United we fall
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Summary

Later, when he attempts to pinpoint the exact moment where everything went off the rails, Loki thinks it might have started already in the beginning. It started innocently. But innocence is a thing to lose, always.

The evolution (or decay) of Thor and Loki's relationship throughout the centuries.

Notes

In a way, it can be considered my first Thor/Loki story - which is surprising, seeing I have posted a bunch already. The notes to this have been sitting on my comp since the beginning but never got to sit down and fill in the gaps.

Those who follow me on Tumblr know about the mother of all writer's blocks I'm fighting now, so apologies if it reeks of this struggle.
Streaks of sunlight. Scent of fallen leaves, damp and withered: the hint of autumn. The breeze carries something with it, the taste of old times, never-been memories, and it plants a feeling in Thor’s chest akin to premonition. Bugs rise with the last patches of light, and Loki, young and ethereal, amidst the whirling cloud of insects and the buzz of tiny perfect wings, turns back and looks at him. Thor stares back, transfixed, watches the cape of bugs behind his brother: they look like wings, black wings or a shadow. The sun cannot seem to touch him, it slides off his lithe body, flows around him like a foreign substance but it doesn’t illuminate him. Thor stands rooted, awed by the onyx halo of Loki’s hair, and the balance of the world shifts. He knows with conviction, with such certainty that it should scare him, that the balance will never be restored, it is forever lost to him.

So this is how it begins.

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TOP

i.
Later, when he attempts to pinpoint the exact moment where everything went off the rails, Loki thinks it might have started with their parents, already in the beginning. It started childishly, innocently.

But he also knows now that innocence is a thing to lose, always.

ii.
They are children, just in the age when the greatest struggle is to find their way through deciphering and scribbling runes. They are young and they are yet to understand many things still furled and tangled in their minds. Some things won’t ever be untangled, though, not for them. Other things, though, will be unfurled, skewed and warped.

When their parents kiss, the two brothers watch, ink-stained, shifty-eyed. It’s not more than an affectionate peck on the lips but it is intriguing because it is followed by smiles and happiness and an air of comfort soft like a pillow.

“What is so good in this? What mother and father do.” Loki is ever the curious, the immensely thirsty for knowledge, while Thor is all bravery – he still leads them into adventures and troubles and Loki would follow but it wouldn’t be this way forever.

“Maybe people who love each other dearly do it this way?”
“So I need to give my goodnight kiss on your mouth?”

“I think yes. If you give it to my cheek, it means you don’t love me enough.”

It’s an incomprehensible concept for Loki, in a way it will forever stay like this, though its senselessness doesn’t yet frighten him the way it will do later.

“We try it.” Thor suggests, and they lean in, and it is a noisy peck and nothing more. Their brows are in questioning arches as they try to figure out if it felt good or bad, but in all honesty, it didn’t feel anything.

“Again,” Loki goads, and though there is a strange glint in his eyes that Thor knows means trouble, he scoots closer and presses his lips against Loki’s. It’s a moment of standstill before Loki, with a sputtering noise, squeezes out a mouthful of saliva between his lips, and Thor jumps back with a cry.

“Loki!” And he is spitting and rubbing his face, smudging ink smears all over it while Loki is all laughter and jingling giggle, and Thor tackles him, and they are rolling on the carpet like two playful pups, all dull teeth and sloppy punches.

They don’t know yet but this is how innocence starts to fester.

iii.

They are still very young when Frigga takes them to the observatory at the end of the Bifrost bridge to meet the Gatekeeper’s unwavering gaze for the first time. She tells them how Heimdall sees everything and beyond, how his guarding eyes keep Asgard safe. Thor finds it fascinating and a great gift to the golden realm but Loki’s mind wanders to the dark places he thought only he had knowledge of: if Heimdall sees everything, he then sees where he hides the little trinkets he stole from other children and people, the loathsome wooden warrior Thor cherished so much that he spent more time with it than with Loki. Then he thinks of how Heimdall might see when he is assaulted by nightmares or…

His heart jostles in his chest because not being able to have secrets shakes his small-scaled world.

He looks up bravely, maybe with a hint of resentment so alien on such young a face, and challenges, “If you see everything, what color is my undergarment?”

Heimdall looks bemused, while Frigga scolds him with a barely hidden laugh, “Loki, this is not polite!”

“It is green, my prince.”

Horrified, Loki draws closer to his mother’s leg, clutching at it as if her nearness would diminish any horror in his life. He still doesn’t understand the dread that settles deep inside him but it’s a weight he cannot shake off for centuries to come until, at the end of a long road, he finds a cure for it.

“My mother…”

Frigga’s hand strokes his hair gently. “Heimdall is only jesting, my dear. Your private chambers are sealed from his sight.”

His suspicious glare doesn’t go unnoticed.

“It was an easy guess. You seem to prefer this color, Prince Loki,” Heimdall concedes but Loki
never forgets this day. The all-seeing eyes of the Gatekeeper scare him away, and there is a twitch in Heimdall’s smile that will always bother him, like a secret kept away from him.

“If you are a good boy, there is nothing to fear, yes?”

He nods, but what he thinks is: he doesn’t always want to be one.

iv.

They are different, Thor and Loki, it becomes apparent very early. What Thor dreams of has no intersection with what Loki values but it doesn’t drive them apart as it would do later. It only serves as a source for teasing, and through it, through an event that almost ends up in tragedy, Loki discovers something he would test later, again and again, grate it to an extent when it’s worn out almost completely: Thor’s unwavering, unsuspecting trust in him. He doesn’t yet comprehend the value of it, sees only the different ways he can make use of it and doesn’t appreciate it for what it is. This, maybe, would never change.

When Thor tells him he dreams of being strong like Tyr, and stronger even, stronger than Father, so powerful that a puff of his breath would freeze his enemies’ hearts and a blow of his arm would level mountains, Loki weaves a joke for their amusement.

“I have once read somewhere if one eats three pints of honey and lies on the sun for three hours, one shall grow threefold stronger over a fortnight.”

His lips twitch to turn into a laugh because surely Thor would know better than believe such foolishness but the next day Thor follows through on the instruction. And it is just so much Thor that he wouldn’t be satisfied with threefold strength when he could go for sevenfold even.

It’s one of the chambermaids who finds him in the corner of the courtyard of the Western wing, lying in the sun, barely breathing. Frigga yells at them for minutes, though she rarely raises her voice. She yells and cries while the healers tend to Thor’s dehydrated body, and Loki is silent with dread as he watches his brother’s limp form on the bed, lips white and crumpled like the sheets beneath him; he stares motionlessly with the weight of what could have happened, what he could have lost forever, and also with the blossom of a realization that thoughts and words have greater power than mere muscles.

v.

The wooden sword feels like a bluntly carved lie in his hand, and he wields it like he would wield lies later. Thor wields his like it was the extension of his soul and heart, not only his arm. He defeats monsters and unnamable enemies, ghosts and darkness like, Loki is sure, he would do centuries later, and Loki is at his heels, always – but he wonders if he belongs to the other end of Thor’s sword instead, rather than behind him, watching his back, following in his trails; if he is an unnamable, strange thing that is out of place in Asgard.

He believes he may be the first to wonder, by looking at themselves, how two brothers can be so different.

vi.

It is decades later, though they are only barely taller or wiser than the first time they tried it, that Loki
sees the Lady Freya with a nobleman in the groves behind the lady’s palace.

“They were kissing but it was different,” he tells Thor that afternoon. He demonstrates it by opening his mouth and tipping his head from left to right then back to left, and it is so funny that Thor starts to laugh.

“You need to show me for real,” and Thor, the brave, holds his face and pouts his lips. “But don’t spit on me!”

Loki leans in. With his finger he coaxes Thor’s jaw open, and they are like two fishes, stuck together through open mouth, blinking in confusion.

“Maybe we have to move our lips,” mumbles Thor against Loki’s mouth. Loki’s tongue ventures in, and they draw back at the same time.

“Eek, what are you doing?”

“What did you eat?!”

But they try again, and it’s uncoordinated and sloppy, but they start to get the hang of it.

“Mm, it feels good. You taste nice, like dessert. Again!” sighs Thor in astonishment, and the next hour is spent in frantic search for the right method.

vii.
It’s a good mean. It settles their fights, and if one of them is in low mood, this always helps.

Thor meets new friends, and Loki barricades himself in his room more and more often.

“Come on, what can you always do with these silly books?”

“Silly books? Brother, if you were a book, you would have empty pages.”

Thor laughs, leans in and presses his lips against Loki’s, his tongue slips in and they moan in unison.

“Come on, brother,” Thor murmurs, and Loki cannot do anything else but follow.

It is a good mean. It stays so for long decades.

viii.
Everyone knows Agmundr for he loves quarrels, and he more occasions than not ends up among the four posts just off the main marketplace. Holmgangs go until first blood; after the war against Jötunheim Odin forbade any duel ending on death.

Agmundr is a huge man, and it scarcely matters what weapon is picked, he would finish off the opponent in a fine but uneven duel.

“Why are they fighting this time? What is the offence?” Thor asks. They are surrounded by a crowd, just off the square marked by the huge stone posts standing in each corner. Thor’s new friends are with them, and Fandral smirks at them, his lips twisting around a word that comes out like a whisper.

“Ergi. Agmundr drank too much again and called Fálki sorðinn.”
Thor looks at him then at Loki as he always does when he is in the need of explanation, but Loki shakes his head.

“It means he is lying with other men. It means he is no different from a woman,” Fandral hisses, and the crowd cheers as the fight unfolds before them.

They are children still. They laugh with the other people as Fálki hits the ground, and the offence rolls off their tongue like it doesn’t weigh a thing.

Later, it would weigh the world.

ix.
The hammer sits on a pedestal in the Great Hall of Hlíðskjálf, a gift from the Dwarven blacksmiths that seems to mock everyone. They call it Mjölnir, the Grinder. Men, great in physical strength, try to move it to no avail. It’s an intriguing object, and for several days Odin’s sons are hanging off its handle in hopes of toppling it but it is said to answer to only those worthy of lifting it. The concept only drives Thor to try it harder, while it chases Loki away and he never touches its handle again.

There is an idea forming in the back of his mind, and idea he doesn’t know the origin of: that worthiness is a trait he would only ever see just out of his reach.

x.
Later, Thor would say it was all Loki’s fault but in the long run he doesn’t mind the consequences. He also cannot blame his brother for his own thoughts, only for goading them out at the wrong place, wrong time.

Thor’s strength is physical, and anything restraining it feels like punishment. Every lesson with their tutor is torture, but so it is for the old man too for Thor is unlike Loki, he lacks the patience for words and the unfolding of the intricate designs of politics.

