The Chrononaut
by PhantomWriter

Summary

After the encounter with Thanos, Thor is unwillingly sent back in time to his supposedly coronation day six years ago.

Notes

a.k.a. fic where the teaser for Infinity War scene of Thor crashing against the GotG gang's ship never happened.

I'm basing the years from Earth years. 2011, Thor first movie timeline, and 2017, Thor Ragnarok timeline. Time might be running a little different in Asgard. Meh.
The last thing Thor remembered aside from the excruciating pain— that was from being thrown like a ragdoll by the force of the hit on the side of his head near his fresh injury—was Loki standing frozen, watching him with barely held back storm of anguish as Thor fought his way to him, not intending to leave his brother, the only family he has, behind in the hands of the Mad Titan.

Thor wondered himself why his initial thought wasn't betrayal by Loki when the Titan's ship towered over theirs, with the trickster facing the Titan as if he was expecting him. The alarms should have went off when Thor himself saw the Tesseract not destroyed among most of Asgard, sitting instead on Loki's palm and was handed to the Titan.

Perhaps it was because of Loki's bargaining for their ship's safe passage, specifically asking to continue on their way unharmed. With his brother's silver tongue, he was left in charge of the diplomacy Thor was yet to have proper grasp on. Thor had been on edge at the whole ordeal, adrenaline thrumming for a fight as he was having qualms on leaving the Tesseract at the hands of the purple monstrosity. Even more so when this Titan—Thanos he was called—was plotting the dominance of the cosmos once completing the infinity stones.

This was usually the part where he charges head-on, stopping the evil before it even spreads further to the vastness of the universe. But the situation changed—his people were in tow, defenseless and weak after the destruction of Asgard. It gave Thor thousands of reasons to still his hand, and albeit with a heavy heart, he had to let his brother do the talking for the remaining Asgardians' survival. Thor would rather not send them to their death of a different manner after narrowly escaping one recently.

It would have been fine, it seemed, until Loki was to stay behind.

At his early reign, Thor was already forced with the decision of choosing between two difficult choices. Oh, he knew too well what a survivalist Loki was, and that there should be no conflict within Thor. It was a simple choice of many over an individual.

But damn if he would let Loki fall again.

Thor fought his way, thoroughly undoing Loki's efforts and sealing their fates.

And as long as the others were finally off a good distance, with Heimdall replacing him as their new leader, and Banner was brought back to Midgard as promised, Thor was satisfied. He would take Loki back with him, with the escape much easier with just the two of them, and then they would reunite with the others. It was a half-baked plan at most, but Thor knew they would manage; as long as they were together, they would thrive, and in the end, they would share the story of how Loki dare tried to trick him again, with Thor calling him out on his predictability.

As Thor fell on the endless void of the abyss, he smiled with his busted lips, numb face, and battered body.

With an unsaid apology, his only regret was being a failure for leaving Loki behind.

He woke up with the sudden flood of air filling his lungs. He breathed deeply, calming his racing
heart down when he took in his surroundings. The whole body ache faded into phantom pain, and the open wounds and bruises on his skin were gone. Miraculously enough. It took him several minutes to realize he was seeing with his both eyes.

Thor figured out he was in Hel. It was impressive that the land of the dead has his old chambers in Asgard reconstructed at the smallest of details and even bothered to give back the half of his eyesight.

Ironic, really, that when he should have felt the telltale signs of being dead, he was feeling healthy and filled with the vigor of youth. Perhaps this was how it was here, and it wasn't as cold and devoid as it was depicted. Maybe it varied on the person.

Seeing himself on the mirror, Thor was taken aback how younger he appeared. His body still huge but without the added mass he gained these past few years, and he might be imagining it, but it seemed as if he was a half inch shorter. His hair was lighter and longer, barely passing the shoulders.

Thor recognized him.

This was the very same person who was labeled unworthy and banished to Midgard. At the same time was the current him, with eyes of that who had experienced loss, betrayal, suffering, and victory, mingling with the arrogant and overconfident exterior he used to have.

A female servant stumbled upon his room carrying breakfast. Thor vaguely remembered her as one of the palace's servants. She immediately apologized profusely after seeing Thor naked from waist up. He took pity on her, promptly putting on at least an undershirt and took the heavy tray from her.

"I could have gotten this myself," Thor told her, all the while wondering why he would even need sustenance in the first place. He let it slide as one of the quirks of Hel—creating vivid recreation of one's former life.

She hung her head low. "You specifically requested that I bring you your morning meal today," she said meekly.

"My apologies then. I shouldn't have let a young maiden like you carry something heavy." She looked rather young, a few years past the teenage years. He was hit with the realization that she was probably one of the casualties before Ragnarok. "What is your name?"

She blinked up at him, somewhat confused at the question. "Astrid, my prince."

"Astrid, from now on you're under no obligation to serve my meals. You have the morning for yourself. And, no, I'm not relieving you of your job, only that I require no servant."

It took her a while to process, with mouth slightly open in surprise. "Thank you, my prince." She smiled gratefully and bowed low before politely leaving.

Thor smiled in satisfaction at the exchange. It would take some getting used to on his new reality, of his new home without the people who made it be. He might be stuck in the place for eternity, never moving to Valhalla with Frigga and Odin. If this was where he was meant to be afterlife, then so be it.

Looking at the tray of food, his stomach gave him a pang of hunger. He frowned, for some reason not seeing any sign to give him the notion of being dead. The food, his surroundings, and his anatomical functions were all as if he was still alive. The only thing Thor has to convince himself otherwise was his memories and his last waking feeling of life on the verge of leaving him.
But what if it didn't? What if he landed on some place and was helped by its people? Although there was no explanation to his reverted age, he was reminded that it was possible to survive the void, though not without repercussions after seeing Loki's state when he tried to invade Midgard. Would Thor be encountering hostile entities as well? Or was he already in their territory?

He peered outside the window, Asgard in spring greeting him—very much intact and protected with magic. The training yard was not far below, lined with new warriors of the Einherjar being trained by Tyr.

Seeking answers, Thor went out, opting to observe the environment that resembled his former home. The noise of bustling activities in the palace greeted him, in the distance were the servants' to and fro, the ringing of steel against steel, guards on patrol… Thor could feel the vividness, far from the ruins he left it as. It might be a heavily elaborated illusion, but Thor missed this truly.

For a brief moment, he thought he could be ignorant and take everything at face value. If this was his new world… then he supposed he could live in it.

There was the sound of merriment at the banquet hall, roars of laughter and loud voices. There should only be one bunch of warriors who Thor knew could made such ruckus. And he wasn't wrong when he came upon the sight of the Warriors Three and Sif, his long-timed friends and brothers at arms.

Volstagg raised a turkey's leg his way, with Fandral raising his goblet. "To our dear friend, Thor Odinson," Fandral said aloud for a toast.

Thor fondly accepted the "Here, here" around the table. He settled beside Sif who was rolling her eyes at the ridiculousness of her friends but with lips pursed to a small smile.

"To the future King of Asgard," Volstagg's booming voice added as an after toast. The replies were tad bit louder this time, making Thor chuckle.

"My friends, there's no need for such," he told them, in which Sif raised an eyebrow. "I toast for our friendship, of us finally reuniting. Albeit in the afterlife," he whispered the last one in a solemn tone. He must admit it was in poor taste.

The last sentence didn't escape them, it seemed, when Hogunn stared at him inquisitively, Fandral incredulously regarding Thor, Volstagg promptly stopping his chewing on a bone, and Sif giving him an almost you're insufferable look from the sidelines.

"That's rather morbid, don't you think?" Fandral was the first to speak up, shrugging. "Forgiven. Must be your nerves speaking."

"And what's with the 'finally reuniting'?" Volstagg said between mouthfuls of meat. "We've seen you before sunrise," he pointed out. He paused, contemplating. "I was right to believe that blow in the head by the bilgesnipe did something to you."

Sif snorted, shaking her head. "Good lot it did."

There was a round of laugh at the table with Sif smirking winningly behind her cup.

Thor was confused at the sudden déjà vu. At the back of his mind was a short trip to memory lane of his last hunting trip with the Warriors Three and Sif that happened the day before his supposedly coronation day. He recalled the head injury they were pertaining to and the headache with it that lasted in the whole duration of his banishment in Midgard, living as mortal and all.
None of this was making any sense. First, waking up in Asgard that he had recently seen as a battleground of Surtur and Hela; second, appearing very much alive and few years younger. And then this, reliving the day that marked the shift from the spoiled, selfish, proud Prince of Asgard, to being Thor, protector of Midgard, an Avenger, the Lord of Thunder. If this was Hel indeed then it was twisted in its own way.

He regarded each of them fully, noting the changes in physical characteristics that he completely missed—their apparent youth, in recklessness and appearance. He wasn't the only one reverted then.

In fact, it dawned to him that everything around him was how they seemed more than half a decade back. Perhaps there was a more farfetched explanation behind all of these, one that was improbable but would put together the mysteries.

Thor was torn between the idea of being played with and being right at his guess. And if it would be the latter, then it was a perfect window of opportunity for him, Asgard, and even Midgard.

He excused himself, almost staggering on his steps in his search of someone. It might not be the best course of action at the moment, but he still has to make sure.

Make sure that he did travel back in time.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

might point out that it took Thor long enough to realize he traveled back in time and is yet to believe it himself. Remember that he was on the verge of dying (sorry, Thor) and time travel will be the last in his list.

should I continue this shit?
Thor stopped short in front of the huge library doors.

There was not an ounce of hesitation when he rushed in, with the smell of old and thick tomes wafting out. The library has always been like this, he decided, always with a touch of homey feel and of something familiar. Thor has never been a fan of this particular place, but he could see the charm now. No wonder Loki liked it aside from the books and silence. Thor could only imagine how the library served as his brother's second chamber; Loki falling asleep near the windowsill at the far end; Loki pacing alone when deep in thought; Loki hiding at the top shelves when Thor would ask him to come with him and his friends on their adventures when they were children, not having a single clue that what Loki enjoyed were different from his. Thor used to stupidly think that they were the same, that what he preferred were Loki's too. How naive of him.

When he entered, there was nobody to be seen. For a moment, Thor was afraid that he was experiencing a rather lucid dream of going back in time, of having the advantage of foreknowledge this time around. He could already imagine the possibilities, of incidents he could avoid and stop at its roots. Oh, how he terribly, terribly wished for it to be the case.

But the prospect was moving farther and farther away at each passing second of quietness. His previous memory of being beaten up and sucked to the unending void intensifying to a dull ache at the back of his head. He almost forgot that he left his brother with that Mad Titan with his reckless and ridiculous attempt of rescuing Loki. For all his years, Thor never learned—understatement of the millennium.
"Who would have thought I'd be seeing you here first?"

Thor turned to the source of the amused voice. And then there he was, standing not far behind, looking as if he did something nobody would know of. He looked too young to Thor, like a separate person from the one he grew to have a complex relationship with. The Loki he was seeing now was the brother that had lived in Thor's shadow but whom Thor adored very much and wanted to protect.

Thor didn't know whether to be glad or frustrated at the confirmation of his dilemma. He could no longer deny the unlikeliness of time travel. But for reasons unknown, here he was, given the power to fix his past mistakes and save those he lost. A great responsibility came with this chance, and Thor wouldn't waste this one. He promised that he would be wise on this, with the fate of many resting on his shoulders.

"Thor?" Loki asked at the uncharacteristic silence of his normally loud brother. "Is something the matter?" he came closer with thinly masked concern.

"Nothing," Thor replied with forced cheerfulness, surreptitiously regarding Loki's features, so familiar and yet somebody else entirely. He yearned to embrace him, assure him that it would be different this time, no matter if Loki understood what he meant. Thor opted to rest his hand on the other's shoulders as if seeing him in a new light, smiling genuinely. "I've missed you. That's all."

"You speak as if you haven't caught me yesterday teaching three of the councilors a lesson. Though I wouldn't mind you pretending you don't know."

Thor beamed wide, remembering the certain scenario. "You mean pranking the old coots because they're being stubborn lately and are not being reasonable? Yes, you've been complaining about them."

"I'm impressed that you're actually listening." Loki shrugged. He observed Thor back, head tilting slightly but didn't say anything regarding it. "Shouldn't you be presenting yourself to father at this moment?"

"I'm sure it will be alright if I spare a few more minutes."

Loki smiled wryly at the statement, turning away from Thor and walking over a shelf. "I suppose you're right. He does tend to be lenient with his favorite after all," he murmured, and it would seem like a dismissive line before to Thor, but currently he could feel the envy in the words, creating a pang in his chest.

"Do you think it's important?"

Loki scoffed at the question. "You tell me, brother. Whose coronation is it today exactly? Maybe father will be handing down the Mjolnir to you in private so you can flaunt it around later on and proudly declare war with the realms we have the most strained alliance with."

Thor winced at the blitheness of Loki's tone. "Did I truly said that?"

"Verbatim from the night before yesterday. Admittedly, your mind was too muddled with mead, but there must be some truth on your declaration." The trickster shrugged. "Fret not, plenty will be backing you on your plan."

By the Norns, Thor wanted to kick his own backside at that. "Then I take back what I said. That was… inappropriate of me."

