realizing looked very young, a kid, probably not old enough to drink yet-- chewed his lower lip for a moment before replying, "Thor."

"Thor? Any last name, Thor?" No response, except maybe the blankness got deeper. "Family name, I mean." No response, and Coulson tried to think of another term Thor might understand better. "Patronymic?"


"Okay. Thor it is. I was just looking in on-- I understand he's your brother?"

"Yes," in the same strangled whisper. It sounded like he'd been screaming so hard he'd lost his voice. Thor looked up, blue eyes dazed, and asked, "He lives?"

"Yes," Coulson replied. "He regained consciousness, briefly, while I was taking off those handcuffs."

Thor stared. "You removed the shackles? How could you-- they were imbued with the powers of the Allfather, how could-- ?"

Coulson shrugged. "Used a lock pick. But the interesting thing is, after I took the cuffs off, he woke up for a second and kind of shivered-- and now he's not blue anymore. Is there anything we should know about that?" Thor looked away, a couple of tears sliding down his face. Coulson waited a moment, but Thor had nothing to contribute. Coulson opened a folder on the desk, containing the notes Barton had written up after the first round of questioning.

"Okay. You say your brother was attacked, and you rescued him, and you were escaping from someone and that's how you got here?" Nod. More tears. "And you don't know where you are?"

"Midgard," Thor murmured incomprehensibly. Again, he didn't seem inclined to elaborate, and after a while Coulson went on,

"Okay. Now, I'm sure what happened was very upsetting to you, but we need to know where you came from and how you got here." He hesitated, and this time it wasn't for tactical reasons. Looking at the slumped shoulders of the giant in front of him, Coulson said quietly, "Also… you told Agent Barton that you were protecting your brother. He's… really badly cut up. Whoever did this to him, it was a vicious attack." More silent tears. "You, on the other hand… you've got some burns on your hands, similar to the ones an orderly sustained handling your brother in… in his other skin. But the only other injuries you've got, apart from that, are on your right hand."

Thor looked up, locking eyes with Coulson, who was momentarily very conscious that Thor was big and the room was small.

And then he went on, "You've got a number of cuts on your hand. Cuts that are consistent with… when you stab someone, Thor, it's a messy thing, and sometimes you hit bone, and the knife jolts, so your hand can slide from the grip down onto the blade. That's a characteristic injury you see on a
person who's stabbed someone, especially multiple times. The burn on your left hand… is consistent with the injury being sustained while your hand was wrapped around something. Like a throat, for instance.

"And your brother-- what's his name?"

"Loki," Thor breathed.

Coulson nodded. "Loki. Like I told you, Loki only woke up for a minute, and he didn't say anything before he passed out again. But while he was under, I'm told he did mumble a little." Coulson looked down at the folder again, and quoted the doctor's report of the patient's words: "No, Thor, please don't." He looked back up, into the eyes of the boy across the desk, who suddenly seemed very much smaller. Still in his most reassuringly businesslike voice, he asked,

"Are you sure there's nothing you'd like to tell me about what happened?"

~oOo~

It was maybe just a little creepy, how fast Loki healed once the shackles were off. By the middle of the next morning all but the worst of his wounds were nothing but faint pinkish scars on his pale skin. He was still weak from loss of blood, and still on the saline drip to keep his pressure up, but was reasonably alert.

"We're going to have to get them out of here soon, Boss," Barton commented, as they stood in the hall outside the room. Coulson made a noncommittal noise. "Kind of hard to keep two aliens under wraps in a place this small. And we really should find out what kind of powers they have, apart from the obvious."

"The obvious is interesting enough, at this point," Coulson agreed. "I'll want to talk to them about that. And about what happened to both of them."

Barton looked thoughtfully at Coulson. "Don't get emotionally involved, Boss."

Coulson gave him a hard look. "Don't be stupid. I just… I remember reading a story about members of the Hitler Youth having to kill their own pet dog to prove their loyalty to their leaders. That turned out to be an urban legend, but this really happened. With the kid's brother in the role of the dog, no less. How twisted is that?"

Barton scowled. "Just keep in mind, they've probably both been brainwashed like that all their lives, and that could make them dangerous in ways we can't even predict."

Coulson nodded in acknowledgement, took a sip of god-awful coffee, and looked toward the patient's room. "Has anyone debriefed him?" Barton shook his head. Coulson nodded, tossed his paper cup into the trash, and walked through the door.

Loki watched him, green eyes wary, flicking from Coulson to the IV pole to the closed window and then back to Coulson. Having some sympathy with Loki's probable state of mind, and also very little desire to get himself strangled with an IV line, Coulson didn't approach too closely. Instead, he pulled a visitor's chair to what, judging by his body language, Loki considered a safe distance, and sat down.