His complaints and boastful oaths meet only Loki’s encouragement to be honest with the old scholar and write in his essay how he imagines picking up the threads of their father’s heritage to weave their own parts to it later when the time comes, how the learning of the past would shape the future days – a task that sends Thor to despair.

Frankly, it is not Loki’s fault that he puts down words -when I’m king, there will be no need for old scholars and old stories of old history- and lets others, akin, to follow.

One would think a man at such high age would have more patience for the wrongdoings of young ones but the essay upsets their scholar so much that the case ends up before Odin. The All-father calls his firstborn arrogant, and the doors are sealed until lunchtime, until Thor fixes his essay. Odin tells them to pray their tutor could be persuaded to come back and continue their lessons, but Thor finds he doesn’t have the heart in such hopes.

The doors are shut and it’s only the two of them among rolls of parchment and blots of ink seeping slowly in the wood while it’s sunshine outside and freedom, and Thor feels like a caged animal. He glares at Loki as to why he suggested him to write the essay but Loki only smirks, and his eyes are green like the scales of a snake, and poisonous, biting.

“Tell me now, Thor, aren’t we left alone, with free time on our hands?”
“So this was your plan?” Thor stares, only now starting to understand how sometimes straight way is not the only way.

“Of course.”

“And could you not plan something where I wasn’t punished?”

Loki laughs at him. It’s a child’s laughter yet there is a hint of shrewdness in it, something everyone would consider him too young for. “Where would be the fun in that?”

Thor’s laughter, on the other hand, is loud and frank. “Oh you little evil fiend.”

And he pounces on Loki, pulling him to the floor, and as every fight they would ever start these days, this one as well ends up in something entirely different.

xi.
It goes on with stealing each other’s taste like it was their rightful possession. It is so heated that Thor trails further down, and neither has the courage to stop because if they stop, they think, and if they think, they will retreat, but it all feels too good to let it go to waste.

They don’t get there fast enough to undress each other when they come, messily, unexpectedly, in their own breeches.

xii.
It’s Loki’s idea to steal the ale from the kitchen but if anyone asked, Thor wouldn’t even be able to tell it really was so. Loki is young still but old enough to realize the power of stealthy and well-placed words.

They drink everything behind the stables with the greed of beginners and haste of those who know they are trespassing, as though the only aim was to make the content of the barrel disappear. It’s an unannounced contest that Thor wins eventually, clinging to Loki and panting into the crook of his shoulder with an instinctive urge that drives him to his brother, always reaching out for an anchor and always finding him there – he doesn’t know yet that it would change: not his reaching out, no, that he would never part with.

His lips slip across the pale skin of Loki’s neck, and they tumble down.

This time they undress.

There is no coordination in their touches, in the clash of their tongues, no questions, no second-thoughts – they would leave it for other days, for sobriety, for dark hours when they would have nothing but. The ale dulls their inhibitions, and Loki tastes Thor’s juice, and Thor, slack-jawed, stares at the slender finger between his lips, pulls the pale hand to his mouth and tastes it, too. The hay pricks at their skin, sticks to them and steals into their mouths as they roll against each other, dazed by the savor of ale, sweet and bitter, and of their own taste – this will forever stay with them, in every moment they share, in every kiss and sin, the sweetness and bitterness of it. The saltiness that dries everything in their throats.

When they come, it shakes them deeper than the ale should let it. There is no place for consideration when they lick off the mess they created, the mixture of the liquid on each other’s abdomen. Even through the vertigo in their heads they realize how they crossed a line for good.
It is then that Thor jolts up and empties out the content of his stomach, as though a last attempt to get rid of the bitter, the sweet and the taste of his brother too, but it’s too late. It’s always been too late since an old ink-stained day they ventured into the adults’ realm they knew nothing about.

xiii.
His songs are sharp and witty, flow seamlessly and ring clearly among the walls, and it lifts Loki’s heart whenever he sees the people of the great dining hall listen to him with ale-addled eyes. Their laughter reverberates through his bones, unloosing something warm there, something that he recognizes as acceptance, maybe acknowledgment. Maybe this is how it feels for Thor, in every miniscule detail of his life. They ask him for new anecdotes or old sagas to repeat in every feast, his voice flies high and theirs join in drunken unison. In the streets, around the palace his ears catch sometimes the tunes of his songs, hummed unconsciously: a piece of his own doing. It swells his pride. He revels in the discovery of the art of threading clever words for the enjoyment of others.

It is only much later that he would thread them solely for his own amusement.

xiv.
It’s not that they have never tried it, never tried to go against their own selves, never attempted to untangle the threads of their fates and follow it back to the roots to weave something different out of them.

The world opens up for them and they are no more the golden princes living among gilded walls and hanging gardens, served and protected and cherished. They meet new people and make friends, some of them bound by tighter, some by looser threads, and it overwrites many things in them.

Human mistakes and defects of character, his own or others’, teach Thor how to love. They teach Loki only to hate.

The stories their friends tell them of the world outside, of adventures they might or might not have fabricated for themselves for sheer entertainment, warped as they may be, unwrap something in the princes’ minds. There is a sort of understanding dawning on them, of what is expected of them, of normalcy, of traditions. They never talk about it because there is no moment to pinpoint when they finally see the deviant ways of their youth, the wrongness of the affection they have shared with each other. It drives them farther apart, the realization, the shame of it. As if by putting distance between them would make everything undone.

Thor builds a reputation among the maidens of Asgard, and in all honesty, Loki sometimes cannot tell how much of it can be true and what part is only legend. For decades, in the rest of his adolescence Thor collects thongs of broken hearts and sagas of his prowess and insatiety that could fill a tome.

Loki is subtle in his progress, in his hunger, in how he covers his tracks the way Thor would never do. Thor sees value in honesty, no matter what the subject is about. Loki deems it foolish.

His curiosity isn’t narrowed only to women, and that alone is a detail to hide. It takes decades to realize the tang of staleness on his tongue.

xv.
Loki wonders if Thor knows the feeling, too. If he knows how it tastes, how it feels, how it sounds. If he recognizes it in every coupling, if it spreads like decay and oozes into the depth of things: the feeling of failure, of everything coming out wanting, lacking. That whoever he lies with, however satisfactory it is, feels wrong. Nobody is right enough – or maybe everyone is the wrong person because there is one they cannot have without knowing now that it’s despicable and sinful.

And then, after centuries of tasting and feeling and consuming the wrong, it all comes to a full stop one day.
There is something wrong with him. It’s a bone deep conviction that seeps into his fibers and blazes his muscles, scorches his nerves. The belief has always been his company since his early years when Loki first noticed the differences of his nature and of others, when he realized that Thor is the paragon of everything one should be and he is everything but. He knew there was something wrong with him then.

Now the notion twists out of its bone cage, out of the forbidden recesses of his mind and steals into his limbs, burns his blood with unimaginable fire. His skin prickles and the tension lurking behind his eyes seems to stretch the physical boundaries of his skull. Aesir are rarely sick, and in Loki’s eyes this only proves his wrongness all the more. He doesn’t tell anyone but Thor, ironically, for he is oblivious at any other time, catches upon his discomfort with keenness so unusual of him.

It goes on for weeks, and Loki grows thinner and paler by day, more in spirit than in body, and Thor is beyond himself with worry. He follows Loki like he was afraid if he lets his brother unattended, Loki might fade from existence. He is silent for most of the times, and for that Loki is grateful. Even though they cannot share his pain, they share, against Loki’s will, the dread.

It happens in their mother’s garden, on a strange day when the world feels like it’s closed in a glass capsule, and Loki suffocates under the overcast sky. The crop is turning yellow on the fields and the air is heavy with a metallic taste and the conviction that he meets a point today and that every point is both the start and end of a different journey.

His skin feels cold but he is sweating and he sees how his hands pale to a point where they almost turn blue. He has to sit on the ground, there, among their mother’s bushes and flower beds, among the torn-edged fallen leaves, because the tension cuts through his lungs and picks his blood apart to its particles. Thor is there in a second, and through the eye-watering torment Loki thinks he has never seen his brother so desperate, so vulnerably, definitely lost. He thinks how this can be the measure of his love.

“Healers! Guards!” Thor shouts, but Loki protests with a groan. Thor grabs his shoulder, for a moment unheeding of his own strength and how he only deepens Loki’s pain. “Then I will take you to Eir’s myself.”

“No!” Loki barks. His mouth twists into a snarl, feral and wild. His palm pushes against Thor’s chest, skin hot like branding iron even through Thor’s tunic. “Don’t you dare—“

He never finishes his threat. Suddenly his hand engulfs in flames, the wild yellow and green of brimstone, and Thor is thrown back, his chest on fire. Terror pours on him as he looks at his brother, the licking, dancing, leaping flames around his body, and he doesn’t waste a moment: the urge embedded in his very core to protect his brother propels him forward beyond rationale. He throws his
own body on Loki’s, trying to put out the flames but Loki wriggles out of his arms, unscathed.

“What was this?” Thor breathes, pulling Loki’s hand closer and studying his unblemished skin.

“It’s gone, Thor,” Loki mumbles, bright-eyed. He is still pale as if not even the fire could warm him.

“What is gone?”

“The headache. The pain,” he smiles but there is something broken, something fearful and sad in his gaze that makes Thor lurch forward and pull him in his embrace, burying his face in the collar of green robes. His hand envelops Loki’s lithe form, running up and down his back as his dread runs up and down in his own veins. I thought I lost you.

“What was this?” he repeats, lips brushing against Loki’s skin and something he thought he has left behind for good uncoils in his lower belly.

Loki is silent for a very long time, hands curled into fists in Thor’s tunic. The single word brushes against the fabric on Thor’s chest and seeps into his skin, into his heart like a damned hex and his mind shudders with it.

“Seiðr.”

It’s only a word but Loki says it like it’s a shame, a mark, a blemish, a fatal disease, and maybe it is, maybe not – for Thor, it is something that almost took his brother from him, something he would forever curse.

xviii.
Thor likes to think they are inseparable. He likes to think it would never change.

There is a place in his heart he has no courage to look into, and beneath it is the bottom of his worst fears. But sometimes truths burst out without ever nudging them.

They are threading through the field beyond the palace, and it is sweet scented and bright green with patches of yellow, and in the streaks of sunlight Loki turns back to look at him, Loki in onyx halo, Loki with the shadow of wings like all things ethereal and uncatchable, and the moment is a golden whisper that engraves itself in Thor’s heart.

The leaves smell like autumn and passage.

xix.
His mother’s magic is intricate and delicate like the threads she spins and it’s just as ominous. Loki watches her fingers spread like a fan, bone-spindles to weave a different kind of masterpiece, then curl and twist and dance around words whispered, words he rather feels than hears, words that wrap them and nestle against them like colorful threads in a handiwork, a different yet similar design, and they pull out the shape of magic, warp and mold it, and it’s beautiful in a way he thinks only few can appreciate.