Green eyes narrowed a fraction, secretly scrutinizing Thor. "That was childish, yes."
Thor nodded, accepting that fact. "Agreed. I'll try keeping the mead at minimum. It tends to cloud my judgement." Not that he has good judgement at this phase. He dared meet Loki's gaze, only to find the trickster staring at him strangely, a question on the verge of spilling that Thor was afraid he wouldn't be able to give a lie as an answer. It was foolish to lie to the liesmith. "Have you seen mother?" Thor added before Loki could ask.

If his attempt at changing the subject was noticed, Loki didn't show, instead directing Thor to the garden, by the peach orchards where Frigga and Loki usually bond over tea.

"I'll see you later," Thor said, excusing himself.

He was thinking that he did right by not mentioning he would be joining their mother for tea. It was over the top to think that he and porcelain cups go well together.

"Mother?"

Her back was turned to him when he came upon the garden. Frigga spun around, her visage softening seeing her eldest, somewhat surprised at the hint of uncertainty when Thor called her. "Good morning, son."

It took Thor a lot of strength to not let the dam break. His mother was alive in front of him after four years of thinking he would never see her again. Her death had been a wake up call to both him and Loki; even in the afterlife, she was still looking after her sons. As radiant as ever she was right then, the strong, brave, and compassionate queen and mother Asgard deserved.

Thor swallowed the lump of emotion threatening to get out. "Good morning."

"You're early," she commented. "Have you seen your father?"

"Not yet. I thought I'd see you first before going to him," he admitted. "How are you, mother?"

"As always. I must say I was expecting you to be up and about later in the afternoon that I'll have to wake you up myself." She nodded approvingly. "But I see that you're correcting the habit."

Thor sheepishly placed a hand on his nape. "Overindulging has been a terrible habit of mine."

Frigga's laugh chimed pleasantly in Thor's ears, triggering his sentimentality. "I can't agree more."

She gestured at one of the two empty seat. Thor purposely took the other he knew wasn't Loki's spot. "What brings you to me?"

"Can't I have no reason to see you?"

She smiled fondly. "Of course, you can. At least you're not pretending that you'll be joining me for tea."

"I'm planning to." He gingerly held the pot, careful of the cups and mindful of the spill. He learned a thing or two—despite not becoming a fan of the drink—for social purposes and whenever he was with Banner at the gathering of the Avenger's, or if it was simply the two of them. The man was as much as intriguing as the other guy he was keeping at bay. Thor poured one for himself, gently placing down the teapot afterwards.

She was fondly observing him, as if seeing his new side. "Thank you."

He committed the memory of this moment, taking Frigga's powder blue attire and its glistening
pearls, how her golden locks arranged neatly, enunciating her beautiful face that wasn't old, experienced. Her light has not diminished over thousands of years. Her fierceness and gentleness mingled with her regality. A true beauty of Asgard.

It hit Thor that he could finally change the course of events, prevent her death from happening. If he was sent back in time for reasons, then this must be the one of many.

"You are troubled," she pointed out, cutting the blanket of comfortable silence.

"I am," Thor said honestly. He gave in to her curiosity and slight concern. "I had a bad dream." He decided to keep his situation a secret for know, understanding the deal with confidentiality.

"What is it about?"

"I forgot most of it, but I remembered some like the deaths of those around me." Thor wouldn't call it lying when there was a hidden truth. "It wasn't recurrent," he assured when asked. "Merely today."

"If it ever plague you, do approach our healers if it troubles your sleep. Or better yet, come to me, but I do hope it won't come to that." She paused, changing the topic. "Are you nervous to be crowned king?" She suddenly waved a hand. "What am I saying? I'm sure you're excited."

He had been. Once. But happening twice and knowing that it would get interrupted killed the excitement out of it. "To be honest, I don't know what to feel."

"That's a first." She reached out to his hand, putting her smaller ones over his. "I'm proud of you and your brother. Loki is developing into a fine diplomat, a person you need to have on your side who you can trust the most. His role is as important to you the same way you, the king, is important to his people. Never abandon each other." She squeezed. "You have more to learn. Be open minded to new things, listen to others but listen most to yourself. If Loki has his brilliant mind, you have this." Frigga pointed to her own chest before continuing lightly, "Though you'll have to do something with your ego." Thor grinned guiltily. "Being proud is good, but never overdo it."

Thor took her advice at heart. The most significant difference he has now than before was that he knew how to listen to those who knew better, and at the same time doing what he knew was best not only for himself but for others, putting them above him first and foremost.

"Thank you, mother. I'll keep it in mind."

"I don't doubt it." She stood up, with Thor mimicking the gesture. "Shouldn't you be seeing the Allfather?"

"That's what Loki also said," Thor muttered. "Best not keep him waiting." He paused. "Mother?" He remained in place, for a moment considering. "Can I embrace you?"

"You don't have to ask." She opened her arms.

"I'm asking because it could get really, really tight."

"No matter." She beckoned him. "Come here, son."

Thor encircled his thick arms around Frigga tentatively until he was assured that she was real, this was real. She didn't complain when he pulled her in further, her warmth and smell etching themselves to his mind. Her arms embraced him back, fingers carding his hair soothingly the way she used to do when he was a child.
Thor would save her no matter what it would take.

Odin's death was the most recent, but it didn't make the pain of his passing any lesser. The Allfather passed away peacefully, of natural cause and not without bidding farewell to his sons. Thor was contented that his father was with Frigga. Odin had ruled for too long and was finally at rest.

Though, honestly, Thor wouldn't have any qualms hugging him right then. If not for the seemingly spontaneity of it from an outsider's perspective. And, well, it wasn't proper to suddenly embrace the king in the middle of formal meeting with him.

The Allfather was a prominent figure inside the treasure vault, standing by the Casket of Winters, Mjolnir on hand and waiting for Thor.

"Father." Thor genuflected slightly before standing straight in presentation.

"Son." Odin's single eye studied him briefly as if figuring Thor, the movement not completely missing the latter. He adjusted Mjolnir and handed it to Thor.

Mjolnir actually felt lighter without Odin's spell. Thor tested the hammer on his hands, holding it both for the first time and been some time since. Indeed, it was as if he lost a loved one when Mjolnir was destroyed. Later, Odin would tell him in the ceremony that it would either be a tool to build or to destroy, in the original timeline him proving the latter the very same day. Thor smiled wanly at his foolishness and his simplemindedness on how things work.

He would be in numerous battles with Mjolnir at hand—in Asgard, Midgard, and on few surrounding realms. He felled foes with the hammer, and on the same note, fond memories came with Mjolnir too. His mind recalled a memory of how his fellow Avengers tried to lift the hammer in various unsuccessful attempts. And if he were to be honest, he had been both concerned and at awe at how Steve managed to nudge Mjolnir.

The Allfather was watching Thor with his eye, noting the brew of emotions dancing on Thor's features as he longingly held Mjolnir. Thor could feel the heavy weight of Odin's calculating gaze, perhaps sensing the change in Thor's demeanor compared to the last time he had seen him.

"I cannot accept this." Thor laid the hammer on his palms, giving it back to Odin.

If the Allfather was taken aback by Thor's decline, he expertly suppressed it. "And why is that?"

Thor wetted his lips. "Allow me to rephrase, father—I cannot accept the crown and Mjolnir when I am yet to be worthy of both. Asgard deserves a king, not a spoiled prince who knows nothing but hunt and fight and declare wars on simply those who crossed him. Asgard can do more than an immature prince who will sit on the throne just because he's the firstborn." He gripped the hammer tightly in emphasis to his next statement. "Mjolnir is too powerful to be wielded by somebody who is inexperienced at the ways of treating it more than a mere weapon, when it could be a companion and a friend. It is a tool to build and to destroy the harm that comes to those it protects. If I am to own and use it, I want to earn the right. I'd rather it choose me than handed down to me. I am young, reckless, and impulsive that Mjolnir will be nothing but a weapon of destruction. I do not want that to happen. Mjolnir and the throne—I want to prove my worth to them first. If you would allow it, father."

Thor knew Odin continued to study him, searching for folly in Thor's words. After a painstakingly long silence and heavy atmosphere, Odin said, "Very well. If that is your wish, then I'll be honoring it." He took Mjolnir and murmured the spell Thor knew to be the one which will let the hammer decide who is worthy of lifting it. Thor was secretly glad he didn't alter this event.
"I see that you recognize your weaknesses," Odin continued. "A feat that I am genuinely unsure whether you will achieve."

Thor pursed his lips. He couldn't really deny that. "You were not wrong, father."

"And I am glad you proved me wrong today." Odin lifted Gungnir, leading the way out of the vaults. "But a king who only knows his weaknesses will grow insecure and indecisive. You must never also forget your strengths, and you must also know how to harness them."

Thor nodded at the advice, keeping it in mind. He wasn't planning on failing in this second chance of his. Thor wouldn't waste the opportunity given to him with the same mistakes he did in the past. He would be doing it right.

"Now, how do you plan to explain to the whole of Asgard that you refused the crown?"

Thor decided that it shouldn't be difficult. "Actually, I do have a small favor to ask of you, father."

News of the cancelled coronation spread within the palace, reaching Frigga and Loki first. Suffice to say, the two were surprised, but Frigga realized the reason quickly without directly hearing it from Thor or Odin. She merely smiled in understanding, satisfied at the abrupt change in her eldest that was for the best.

As for Loki, it was an understatement that he wasn't one to discard his curiosity that easily. When he came knocking on Thor's chamber, Thor was expecting him. Much earlier, in fact.

"Loki," Thor greeted upon seeing the trickster, grinning too wide at the sight of his brother's crossed arms over his chest. "Come in."

"You refused the crown? Why?" the brunet immediately started the minute he went inside.

Thor shrugged. "I don't think I'm up for the task yet."

Loki groaned. "Don't tell me you found out the limitations that come with the responsibilities and that you're a having a cold feet now. Is this about the arranged marriage I told you last week? I was making fun of you. Of course you can marry anybody you please."

Thor barked out a laugh. "I know that."

"Then explain to me why. Unless you didn't refuse it, and father took it back. Did you insult him?"

"Not that dire, brother. And if that was the case then the Allfather wouldn't let me out without smiting me," Thor responded reasonably. "I told him I'm not worthy." He shushed his brother before he could interrupt him. "Anybody who knows me knows it too, though most are keeping a blind eye on the matter. I'd rather avoid the repercussions that will come if I accepted it at this point."

Thor was getting a lot of puzzled stares already during his first day. He kept in mind to be less conspicuous on following days. But then again, the last thing they would expect was that he was from the future.

"On the plus side, I think I saved you from executing a plan to prove to father that I'm not worthy. I mean, you're the only person who will dare to prove his own point." He elbowed Loki playfully. "And you're a bit of an extremist. I won't put it past you."

Thor pretended not to notice Loki tensing, keeping from his mind the whole ordeal about the frost
giants slipping inside the Asgard treasure vault.

"That's good to know that Asgard won't be burning to the ground anytime soon," Loki said after a while, smirking.

Or never. Thor would make sure of it.

The feast of the spring went on for hours, like Thor expected it would and glad for. He wasn't one to quell the people's excitement, knowing how Asgardians were fond of feasts (he as well), and so he gave them another cause of celebration in replacement to his supposedly coronation.

In the early hours of the feast, he had been with the Warriors Three and Sif. Aside from Sif giving him odd looks, but was otherwise silent, they pretty much forgot him being uncharacteristic earlier. Their table was the most boisterous, which was a feat in itself considering Asgardians were generally loud.

Thor would choose this joyous noise over the sound of cries and battle any given time.

His toast was short, keeping the reason for the cancelation vague and focusing on the fine beginning of spring, even adding that Asgard wouldn't be seeing a new king soon, ending the speech with a toast to the Allfather's longer reign.

The music progressed to a mellow tone, where Thor stole Frigga from Loki after a round of dancing, in which Loki gave him an unimpressed expression but letting Thor took over. Out of the two of them, his younger brother was more adept. Thor would show him his newfound skill.

"You're good at your feet," Frigga commented, impressed. "And here I am hearing horrors from the ladies you've danced with."

"I tried not to be too good." Thor twirled her. "I had a good instructor."

"Ah. I'm sure it wasn't your childhood tutor. He used to complain about your two left feet giving him migraines." Frigga's eyes darted to the table where his friends were. "Was it Sif?"

Thor stifled a laugh, grinning in amusement. "No, mother. She's as bad as I was." She didn't need it, Sif said before. "Her name is Jane Foster, and she's the most patient instructor I know."

Jane once brought him with her in a celebration called Silver Jubilee where there were couples dancing on close quarters. After finding out his hideous footwork, she took it upon herself to teach him. At the small space of her apartment and sometimes on clear evenings, the dancing often lead to several kisses or eating the Midgardian treat called ice cream.

"A friend?" Thor didn't miss the complete inquiry when Frigga asked.

"A dear friend, and more." Thor lowered his gaze, smiling wanly. "It didn't work out in the end, but it was pleasant while it lasted."

"You were happy."

"I still am."

Frigga glanced at him knowingly. "Then she taught you more than dancing."

"And here I am who thought I was the only brooding son."
Thor was leaning by the balcony, enjoying the evening breeze, when Loki appeared beside him. "Hello to you too, brother."

"Feast not to your liking?" As if on cue, there were multiple sounds of cups and plates breaking.

"It tends to get tiring." Thor bumped his shoulder against Loki's. "Also, I remembered promising you that I'll keep the mead moderate."