"Good morning," he said. Ordinarily, pleasantries weren't part of Coulson's repertoire, but he was willing to make exceptions for presumably scared and disoriented aliens who had just had a close brush with death. The fact Loki looked, if anything, even younger than Thor might have had some influence on his approach.
Loki, with a white-knuckled grip on the sheet covering him, did not reply.

"My name is Phil Coulson," Coulson went on. "You probably don't remember this, but I was in here last night just after you arrived. I took the shackles off your wrists." Loki blinked a little. "I also had a long conversation with your brother, Thor, about what happened to you." Loki did not react to that, either, and Coulson, for accuracy, amended, "About what he did to you."

"It was the Allfather's command," Loki mumbled, his voice just as hoarse and scratchy as Thor's.

"That's what he told me," Coulson agreed. "Something to do with proving his loyalty to your country, is that right?" Loki nodded, casting his eyes down in what might have been an effort to hide the tears brimming in them. Coulson considered waiting him out, but reminded himself this wasn't an interrogation and Loki wasn't a prisoner.

After a moment he said quietly, "There's a saying I read once: If I ever had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my brother, I hope I'd have the guts to betray my country."

Loki looked up in evident confusion, and Coulson elaborated, "What was done to you-- we don't allow that kind of thing here. Your brother isn't going to be punished, because we don't have jurisdiction over your planet, but here, you're protected. Both of you." There was another pause. This time, Coulson let it stretch.

"It was my fault he failed," Loki mumbled. Which was not exactly what Coulson had been expecting, but he remembered Barton's word: brainwashed.

"What do you mean?" he prompted, after a moment.

"I… disgraced myself. I begged him-- " Loki broke off, fingers worrying at the edge of the sheet. "And then… I was not supposed to be able to, my magic should have been suppressed by those shackles, but… all my life I have worn this form. I was pleading with him, like a coward, like-- "

"I don't think you can be blamed for not wanting to be butchered by your own brother," Coulson interjected, before he could stop himself.

Loki winced. "I should have been… braver. But Father, and Mother, they had-- and I could not bear to die that way, at the hand of the only one left who had ever… so I called on the glamour I had thought was the truth, and made him see… the lie we had both believed. And he stopped." Loki scrubbed his knuckles against his mouth. "I do not know how I did that. The Allfather's magics should have-- "

Coulson leaned forward a little in his chair. "I think maybe you were stronger than your father expected." Pause. "And so was your brother."

For a long moment there was no sound in the room, except a few muffled sniffs from the kid in the bed. Then Coulson said, as kindly as he was able to,

"How about we find you something to wear, and something to eat? Would that be okay?" Loki looked up and nodded. Coulson smiled as kindly as he could manage.

"And-- your brother would like to see you."

~oOo~

Ordinarily, the last thing Coulson would have countenanced was to put a victim in the same room with his attacker, but these were exceptional circumstances, and by the next afternoon he thought it had to happen. Barton went looking for proper clothes for both boys and managed to outfit them in
jeans, shirts, and boots that fit. Thor clearly felt very uncomfortable in the strange get-up, but Loki, who'd spent the past day naked except for a sheet, just seemed relieved to be decently covered and able to move around.

Coulson had no idea what either of them might want to eat, but they looked like teenagers so he figured they'd be ravenous and would probably like pizza. Barton was sent on pickup duty while Coulson walked Loki down to the conference room they'd commandeered for this meeting.

It did cross Coulson's mind that if this went south, he was likely to be the first casualty. But Thor hadn't shown any inclination to get violent toward his brother again, while Loki seemed to be blaming himself for being alive more than Thor for trying to kill him. He mentally shrugged, tapped on the conference room door, and called to Thor, "It's us."

Loki hung back behind him as they walked into the room, and on the other side of the room Thor fidgeted in his chair but stayed seated. Loki sat down in the chair Coulson indicated, hands clasped and worrying together in his lap.

For a long moment, neither boy spoke. Then Thor began, hesitantly, "Loki--"

"I'm sorry," Loki burst out, hands clenched around each other. "Everything is ruined, all your--everything, it's my fault, I should have-- I should not have-- I'm sorry--"

*Brainwashed,* Coulson reminded himself, put a hand on the kid's shoulder, and was about to say something when Thor--

--Well, when Thor erupted out of his chair and came flying around the table, which might have been frightening if he hadn't been weeping and making a sort of broken crooning noise at the same time. Loki jumped up to meet him, and the next thing Coulson knew the two boys were hugging each other and crying their eyes out.

"I am so sorry, brother," Thor wept. "For everything. For… hurting you, and… hurting you, and… It was not worth it. Nothing, not the throne or Father or Mother, none of it. Can you ever forgive me?"

There was a short pause, broken only by sobbing from both kids. Then, in a shaky little voice:


Coulson pulled out a chair in the corner, and sat watching them and waiting for Barton to come back with the pizza.

**End Notes**

Coulson misquoted a little--the actual quotation is: *If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.* - *E M Forster.*

**Works inspired by this one**

*No Good Choice* by Mythwine
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