His hands are slim and boney, maybe womanly, and they curl like his mother’s do. His magic is hazy, haphazardly spliced threads of seidr, but it spills like a current, colorful and spry and eager to wriggle free. Frigga smiles, and Loki thinks it is only theirs, this moment and the others that would follow, this is theirs and nobody can take it. He smiles back, and the idea lights up in him that this is
something, the only thing, that Thor would never have.

Later he would consider it a curse, yet another proof that he is a wrong thing. Much later, when he will have learnt to use it to his advantage, use it like he would his own hands and forever consider it the part of him, inseparable like a limb, he will feel the certain kind of resentment people wear in face of others’ incomprehension of something they consider the pivot of their own lives.

He would never see how it will stand between them forever.

xx.
The flame he conjures doesn’t waver, and his heart leaps with joy and relief. His father’s face is unmoving, the golden surface of his eyepatch glints greely now in the brimstone light of the mage fire, his face ghostly, worn, unsmiling, and the fire freezes in Loki’s palm. Its twisting flames curl into each other, move and spin, whitely and coldly in the crib of Loki’s fingers, pointy tips reach higher and spread in all directions, twigs and roots grow with speed so unlike of ice. He thinks it’s perfect, an ice Yggdrasil, not taller than the span of his own hand, sitting in his palm. He reaches out, offers it to the All-father who sacrificed himself on its trunk for wisdom, for the Nine Realms, for himself.

Odin looks at him strangely, pinching a delicate branch between his fingertips. The smile on his face is faint and distant, contemplative, and Loki tells himself it’s shadowed by the memory of nine days that might have felt centuries or millennia, and not by the disapproval of Loki’s seidr.

“Ice. How interesting,” Odin murmurs, fingers twining around the trunk, beads of water running down its crystal bark to pool in Loki’s palm like Mímir’s well.

Then the door rips open and Thor bursts in, red-faced and sweaty and glorious, and Yggdrasil shakes in Loki’s hand like it is said to do at the end of all things. Loki lets it drop to the floor and shatter into million crystal splinters. Odin doesn’t look at him anymore because Thor’s arm is up in the air, bloody and beaten, but among his distorted fingers quakes the mighty Mjölnir.

“Thor,” Odin says, and to Loki’s ears it sounds like a praise. He isn’t surprised that Thor was found worthy to lift her, that it’s always been a gift waiting for him to grow into the man he was destined to be.

Worthy. A word that has always been taunting him like the hammer has been taunting everyone. Where Thor was concerned too, how could he ever have the chance to win? He doesn’t know yet how his own powers would get a label so different from Thor’s.

“She answered to me, father!” Thor booms. The air cracks with static, and Loki feels the distant taste of metal on his tongue. The fragments of Yggdrasil scrunch under his soles as he moves toward the door.

“Loki, look,” Thor calls after him, with Mjölnir part of his palm as if she was one of his fingers, and his eyes, the hungry, desperate expression on his face make Loki wonder whether he looked the same just minutes ago. There is a selfish twist in his guts, and he shrugs.

“It was about time.”

And he wonders whether the expression crumpling on Thor’s face and carving a line into his forehead, drawing a shadow over his eyes is the same, too.

On his way out, Odin places a heavy hand on his shoulder. “Practice if it makes you happy.”
Loki smiles, and it’s shaky, it does not yet possess the artistry of the smiles he would fabricate later out of lies when he learns that pain can be magicked invisible. As he leaves, he repeats in his mind: *if it makes you happy.*

Not because it makes him.

xxi.
Like a small rodent, born and raised in darkness, he only ever wished for the light, and Thor is the paragon of everything Loki isn’t.

The radiance of his smile is a pierce in his guts, and he is drawn to it yet terrified by its power. It pulses in undulating waves like the shimmering magnetic field Mjölnir emits, the earthquakes her blows awaken – it shakes Loki to the core of his bones, peeling his flesh off and leaving him raw. He doesn’t know why, he doesn’t understand the meaning of it. He cannot name the quivering of his fibers. Only one thing is familiar: the clenching, mangling bitterness when it is directed to anyone else but him.

He doesn’t want this never ceasing captivation, watching Thor, spellbound. He has only ever been envious of him, of the warmth and gold and summer-sky blue, of hay strands, of the fire and warmth and *life.* When Thor is there, he is never cold, never in fear.

But he sees himself with Thor’s eyes, the brother who always comes out lacking, feebly trailing in his track, who he loves because he is family and he got used to loving him over the centuries to a point where he doesn’t question why he does so.

He sees how convenient it is for Thor. After all, if there is no shadow, how can you appreciate the light?

xxii.
When Thor comes to his room and tells Loki it’s over with his last conquest, Loki only shrugs. There is a scorched mark over his forehead, like a frown, like a shadow of the scorch in his heart.

“Go and find another instead of moping here,” he snaps, short of patience and the inherit pretense that nothing hurts.

“‘There would be no sense in it. I… all along… every time… please don’t mock me for it, Loki, I know how not right it is…”

Thor shifts. He is a massive bulk in the middle of Loki’s room, enveloped in the light of the torches around, his many shadows embedded in the nooks of the walls, in every corner and every crack, and Loki thinks it is just right because Thor is part of his every cell and every fiber, each rush of his blood. He can tell something gnaws at Thor and it makes Loki fall silent, and he waits.

“I was thinking of you.”

His heart drums against his ribs so wildly as though it wanted to break free, and for a moment Loki wishes it would. For the heart is a vicious thing.

Through the collision of dreams and reality, through the vertigo in his head he thinks, *yes, each rush of blood.*
The bristle on Thor’s chin has grown tougher during the years they stopped tasting each other. It scratches Loki’s skin and numbs his lips, and he thinks how his tongue would later find its way back to prod them, lick them to ease the soreness, and he smiles into the kiss. Thor tastes differently, denser now, raw and musky, and it makes Loki think with regret of all the stages of Thor slowly growing into the ideal of all Asgardians, he thinks of how he missed the chance to compare each stage to the previous one, to follow them not only with his eyes but with every nerve-ending, too. And yet, Thor’s hands are natural against the angles of Loki’s hips, blunt bones slotting into shallow dips, and their resounding moan is natural, too. And right, finally, always, with no staleness on his tongue.

Loki steals touches and ignites fires with deft fingers like he would do with murmured spells, there is stealth and subtlety in every movement. Through the imminent desire, through the mind-numbing disbelief that it is happening, that secret wishes can sometimes come true, he remembers only one fact: that he is a wrong thing. That whatever they do together would only engrave his wrongness and wouldn’t spoil Thor’s grandness. He reckons that the burden of such sin would dissolve in Thor’s heart while it would only blacken his own. He thinks of Mjölnir for a second, whether the mighty hammer would still find Thor worthy enough to lift her.

He wonders if such burden can be passed on. If he can perfect the art of deception to a degree that he could lie to himself and still believe it.

He dreads the day Thor would realize what he is, how skewed and erred – he wants to know whether Thor would put the blame on him for this deviation one day.

“We cannot do it.” he says. Palm curling against the flat of Thor’s chest, it’s more of a promise than rejection, and it’s exactly how Loki wants it. “It’s either we fight and bury this and may have the desire destroy us, or—no, I cannot even say that.”

“What? Tell me, Loki, because not touching you cannot be an option.”

“Relenting to the desire. But we cannot do it, it’s not right!”

“Loki—” Thor’s arms thick and strong but Loki is slippery, he can be water, he can be the southern wind when he wishes so. “Just once, just this once.”

“No, Thor. You cannot touch me. It’s not right. It’s madness.”

And every word is a well-placed figure on the board, because he learnt decades ago that words can be stronger than raw power. Words can create and demolish kingdoms, they can start wars and just as easily end them. He knows the only thing Thor hears is that he is not allowed to touch. Thor has never been good in keeping away from things he is denied.

“I don’t mind. I don’t care,” Thor murmurs against his neck.

The words haven’t hit the bottom yet in Thor, and they might take centuries to reach it but they eventually will, Loki knows they will. And when they do they stir up regret.

But for now, for this crafted false moment Loki closes his eyes and imagines it means: I don’t care if you are the wrong thing.

And he realizes he would give everything if it was true.
His nails dig in his back but Thor doesn’t seem to mind it. Maybe he wants something to remember this night by, a treasure he would keep hidden from everyone, just as Loki wants his blood under his nails, red crescents he can pick on later.

Loki grips the headboard, for a moment his eyes are closing in the sweetest mixture of pain and pleasure. His throat is so dry that he doubts he could utter a single sound. He can still feel Thor’s taste in his mouth, and he runs his tongue with a purr of arousal over the sensitive flesh and scrapes just on the inner side of his lips. He has to bite back a moan thinking how he got them. Thor is driving into him with an almost peculiar motion of gentleness and brute force, and Loki cannot keep his eyes off him, off the shimmering haze on the sun-bitten skin. The muscles in his arms and torso flex and relax and flex again, and it’s beautiful, the ripples of power underneath. Thor doesn’t release his gaze, even in the dim light Loki can catch the ethereal blue of his eyes and the untold affection lacing them makes his stomach roll. There is a drop of blood on Thor’s lips as he has bitten on them to prevent himself from crying out too loud, and Loki longs for lifting his head and nipping at it, drinking the blood they share in their veins. It warms him with seething floods that he made Thor draw his own blood for him. He is yet to realize this tendency, the twisted craving. At this moment he isn’t aware how much it would shape and symbolize their relationship.

He has already spent himself once into Thor’s fist and he doubts he could reach his completion again but he decides it doesn’t really matter when Thor suddenly hits the wonderful sore spot within him and stars erupt behind his eyelids. It’s a slowly building pressure that rips his body apart gradually and surely, a pleasure that short circuits and burns out his nerve endings. His first orgasm was short and sharp like a needle piercing a bubble but this is different. Beyond a point he is not sure anymore if his body can take it, the constant rise in the level, like the flow of a tide it suffocates him slowly. He is not aware of the long consonants and vowels leaving his mouth and making no sense. Beyond his consciousness he senses Thor’s hand wrap around his length, and he slaps him away because it would be too quick this way. He wants the slow scorch of his cells, the steady falling apart, even if it leaves his mind blank for good. He angles his hips so the head of Thor’s cock would keep brushing against the spot on its inward route.

There is a sigh on Loki’s lips, it doesn’t ascend, it lingers around his mouth for long like smoke that doesn’t dissipate, and in the sound Thor imagines a word committed into living: “Brother.”