The trickster hummed noncommittally. "Which is rather strange of you, if I must say." Thor's silence urged him to continue. "You seem different today."

"Truly?" He twisted to his side, an elbow supporting him, as he faced Loki. "You're the first to point out."

The celebration appeared to be dwindling down, people highly likely in varying degrees of drunkenness based on the lessening noise of ruckus.

"But I'm not the only one to notice."

"The change is not to your liking?"


"It's still me." Because nothing would change that single fact, time travel or not. He wished he could reiterate and tell Loki about his situation. Would he believe him, or think of him mad?

Loki nodded, taking the answer reluctantly. For now.

The brunet was naturally curious, plenty of questions often hanging on him. Thor would have to be creative from now on when evading Loki's inquiry. He shook his head slightly to himself, amused.

He would be fine.

Heimdall's ever watchful eyes remained far off, only turning away when he noticed Thor approaching. "My prince."

"Heimdall." Seeing him in the flesh made Thor wonder if the former gatekeeper and the Asgardians left managed to escape Thanos, with Thor giving them the head start without him. It made Thor wonder if that reality existed somewhere in the vastness of the universe.

"What brings you here?"

Thor decided not to dilly-dally. "I want you to look for someone, for me, if you will."

"Is there anybody in particular?"

"Her name is Jane Foster, a woman currently in Midgard in this place called New Mexico."

At the moment was exactly the time Odin banished him, landing as a mortal and meeting her. But none of it would repeat tonight, with the major course of events beginning to get altered. Thor would no longer have the specifics from then, only the knowledge of the huge events that were to come.

"She's dining with another person. A man of her age," Heimdall said.
"Is she happy?" Thor had to know.

"I can see that she is."

It was enough, he thought. Jane was one of the best thing that happened to him, but if she was already contented, then Thor would no longer disturb that by equating himself to her life. With her involvement with him, she had been in place of danger multiple times. This way, he could even avoid the Aether making her its host.

Staring at the direction of Midgard amidst the bright stars, Thor murmured a farewell to the flame that would never rekindle again.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

i don't really want to disregard the Thor/Jane thing. i mean, they've been together for years. meh, just accounting their relationship as a past thingy.

so, yeah, next chapter onwards we'll be derailed from the canon events (except the major ones). be prepared.

hope to see you next time. xoxo
Thor closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

He focused on gathering his inner strength, trying to get ahold of the feeling of surging electricity from within him. He opened and closed his left fist, attempting to summon at least a spark of lightning to his fingers.

After multiple tries, nothing happened.

He supposed it was a long shot, and perhaps he was lacking the muscle memory with the reset of time. But Thor was far from losing hope, promising to himself that he would always try without the dependency on the hammer that was once again intact.

He hardly slept, mind reeling over his list of people he was thinking of telling his circumstances. So far, the Allfather was at the top, only because Odin must have been sensed Thor was a bit off, and if confronted Thor might not be able to refute that he was an Asgardian out of time.

Another matter was his situation. Thor had to know at least an inkling of how he came to be in here. If he wasn't mistaken, the time stone has the power over what it was named after, and that included time manipulation. Though if Thanos already has the gem, then it was highly unlikely that he would be using it to send Thor back to the past which would tip the scales lesser in the Mad Titan's favor. Unless Thor was part of his grand schemes, and everything was planned cunningly—which made absolutely no sense when Thor dwelled on the idea.

It wasn't comforting to think either that somebody else who wield the time stone sent Thor back in time. It could be for nefarious purposes, for all he knew.

Personally, he was inclined to think it was an accident. That and luck for being at the right place.

His head hurt thinking too much. Never did he imagine lamenting over missing lectures from tutors about the universe and its dimensions. Before, knowing Bifrost was connected to realms was enough. No wonder Loki was more knowledgeable of the other paths without using the bridge.

Of course. Who better ask regarding time traveling but his brother?
"You're planning to travel in time?"

"No. I'm asking if it's possible without the use of any," Thor trailed off, gesturing vaguely with his hands. "Artifact."

Loki turned a page. Without looking up, he said, "Opening a wormhole is another way."

Thor perked up in interest. "I thought it's for interstellar travel?"

"It is commonly used as such, but it can also be for what you're asking. Whether in the time that had passed or is yet to pass is a different story though."

"And how is this wormhole created?" Thor had the gist of it from the Battle of New York, with Loki using the space stone and Stark Tower's energy source.

"Wormholes are around us but not visible to the naked eye. Think of them as tiny crevices in a smooth-surfaced object. You'd think they're not there, but it's an accepted fact that the object has wrinkles," Loki told him. "You don't 'create' one, you merely enlarge it to make it passable. Though it is difficult to stabilize it without help from any device specifically designed for such."

"What happens when a wormhole is not stable?"

"You get swallowed before you can even reach the other end." Loki shrugged. "Destroyed along with it."

Alright. Without the space stone to open a wormhole, it was impossible to get a stable portal in time. It sounded simple enough that Thor understood it perfectly, therefore crossing it off from his mental list of how he could have gotten six years back—if it could even be called a list when it was sadly lacking in content.

The trickster put away the book he was reading, his attention solely on Thor. "Pray tell what's the sudden interest on the topic is about."

"A fleeting fancy." Thor didn't have to look to know Loki wasn't convinced. "I've been intrigued."

Loki seemed to take pity on his attempt to avoid the question with a clipped answer. The brunet held up both his palms. "You don't have to tell me, but I want to make sure you understand the consequences in case you're planning to take a time trip." He paused. "And you'll have to take me with you so that I can keep you in line and avoid paradoxes." Loki's lips curved into a conspiratorial smirk.

"None of that, brother," Thor assured him. "Believe me when I say there's nowhere else I'd rather be right now, or anytime," he murmured. He cleared his throat, leaning forward against the desk. "Another thing, there's a favor I want to ask."

"If it's the hunt at VAlfheim your friends has been raving on for days, I'll pass. The realm got old to me."

Thor shook his head, undeterred. "It'll only be the two of us, and it's not in VAlfheim either."

"Oh? Are you sure you should be squandering it with me? Sif and the Warriors Three has been looking for you since the early hours."

"I'm sure it can wait," Thor said. "Besides, it's been a while since we had a trip. Something tells me
we won't be getting any in the next centuries when we take up on our duties." He put on his best pleading look when he noticed that Loki wasn't budged. "Please?"

"Fine," Loki said, grumbling slightly. "Where are we going?"

Thor momentarily counted it as victory. "While we're on the subject of my fleeting interests, I thought I'd show you another. Except that this one won't be passing anytime soon."

Loki wasn't impressed at the array of selection of cold treat.

"Welcome to Baskin Robbins. May I take your order?" the male attendant in a pink cap and attire (which Loki thinks an obnoxious color, by the way) said, practically drawling and giving the vibe that he should be anywhere but there.

Thor beamed enthusiastically at the employee. "I'll have the banana split, friend..." he squinted his eyes, reading the name tag. He missed the attendant's confusion at being called friend. "Scott." Thor turned to Loki, who appeared to be sending a dry look at Scott. Thor decided to order for the trickster. "He'll have one as well."

"Two banana splits coming right up." Scott was presented with two varying expressions—a flat out bored look with crossed arms from the brunet, as if judging him and the choices he made in life this far, while the other has the excitement of an overgrown kid, though the term overgrown wasn't exactly appropriate for a hulking blond man.

"What are we doing in Midgard again?" Loki asked as they waited. He asked for the third time. He should have asked multiple times, just to be clear, before Thor specifically requested to use the other path (the one known only to Loki) to the realm and not the Bifrost. In Thor's defense, he knew S.H.I.E.L.D. would be after their tails if the Bifrost left an unexplainable imprint on Midgard.

"Sightseeing, simply put."

"There's no sight to see in Midgard, Thor," Loki argued. "If there is, then Alfheim will not be the only realm I will frequent." He was an admirer of the rich nature of the Elven realm. Alfheim has the tranquility Loki likes, a break from the ever loud Asgardians. For him, Midgard was as rambunctious as Asgard, if not worse, with their day-to-day activities. Most of the mortals have few affection to spare for their environment too, replacing forestlands with towering concretes for pointless functions. There wasn't anything in Midgard that he hadn't seen on his own home realm.

"That frown won't do you good, brother," Thor mused. "I know what you're thinking. It's not the place, it's the people."

Loki was handed with a cup of the treat. It has slices of fruits and scoops of the food Thor called ice cream. He eyed it with disdain while Thor dug on his without waiting to be outside the establishment, murmuring and nodding in approval at the taste, occasionally saying he missed it. Seeing Thor eat with gusto, Loki supposed he could humor him, spooning a bit from the ice cream with suspicion.

It wasn't too terrible.

Thor hid a grin.

"Since when have you been familiar with Midgard?" Loki asked, noting the disguise Thor specified earlier in order for them to blend well among the mortals, in which Loki was having doubts if it was working whenever they get a lot of heads turning their way on the road.
"Not long ago. Only when I can sneak alone," Thor said, might as well clarify that he wasn't sneaking to brothels (though he totally was during these years).

"And the recurring interest with mortals?"

"It's their diversity, I think, that attracts me," Thor said. "They're unlike us who are a race of warriors, nor like the other races you could generally describe. There's a bunch of variety and yet not one never belonging. Everybody has their own place in their world. They haven't reached their peak of development yet, with more to learn about their selves and own planet. Maybe it's because of their shorter lives than ours, which is also their special gift, I think. Because of it, they know how to live the fullest and form meaningful relationships. With their limited time, they try not to take things for granted. And it's fascinating of them to think that hope has room in every shadow. Maybe that's what makes me admire them more, the unwavering faith and belief of something despite the odds."

Loki has plenty to say to those. Midgardians were divided, people working under a different rule depending on their location. It caused them conflicts—the varying morality and beliefs—since, as Thor said, the mortals were not one to waver from something they stood for. No wonder their history was bloody, their battles fought over petty reasons. The current generation might not be the same as the ones before them, but there was evil in the hearts of men that could be unleashed with the right trigger—like greed for power and wealth, their common weakness. Secretly, Loki was glad for their slow advancement and ignorance of the life outside their world.

He could claim that Thor was merely seeing the good out of this race, whilst Loki was seeing the other side. He could hardly fault Thor's trait of seeing the better part of anything.

"I will propose to father that I plan to take Midgard under my protection," Thor stated.

"Do you think it wise? Your protection can serve you more politically on other realms. Midgard isn't aware of you or of Asgard. It will mean nothing to them," Loki reasoned.

"It is not my intention to be recognized by them," Thor said firmly. "Only that I wish to protect them from terrible forces outside that they don't know of."

It dawned to Loki that Thor didn't simply like them. He loved these mortals. The trickster kept the realization to himself. If Thor hasn't figured it out yet, then he soon would.

Ah, if only the humans know what they have.

Loki was silent when Thor showed him around New York, in places he had been personally. His brother was difficult to please, he knew as much, but it never put Thor off. He has a lot of catching up to do with Loki, assurances to make that they've always been equal and that there was no need for him to live in Thor's shadow. This time, Thor knew the truth beforehand. He wouldn't keep it from him, seeing as it was a dire mistake made from previous.

Once Loki found out and decided to leave, then Thor wanted it to be a choice he made not out of fear of being inadequate. For the meantime that it wasn't weighing down on them, Thor wanted to spend some time with him, however short it might be.

"Do you think father will be mad that we're loitering around Midgard?"

"Highly likely," Loki replied. "If Heimdall knows we're here first."

"You cloaked us?" Thor forgot to tell that bit to Loki. It turned out that there was no need after all.
"Force of habit."

"Why am I not surprised?" Thor snorted. "You should take me next time with you to Alfheim," he suggested.

"Are we talking about the same place you deemed dreary when I asked you once?"

"Elven land, why not? You said the scenery is breathtaking there."

"Yes, and I mean the nature. Not..." The trickster struggled a bit, frowning. "The bathing female elves by the falls."

Thor chuckled. "That's one more reason to go there."

Loki rolled his eyes fondly. "Oh, shut up, you oaf."

"Kidding, but elves are beautiful creatures, male and female alike. Forgive me if I appreciate their loveliness." Thor patted him encouragingly on the back. "And I won't blame you either if there's a maiden waiting for you in Alfheim."

Loki cleared his throat. "There's no maiden."

"A bachelor then?"

"No."

Thor smiled good-naturedly. "All I'm saying is you better introduce them to me. I want to make sure they deserve you."

"Don't pull that crap on me, Thor. I'm not a woman." The blond laughed at that much to Loki's chagrin. "And what makes you think it isn't the other way around? It could be me who doesn't deserve them."

Thor's expression softened. "As if. You're smart, clever for his own good, knows his way with words, brave, strong in a sense of your own abilities with magic, good with knives if that's their thing. Oh, and they should know that you're one of the best cook of the palace, but you're a prince so the servants don't let you take over the kitchen." He looked up, thinking of more. "They do say elves are romantic people. You can make them poems and whatever you're usually writing. I'm sure they'll love it."

"Even reforms and treaties?"

"Even those." Thor nodded, more to himself. "Anybody will be lucky to have you, brother. Don't sell yourself short."

"I'm not. It's just that they usually prefer the crown prince than the second son." Loki's lips thinned to a line and not meeting Thor's gaze.

Thor wasn't expecting the low self-esteem from Loki who carried his own proudly and wasn't above arrogance on occasion. "Is that how you see it? You second only to me?"

"Don't you see that I'm envious of you sometimes?" The trickster smiled humorlessly. "You getting the favor of our father, and the people revered you as the golden prince."

"You're my brother and my friend. Sometimes I'm envious, but never doubt that I love you."
Thor’s mind supplied a precious memory from before, back when their relationship as brothers was yet to collapse. He always held on those words, even as Thor has come to accept that their paths were diverged.

His hand found Loki’s, squeezing. "You don’t have to seek anyone’s approval. I like you being yourself. The mischief, snark, and sarcasm included since they’re part of the package," Thor said the last bit comically but far from jesting. "Change is inevitable for all of us, but never doubt that I love you. No matter what." The scene was but a memory from the previous timeline, but it didn’t mean that Thor wouldn’t be using Loki’s own words to him. If back then Loki was actually waiting for a reply, then here it was now.

Loki stared far away, beyond the view overlooking the lake of Manhattan. "You’re awfully sentimental today," he commented.

As neutral it may sound, the light squeeze Thor got in return was enough of an answer.

"I am," Thor relented.

It took some several caught flashes of cameras from giggling female teenagers, with some brave enough to approach and ask for pictures (for someone who said nobody knew him in Midgard, Thor was very familiar with picture taking, Loki thought idly), and much to Loki’s surprise, he got to be dragged as well among the particular group of young women in uniform, fawning over his form-fitting two-piece Midgardian attire. Thor also saw Stark plenty of times flashed on ridiculously huge boards that sometimes displayed black and white projections of Captain America and his early years in the war. They passed the tower a couple of times, with the large signage still bearing the symbol of the Man of Iron.

After roping the trickster into eating shawarma, much to Loki’s repulse to the strong scent of the food (but ate it anyway, with Thor patiently waiting for the approval which Loki begrudgingly gave; suffice to say, Thor had a shit eating grin), and convincing the brunet to pick the realm for their next escapades (with Thor constantly dropping hints about Sakaar), they both decided to call it a day, returning to Asgard using the path earlier.

"I look forward to next time," Thor said once they arrived at the palace.

Loki looked amused. "You say that as if we were on a date."

"Could be if you want to," Thor quipped, unbothered.

Loki opened his arms jokingly, waiting for something Thor had no idea what. "Give us a kiss."

Thor elbowed him lightly, laughing until he turned to a corner and caught Frigga stalking the halls. They were a second late before she noticed them, moving briskly towards the two as they stood straighter.

"Mother." Thor’s jaw ached from the overly stretched smile in trying to appease Frigga, not fooled by her calm expression when rebuke was likely brewing underneath the surface. "Um, hello, mother," he tried again meekly.

Loki was more graceful in testing the waters at least, hiding his mirth behind clamped lips. "We were absent," he began. "For a few hours."

"For half a day," Frigga corrected.
"For half a day," he amended. There was a silent agreement with Thor that Loki would be in
charged of the talking, while Thor would be the one to give his best rendition of the look as if one's
puppy has been kicked. "Sightseeing. Not in Asgard."

"I assume Heimdall isn't aware where either."

"I may have hidden us from his sight." He quickly added, "It was a neutral realm, mother. If ever
something happens, we can take care of ourselves."

She regarded the quiet Thor, who seemed as if mulling over the mistake of sneaking from the palace
—that or he was doing a good job with his expression. Frigga finally sighed. "Did you two have
fun?"

"We did, don't we?" It was as if a switch has been flicked and Thor returned to being a jolly giant,
pulling Loki to his side by the shoulder. The brunet was caught off guard but didn't express denial.

"That's what matters," she said knowingly. "Now go see the Allfather. He has been looking for the
both of you."

Thor and Loki excused themselves, with Frigga watching their retreating back fondly as she listened
half-heartedly to their exchange of gibes.

It was pleasant to know she was worrying over nothing.

"That stance is hideous, Thor. You're pretending to be unguarded, not on the verge of mauling the
opponent," Loki barked.

Thor scowled at his brother's direction. He was beginning to regret asking for Loki's expertise in
knifeplay. He was under the impression that it would be easy, with his mastery of other weapons
such as the sword and spear. He should have listened when Loki warned him that it would be about
stealth since small knives were typically concealed and more effective when combined with the
surprise factor.

Deception wasn't Thor's style, nor was fighting without facing his opponent, but while he didn't have
the Mjolnir, he might as well expand his skills. Loki might be difficult to please with his high
standards, but damn if he wasn't a good instructor.

Thor waved briefly to the Warriors Three and Sif who were standing by the weapon rack as
spectators, something Loki wasn't that pleased about. More so when they came closer, with the vibe
of looking for a spar.

He wasn't wrong.

"What better practice than using it in a fight?" Volstagg said, seconded by Fandral.

Sif was far from discouraged with Loki's change from stern to dour. Hogun was, as usual, tagging
along with the rest without complain.

Thor turned to Loki. "Would you like to?"

The trickster wasn't used to being asked first, especially by Thor who craved a good spar as Volstagg
craved for a meaty lamb leg. He waved a hand dismissively; it was five against one after all. His
expression softened to that of resigned. "Go on."
"Since it's the prince's first drive, how about two on four?" Fandral suggested. "The brothers versus us. You use only knives. No illusions," he said, eyeing Loki as warning. "First team to have a member knocked out loses."

Hardly fair if Thor was asked, but Loki remained unmov ing and determined to take up the challenge. And for Loki's efforts teaching him, Thor would make him proud. "Deal."

At respective distance between the opposing parties, the spar commenced without further ado.

Sif was immediately on Loki, which the latter guessed was a touch personal in regards to the prank he pulled on her. The knowing smirk provoked her even more into attacking his unguarded flank while Fandral encircled the area behind him. Hogun and Volstagg were on Thor, with Volstagg instantly going for a head butt. Hogun's mace came flying to Thor's shank to put him out of balance, a move that Thor narrowly avoided.

Sif's and Fandral's brute force were too much for Loki to handle with mere knives. Strategically, he moved back near Thor's position, calculating the distance between him and Volstagg. He momentarily met Thor's eyes, somehow managing to relay what he was thinking. In a blur of movements, Loki switched places with Thor, and crouching low enough, elbowed the back of Volstagg's knee, throwing him out of balance. He parried the upcoming blow from Hogun, hitting the handle of the knife against Hogun's wrist.

Thor was doing a good job of evading the attacks thrown by Fandral and Sif. Fandral moved as if in a dance, something Thor used to his advantage, always on defensive mode unless Fandral was changing his stance. Sif was actively seeking him on the field, always near wherever Thor was. Thor didn't miss the signal she was giving Fandral before she thrusted the pointed end of her spear and swinging the whole length of it as she twisted. Thor was guarding himself through sheer strength against Sif's blows, the knife he borrowed from Loki barely keeping up. Alright, Thor conceded that it was hardly a fair fight.

Which made it more exciting in his opinion.

He pushed back to Sif, completely forgetting about Fandral. He jabbed her on the side, almost knocking her weapon from her grip when he noticed Loki cornered by the other three, with Fandral behind the trickster to deliver a finishing move. Fandral was the best of them with a blade, and Thor had no worries that he was only about to disarm Loki in a quick move, but Thor couldn't help the warning he yelled along with the instinct to shoot out his hand at Fandral's direction.

There was a thin blinding spark that send Fandral crashing several meters across the training grounds, to their utter shock. The spar was instantly stopped as they checked on Fandral. He wasn't twitching, and Thor took it as a bad sign until Fandral groaned aloud, much to their collective relief.

"That hurts," he grounded out. "I thought I said no magic?"

"No. You said 'no illusions','" Loki said, shrugging but nonetheless relieved. "And that wasn't me." He looked at Thor over his shoulder, slightly concerned. He gestured to the others. "Why don't you bring him to the healers?" Volstagg carried Fandral, supported by Hogun, with Sif following suit.

"What was that?" Loki said once it was only the two of them.

"It's something I've been practicing the last few days," Thor replied evenly, choosing his words carefully. "I was having difficulty with it. Today is the first time it acted as it should be."

"It's supposed to send your friend to the infirmary?" Loki's tone wasn't reprimanding though, perhaps
understanding that Thor wasn't in control of whatever it was he conjured (he guessed it was lightning). "How come it worked now?"

"Adrenaline, probably." Or the fact that he wanted to defend Loki from a hit. Thor wasn't sure.

Loki nodded, finding it reasonable. "Well, why don't you go to him? I don't think he appreciated you merely standing dumbly."

Thor smiled wryly, returning the knives. "Can we continue tomorrow?"

"Of course." Loki regarded him, hands on his back and the blades put away. "You can even use that little trick of yours. It has potential."

Thor planned it to be more than a mere trick. "I'm looking forward to it."

Although it has been weeks he was under Loki's tutelage since the incident, Thor never managed to repeat the sudden spike of lightning again. Loki's efforts weren't unfruitful once Thor learned meditation. He was yet to test it whether it was helpful in healing faster than normal, but knowing Loki, perhaps it was his secret on how. He wondered if Loki debated with himself whether to reveal a technique of his to Thor.

In turn, Thor studied him. He found an undesirable pattern when it came to his brother interacting with his friends. There was a fragile tolerance between them, and the tolerance was only there when Thor was around. In fact, the expertly hidden aversion to the second son of Odin was being emitted by most Asgardians. Thor knew the people tend to lean on favoritism, but he had no idea it was this worse.

He couldn't fault Loki if he felt out of place Asgard simply because of being different.

Thor hated himself for not seeing it before.

But for all of Loki's recluse, Thor propelled himself towards him, albeit intruding at times. He was quite confident that Loki would send him away if he was suffocating him with his presence. The lack of dismissal was a positive sign to Thor (and here was to hoping too). Thor lost count on the times he slept in the library with a thick tome on the history of Asgard serving as his pillow. Needless to say, he kept getting looks of utter abhorrence by Loki whenever Thor woke up with neck and back pain, coupled with the aches on his sides by Loki's unrepentant kicks to his gut in shaking him awake.

A few minutes later, Thor would often see him smirking in victory.

It was the little things that made spending time with Loki rewarding. Thor didn't know he has it in him to make the trickster laugh without making a fool of himself (though often, it was what it takes). Thor privately likes the incredulous stares he would get whenever he asked or do something his past self never did, always when Loki thought Thor was turned the other way. Perhaps he was still getting used to the sudden change in Thor's demeanor but was gradually embracing it. It was one of his hopes, after all—Thor maturing and showing interest in other than himself.

They parted ways before midnight, with Loki going for his chambers while Thor with another destination in mind. Following an exchange of good nights, Thor went straight to where Odin was.

On his third knock, Thor was allowed inside, the sight of a pensive Allfather greeting him. Odin was standing by the only window of the room, hands on his back in quiet contemplation. Thor went beside him.
"You wish to speak to me," Odin said, as if he was anticipating the moment.

"It's about myself, father," Thor began. "And the future of all of us."

"What of it, Thor? Are you here to tell me that I'm leading us in the wrong path?"

"Not wrong, but there will be repercussions along the way if you make the same mistake of—" Thor supposed this was it. He would let fate decide whether telling the truth to Odin would be for the best or worst. "The mistake of not letting Loki the truth in advance."

"You speak as if I have to make the same difficult decision before." Odin's voice was unwavering yet somehow feeble.

"Because it isn't your first." Thor exhaled. "I know he isn't my brother by blood. That he's a son of Laufey you took home and made part of our family. I know of it, because I you told me, father. I… I've lived this day before."

"You are from the time that is yet to pass," Odin observed, expression remarkably not giving anything away.

"I am. Six years from now, to be exact."

"And you returned in this time to alter the course of events."

"It was accidental. I thought I died, only to wake up on the day of my coronation. I took it as a chance to correct my mistakes such as accepting the crown as if it was served to me in a silver platter just because it's my birthright. I want to avoid the horrible events that happened in the other time stream, and you have to help me, father, by telling Loki the truth. We owe him as much."

"Does he know? In the other time you speak of, does he know?"

"I made a dire mistake, and one of the consequences lead to him finding it out on his own. Hatred grew in him when he realized that he was seeking your approval for naught. Hated me even more for being your real son," Thor whispered the last sentence. "He considered himself as another of your stolen relic. While I know that you grew to love him as your own, you never saw that Loki was feeling out of place in Asgard long before. It destroyed him to find out that he was actually one of the monsters Asgardians were told of as children."

"I never saw him as any different from us. In a time where there was only death and where winning the war hardly mattered, he shone like a beacon amidst the ruins. I never forgot how he calmed down when he saw me, and I love him since then," Odin recalled, his visage clearly showing the millennia he lived. "If knowing his origin will not end well for Loki, how is it different if I tell him? It isn't prevention, Thor, but merely delaying the inevitable."

"But it is better than believing a lie and then finding out the truth in the worst time," Thor urged, his tone raising. "Coming from you, father, trust me when I say that it'll be a whole lot different."

"No, Thor," Odin placated him. "If it will break him, then it is my duty to protect him from it."