It’s breathy, it dies before it could fully come into reality but the effect on him catches Thor unprepared. His body shivers and twitches, and he knows he is close, so close, and still, a part of him wishes he would never arrive. He feels Loki’s eyes watch him, his gaze open, mouth agape. He is wide-eyed as if in constant awe. His face is morphed into an expression of mild pain, tinted with something Thor cannot name any other way than bliss. His body shakes and spasms, and Thor knows he came for a second time already from the look on his face, the tight arch of his back. With one hand he grabs the bedpost, knuckles white because it feels like -in the wave of white, foaming, burbling pleasure- it is his only lifeline and he might be drowned if he doesn’t cling tight enough.

“Brother”, it sounds again, neither is sure who said it, maybe none of them, maybe both.

Thor throws his head back as he drives, drives like a mad, like a tidal current into Loki, tendons and veins protruding in his neck, and he wails a long vocal noise that sounds like an ancient lament the wind rips from his throat.
“Loki!” And his brother’s name spills from his lips like a prayer, and he repeats and repeats as he
spills inside him, repeats even after they are lying on each other like logs because he cannot help it,
the magic word, the four letters that form the most perfect thing in the Nine Realms. “Loki. Loki.
Loki.”

And for a minute he is petrified that with the name, his heart would spill, too, because it is, they are,
so flawlessly and unbearably beautiful.

It would never be like this again, he suddenly realizes, and on their own volition his arms tighten
around Loki as if he was about to drift away from him. These moments, their halcyon days – they
will fly away and never return.

He feels somewhere in the pit of his stomach, like a looming dark fluid that doesn’t want to drain that
this moment is unique and it would never be so pure, so innocent ever again. Under the cover of the
night, along with their clothes, stripped-off fears and worries and all the things they, during daylight,
know are wrong, it is just Loki and Thor. It is just two people who are not afraid to give in to
something bigger. It is so simple. By night, in the holiest hours, it is. Thor doesn’t want to think of
the morning, of light creeping in through the curtains, of limbs and fingers and breathes mingling,
ensnarling between the sheets in a way it is not appropriate for brothers. He doesn’t want to think of
regret, of hiding, of lying, of denial.

By night, there is something in Loki’s look that freezes Thor’s heart. Something ethereal, something
intangible and unworldly. Something that sings of loss, of heroes chasing shadows, lovers turning
into stone, into ungiving tree, into light that filters through branches like a teasing. He thinks Loki
could be them, the shadow under the rocks, the dew dissolving in the sunlight. It draws him to Loki:
the bitter knowledge that he would never be able to know him fully. Have him fully. Maybe not even
keep him forever.

By night, when the only light is of the wavering stars and the shimmer of the golden towers, Thor
sees the incessant darkness and distress rippling under the too pale skin; skin that absorbs light and
washes them into ivory and alabaster and paints them with violet shadows and greens and greys and
blue veins channeling pain and hurt and so much solitude Thor never imagined it could exist. He
buries his finger in the pliant, cotton-soft hair, twirls them around his wrists, these silk-snakes, iron-
black chains, and makes himself believe they chain Loki to him as much as he is chained to Loki.

At that moment he realizes it would always be like this: him watching Loki even when his eyelids
are drooping low, because he can’t not stare at him; trace the curves and veins painted blue and stark
white in the patches of moonlight, and the swell in his chest would be the same, too.

Suddenly he is sure they would do this for many years to come, no matter what he said before, no
matter its falsity, no matter the gnawing guilt of the dawn, they will probably do this forever, even
when it eventually festers, even when it brings more pain than pleasure because they cannot break
out of the cycle. This is somehow a comforting thought, and Thor understands how twisted it is, how
utterly, sickeningly wicked and destructive.

Maybe this is a moment he should stop and turn and walk away before it is too late but probably it
already is. Probably it always has been. Because beneath the guilt and the filthiness of it something
clicked in its right place as he slid home inside his brother.
“I miss your tales,” Thor murmurs into the pillow. His skin radiates warmth in his afterglow. “You don’t tell them anymore.”

Loki stares into the darkness. They were different, those two children, sharing a room and staying up late to tell secrets into the dark. He used to tell Thor tales he half heard, half invented, and Thor loved them more than any other tales. He remembers those night, the rhythm of Thor’s breaths; it was always Thor falling asleep first, and Loki would listen to it for long before he followed, the thread of a never been story dying with the half-chewed words. He missed the sound afterwards for a long time when they moved to their separate quarters.

“There is a story they tell in Midgard,” he says slowly now. His fingers draw two languid lines on Thor’s chest. “Of two great rivers. One flows from a faraway land, its water dark and its drift steady and strong. It founits in the past and crosses a land with jutting rocks, hard-lined, unchanging, unforgiving. The other winds between swamps and shadowy forests, fog hanging above its surface and drips into it from clawing branches. It quickly disappears in the gloom ahead as it cuts through to future. They meet where nothing is certain, and all things are as alive as they are dead.”

Thor’s breaths sweep across his forehead, and Loki thinks: oh how I have missed this.

“If you drink of the first river, you will remember and know everything that has ever been known in the world. The second, though, is the river of oblivion. The dead souls drink of its water to forget their past life.”

“What an odd story,” murmurs Thor. His arm tightens around Loki’s shoulders playfully. “I know you would drink of the one that gives you omniscience. But then, what would you do with all those books of yours?”

Loki chuckles, poking Thor in the side. Thor rolls them over, buries his face in the crook of Loki’s arm.

“Who would drink of the second willingly, anyway?” he asks, and Loki can only shrug.

Everyone knows he is good with long-range weapons, deadly with knives, with spears. He knows how it is considered a lesser trait than wielding a sword or a mace, being fearsome in hand-to-hand combat. They frown upon his evasive movements in the ring. Even Thor does a little, and it always propels Loki into despair, into pushing his limits until his teeth cut through his lips and draw blood, and even beyond until his muscles are on fire and his tendons on the verge of tearing.

In the daylight they fight and spar, landing blows and cuts on each other that they would kiss and caress during the night. When they train together, Thor always stops, stops before the last final blow,
before he can shatter Loki.

He doesn’t know he shatters him just with that.

xxviii.
For all the magic Loki wields, there is something he can never conjure. It is possible to morph, distort, transform something, it is possible to reshape them but there cannot be a thing created from naught. He cannot plant the seeds of dependency in Thor. He cannot conjure real love in him.

Sometimes he ponders this obsession, the starvation that dries his bones, the ache to grab Thor, to hold him, tear him, consume him. He wonders whether it is an underlying notion that, if he owned Thor, he would a hair closer to what Thor is, and what Loki would never be on his own.

xxix.
They have guests from Alfheim. The great hall is full, and Thor is eying him with barely concealed stares. The dread is a sudden sharp stab of a dagger in Loki’s guts. The honest fool would betray their sin with his guileless acts and unmake his great efforts to keep it a secret.

His practice of seidr has ventured to a territory he knows, if not forbidden, is at the least dubious. He studies old tomes he found in far alcoves of the library, going down winding corridors nobody has for centuries, discovering a city within the city. Time is in a different pace here, and it took all the darkest hours of the night to find his way back at the first time he ventured into the halls of forgotten knowledge. He knows what he seeks is not even forgotten but never known. To shield himself from others’ sight is an ability he has acquired to perform, following the lead of old grimoires. To be invisible even to the eyes of the Gatekeeper, to the All-father himself is something that has never been done before.

Their private chambers, now witnesses to acts of the lowest nature, are said to be safe from Heimdall’s sight, yet Loki doesn’t trust them enough. He cannot trust his own life, Thor’s life on such insecurity.

There is no assurance that it is something possible to accomplish, but with patience and endurance he is experimenting with it in secrecy, twisting his body and mind into unknown shapes because they commit an unforgivable, vile act. He has not the courage to imagine how Odin would take the news of the base desire that chases his sons into each other’s bed.

And now, the foolish oaf in his simple mind would destroy all the hard work he has put into it.

It has always baffled him how Thor wears his feelings every time like they were precious, something he conquered in a battle and now took with himself home to show the Asgardians what he could acquire. He sticks them on his helmet like a red feather swaying above his head. He puts not only his anger on display but his sadness, disappointment as well, his joy and passion, his pain, and he doesn’t deem it weakness. He doesn’t consider it is something to hide and lie about in order to protect himself, and Loki envies him for it. For his naivety, for his… this is the first time it occurs to him: bravery.

xxx.
They think he seeks solitude to avoid people but they forget about the ancient knowledge lying
untouched in the nature. He ventures deep into the forest, lost in thoughts and in awe of the nature, watching birds for hours and collecting herbs, mushrooms and berries, unnamed roots nobody remembers their use of anymore. He puts down notes, fills long parchments of his observations: of plants every animal avoids, of others they collect and hide in holes they dig. He sleeps in the forest sometimes, his bedding is moss and frond and fragrant leaves, and his lullaby is the nightingales’ song, and the animals don’t hurt him. The jays would watch his sleep, and their alarm wakes him if something is amiss, but the beasts avoid him, too.

He is a nature god, he is home here.

xxxi.
He knows when he finally succeeds even before he moves down the Bifröst to test the spell on Heimdall. It works. He accomplished what no one has ever before, and for a second he is standing there, looking the Gatekeeper right in the eyes, and the possibilities he could gain out of this new achievement are running numberlessly through his mind.

The stripes of the rainbow bridge vibrate under his feet, and he thinks he isn’t the good boy Heimdall once warned him to be. He might never be, never again, not with this knowledge.

He wants to tell someone, tell Thor, tell his mother, his heart on the verge of an outburst but it’s a lonely victory. He understands slowly that such weapon should never be revealed.

xxxii.
They both know that something being mutual doesn’t necessarily mean it is justified or righteous as well.

Still, somehow it feels right and natural. Like they have been doing it for centuries, in a life before this, and even before that, in lives they don’t have memories of anymore but the sensation lingers, the instinct draws them to each other and they would find the other in every life that would come in the future, the life after this, and the one after that.

Thor watches the locks of hair, black spider webs spread across his chest like the spider web he knows his brother wrapped around him – frightening but around his heart, too. Loki’s cheek is the perfect shape slotted in the hollow of his chest.

Thin lips move, Loki whispers into the stillness, a silent curl of hot air against the sweat cooling on Thor’s skin, and a shiver awakens on its trail. Thor thinks the warmth might be yet another magic, a spell over his heart, enthralling, seducing it. Encaging it forever. Loki doesn’t need spell for it, he muses. He has it stolen away ever since the Nornir started to weave the threads of their Fates.

It doesn’t worry him. Not yet. And even later it is closer to helplessness than to regret. It never is regret.