"You don't understand," Thor croaked. He knew that once Odin's mind has been made up, it would be difficult to change it. But he thought he would be raising valid points, and that they were enough of an argument. Instead Thor was hearing Odin's stubbornness. "That will only turn him into what he was. He would kill his sire and would try to bring end to Jotunheim, for you. He would dare conquer Midgard with an army of Chitauri, seeking to bring the human to their knees. He would be a murderer, father, with convoluted ideals. And when I thought I could save him, he was already too
far gone, turning to a person I didn't even know. Would you rather see him that way?" Thor couldn't
care less if he was breaking every rules of time traveling by revealing too much of the future. He
wasn't there to preserve the time; rather, to change it and make Odin see some sense.

And yet for all of Thor's reasoning, Odin remained unmoving. Thor realized that he would no longer
be heard on the subject, with Odin finally turning a blind eye and deafening his ears.

"You're proving her right," Thor said, listless. "That your solution to every problem is to cover it
up."

Odin faced him, caught off guard by the statement.

"She said you did the same thing to her. Locking her away as you wrote the history of Asgard
without including that it was built in colonialism and genocide." The Allfather seemed to have
staggered back at this though not denying what Thor said. "You tried to forget her, your firstborn
and my elder sister. Does it mean that you're fine letting Loki become like her? And when we can no
longer handle him and he becomes a threat, you'll imprison him for as long as you could just like you
did to Hela," Thor finished angrily, unaware of Odin's internal turmoil.

In the midst of Thor's fervent state, the Allfather leaned aback heavily, finding a hold on the
windowsill that unfortunately didn't support him. Odin landed on the floor as an unconscious heap,
Odinsleep taking over before he could witness Thor paling and rushing to him.

In the dead of the night in the palace, a yell for help could be heard.

It wasn't until later when Loki asked Thor what triggered the early Odinsleep did the latter admit
being in an argument with the Allfather, with Thor flying off the handle until Odin collapsed.

"It's always your temper," was what rang in Thor's ears as he was left alone, with Loki's look of
disappointment etched in his mind.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

i realized Thor and Scott haven't met yet in the movies? and uh, i just kinda assume
Lang is not serving sentence yet (cause i want to give him some slack) and working in
Baskin Robbins (because they always find out).
Although he should have been numb to the feeling since he had been in the same position once, it did nothing on the tightening of his chest by immense grief.

"I'm sorry," Loki managed to say between ragged breathing. The tiniest effort made him wince from his injury.

Thor shushed him, telling him to not speak and save his breath. Internally, Thor was panicking at the lack of accessibility for help. The devastation made the city unrecognizable, piles of wreckage mingling with littered corpses of allies and enemies alike. Not long ago, Thor passed by the Captain's broken shield, of the Man of Iron's huge chunks of his suit's parts that if Thor had looked any further, he wouldn't miss the lifeless body of Anthony Stark not far. Thor wanted to forget the teenage boy who joined them, enthusiastic about saving the world and using his spider-like abilities to be a hero; a boy only to Thor's eyes and yet so earnest, only to die at his early age, seemingly like a ragdoll after saving civilians as much as he could.

The air smelled of death, taking with it whoever on its path. Except Thor who was currently cradling another soon to be—no, he wouldn't let it. Thor wouldn't let Loki be taken. A part of him was anticipating it to be a trick, like the one that Loki pulled before. And Thor would rather it be the case, for it would mean that he would see him again, mocking him for his mourning in which Thor would hate him for and forgive him again later on.

Wouldn't that be better than for it to be real?

A weak wry chuckle broke from the trickster, as if reading Thor's mind. Thor's lips twitched to a half-smile, hope not leaving him yet despite the continuous free flow of blood from Loki's deep large gash on the abdomen, staining Thor's palm stickily. He was aware that he was being too optimistic about the situation, but what else was there for Thor?

"I'm sorry," Loki repeated, gurgling in his own blood. "I'm afraid it's for real this time," he gritted out, a hand lowering itself on his abdomen, placing it above Thor's.

Loki mouthed three more words, barely caught by Thor. He held Loki closer, tucking him underneath his chin as life flitted away from green eyes.
Thor sat up with a gasp and damp eyes.

It was a terrible nightmare that he blamed on the lack of sleep the past few weeks. He had been subjected to an unhealthy amount of stress, feeling as if he was stretched too thin acting as the prince regent. He wasn't without aid in taking upon Odin's duties. There was Frigga, who even as she remained by Odin's bedside day and night, never failed to check on her sons from time to time. Loki was bearing almost half of Thor's responsibilities, handling affairs concerning outside of Asgard. He was more than willing to also help with the affairs inside the realm as long as he wasn't involved in breaking petty squabbles of Asgardians, or listen half-heartedly to citizens' whining that were Thor's main source of headaches. Overall, they were both doing the best they could. It wasn't as perfect as how Odin gracefully handled his kingly duties, but they were trying, albeit missing meals and sleep. Thor knew his father was a successful leader, but experiencing this, he recognized completely how actually impressive Odin was in running the kingdom. The Allfather was effective in dividing himself to be in his multiple roles simultaneously.

Granted, it was Thor's first time (and technically, Loki's too), and they did say there was a first time for everything. Leading a handful of Asgardians was one thing, and quite another to lead a realm of them. Thor wasn't mistaken when he said he wasn't prepared for it.

During the breaks he could squeeze in between, Thor's mind would be occupied by mulling over whether the dream was a mere bad one or a laid out future event should the time travel didn't happen. The fine line between reality and distant possibility was disturbing.

It was even regarding Loki, no less.

Things were quite shaky between them at the first few days of Odinsleep. Loki was dour around him and never saw Thor unless it was of importance. Thor couldn't fault his brother for blaming him; he did push the Allfather to an untimely rest. But Thor didn't regret calling Odin out, even if he was uncertain whether it would be for the better or worse. Looking back at Odin's reluctance in revealing the truth, it appeared that Thor would have to take matters on his own hands.

To have an impeccable timing was all that was left.

As much as Thor loathed to admit it, now when responsibilities were pressing down on them wasn't the most ideal.

Soon.

Loki's disappointment seemed to have ebbed gradually in seeing Thor's infallible effectiveness in regency. Thor had even taken with grace the brief visit of dwarven delegation with ease, and surprisingly, without tempers rising. The visit was more of a surprise, in which Loki suspected the dwarves had deliberately chosen the time to avoid the Allfather. No love lost there.

As for Thor though, he believed he already failed in diplomacy after mistaking a female dwarf for a male. Loki hid his mirth with a cough then. To be fair, he wasn't above making the same mistake; all dwarves sported magnificent ruddy beards.

The visit lasted for three nights, and with all the noise the dwarves made during the feast in their honor (which Thor did a splendid job of; he knew how to get to their hearts, it seemed), it was a wonder why Odin hasn't woken up yet.
They had taken a liking to Thor, even deeming the prince regent to be a better ruler than his predecessor—a very rude comment to make under the roof of the host. Thor took the compliment gratefully, saying he has more to learn, and at the same time defending the Allfather and managing to politely berate their terrible manners. Loki swore his eyebrows shot up on how Thor did so with only two sentences.

More impressive was Thor securing a century more of fruitful alliance between Asgard and Nidavellir because of the warmest welcome we received, laddie (verbatim). They didn't forget to insult the walls of Asgard, however. They deemed the craftsmanship was as if created by those soft and delicate light elves. The dwarven delegation departed not without a promise of sending their skilled stone and metal workers to fortify the borders with their priced metal that Thor was sure sounded like 'myrtle'.

"It's mithril," Loki corrected him, unblinking. "A rare metal that can only be found in Nidavellir. They use it mainly for crafting weapons and armors since it's a light and sturdy metal. The dwarves guard it as they would with their culture. You just had them promising you a large amount of it."

"Oh."

"Yes, Thor, that's one way to answer to that," Loki said dryly.

"Does that mean I did alright?"

The trickster snorted. "Trust me, it's more than alright."

Thor let out a breath in relief. He noticed Loki watching him, bemused. "What?"

The brunet shrugged. "You know what this means? A delegation from Alfheim will follow."

Thor tilted his head confusedly. "I don't think I know why."

"Let's just say the light elves will not let themselves be bested by dwarves." He eyed Thor. "In anything."

Thor wasn't sure if the groan that escaped him was in exasperation or dismay. It was bad, that was what.

Loki straightened himself. Standing, he said, "You did well, brother. Keep it up." The pat was more consoling than encouraging.

Thor couldn't help the triumphant smile though.

As expected, the light elves didn't took kindly at the news of the Asgard's prince regent gladly receiving the dwarves. Thor was awfully frustrated whether to take it as an offense or simply let it be. The haughtiness was uncomely of these creatures, but then again, nobody was perfect.

Fortunately, Loki was there to appease the light elves. If Thor was favored by dwarves, Loki was favored by the light elves. That alone kept Thor in their good graces. Just his luck.

The light elves were surreal in their beauty, like statues of old—unmoving and unchanging, even as they promised Thor an elven bride, the unbetrothed daughter of the king, famous for her semblance to one of their revered deities, with her hair akin to the evening sky that captured the glittering stars above, hence the title of the Lady Evening Star.
Thor barely registered that he was being pushed to marry somebody politically. He was blanching when Loki elbowed him sharply on the side. The latter wasn't kidding when he said the light elves wouldn't dare lose against the dwarves. Whatever the Hel began the interracial feud, it better not be because of trying to curry another kingdom's favor.

"I, uh, will think about it," Thor attempted to say neutrally. "It's a huge step. Which, I admit, I'm not prepared for."

The finicky elf, who Thor mentally called the *prissy elf*, flatly said, "Good. We'll send her soon with an envoy." He stood straighter, the gesture made him an inch or two taller than Thor. "May this signify a more lasting relationship between Alfheim and Asgard." Thor was fumbling in mimicking the elven tradition of greeting: placing a closed palm on the chest, the left of where the heart was, and then nodding down.

The twitching of Loki's lips went unnoticed by Thor.

"It could have went worse," Loki murmured, weight also coming off his back, try as he might to hide it. He regarded Thor for a minute. "And they just secured you a bride of royalty."

"What am I supposed to do with her?" The panic in Thor's tone was, frankly, laughable.

"You marry her," Loki deadpanned. "Have plenty of children with her that will either be pointy-eared or not depending on whose blood is stronger. Although, I'll be honest, I'm not looking forward yet for half-elven nephews and nieces."

Thor wasn't either.

"That's far away in the future, brother. Please don't make it like some bad premonition."

Loki slid beside him, palms open in surrender. "I'm kidding. You do know you can turn her down. Remember that you're not bound to the duty of marriage for convenience. Careful, though. It doesn't mean politicians won't try to wed their daughters to you, and until you're uncommitted to another, they won't stop." On a situation like this was when Loki was glad he was the second born. He might get the same treatment from some desperate families, but at least there weren't a lot. "So why not find a lady? Of course, finding one is the easiest task." Thor wasn't lacking in wenches after all. "What I mean is, you have to find a suitable lady you can present. They don't have to know you're tricking them. Sif is actually a good candidate for posing as your woman. I bet she'll even be glad."

Thor dismissed the suggestion immediately. "Sif is a dear friend. Also, that will be unfair for her." He wasn't blind for her affections for him that went beyond friendship, though it didn't mean he would use it. "Besides, she'll kill me first before she agrees." Thor could feel an incoming oh, please from Loki. "It's a horrible idea, brother," Thor firmly said to stop Loki's retort.

"There goes my brilliant advice."

Advice or a comeuppance to Sif, Thor couldn't decide. Their dislike of each other was fascinating in itself. Sif was arguably the most Loki couldn't stand among Thor's friends. For whatever reasons.

"How is mother?" Thor asked, changing the subject. He hadn't seen her around for a couple of days now.

"The same." Loki was thoughtful for a minute. "I'll try to coax her out tomorrow. See what you can do to distract her for a day. Meanwhile, I'll be the one to stay by the Allfather's bedside." Thor
nodded, acknowledging that Frigga hardly left Odin's side.

"Are you sure you do not wish to be the one to spend time with her instead? She'll enjoy your company more."

A smile tugged Loki's lips. "It won't make much difference with you. Besides, you're too important to be not seen around in the absence of the Allfather."

Thor couldn't argue with that point. "Very well. I shall do as you said." He paused, considering for a moment. "If father wakes up, do tell us immediately."

He wanted to be there once Odin opened his eyes again. Thor owed him as much after his lame attempts of visiting Odin that only went so far at the doors of his chambers. Thor was always hesitant to continue inside, the night of his conversation with Odin replaying like a broken record whenever he was on the verge of knocking.

"I will."

__________________________________________________________

True to his word, Loki was successful in persuading Frigga to spend a day not cooped inside. She appreciated the gesture by her sons, hooking an arm under Thor's as he escorted her to an outdoor lunch.

Thor talked of the recent visits by both the dwarves and light elves. He took the opportunity to ask of the feud between the two races. She mentioned broken oaths and of aid from the other that never came for the other. It was a long standing dispute that nobody on both sides bothered to pacify.

They exchanged a few more words, on varying subjects of tenacious advisors and pigheaded councilors, a topic which Frigga has plenty to share basing from her own experiences.

Although try as he might to steer her from worry for Odin, Thor didn't completely miss the deep concern for the Allfather she couldn't set aside.

"He'll be alright, mother," Thor assured her. "For his age, father can still move a mountain."

"I have no doubt." Frigga shared a knowing smile with Thor. "I should have been used to this, son. He falls to his sleep from time to time long since before we had you, and yet I often fear that it will be his last when his sleep would extend for a few more weeks. Like this one." Her gaze was distant, unmoving. "I hope it isn't a prelude to more frequent sleeps. His strength… has been wavering for some time now."

She wasn't wrong, considering this was also the beginning of the millennia's taking a toll to Odin in the original timeline. Thor used to assume it was because of Odin's despair due to his dismal failure to Loki.

"It's never easy, no matter how many times I've been on the same position."

"I'm afraid it's for real this time."

Thor shook the memory of his dream of Loki's death, thinking it odd that it remained in his mind and not forgotten as nightmares usually were.

"You haven't seen him," she said, observing Thor. "I realized I hadn't seen you around in his chambers."
"I haven't been there yet," Thor replied. He didn't think he could.

"You never did that before. No matter your disagreement with your father, you can't stomach the thought of ignoring him."

He hadn't come into terms how to feel with Odin's obstinate refusal on admitting the truth. Partly, Thor believed he could have handled it better, without Odin falling into Odinsleep. Odin was his father, and with proper tact, he would have listened to Thor.

"You spoke of an argument when he lost consciousness," Frigga began softly, not putting any blame on him. "What happened?"

"I reacted strongly," Thor whispered. "Over something I said that he refused to agree with."

"It must be of ultimate importance if you pushed him on edge." Frigga understandingly didn't pry. "And you must have surprised him that much by fervently expressing your thoughts."

*Among other things,* his mind unhelpfully supplied.

"You feel guilty," Frigga answered for him to his uncertainty.

*Yes.* Thor didn't speak, but the silence was enough to her.

"I hope it will come to pass, whatever it is."

"It's Loki, mother. I know he's not yours, but I couldn't care less because family is more than blood. Though if father doesn't see that keeping it from Loki will not result well, then you're the only person left who will have a place in him, but, like me, not enough to reach him. I know this because I've traveled through time from the future, and I'm here to correct the past. It includes your death which broke Loki even further. It made him fearless since he knew he had nothing to lose."

If only Thor had it in him to say what was exactly played out in his head. Wouldn't it better to get rid of at least some of the weight of the burden?

Only it wasn't that easy.

He closed his eyes, sighing inwardly. "I hope so too."

Oddly enough, he hadn't seen Loki around the following day, or the next, and even the next after that.

Thor checked for him around the palace, slightly alarmed that he found no trace of presence of his brother. He steeled himself and was relieved when Heimdall told him of Loki leaving for Svartalfheim. He was about to complain that the trickster never mentioned it to him when the Gatekeeper assured him that it was a sudden call from Queen Alflyse.

Hearing the name made Thor paled. There was a story there that he didn't want to revisit.

With a cough, he excused himself, feeling silly for his worry.

Though to be honest, it tended to get lonely at the palace sometimes without company.

Loki returned by the fourth evening, giving Thor a clipped report of what had transpired. It seemed interesting, if only Thor wasn't occupied observing his brother carefully. He noted the paler
complexion, the dark rings under the eyes, and generally the tired look he was projecting then. How could Thor forget that Loki was doing the heavy lifting as much as Thor did?

"You should rest, brother. Can't have you collapsing from exhaustion." Or follow the Allfather in his deep sleep, if that was also a trait.

Loki minutely flinched, turning away before Thor could catch it. "There will be time for rest. He's bound to wake up sooner."

"How do you know?"

Loki was listless when he murmured a reply, "I just do."

Loki made himself scarce to Thor.

Baffling, to say the least. More so was Loki not speaking to him as if Thor wronged him in some way, giving him the cold shoulder treatment. Heck, the trickster would even address him formally and nothing else.

Unable to stand it, Thor mustered the courage and corner him one morning, holding out a knife.

"Spar?"

The brunet was hesitant to accept, until he finally relented. It might just be what Loki needed, judging from the heavy blows he had thrown at Thor that lacked their accuracy and measurements—which didn't make them less deadly, however. There were more frustration and recklessness in Loki's movements, as if letting out all that was pent up inside him.

Ironically, Thor was the calm one of the two of them then.

Loki stopped until his arms ached and went as heavy as lead. He was panting when he laid down the ground, not caring of the dirt getting on his attire. Thor joined him without a word, waiting for Loki to calm his breath.

"You okay?"

The trickster smiled wryly. "I've been better."

Thor supposed it was something Loki didn't want to talk about. He let him keep it to himself; Loki would tell him if he wanted to.

"I should take a bath," Loki announced, standing up. He was about to tuck his pair of knives away when he decided against it, instead offering them to Thor. "Take these. They're yours."

"Why are you giving me this pair? It's the first you had." Thor's eyes widened. This was his brother's favorite!

"Keep them," Loki insisted. "You did well, and I can't think of any to reward you with."

"I didn't ask you to teach me for a reward."

"Nonetheless, you've earned it." Loki's expression softened. "You did well, Thor."

"Thanks to you," Thor countered. "You've been a great instructor and the best support I could ever have in this regency. I think you also deserve the praise. Good job, brother."
Loki seemed grateful for the statement, lips quirking. "Thank you."

Thor peered at the blades. "Thank you for these too. I shall care for them as you would." He would hold them with importance as he did to his own hammer before.

"I have no doubt," Loki said. "And take good care of yourself, too," was his last piece of advice that sounded very much like a farewell as he turned to clean himself up.

Thor didn't like the sudden feeling of dread that he has while he watched Loki walk away.

By the end of the day, the Allfather was finally awake.

They merely exchanged terse greetings and kept Odin up to date on the important matters. Thor was glad to be dismissed afterwards. He and Odin were both too weary for another confrontation. Thor would not risk another heated meeting with the Allfather.

Surprisingly, even Loki spared Odin very few words. It turned out that Thor wasn't the only person who needed the break.

He called for the trickster once outside. "Tomorrow. Can I ask you again to join me?" If Odin was beyond persuasion, then Thor would do it on his own. "I have something important to tell you."

Loki appeared to have made up his mind to decline. "Is it life and death?" he asked lightly.

"Possibly," Thor replied grimly.

The trickster went serious, changing his mind, thinking that Thor seemed to have grasped well these days what was considered weighty. "Very well."

"I'll see you tomorrow, brother."

Loki's answer was simply an affirmative smile.

Loki padded gingerly inside Thor's chamber.

He found him already dead to the world, unstripped of his days clothing. Loki was disappointed to find him asleep, but on the other hand decided that it was better for him.

He might lose his will to leave should Thor ask him to stay.

Loki sat beside him quietly. It was either Thor was yet to learn detecting Loki's sneaking, or he was sleeping deeply; he suspected it was the latter. Typical of his brother.

Except that you never were my brother.

Loki could have been as pleasantly ignorant as Thor, strike off the record what Odin said to him in his brief waking moment, but unhindered thoughts kept on coming, such as why Thor was favored between the two of them. It wasn't as if the Allfather would put a frost giant on the throne—Laufey's son, no less.

But Loki never wanted it. All he wanted was to be Thor's equal.

Something which Thor himself already assured him of. Perhaps for all the times he appeared to be a huge oaf, he was right when he told him that he didn't have to get anybody's approval. Odin or not.
If there was one thing Loki was grateful for the secret kept from him his whole life, then it would be growing up and knowing Thor was his brother and Frigga was his mother.

It was enough to take along with him.

He reached out to Thor's forehead, placing a palm and whispered a small spell. It was an unperfected skill, harmless unless he intended to. He pulled forth a recent memory Thor has—the memory Thor deemed pleasant.

What he witnessed was unique—probably a memory of a dream—for Loki caught glimpses of Thor, his hair shorn too short, although fitting. He has a single eye that made him looked more like Odin's heir. Loki didn't disregard how Thor appeared older and albeit worn out, wiser and experienced. He was in a ship of some kind and was embracing another in his arms, making Loki fall back in an instant, afraid to stumble upon an intimate moment.

That might have answered the question of who was holding his brother's affections.

They did say dreams were repressed desires, and Thor was clearly having one about being with his dear person.

Where exactly could Loki fit in?

It was a sign, he supposed, telling him to move forward. Odin might have assuaged his concerns, saying that he no longer saw him as the same babe he stole from Jotunheim to serve as a bridge for a more stable relationship between the two realms. Still, staying in Asgard would be of Odin's design and not Loki's.

About time Loki set the path of his own, even if it meant leaving the people he held dear for good.

"Sleep well, Thor."

As Thor dreamed of having Loki by his side, the second son of Odin vanished from the face of Asgard and was never heard of again.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

i did a lame attempt for that hug scene we're not privy of.

I can't help the LoTR references since I'm rewatching the trilogy as I was typing this chapter. Hope you don't mind them.

anyways, belated happy holidays, everyone! :)
Watershed

Chapter Summary

Was it a complete avoidance or prolonging the inevitable?

Chapter Notes

i should stop apologizing for late updating cause i'll probably never change.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Sif looked back at the past events, she realized they fell like dominos—the previous caused by another before it, and so on. She took herself further down past and came to a realization that it began way back since Thor stared acting strangely.

It was a simple toast that went past the Warriors Three but not to her. She was, after all, more perceptive than given credit for. She noted the tremendous confusion of Thor that followed and had never forgotten when he bolted out as if he couldn't believe what was happening then.

She felt a twinge of concern for him, which she hadn't willed away until Thor was suddenly back to his usual self the same evening, with a touch of oddness if she might add. Not when he refused the crown, as it remained a mystery to them up to now why, but rather when he took Frigga for a dance. It was as if he had longed for it, longed for her. It wasn't a cause for worry, deciding that Thor was just being an affectionate son towards his mother (where Loki was usually a step higher than Thor in that regard).

What surprised her the most was the sudden change of Thor and Loki's relationship. It used to be a subtle competition between them since they came of age, always for the Allfather's attention that Thor already won without difficulty. He was favored greatly over the other, and Thor knew it and used it to keep Loki in line, reminding him his place from time to time. Loki was merely tolerated by them with his association with Thor, and barely a friend or not, Sif didn't miss the envy. She knew Loki had been subliminally suggesting that Thor wouldn't be adequate for the crown. There was truth of what he spoke, but it was confusing whether it came from jealousy or pure concern.

There had been a shift after the supposedly coronation day.

Thor was always found with his brother since, hopping from one realm to another together, she heard. In Asgard, they were both frequently in either the training grounds or the library, a place Loki once deemed his sanctuary, with Thor often declining his friends' invitations politely. The brothers were hardly seen not together, bickering for the sake of it, and after their display at the two versus four, Sif acknowledged that they were a more efficient team than Thor with her and the Warriors Three.

Something changed right under their noses.

Or more accurately, someone changed.
For anybody else who knew Thor, he could be written off as the same golden son of Odin—proud of his achievements, passionate, and could make friends fast, although closely as fast as making enemies, admittedly. But for people like her who knew Thor on a personal level, somebody could say he became less arrogant, with added improvements on his patience and selfishness.

Simply put, Thor was... *humbled* down.

Sif had nothing against on the *new* Thor, as she called it in her mind, but she couldn't avoid the nagging curiosity at the suddenness of it. As if her friend became a brand new person overnight.

Looking at the re-contained Aether she currently has, she was having the question of the lifetime of how the Hel Thor could have known it would be placed on the wrong hands when not moved immediately.

It was a precaution—Thor said like it would explain the mission when it only caused more questions to rise—for once the Convergence began, the Aether would call for Malekith, who would then seek to take it back for himself. In her opinion, it was safely stored in its previous location: a small dimension existing between two planes of known realms, a knowledge passed down from Bor only to Odin. It was guarded enough. Thor didn't share the confidence, however, convinced that it was no longer safe and had to be taken to a place where it was sure to be guarded.

To The Collector.

Looking at him, Sif was unimpressed with the eccentric person standing in front of her and Volstagg. The Collector's Museum was filled with various trinkets from different planets, making the place stuffy, crowding her and Volstagg on the narrow hallway.

Even as she handed to him the Aether, Sif remained internally questioning Thor's decision which the Allfather surprisingly considered and allowed. If what was inside was as dangerous like they claimed, Thor better be right about this.

Sif hoped it wasn't a decision brought by Thor's pent up grieving for his brother who bafflingly went missing without a trace one evening from Asgard.

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For all of his claims of changing the past, Thor couldn't prevent Loki leaving.

It seemed as if there was nothing that could stop it from happening. Knowing his origin in advanced and coming from Odin himself, or Loki finding it out on his own, barely had any difference. There was a light to be seen, if it could be called that, on the fact that there was no reported disturbances in Midgard after a year of Loki's disappearance.

A year.

The almost lack of sign of his brother was enough to tear Thor slowly as days fly by. Occasionally, Thor's mind would be swarmed with morbid thoughts of Loki falling from Bifrost to his death, or to an eternity of oblivion at the ends of the universe, or falling to the same demise like in the original timeline. The first one was fortunately unfounded due to Heimdall's confirmation that Loki was still alive although yet to be found out where. While the last two remained plausible, they were consolations compared to former.

Had Odin foreseen this outcome? If he did, then it would explain his adamancy.