He deems it sad that Loki doesn’t know, Loki would never know, never understand that he doesn’t need witchcraft, doesn’t need plots and goading and proving himself constantly. He doesn’t need to hold onto him with ten nails, with a desperate vice grip as if it was Thor who could dissipate into smoke and sparkles whenever he wishes so. For all the shrewd schemes and deftly crafted words he wields as weapons, Loki can be surprisingly obtuse sometimes, and Thor finds it just as much worrisome as amusing.
“I wish I knew magic,” he says into the silence. But what he means is: *I wish I knew you.* Maybe it’s a foolish notion but sometimes he thinks if he knew magic, he would find the key to Loki.

xxxiii.
He has outgrown her. It is a devastating, frightening, horrible feeling. It is also elevating if he looks at it matter-of-factly. What he certainly knows, though, is that it’s not right, it mustn’t have happened so.

Frigga is one of the greatest seeresses in Asgard; her magic is subtle and soft yet terrifying when the need rises. She keeps a perfect balance between the extremities her powers can reach, the ideal Asgard requires.

He isn’t sure he could do it, against his best intention. There is already the weight of things he does not yet know, things he intends to learn tipping the balance, and he knows it is a thing of concern and disapproval but he cannot help it. The thirst sucks the marrow of his bones dry, the craving to grow, to prosper like weed, unattended and wild, without limit. This is the only freedom he knows, here, stuck in a rank that had been dealt out to him even before his birth, in a body that doesn’t live up to any standards. With a heart that betrays his own will and longs for someone he should not have, will never have wholly, truly.

This is the only freedom he could ever have.

xxxiv.
He looks down between their bodies, fascinated by the sight of Thor’s cock disappearing in him, the depth it touches, the throat-burning feeling it evokes. He loves this so much but he thinks maybe he shouldn’t. He thinks that the way every thrust reduces him into a visceral, hungry being should not fill him with immense satisfaction, yet it percolates in his belly, deep in his heart like a treasured brew.

An old memory rises to the surface. There is a question in the back of his mind like a thorn under his nail, a faint yet annoying sting. The question is crowding against his teeth, his breath hitches, and it’s out:

“Does it make me argr?”

Thor ceases his movements, stays buried deep inside him. Through the wet locks falling in his face, he watches Loki with unwavering eyes. “If you do it out of love, it cannot be labeled ergi.”

Loki lets Thor kiss him, his mind grasping after the fact that Thor is incapable of lying.

Only his heart beats a different rhythm.

xxxv.
He doesn’t know when it started to be easier to wrap his words in different coats than what they would wear, since when a lie has come more swiftly to his tongue than a truth. It is second nature now, and there is scarcely a smile, a gesture that comes to him without a deeper scheme beneath, a motivation or hidden agenda.

Sometimes he lets out heavy truths that sound like easy lies, and this is the only way he knows
confession.

“I love him more dearly than any of you,” he tells Thor’s friends and hides his heart behind the skeptical quirk of their eyebrows.

And sometimes he kisses Thor as if he tried to steal the truths into Thor’s mouth, the truths he is unable to say, the truths he have bent and reshaped so many times he doesn’t remember their real form anymore.

xxxvi.

When they were kids, they discovered the catacombs under the citadel. Loki knew their history, the tales of the catacombs, each nook, each arch had a story on their own, gruesome story, horror-tale. Thor liked this history lesson much better than that of their tutors. The corridors were winding like labyrinths but Loki knew them like the back of his hand and Thor has thought many times had Loki left him there, he would be found long after he had starved to death. Yet he followed Loki nonetheless, always following and never questioning – he thinks sometimes that this is very symbolic, this is how he would always follow Loki, throughout his whole life, through every scheme, every mischief, tied on the end of the long tether of his love. Maybe he really is the fool Loki says him to be but he has let Loki lead him until he ended up wound in a tangle of white lies and merriment and, later, lust.

They are drifting apart, lately. He wants to stop it, wants to shake Loki and ask him whether he sees it, whether it punctures a hole in his chest, too, but he is afraid of the answer. They have always been like two planets moving on the orbital course around each other: if it’s Thor following him or Loki following Thor, he could never tell. Maybe both. He’s always believed it would never change, it cannot be changed because fate designed them this way. Planets can go off-route only with the explosion and devastation of a cataclysm.

These days Loki retreats to these passageways under the palace to practice his magic, to hide from the world, to hide even from Thor. But he seeks him out here and stand behind a corner to watch Loki practice, to listen to his voice as it drips off the walls like cold condensation that circles in the closed air, forever trapped there but more part of it than of anything else. When he is discovered, because he is always discovered, they would merge into the shadows of a niche and bury themselves into each other’s body, driven by desire, and Thor would take his brother there, on the moist cold floor, a thrust for every hour Loki spends down there without him.

In the dungeons there is no sound, no natural light. It’s a realm on its own, off the roots and branches of Yggdrasil, and for these blessed hours they can make themselves believe there is only the two of them in the whole world: Thor and Loki in an empty world, and it shall be perfect. It’s a painful, down-hearting thought, though: that they can be in peace only if the universe dies, only when there is no life left but the plants and animals, the orbital route of planets, the last blink of stars before they grow cold. Only in such extremity they can find the flawlessness of what they share.

xxxvii.

They start to whisper behind his back. Seidr curls after him like the dust his steps kick up, and he learns it is a loathsome thing. He trains with Frigga in the secluded secrecy of her gardens, or alone in the many hideouts he has discovered on his stealthy journeys around Asgard in his folly to keep away from people. He knows it better now, he sees the benefit of mingling with them. He has come to realize, in order to trick them, to outmaneuver and manipulate them, he shall know their nature.
Every insult bitters in his belly, and he deals each with a jibe of his own twisting between the words of his songs, slippery-snide taunts barking offence at those sharp enough to understand them. They don’t do it first, they don’t expect the son of Odin, the court jester, dealing out blows and carving them into eternity in his songs. They don’t expect the lesser son who fails at everything manly be so audacious. He watches the recognition seep in the place of dull drunkenness, and the twisted delight that floods his limbs is cutting sharp like the tip of a knife.

He licks his lips, trying to catch the taste of glee and expecting the coppery savor of blood but he finds the bitterness of poison instead.

xxxviii.
People build their own cages. Cages of many things, of conventions, expectations, of guilt and love and passion, of things they desire. He keeps his distance, shakes off every attachment (except that one, that one he cannot shake) so he doesn’t have to deal with losing them but it’s a lonely life. Paradoxically, he muses, his freedom is his cage. He is running around in it, biting his own tail.

xxxix.
There is a minor disturbance at their borders with Jötunheim. Vargrs ventured down from the icy hills to the rich fields along the borders and massacred the stock, ravaged the crops. Thor is very keen on seeing to it personally, palms itching to try himself in real fights, not only those confined to the sparring ring. Loki tags along for the same reason but with different weapons, and this is his first time he uses seidr for his own aid in a fight. He sees the look on their friends’ faces, the weight of his spells measured against the blow of their weapons and found wanting, always wanting.

xl.
The coat of blood on Thor’s back is caked and falls off in flakes at the crevasses. The water in his bath turns rusty, and Loki huffs, increasing the pressure on the sponge. The red marks he scratches into his brother’s skin spark desire in his belly but he swallows it for now.

“How did you even manage to get dirty in the middle of your back?”

Thor’s laugh bounces off the walls. His body radiates contentment, a certain satiety he can only gain after well-fought matches. “Some fight in the middle of the battlefield, brother.”

He cannot see Loki’s frown but this time he lets it pass. “It is more like you wallow in the spilled blood like a rabid dog.”

Thor jams his elbow back, just slightly, not really hitting Loki and swats the water in his direction for good measure.

“Oh, your fingers are blessing for my sore muscles. To the left a bit, brother.”

“I’m not a maiden,” Loki grumbles but obeys still.

“Yes. You are far smarter and prettier than any of them,” Thor says, the smirk apparent in his voice.

Loki’s fingers curl into the meat of his scapula as if to pull the words right out of his heart through his back, and pushes at Thor, his teeth bared. “Curse you!”
His fist gives a hollow thud against the valley of Thor’s spine.

“What is it?” Thor watches him, perplexed.

“Pretty?” he spits.

“Brother, this was but a jest. You are handsome.”

“There is difference between the two words!”

Thor is looking at him so openly that suddenly Loki doesn’t understand how he could ever think Thor would intend a subtle meaning to his words. He is painfully guileless to that.

“What is it, Loki?”

Loki rubs his forehead. “Don’t tell me you’ve never heard them calling me names behind my back.”

“Names? What names?”

Silently like it has to be ripped out of him, he snarls. “Argr.”

Suddenly Thor stares at him like it was he who used offending terms. “How dare they?! Who was that?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it does! Tell me so I can wring their coward neck!”

“You cannot undo the damage, Thor. You cannot strangle the rumors by wringing someone’s neck. It is like building a wall in the way of an avalanche.”

“It would be a thick wall though,” Thor mumbles, and Loki cannot help but let the hint of a smirk tug at his lips. “They are foolish, Loki. You are no argr. Don’t take their venomous words to your heart. They are only envious.”

_They fear me. They despise me. But they are not envious_, Loki thinks but he doesn’t say anything.

He watches the water drops paint pale lines into the smear on Thor’s chest. They are like dirt roads leading nowhere. The drops spill, dark pearls, into the bath, and Thor is unblemished once more. For an unconscious second Loki wonders if he could ever stain Thor permanently. The idea stirs something deep within him he doesn’t care to name but it coils hungrily, its touch scorching.

“You would fight my battles for me. You would let your skin split and your blood spill if it meant to save me,” he says, his voice wondrous.

Thor doesn’t nod, he doesn’t think he needs to as what Loki said is true. He would do all of that and even more. He knows not, though, if it is a good or a bad thing.

xli.

“Lies are just as much tools as true words are. Only a fool cannot see it.”

Neither can tell how they ended up at each other’s throat again. It’s not scarce these days; they clash over every word, every act that doesn’t find its reflection in the other, and they beat and crush and knead, trying to reshape and redefine but the sparks of their tools catch fire – still, they cannot see the
error in their ways, cannot see the value in difference.

“Lying is necessary. It’s sometimes charity, sometimes peace, sometimes only fun,” Loki claims.

“The straight way is the only good way.”

“The straight way is the boring way.”

That night, Loki makes sure to bite Thor’s neck, sharply and long so it would leave a mark, sucking at the skin as if attempting to suck the stubbornness, the false way of his thinking right out of Thor.

He is there the following day when in order to wave off his friends’ jests, Thor conjures himself the story of a fierce maiden having been too enthusiastic.

Loki watches him wordlessly. He waits all day, being just a shadow in the periphery of Thor’s vision, patient like the ice over the surface of rocks. Seeing Thor err leaves a putrid mass of satisfaction in his guts. If he cannot have it, cannot copy it, he wants to taint it and steal its shine to make them alike. There is no other way to make it work, with a universe of dissimilarities gaping between them.

They are alone in Loki’s chamber, and Thor is inside of him when Loki whispers: “Once a liar, always a liar, brother.”

“So you did it just to prove your point,” Thor hisses.

“Yes, to prove that for everyone who has secrets there are other ways than straight. And there is no being that is without secrets.”

xlii.

“Maybe,” Thor says, a frown carving its way into his forehead, “you should use traditional tools in the sparring ring.”

A snarl twists Loki’s face. His brother’s clumsy, guileless words are not hard to be translated: your seidr is despicable, a disgrace to you and your family. If you were man enough, you would beat your opponent into a pulp with your own hands.

He reaches deep within his mind and body, pulls on strings he has only toyed with so far and never succeeded. He curls into himself, in psyche and body, and when he springs forth there is not only one but half a dozen of him charging at Thor. They are alike in everything from their moves to the vicious, hateful stare of their eyes, to the dark well of accusation behind them. An ocean of bitterness and frustration. Endless depth of self-abhorrence where no light can reach and no one has ever seen the monsters living there, chewing at the roots and devouring anything soft and delicate.

The surprise on Thor’s face is the strangest ointment on Loki’s soul: the kind that’s biting smell draws tears in his eyes.

xliii.

It’s hard to tell if the idea has come from his penchant for mischief, the practicality of perfecting his shapeshifting or bloodthirsty desire for vengeance for vile words (each of them a hole he cannot repair, a wound in a place he cannot reach; ergi, nīðing, sordinn).
In the tavern nobody recognizes him in this form, masked as an old half-crazed man, though he still wants to find a way to change his smell, not only his appearance. At the counter he makes sure the bartender catches a glimpse of the three golden apples up his sleeve, held close to his chest, cradled and protected. It is easy. He has learnt to read in others’ greediness, envy and desire. No one knows so well as he does how one’s desire defines somebody, how dangerous it is, a weapon to turn against them. His own is an eternal burden crushing his shoulders and pulling him to his knees when he is certain nobody sees him. He lets it reign only when he can watch Thor only from afar, from the shadows.

“Where did you get those, you sad fellow?” asks the landlord. The lie is ready on Loki’s lips, sweet like honey.

“Oh but I was smart to bring a stray cat to the goddess Freyja for she is known to love these creatures beyond everything. She gave me three of Idunn’s apples in her gratefulness.”

It’s really not his fault that in his greed the bartender brings a bag of wild cats and let them loose in Freyja’s palace. Her screams might be heard even in Alfheim.

xliv.

“It is your fault, after all,” he watches Thor like a vulture. The snarl on his lips has the shadow of a smile, the type that is cut across his face as if sliced with a blade. His words taste of blood and he savors the tang, sharp on his tongue. He has been keeping the space for them for so long, since the beginning, the space the words would fall into, and he wanted to beat Thor at it and say them before he would. “You started this.”

“What?” Thor frowns, confused like he hasn’t just told Loki how they should lie low for a while because their friends (their friends, always, as if it wasn’t obvious they were only his) almost walked in on them, but honestly Loki couldn’t care less if the chance of being revealed slices Thor as deep as the terror in his eyes does Loki. Those hateful labels are worn not only by Loki, it seems. He can see each of them in Thor’s cautiousness.

Maybe there comes a time when it will be disgrace even to stay in his company.

The thought twists something crucial in his chest, and he says the words again and again, hiding their falsity even from himself, and they fall to their space but it is only later that he realizes how it doesn’t matter who utters them: their weight would always be within him.

“That day you forced this on me.”

Thor just stands there, a man on the ledge, and they know if he falls, they both fall. Maybe it’s always been like this. Never-ending cycles of hurting each other.

Read me, brother, Loki thinks suddenly with the last scraps of sobriety, and the wish is like falling endlessly. For a moment, he thinks it is unfair of him to expect Thor to unravel the lies even he has troubles to unravel.

“How could you say that?” Thor mumbles. “I didn’t violate you!”

Loki’s eyes rake his brother like he was a new piece of art, just revealed. Thor is naked now. He is hurt, and like everything in regards with Thor, it is vibrant and livid. The layers of swashbuckling are peeled off now and Loki can see the raw inner core, and it’s beautiful because it’s the doing of his hands. He cut a wound and squeezed his fingers in and pulled the edges to look if there is anything
beyond the thunders, anything of value, of serenity. Nobody has ever done that before, nobody has ever seen Thor in his weakest, in his humblest and most earnest.

He doesn’t realize it at this particular moment but this is the fount of an addiction he develops later, and it’s a sad one: he falls into the wicked belief that the only way to see this essence again, to savor the fact that he can apply effect on his brother is by hurting Thor.


Thor takes a step back as if hit. As if he believed him.

A flare of anger rears in Loki and he launches himself forward. The vulture thirsty of blood, of raw meat; he tears at Thor with nails and teeth, with kisses that lend more pain than pleasure, and Thor lets him. His arms twine around Thor’s iron shoulders and they are falling backwards, entangled, forever joined.

That night Loki’s every touch is like punishment for things that cannot be destroyed. Things like Thor’s trust; things like the tether between them that only keeps shredding something within him when stretched. Things like the emotions he cannot trample. He cannot even name them.

He tries to tell things without words and he fails to see how Thor understands only words.

xlv.

Sometimes he mulls over the old tale: of the two rivers washing omniscience and oblivion in their beds. He wonders about Thor’s question. Who would drink of the second willingly?

Sometimes he would drink of it until there were no more drops in it.

I wish to forget you, he thinks, and the thought is like a wistful sigh in his mind. But the kiss he placates to the skin between Thor’s shoulder blades is a desperate one, curling into eternity.
Before Thor2 comes out here, I wanted to post the last one because maybe after that I never would. Sorry if it feels fractured.

Lately he recalls old memories, turns them and looks at them from all directions to see if there have ever been tiny cracks and miniscule nicks that could predict the future had he paid more attention to them. It’s not his territory but Loki’s, analyzing everything, dissecting them, putting them back to create a monstrous shape but he cannot help it, even if it pulls his heart apart string by string.

The simple truth is this: once they were inseparable.

He remembers how they built tents in their bedroom on rainy days when the skies collapsed on them, tents of blankets and furs and sheets, and they hid under the labyrinth with stolen food from the kitchen, with their pillows and toys and books, and pretended to be on an adventure. They would sleep there, have their meal there until their mother would come and order them to dissemble the tents.

They don’t go on much adventure together anymore, and it makes Thor wistful, thinking back at their time in the dim light under the blankets when every threat was only imagined.

Only he knows it is part of cowardice that he chooses to leave when Thor is away from Asgard, no doubt engaged in another mindless hunt. He doesn’t think it would make any difference if Thor was present but it certainly makes things smoother.

Just the day before he had a spell gone wrong, and it was by sheer luck that he could reverse it before it caused a more serious damage in him. It wasn’t an easy realization that he needed help to improve. He has only ever relied upon himself, shrinking away even from the thought of asking for others’ aid. Frigga, with her magic bound by convention and goodwill, reached her limit in tutoring him.

There are words of a mage barricaded in the mountains above Asgard. A man practicing the magic of women, twisted and dark one; he’s been cast from his people for it, and Loki has no illusion his own fate wouldn’t be different had he not been Odin’s son.

They say the mage lives where only wolves go, and even beyond, where pylons of ice-trees scrape the canvas of the sky and the daylight is in constant defeat against darkness. They say he lives there
like an animal, tearing them apart with his bare teeth, living with them, sleeping with them. Loki
laughs at the fear of the ignorant, of this obvious incomprehension of the nature of seidr.

He doesn’t take too many things with him, a furred cape, a book and a set of knives, Thor’s gift from
the spoil of one of his brawls – he doesn’t even attempt to justify this weakness, to craft a skin for it
that would hide what it actually is.

He tells only his mother that he would be away for a while, and seals his room as if anything he
wishes to hide is actually placed there and not in his mind and heart.

xlviii.
He never understood why Thor does not appreciate the silent and simple beauty of snow. Snow is a
foreign concept in Asgard but when they were children, they sometimes accompanied their father on
his travels to Alfheim. They would play, roll around in it like fish in the water but Thor grew irritated
and cold too quickly. Loki has never felt the cold himself.

He wishes now that Thor was here. Maybe he would make him turn back, at least for a while, turn
back and pretend everything was right with them. Maybe they could avoid the change that Loki feels
now lurking ahead of him, they could delay it in self-deceiving ignorance. Because change would
come, he knows it with conviction. Whatever waits at the end of the road, nothing would ever be the
same again afterwards.

It’s not dark amidst the trees: he can see the path clearly as the snow and the moonlight filtering
through the frame of branches above illuminate his surroundings. It’s a peaceful silence. He can hear
his own crunching steps and nothing else. He sleeps at the root of trees, huddling into his cape,
keeping warm at a mage light that barely has any warmth. He crosses the paths of various animals,
finds shelter in caves of bears, and the beasts never hurt him. The white twigs and branches embrace
above his head and build a wall around him, soft and beautiful.

He loves it here, and doesn’t feel alone or lost. He doesn’t yet see how it is only the first step on a
way that doesn’t lead backwards.

There is a crow croaking above his head, watching him with keen clever eyes. It springs from branch
to branch. The stare it gives him is measuring, calculating as if it was already a test he has to pass,
and it can very easily be. He follows its flight because he knows it leads him where he needs to go.

xlix.
Eldred is waiting for him as he is bound to for Loki has always been destined to set on this route.

The mage is withered but it’s impossible to tell his age. There is something shifty in his eyes, too,
something unsettling in the half smile he has on his face. When Loki meets the cottage Eldred built
for himself, sees the worn robes he is wearing, there is a bristle of disappointment and doubt rearing
in him. His lodging is in a cramped room in the back of the hut, so different from what he is used to
at the high palace of Asgard, and he thinks of how Thor would mock him now that his
meticulousness has to meet its end here.

Eldred doesn’t ask much, he directs Loki with short words and gestures of someone who is not used
to talking, and Loki cannot really blame him for it. He calls him on his name without Loki
introducing himself, but his behavior doesn’t bear any signs that would answer to Loki’s title, and it
is just as irking as it is a relief.
For days all they do is watch animals. They are motionless, sitting atop a rock while days turn into nights and the moon shrinks to only a pale slice cut in the skies. Frost climbs up their limbs and binds them to the rock as if they were the part of it. Wild animals cross the clearing with no fear of them, and they watch them silently. Eldred doesn’t instruct him, and Loki wordlessly studies the flight pattern of birds, the descent of their landing, their cruise upon a drift, every single beat of feathery wings drawn into his mind.

He knows it’s a lesson, just as much of patience and obedience as of magic.

*Know the things you want to use for your own purposes,* Eldred tells him with a whisper and it doesn’t sound like a human whisper, more like the wind whistling through bare branches. *How can you be one of them if you don’t know their nature?*

Loki, with a sting in his chest, thinks this might be a lesson he failed in with his own people.