Though if Odin *did*, then he would remain unmoved and would never had bothered with making at least an attempt. Instead, in his fleeting waking moment at the duration of Odinsleep, he did what
Thor asked of him. For that alone, Thor was glad. Odin wasn't one for rubbing salt on the wound, leaving Thor to his devices and spoke of nothing regarding Loki or of his disappearance, but there was the unmistakable pang of regrets Thor could see in him now and then, more so when Odin would glance at Frigga who was mourning on her own. If there was anybody else in Asgard other than Thor who was greatly lamenting over the loss of Loki, it would be their mother.

There were times when Thor would pull himself out of his grief to be strong for Frigga, knowing that dwelling in sadness meant that he accepted that Loki was gone for good, possibly died somewhere he would never know.

He threw himself in planning his next steps, with his hopes for Loki not far in his mind. There were other crises still to avoid. He might have avoided the Chitauri invasion to motion, but there were other threats such as Malekith. The creation of Ultron was hanging in a balance with the mind stone not yet in Midgard, though there were other possible events that could bring it to the mortals. There was also the looming threat of Thanos. Out of the three, he was the one Thor had the least knowledge of.

He learned from Odin that Thanos was born of two Eternals, but by physical appearance he resembled the Deviants. As he grew in to an adult, he augmented his physical strength and abilities mystically and artificially. Thanos was driven by love for the embodiment of death, Mistress Death, and would do anything to please her, courting her with offerings of lives he took from wreaking havoc and genocide. The Mad Titan was on a quest to obtain the infinity stones as part of his courtship, seeking to impress Mistress Death by erasing half of the living in the universe as proof of his love for her.

To think this was the kind of monster Loki made a deal with.

With Thor's reveal to Odin, the Allfather has been more considerate of his inputs. Not altogether too open but not dismissing Thor's opinions as ramblings of an inexperienced prince with a short span of leadership under his belt. Odin weighted them with wisdom in accordance to their implications to Asgard and/or to themselves. He advised Thor not to tell him much to not affect his decisions as a ruler with the knowledge of the future, reminding Thor could freely keep some of the foreknowledge Thor personally deem would bring a huge impact. Time was a fickle thing that even one as old as the Allfather has no wish to trifle with. Odin told him that he would put his trust in Thor's judgement, for better or for worst.

Thor first brought up to Odin the Aether and its role to play soon. Sooner, without Jane's interaction with it. Should Malekith would get ahold of it earlier than before, he would have time to amass a larger army in his disposal by the time of the Convergence—a tremendously more solid force to aid him in destroying the nine realms.

Initially, Odin wasn't planning to sanction Thor's immediate cause for action—understandable, they were dealing with one of the infinity stones, the one kept away successfully from the hands of those who would do no good with that kind of power—but with valid arguments, Thor persuaded the Allfather to send him and the Warriors Three and Sif for the retrieval of the Aether. Odin approved of Thor's choice of company: loyal and trustworthy friends that were a party of four. The fewer, the better.

They set off the day after the obsidian container girded with bronze for the Aether was completed. It was specifically designed for such and exactly how it was created in appearance from the previous. The Aether was unlike any of the infinity stones. It didn't have the solid form like that of its kind but was a sentient fluid that could easily latch to a nearby possible host. The container was designed to attract it the moment the Aether sensed it. Enforced with a strong seiðr, the vessel would keep it
trapped inside.

As for the relocation, Thor would entrust it to one of the elders. The Collector, he was called. Thor knew better than to underestimate him by his name and appearance. The elders were by their own right powerful beings who have been around since the creation of the universe. Thor entrusting the Aether to him was ideal in keeping it away from Asgard where he planned on keeping the Tesseract once he retrieved it from Midgard.

As for the mind stone that hasn’t yet made an appearance in the present time, it was safe to say it was still with the Chitauri, waiting for a wielder of the scepter they could manipulate into thinking that that person was the one in charge, exactly what happened to Loki that Thor deeply wished wouldn’t happen again to his brother.

In the same premises that the mind stone wouldn't show in Midgard, avoiding the creation of Ultron also meant no Vision. He might be an artificial being, but Vision was willing to learn more about life and was probably more human than some mortal Thor had encountered. The last time Thor had seen him, the android was making a lot of progress in his learning. He was dismayed at the thought that Vision could possibly be sacrificed along the way.

Directly from Asgard, they were brought in a pocket dimension devoid of life and light. Though grim the atmosphere was, there was no resistance that lurked in the shadows, merely the barrenness of the area that could fend off anyone; though it might not be enough to quell Malekith's (or anyone's) desire to obtain the Aether. Bor might have chosen the ideal place to hide it, but with the Convergence, it became connected to Midgard where Jane accidentally stumbled upon.

Thor couldn't avoid the Convergence, but he could prevent Jane from coming into contact with the stone and keep Malekith from awakening. Thor sought to let the Convergence happen without any disaster.

And avoid Frigga's death by the hands of Algrim at all cost.

The mission was completed swiftly and smoothly. Thor had doubts if he could pull it off, but once he finally handed the Aether to Sif and Volstagg's care to deliver it to The Collector, a weight in his chest lightened considerably.

In this certain picture, all that was left to take care of was Malekith.

It took a few more months to locate where the dark elf's ship was. Heimdall informed him that the protective cloaking the craft has that hid it from the all seeing eyes all these years must have waned, making it visible to the him briefly. Thor idly wondered if it has something to do with the relocation of the Aether. When Thor set out with the Warriors Three and Sif, they found it floating stagnantly outside the atmosphere of Svartalfheim, amongst the asteroids dispersed around the planet.

Fandral, the designated pilot of the vessel they brought, was orbiting Malekith's ship and looking for a possible ingress. It took a while to find an entrance from outside—a man-sized hole under the left wing. Of the stories he heard about the battle between Malekith and Bor, Thor was surprised it was the only damage the mother ship sustained. It must be the heavy fortification of the craft (aside from its invisibility) that made it untouchable for so long.

It wasn't long after Fandral was ready to maneuver their ship near the entrance when a loud rumbling interrupted the eerie silence of space.

It was akin to a sound of a quake, only that it was Malekith's ship trembling in front of them. Thor feared that it was the engine warming when it shouldn't have. Had the dark elves awaken then? Did
Malekith wake?

He knew as much that it was impossible. The Aether couldn't call to Malekith while trapped in its container. Dread filled Thor at the thought of making the wrong move with the Aether. Had he made it even worse? Swallowing unnoticed, he gestured for Fandral to put a distance between their ship and Malekith's. Theirs were much smaller that a debris or an asteroid the size of a boulder would knock them off course.

They watched, belligerent, and waited for the red embers to light up by where Thor remembered the exhausts should be.

But even as the rocking gradually became more powerful, there were no scarlet blaze that emerged.

Seconds grew and so was Thor's puzzlement. The ship wasn't moving by itself but seemed to be controlled remotely, and if he was to guess, from a distant place leagues away from where they were standing, given the minute advance the ship was making. Granted, it was large that whoever was manipulating it externally must be having difficulty.

At what end? What was the purpose of it all? Was it an ally of Malekith perchance? Impossible, for Thor knew Malekith's allies were next to non-existent. Also, there should be no one else but he, his companions, Odin, Frigga, and Heimdall's knew of Malekith's whereabouts at the moment.

Thor couldn't stand still to ponder aimlessly at his questions. He would seek answers himself, even if it meant acting on impulse.

Mjolnir would have been the most helpful at the stunt he was going to pull.

Thor jumped from his safe ground towards the ship drifting away conspicuously. With the force of his momentum, he threw himself a few arms away the opening. A dagger prepared beforehand was buried at a crevice on the surface of the mother ship's hull, stuck at the right angle to keep him from slipping down. Thor barely placed a foot when the whole ship shook once again.

His friends came closer to his position, arms extended towards Thor, urging him to get back.

"Thor, get back here!" Sif yelled, peeved with his recklessness, though undeniably panicking. "Take my hand!"

Thor was hesitant. He knew he could find out where was the destination of the ship if he went along with it, though where that might be could be a hostile territory.

He would rather not risk his friends as well.

Thor took a firm hold on Volstagg's forearm just in time for Malekith's ship to be enveloped in a blinding light, warping into a huge glowing sphere before dematerializing without preamble, leaving them stunned at the display.

"What the Hel," Fandral murmured in disbelief.

They could all say the same.

Thor couldn't pacify the unease brought by what he witnessed. As early this point, he was already clueless what was in store for him, Asgard, Midgard, the Aether (despite the success of the mission), and far too many more variables involved, not to mention the players that Thor didn't have any idea of.
He received an earful from Sif a while ago, with the Warriors Three agreeing in background. While Thor went sheepish at the reprimand, he was touched at how they cared despite knowing he was one of Asgard’s finest warriors.

"I heard what happened," was Frigga’s way of greeting him as she joined Thor at the veranda.

"Mother." Thor smiled briefly at her direction, silently awaiting for the lecture on self-preservation. It never came.

"I’m sure Sif already said all." She wasn’t entirely wrong there. Thor dropped his shoulders, making his mother soften. She observed Thor for a moment, carefully choosing her words. "Is there a particular reason for you to act that way?"

"You know I’m always reckless."

"Maybe before, but now… I don’t think so." Thor supposed she was pertaining to the time he went back from the future. "You’ve changed."

"It’s an ongoing process, mother," he said. "Maybe it’s still in me, the craving for a fight which made me unafraid that I’d go chase it."

"Is it really that?" She could always see through him.

Thor smiled blandly. "Do you mean that how I take Loki’s disappearance has something to do with it?"

"I don’t know, Thor. Why don’t you tell me?" she shot back, not unkind. "It could be subconscious, and you might not be completely aware of it."

Thor didn’t answer.

"You blame yourself," she told him. "I could see it in you. Please don’t."

She continued, "I woke up this morning and realized that the flowers he gave me are wilting. His seïðr in Asgard is slowly fading with his absence. It saddens me, but I hold on to the knowledge that he’s alive. I stopped grieving, and I tried to understand that it’s his choice to live a life that doesn’t involve us. We can only move on, Thor, and wish him happiness wherever he might be."

She pulled him in an embrace that he didn't fight. Thor was instantly pliant, weight almost on Frigga, but she held him firmly, her hand soothingly ran on his back.

"He probably will never come back, but we’ll always be his first home."

Even without reaching Heimdall’s yet, Thor already figured out that the answer would be another shake of the head. It was completely expected but disheartening nonetheless.

"If your brother does not wish to be found, he does it without flaw."

"Like how he does his tricks. Usually."

"Usually," Heimdall agreed, amused. He stared ahead at the vastness of the cosmos, staring into what only he could see. "Like any living, the prince’s soul remain burning bright. I can see it, even if he may be light-years away."
It wasn't reassuring that Loki would distance himself that far from them—but Frigga was right. The only thing left for those he left behind was to move forward.

Perhaps, he need not to worry, that this time it would be different for Loki. He might have left them again, but this time he has much better reasons than hatred and insecurities. When it came down to those, Thor would gladly let him go.

And so he did.

"Good bye, brother," Thor murmured to himself, feeling oddly lighter once he said it aloud. "Until we meet again."

To him, it wasn't a farewell for good. It was a positive outlook to their next meeting in the best of circumstances.

On the very same evening, Asgard experienced a heavy rain with thunder and lightning, though it made up by bringing a bright morning and cool air the Asgardians thoroughly enjoyed and basked on.

Malekith was forcefully torn from unconsciousness, every fiber of his being scorching with a rush of sudden surge of foreign power. There was the telltale sign of the familiar burn in his veins when the Aether once flowed in him, and yet it wasn't quite the same.

He found the source from a glowing scepter pointed on his breast, with a hooded, eyeless creature of reptilian skin and six fingers holding it. Before he was about to separate its wretched head from its miserable body, it spoke in its gurgled voice.

"He wishes to have a word."

TBC

Chapter End Notes

salamat ;*
Thor met Brünnhilde for the second time—there wasn't much difference in their two first meetings.

Thor's search for Malekith was beginning to feel futile.

Despite his best efforts to get a step ahead with his foreknowledge, he remained clueless as to what the altered timeline's future held. It had him thinking on occasion that perhaps he wasn't alone in his unique situation, that maybe there were others aside him sent back in time. Should that be the case, he could only pray that they were on the same side in this campaign of his.

He internally sighed. It tended to get frustrating recently with all of his guessing whether he did the right thing or not.

His friends were generous to offer their help without being asked, keeping tabs on realms they frequented and keeping their ears peeled for any talk of Malekith and his cronies. Although Thor expected that Malekith could be anywhere in the vast universe at the moment, he appreciated their thoughtfulness and willingness to lend Thor their shoulders. He recalled the same camaraderie among the Avengers, knowing they had his back as well, no matter how bad their start was. His friendship with the heroes of Midgard was another thing he categorized as not likely to take place anymore in the new timeline. Thor remembered that they barely knew each other before banding together. Without Loki's invasion, they wouldn't be assembled as they were. In the present time where there were events supposed to take place, the sacrifice was lost on anyone else but Thor.

It was Fandral who first suggested for him to take a break. "Ah, what do you two brothers call it? *Sightseeing in other realms.*"

Thor's lips twitched into a slight smile, suppressing the dismaying thoughts about Loki, knowing he was already past grieving. "Except we've been to almost every nine realms." He didn't mention that even the non-friendly ones.

Fandral shrugged. "The space is too wide for just nine worlds. We could go to different one everyday for, let's say a century, and I bet we won't even see the half of it. I'm sure your brother would agree."