He loses track of time. Time is a concept unknown here, its footprints leave no mark around them.

It takes weeks or months to transform his body into a magpie, and Loki almost breaks his neck at the first attempt at flight.

Other spells and jinxes come gradually, darker in nature, twisted and forbidden. They seep into their lectures like black mud but there is a sparkle to them and a familiarity Loki welcomes. They root deeper but in unsteady ground, sprouting wild and growing branches he cannot yet predict.

The transfiguration doesn’t only touch his body. The power cruising through his veins distorts something in the recesses of his mind, shifts cells in his heart and pulls nerves around until their order suits the purpose of seidr, until there is a part in him that calls to them, responds to their chimes. Sometimes he believes it has a life on its own, a dreadful creature he has awaken, and it demands its share, its ways, and the leash slips from Loki’s fingers. The current, strong and unrelenting, rips him away and pulls him down, and the more he thrashes the more it enchains him.

Eldred guides him loosely like a looming bog fire in the distance. He channels the magic through him, prodding him with invisible fingers, poking his mind and searching the depth of his heart. It despises Loki, the invasion of these private parts, the pieces he wants to keep intact from everyone. He dreads what Eldred would find there, what he would do to them, transforming, shredding them, staining whatever clean is left in him.

The spell he performs is something that has forever labeled the seiðkonas depraved. He is alone in the hut, out of Eldred’s hateful watch. The wont is century-old in him to search and try on his own, to souse in the current and drink from its water. He wants to find a way to make it work, to master it without Eldred’s vicinity that stirs a deep resentment in him but it’s unyielding in its power. The sips suffocate him, the drops of dark magic scorch and stretch his lungs, clawing at his chest from the inside, every untamed spell word is like a whip across his flesh. The sound ripped from his throat is just as much not his own as the words pouring from his lips; words he has never known, words he has forgotten and words he would get to know later come to him now on an order he has never
He understands it now if too late. Eldred has opened a door just a crack and made him stand guard, and in his self-confidence he ripped the door open – but what he is yet able to guard is this tiny crack and not the opening he has just made. There has only ever been one real fear tormenting him: that he would lose control over his own body and mind, that someone else would keep the leash in their hands, and it is happening now. He doesn’t think he can recover from this. Black magic flows through his mind in dark waves, crushing his unprepared psyche, cell by cell, recess by recess, and he knows he would never be the same afterwards. What would remain could not be called a person anymore.

And suddenly, in his drowning another voice joins the incantation, a power that halts the current, bends and eventually turns it into a direction Loki was unable to. He feels hands pull at him, at his limbs, at his garments too but he cannot mind it.

“You foolish boy,” he hears Eldred’s voice seep through the torrent in his ears, “you think you can do alone what only has ever been done by two?”

The sensation of being breached and filled is familiar in a distant way, and through the aversion he feels, the relief flooding him hits him in the chest like a wave of pure pleasure. He doesn’t cry out. The vocal chords feel in shreds in his throat, taut tight to the point before snapping.

He knows Eldred is showing something with this, a lesson not of punishment but of guidance. His mind relents and crumbles, slowly like wood in the flames would fall apart into a fistful of ash. The words that have been tumbling in him before, knocking against delicate parts and crushing them, taking over everything in their wake flow through him now in a terrible yet wonderful order, and finally he understands how foolish he had been to think he would ever be more than a humble wielder of this power.

His body jerks with every push and pull, muscles squeezing around Eldred’s intrusion. His body rubs against the gravelly surface of the ground, gradually grinding him to pieces, and he thinks for a clear moment that he will leave something from himself behind in this impious place. In his climax his lips twist into an instinctive curve on their volition.

“Thor,” the name falls from his lips like a habit, a customary finale to mark the completion itself but it feels like an empty word, a sawdust syllable on his tongue. He doesn’t remember the press of a young body against his own, the weight of a heavy, strong arm across his chest. He forgot how it felt to never want anyone else but the one taking him.

He turns on his side. The trail of hotness trickling down the curve of his ass is only a distant sensation as his nose catches the sultry, heady smell of the soil, and his mind tries to grab after shreds of long gone scents of another. Maybe this is how a vessel works, he thinks dully, this is what it leaves behind: dryness, emptiness, so different in kind from what he has experienced in the ever reborn desire for someone he should have never had.

Seasons are whimsical in this place, Loki learns it after a while. They come and go, sometimes within a day, sometimes staying for what feels like a decade. There is no telling of how much time he has spent on the mountaintop. Even days and nights are changeable: lasting for unpredictable length. Maybe, he muses in reverie sometimes, the world outside has changed, it has gone by and forgotten him.
Maybe the Great Tree is no more.

When he thinks of it, of a world no more, it is not without relief, and not without a pang of envious pride. It is said to be his duty, the felling of the Tree.

In his mind, he can still see the look in the All-father’s eye, the piercing calculation as Loki, eager to please, shows the first spectacles of his seidr: the ice Yggdrasil. That look, while measuring and assessing him, is the wildfire of looming fear.

After all, all of them know the old prophecy of the end of all things.

He wants to see what Odin’s all-seeing eye would compass now that his seidr evolved. Sometimes he dreams of this, of the looming fear, of felling the Great Tree, of seidr unleashed, of proving he can possess the same magnitude of grandeur as Thor does if only in different nature.

Sometimes he wakes up weeping.

liv.
He isn’t sure if the world has really changed but it seems dull and colorless even after he leaves the blanket of snow on the mountaintop behind. Asgard’s golden shine has now a fake tint of copper in his eyes, and the realm seems small.

The news of his return precedes him but he doesn’t mind. He has time to catalog his own feelings, brace himself against the possible welcome of those who had been close to his heart once. He doesn’t know if they still are. Their faces are raw charcoal sketches on the wall of his memory. His father, his mother. Thor.

Thor.

Bile of anticipation rises in his throat, and he cannot decide if it is real or only the imprint of an old feeling he no more finds in himself.

lv.
There is one thing he soon finds out to be still true, and it is this: for all the things he tells himself, for all the things he sees himself to be, no amount of lies can make a truth morph into a lie.

Thor.

It takes but one look and the chains he has imagined into nonexistence are clamping down on him again.

This is the first time, though, that he looks upon them and finds them monstrous in their tenderness.

lvi.
It takes Thor weeks to catch him off-guard, though he is a slippery thing now. He comes and goes as if the wind could lift and take him away, and no one is the wiser when and where he is headed to. He twists through the cracks of the walls and steals through under the threshold.

News and rumors travel fast, he has learnt it quickly when not once has it been according to his
design. Maybe this time is no different – even he cannot tell: his trigger is more intricate now, more subtle than ever before, and nobody sees the hand that pushes the pebble off the cliff to have it turn into an avalanche in the end. He wants to see the damage it is capable of doing, even if it eventually falls down on his head – as it is bound to happen when Thor is in the equation.

Thor is a hunter, Loki recalls it now as his brother backs him in a corner. Thor doesn’t touch him. He doesn’t need to for Loki’s surrender. His intimidating built and closeness are enough to do the trick, enough to make it believable when Loki relents. The pent-up fury ripples under the golden skin, and Loki’s mouth twitch into a smirk.

“How could you let him—?” There is something endearing in how Thor cannot even articulate through his anger.

“Why not?” Loki challenges. Thor’s fury seeps through his pores and ignites the cold ashes of a pleasure not entirely pristine in Loki’s belly.

He is still smirking when Thor punches the wall beside his head. Only a flutter of eyelashes, that is all he reacts with.

“No one is to touch you! No one else!”

Loki tips his head back, looks at Thor with half-lidded eyes, slyly.

“And what would you do about it? March into the mountains and grab the Sorcerer by the neck? Stand upon father’s dais and claim me to be yours? Would you like to label me with your own name, brother? Brandish me like I was a bull?”

Thor only stares because yes, he would do all of these and even more. Instead, he grabs Loki’s hair at the back of his head and pulls while his own head plunges in the pale crook of slender neck and he bites down because this is the only label he can put on Loki.

“You think you are the only one in the world? Sometimes I just seek out someone, anyone, to overwrite the trails you’ve left on my skin because I cannot take them any longer. I need another one’s stench upon me. I am not your possession. You don’t own me, Thor.”

It is no lie, though he sees how Thor struggles to make it to be one. There is something ironic in how he, on the other hand, wants to turn his own lies into truths.

It is no lie but there may be more wish than truth in it. He strives to find out if there is anyone out there who can give him the same pleasure. He wants to believe he can go without Thor, that his world doesn’t end where Thor is.

“But what if I want to? What if I want it in exchange for you owning me?” Thor murmurs into his skin, against the nerves and cells and fibers that have always been his, and the chuckle hitches in Loki’s throat like a ripped open wish.

The knowledge should be victory: Thor is bound to him, against all rationale Thor is his. But it is only ironic that the moment of victory is the moment of defeat in one because this bond is not a one way thing, and Loki cannot turn lies into truths.

He doesn’t understand how Thor can want someone so twisted and base. It frightens him for every mania meets its own end once. Thor will one day wake up and see him for what he really is because no deception can last forever, he knows it well. Thor will see what others have seen for centuries now, and Loki dreads it, couldn’t ever prepare for it.
“Take me, brother… take me…” he groans as Thor’s hands tear at his robes, at his skin, maybe at his heart too. There is another lie ripped from him, crowding on his tongue. “Take me so you would never want anyone else but me.”

But maybe what he means is something else. Maybe what he means is this: so I would never want anyone else but you.

lvii.

Every time they do this, every time they try to bite a piece off the other, it tastes like victory. He leaves angry marks on Thor’s skin, patches of love and hate, and they are tell-tale signs of a sin they keep a secret but Loki wants to declare it for everyone to know that he debauched the golden prince into this sinful beast that seeks naught but his pleasure in his own brother. He finds it disillusioning that his own triumphs can only be other people’s losses, and his gain will never be others’ gain, too. His victories are dubious like everything else about him.

He eggs Thor on when his brother is driving into his body with mad abandon, he calls for more even when there is more pain in it than pleasure because the lower Thor sinks, the closer he gets to Loki. Because up Loki can never go. Because there is an unbendable truth behind all of it: there are no amounts of lies and tricks, no shapes he could put on that would ever lift him to where Thor is.

He is willing to stain and destroy himself if so he can stain and destroy Thor. It doesn’t matter that for pulling Thor down and making him drown he needs to sink too, he needs to swim deeper even and hold him by the ankle and wait and count the seconds, the breaths, the bubbles escaping toward the surface. Watching the swaying, tantalizing sunlight dim.

lviii.

He cannot recall the first time he took Thor, cannot recall how it felt once, before his time on the mountaintop. He doesn’t remember if it ever tasted like victory or loss, or didn’t have any taste at all.

When he takes Thor now, switching their accustomed places more often than not, it’s a foreign savor in his mouth, a strange sensation against his skin like the burn of dripping poison. It is only few and far between when he lets Thor have him instead as if by fucking deep enough into his brother would let him touch his heart and claim it, too.

He bends and kneads Thor beneath him almost ruthlessly as though he is trying to destroy him, with each thrust ruin him a little more. There is only one foolishly honest voice in his head that tells him the idea that Thor can be destroyed this way stems from the knowledge that Loki is destroyed every time Thor takes him.

He breaches Thor like it’s the only thing between him and insanity, and he would do it with open eyes, each time, unwilling to miss a detail of Thor’s expressions. He watches him with a shade of darkness behind his eyelids.

He cannot comprehend why Thor lets him do it, how he can let anyone take him like this and push him to a level no man wants to go to. Submission of a man to another man. They both know how it is labeled by Asgardians. Unmanly. Like Loki is with his magic. Like –he repeats it to himself, each time, at every push of his hips– Thor is beneath Loki. This is the only way he can make his strong and bold brother break and defile himself. This is the only mean for him to share the disgrace of this label, to stick it just for a span of coupling on someone else’s back.
And Thor, great and valiant and immaculate, doesn’t see it. Or maybe he doesn’t care – but the idea
is worse, it twists his guts and somehow makes him feel all the weaker. Thor might be brave and
confident enough to bear such label with dignity because he knows the truth lies elsewhere – but
Loki is not Thor. The word *ergi* makes him rot from inside out.

lix.
This is a broken thing between them, and he cannot decide if Thor deliberately ignores it or really
doesn’t see the cracks, the skewed shape of what they have once been. They are not building
anything anymore but chiseling off the other with each touch, each word said, and each moment of
stretching silence.

This is a broken thing but not fully shattered.

No, that would come later.

lx.
When lies finally turn into truth, when they answer questions he has been asking himself for
centuries, the foundation of his life cracks at the very base. It’s the questions he has never wanted to
ask that pull it apart piece by piece, memory by memory, bond by bond. Lies have the nature that
when they are revealed, everything else falls down with them, too. He knows it well, he knows their
nature even though he has never designed them to the magnitude the All-father did.

They drive them apart, the lies he has never sewn, more than the lies he has ever weaved. Thor still
seeks him out, still talks to him in a manner like it didn’t matter but Loki understands the force of
habit, he knows all these gestures are only too customary for Thor to be eliminated in a span of a
short time. They are not brothers and thus Thor doesn’t owe him any kindness, any tolerance –
sooner or later even Thor would realize it.

It’s one of his last words to him, his last words among the golden walls of Asgard, surrounded and
clad in the shreds of a life he has never really owned. Ironically, it’s a piece of truth he offers as his
parting gift, as a resignation of something they would never be.

“This soil is sown with salt. You cannot build anything upon it, brother.”

And he realizes only belatedly that even this word –*brother*– is a lie now.

lxi.
He doesn’t understand it, this stubbornness, this deliberate blindness Thor displays every time they
meet, every time they clash with so many things between them: different realms, different goals,
different species, old hurts and false memories. Thor on the side of self-appointed superheroes, and
Loki… Loki always and forever on his own side, left with his own means.

He doesn’t understand why all these things don’t affect the desire still churning in his groins.

Thor looks at him like they were still brothers. Like they were still lovers apart.

Like he still had the right to claim him.
“What did you tell them, Thor?” he laughs, even as Thor’s thick fingers dig familiar holes into his bare skin. Even when he can still smell the distinctive odor of the SHIELD cell Thor snatched him from.

There is only one thing he recognizes: the despair in Thor’s touch, the foolish denial of someone who still strives to reach after something he has long lost or never had. He recognizes it easily. He doesn’t know anything else but this.

“Do they know you stole your monster brother away to fuck him like it was a punishment?” he sneers.

He can read in it, in the flutter of Thor’s eyes even in the blinding heat of his passion. These are things he learnt to erase but Thor is not yet good in it. He might never be.

“Oh, the shining hope of Midgard just lied to them, is it so, Thor? It is a lesson I finally managed to teach you. Once a liar, always a liar.”

And Thor chokes on a whimper as if it was he who is being violated, who has the other’s vengeance and rage and lust spilled over him, slick and thick like a bucket of seething mud.

Thor leans over him, all taut muscle and iron grip, and glares into his brother’s face, at the smirk tugging his lips, the whiteness, sharpness of immaculate teeth, and he realizes how it was all Loki’s doing. How he coaxed this out of him, making him think it is he who is in control, that it’s his chosen way of punishment. He suddenly realizes he just lost a war he didn’t even know he waged.

Loki throws his head back as if reading his thoughts, a bloodcurdling laughter emitting from his throat, and Thor stares. Stares at the slender line of his neck, the beautiful curve, and he just knows that this is, too, on purpose. He is certain that Loki offers it to him: it’s a tease, a spit in his face because he knows that all Thor wants is to bend down and sink his teeth in his throat and bite down hard until it snaps, until cartilage breaks, until his essence spills and flows and blurs out in tandem with the thumps of his heart. Until there is nothing left to form those words and laughs with. He wants to tear Loki apart but it is just clear he would tear himself apart with the same act.

“Come on, conquer me, brother, break me, subjugate me,” Loki goads him, and the all-teeth malicious grin on his face tells Thor that it would be an act akin to leveling a mountain with bare hands, turning the tide, tearing a star off the sky. Loki is mocking him, and his words carry the opposite meaning. “This is what you want. To call me mine.”

Desperation builds up in Thor because Loki is slipping away from him and he would forever chase him, and there is no way he can bring back the past because along the way something went terribly wrong and it irks him to no end that he cannot change it, so he slams into Loki with merciless helplessness but it only makes his brother laugh harder with dark and low amusement. He realizes it but it’s too late to stop it: he knows Loki pulled him down into this, Loki fell and made him fall, too.

He pulls back, settles on his heels, and for a moment while he is trying to contain his arousal, trying to convince himself that he can simply rise and walk away from this mockery of their eternity-long relationship, Loki is in silent surprise. And for just this one moment, Thor is ravished by blind victory if only for a second.

“You just realize now that this is the only way you can ever have me, and even this is a lie,” Loki
hisses cruelly, and it stings. It hurts all the more because yes, maybe he can never have Loki, but it feels like he would ever belong to no one but Loki.

“It hurts, right?” and Loki’s nails scrape along his chest, rake his skin and leave marks like bars over his heart, and Thor thinks it is just fitting that Loki caged his heart there all for himself. “It hurts to know that I am the only thing that you are denied. The golden son, the spoiled son. How will you handle this, Thor?”

“Silence!”

He cannot look into this face anymore. He cannot bear that leveling gaze, the cold smirk. It is a face he cannot recognize, a mask modeled after his brother by an ungifted artist. He flips Loki over as if he could flip the whole lie too and look at it from another angle, to see if it shows another picture. Pushing Loki’s shoulders into the bedding is his frantic attempt to silence him because that tongue, the taste of words curling from them are something he might recognize. He grabs the narrow hips and pulls up, forcing Loki’s back to curve into a pale slope, and he slides back into him with a plunge that is so much raw power, so much raw love. So much loss.

Every muscle in Loki’s back and arms tenses, creamy wires under his skin. His shanks lift from the bed just for a moment in undeniable pleasure, and he is balancing there on his face and knees, and Thor stays stock still to watch him in this one unguarded and honest moment.

He knows Loki’s body, from a certain aspect, he knows it more than his own. It is a built-in instinct as he dips his hips forward and enters Loki with a downward motion upon each thrust. The urge to hit the spot that pulls Loki apart piece by piece is second nature and the only means in his hand at the moment. With a twist of his heart he wonders how something so wicked, sinful and enormous can be at the same time picture perfect: their bodies slotting into each other, reaching extremities they cannot do alone or with anyone else. Loki keens below him from the stimulation before he cuts himself off, and it is out of a kind of cruelty that Thor doesn’t fail to miss the spot, just to watch Loki swallow the noises the flow and ebb of his slowly building orgasm rips out of him.

“Ahh, yes, Thor—unh, break me, oh break me, Tho—” Loki groans into the bedding. His voice cracks with the power of Thor’s thrusts and his own pleasure, and for a second Thor thinks this is what Loki really wants: Thor to break him.

His cock twitches at the thought that he could; with his bare hands he could break Loki. But never with anything else.

Loki’s snickers are just huffs muffled against the sheets, but even his spine seems to mock him, pale and slender, coiling, uncoiling, rippling defiantly, concave then convex, and shadows lick at its cavities. Thor drives his thumbs deep into the enticing hollows on Loki’s lower back, just on each side of his spine, and he longs to lean down and taste the shallow dips, the sheen of sweat frosting them, to lick the length of his spine like he used to, tasting the saltiness pooling in its dents, knot by knot. Loki is a writhing mess under him, each breath is a hitch between snigger and moan, and the sound pulls white haze over Thor’s mind, swelling hotly in his loins. He leans forward, pulls Loki hard against his hips and he comes, roaring like a rabid beast, his back snaps back like a drawn bow.

Waves of shudder run along Loki’s body as he spends too, messily and excessively. A small smirk is all Thor can afford at the moment, though it is no victory. He slumps onto the bed and lifts Loki’s face. The sheets are wet with saliva where his mouth was pressed against it. They are lying there, skin to skin for long, but it feels like they are ages, lives apart. And many lies apart, too.

He once thought only a cataclysm could make them separate. He didn’t calculate with the slow death of dying stars. They slowly grow cold, lose their shine and die. Maybe they were still circling around
each other, but they were naught but grey stones.

And suddenly he understands, with clarity and gravity, with the overwhelming sensation of loss and grief, that they are just like those grey stones. That this was their last time together.

“This is goodbye, brother.”

He doesn’t know which of them said it but it matters little. How ironic, Thor thinks, that they would end everything with a simple truth.

lxiv.
He is free, finally. Loki’s mind wraps around the word like an iron cage.

It is the most terrifying thought. It is cold and barren and beautiful like stardust.

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Streaks of sunlight. Scent of fallen leaves, damp and withered: the hint of autumn. The breeze carries something with it, the taste of old times, long lost memories, and it plants a feeling in Thor’s chest akin to inconsolableness.

He can see only the outlines of his brother against the setting sun. He is a dark patch and a long shadow marred in his retina, a permanent invisible scar that stays there forever – the thought comes without doubt, without questioning. Thor strains his eyes, follows the moves of the retrieving figure, just like his brother has followed him all his youth life, he follows it with his gaze as long as he can see him, and Thor knows he would follow it even after it disappears. He would follow it forever with his heart. He squints but Loki doesn’t look back.

So this is how it ends.

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