"He will." Thor hummed noncommittally. "I don't know, my friend. It is a pleasant plan, but I am unrest as long as an enemy of Asgard is on the loose."

"There *are* plenty of enemies of Asgard on the loose. Just saying." Fandral regarded him briefly. "You're doing fine, Thor. Don't beat yourself up yet. There's more time for that once you ascended as the king."

Thor grimaced. "I don't want to think that what father does in his free time is beating himself up."

"I think he's proud of you." Thor initially thought he was talking about Odin. "Your brother."

"You think so?"
Fandral nodded. "He's been actively showing us in his own subtle way how terrible you'll rule, with your arrogance and the lack of proper knowledge. Until you refused the crown."

"He's right. I was all of those, but he meant well for Asgard, and he has every right to point it out aloud. He wanted to change me for the best."

"Yes, you were those. And I'm not saying your brother didn't succeed. Too bad he didn't stay longer to see you now, ridden with worry that some ancient sleeping elf will end us in our sleep."

"Precaution."

"I think you can afford a little leeway for yourself, Thor. Indulge on something." Fandral frowned. "Wow, I never thought I'll have to tell that to you."

Thor laughed. "And I'll be advising otherwise to you, my friend."

Whatever force of nature that pointed Thor to the armory, it was dutifully thanked by him. It caused him to be struck with an inspiration, making Thor think *why not?*

Why not Sakaar?

It only took a fortnight to prepare for his leave, tagging his friends along who were glad with the distraction. Odin was lenient when Thor told him it would be for "diplomatic" purposes. Thor wasn't lying, but not outright telling the entire story either. Though there was no need to at the knowing look the Allfather gave him. If he made out that the place had any bearing on the time stream Thor previously lived on, he didn't comment even when it was just the two of them.

Landing on Sakaar properly and not in the middle of the planet's country-sized scrap yard, Thor began to appreciate the sight of multiple gateways. Idly, he wondered where each one lead to.

At the base of the towering structure with the huge, welded metal heads of the contest's champions, with Hulk's not yet present, was the Grandmaster with the stern looking woman—*uh, secretary?* — who Thor remembered carrying the Grandmaster's melting stick around. The Grandmaster was sporting a different robe that was no less flamboyant in terms of shades of gold and scarlet, with his palms linked together in anticipation at his guests of royalty and noblemen from another planet. Thor would bet Mjolnir that the Grandmaster never heard of Asgard until the formal letter sent ahead, with emphases on *Asgard* and *crown prince."

Trust the Grandmaster to not get short on fireworks when he welcomed them. It was either saying the planet didn't get a lot of visits, the kind that would warrant formality (and knowing its people were mostly dumped in the planet, Thor wouldn't be surprised if that was the case), or it could be just a part of the Grandmaster's flashy showmanship.

"Welcome to Sakaar, Prince Thor and his companions The Warriors Three and the Lady Sif." The Grandmaster bowed. "I am the Grandmaster, the ruler of this planet. I'll be your personal host during your stay."

Thor returned the gesture. He decided that it was pretty nice to be received not by a disembodied voice, fastened to a chair that wheeled him around, and without that electric inhibitor sticking on his neck.

He grinned. "We accept your most gracious offer."
"I did some research on Asgard and Asgardians. A race of warriors, are you not?" The Grandmaster said to Thor as his opening. He was lead to what resembled an office while his friends were directed straight to quarters reserved for the guests; it was only Thor who has matters to confer with the Grandmaster, after all. The walls were painted in two colors as if it remained undecided between gold and red. Thor never understood that kind of design.

"We are, but we also have those who practice the manipulation of seiðr, what we call our inherent magic. My younger brother and my mother, the queen, are known powerful wielders of it. The king, my father, is known for both his physical prowess and seiðr."

"And you, Prince Thor, I assume, is a warrior prince. Asgard's finest, I believe, with your built and all."

Thor wasn't sure if those eyes raked over him from head to toe. "I'm a warrior myself, yes, but Asgard has much more to be proud of in terms of its warriors such as the palace's elite soldiers; there was also another force composed of only women, and there was, of course, The Warriors Three and the Lady Sif."

The Grandmaster trudged on the room, hands behind his back, without any plan to sit down anytime soon. "Ah, then will I be wrong in assuming you all like a good fight, whether it involves you or being a spectator?"

Thor considered changing the subject knowing where this was going. "Yes." The second his companions witnessed the Contest of Champions, Thor knew they would be into the sport. He would have been too, undoubtedly, if only he hadn't experienced first hand the unfairness of it.

The Grandmaster was gleeful despite the clipped reply. "Wonderful! I expect you'll like your stay in Sakaar. We look forward to present the Contest of Champions to you Asgardians. I'm sure you'll love it."

Thor has a lot to say on that, but with better judgement, respectfully nodded in return.

"Perfect!" His host clapped in excitement. "For the meantime, you can rest, Prince Thor, while a feast is being prepared. Only then is the start of the evening." He winked conspiratorially.

This would be a long night.

As expected, even as an audience, the Contest of Champions hardly appealed to Thor. Perhaps once, sometime ago, he would have also engaged in such and would consider it a truly remarkable experience. The sheer display of barbarianism and emerging as a champion would have been a boost on his ego and vanity. The victory and cheers would intoxicate him greatly that he wouldn't realize he was actually drowning. He had been close to that years ago, until the Allfather snapped him out of it by banishing him.

Looking at the Warriors Three not far from him, they had been sated by the feast alone, with exception of Lady Sif who was as vigilant as ever to her surroundings. Not that Thor could begrudge them. Admittedly, the Grandmaster did know how to receive his honored guests.

The Grandmaster's champion that time was a horned centaur. He was nowhere near as huge as the Hulk but has impressive limbs coupled with an upper body strength that enabled him to face challengers twice his size. The centaur was carrying an ivory lance he was using as both a melee and range weapon depending on his foe.

Thor couldn't place the origin of the champion, but he suspected he came into Sakaar the same way
as the others.

"Amazing, isn't he?" Thor barely noticed the Grandmaster sliding close to his position. He was standing by the glass overlooking the arena below, a considerable distance from the lounge where the Grandmaster was sitting at earlier. "I suppose it's expected of their endangered kind." He peered down, murmuring, "That's probably what being hunted down does to you."

"Where was he from?"

The Grandmaster gave a half shrug. "All I know is his ilk used to be native in forestlands of Kentauros. A favorite scrapper of mine sold him to me. She does demand a high price for every stray she brings, though I must say that she has a keen eye for them. Why, would you believe that most of what she had brought me had been my champions? That woman has always been my favorite." He shook his head fondly.

Thor perked up at the mention of the female scrapper, internally berating himself for forgetting what drove him to go to Sakaar in the first place. "Does this scrapper has a name?"

"Now, now, I don't know her that intimately. I suddenly kind of wish I do." The Grandmaster hummed thoughtfully. "We call her Scrapper 142 instead."

He wasn't the one in the arena fighting, but Thor couldn't help the triumphant feeling he has. He was initially dubious, now he was feeling oddly positive.

Knowing Brünnhilde alone for the second time was enough to bear the Grandmaster longer.

She wasn't easy to track, Thor would give her that.

Though knowing her alcoholic tendencies, he managed to reach her in a middle of a drinking contest that she was winning effortlessly. Thor didn't have the time before to admire her tolerance. Had she been back in Asgard, she would give even the best of Asgard's taverns a run for their money.

Thor was had half the presence of his mind when he sat at the chair her previous challenger occupied before passing out on the floor as his coins were swept by Brünnhilde. She was unimpressed as she took in the sight of Thor, her expression gradually morphing to that of confusion.

Thor cheekily grinned. "Thor of Asgard, my lady."

Valkyrie's features turned stone cold, and abruptly, she stood to leave, wiping the excitement from Thor's face.

"Hey," he called once he was outside. She already had a head start, though he was sure she heard him.

She stopped, turning guardedly. "Hey yourself."

Thor approached, slowly as he would to a cornered animal. There was a glint of blade behind her back, ready to pounce at any ill intent Thor could show.

"Hi," Thor said simply when he was finally near and keeping a respectful distance. "You… you're a Valkyrie."

_Tactful, very tactful of you, Thor._ He imagined it in Loki's reprimanding voice.

"And if I am?" she challenged. "What is it to you?"
"Allow me to introduce myself again. I'm Thor, son of Odin. I'm here as an official ambassador of Asgard."

She revealed her knife to him, not daring Thor to come any closer. "Are you here to hunt down the deserters, Your Majesty?"

"What deserters?"

She scoffed. "So the second born is an idiot," she said with reproach. "Or he's clever to act like one. Don't take me for a fool."

Thor raised his empty palms to placate her. "I came here to extend an alliance outside the Nine Realms. There's no other thing the Allfather commanded of me."

"Nonsense. Sakaar is an obscure planet that never bothered to interact with the outside world." She tilted her head. "Why do you think I'm here?"

"You're right, but also keep in mind that Sakaar has many entrances and exits. There's bound to be a person or two would will eventually stumble upon this planet," Thor said reasonably. "Besides, it isn't as if Sakaar doesn't have the reputation of keeping intergalactic criminals and nomads alike."

She huffed, couldn't argue with that point, although her knife was kept trained on Thor. "That doesn't explain why you specifically came after me and knowing immediately that I was a Valkyrie despite us meeting only tonight."

*I have met you.* "I still don't know what you meant by a deserter. As for how I found out, well," he paused, scrambling to find a logical excuse. "Earlier, I noticed your mark peeking through the gap of your vambrace."

Her lips twitched with distaste. Thor guessed she was reprimanding herself for her carelessness. "This mark is like a curse," muttered bitterly.

"I beg to differ," Thor told her. He kept his distance as he slowly put down his hands on his sides. "If you must know, I want to be a Valkyrie when I was younger, until I found out you were all women. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but I won't fit in, both in the force and in the uniform." He cleared his throat. "All I'm saying is that the Valkyries are brave and noble, and being a part of them is a great honor."

"You clearly never heard of deserters then, have you?"

"I told you so."

"Well, I am one. I, who had sworn an oath to protect, fled Asgard after that monster of a first born of Odin murdered my sisters at arms, and I alone survived. I broke my oath. It's understandable that I have to answer for it."

Seeing her own hand faltering, she chucked her knife away, finding it useless when she didn't care anymore. Thor took it as a sign to come nearer.

"The way I see it, you don't have to answer to anybody else," he began. "I do not know where you got the notion that the Allfather hounds down those who abandoned their duty to Asgard. You didn't leave in a great time of need where you could be sorely needed, nor did you leave out of reasons below your duty. You did it for yourself, who you should be putting first and foremost. No one can claim to know what you've been through when you faced Hela, therefore nobody can dictate your decision. Leave or stay; the choice will always be yours. The Allfather is not cruel to take that away
Brünnhilde considered what he said for a moment. Thor could see something akin to conflict fleeting across her eyes that she shook away, smiling wanly. "You speak beautifully, Your Majesty, but that doesn't warrant my trust easily."

"You can only take my word for it," he said, defeated.

"Then that doesn't worth much to me." She retreated from her position, opting to get away.

Thor, on the other hand, felt that if he let her go, he wouldn't be able to see her again. He would rather not lose another person he considered his friend. The whole team of Avengers was becoming a distant, pleasant memory already. Thor wouldn't let the same happen again, not when he could help it.

However, he made the wrong move of holding her arm in an attempt to stop her. She hissed, pulling a dagger—an inch longer than her previous—from her waist and raised it threateningly to him, the cold tip of the blade touching his throat.

"Don't get familiar," was her last piece of advice (threat) she gave him.

The feeling of defeat came crashing down on his spirit, crushing the optimism he had a while ago.

What exactly did he expect, that it would be the same as before?

Now that he thought about it, it was ridiculous to ask for that when he was actively seeking to change the events to come. He interfered with the past so much that he shouldn't have expected to retain at least a semblance of its previous version.

Thor realized with glum that at how terrible he was at this.

The following day rolled in and the last thing Thor needed was the Grandmaster subtly batting his eyelashes on him.

Again, Thor pretended not to notice, signing some papers instead. The Grandmaster had drawn up a contract of sorts that listed how Sakaar and Sakaarans would benefit from the alliance. For all of Grandmaster's somewhat mild hedonistic lifestyle, he only asked that any Asgardian prisoners, depending on what the Asgard's law deemed subjected to life sentence, would be transported to Sakaar and participate as a challenger. Should the prisoner emerge as a champion, they would be absolved of Asgard's crime, and since they would never be allowed to return to Asgard, they would be treated as Sakaaran and would live under its laws for the rest of their life.

It was simple, but in Thor's opinion it was an easy getaway from Asgard's punishment. He didn't voice this out of course.

In return, Thor asked that the Grandmaster's challengers and champions—applied only to non-Asgardians—would be sent to Asgard at call of arms. If a great threat arises and/or Asgard was in verge of war, the Sakaaran prisoners could be called to answer as a reserved infantry and would have to abide to the laws of Asgard.

The Grandmaster raised an eyebrow at this. Thor supposed this was the look of incredulity he could get out of him. "You do know they are intergalactic criminals, thrown out of their planets, and you're willing to treat them as soldiers alongside what you call your 'elite forces'?"
It was a valid point, though thinking back to Korg and Miek and those with them who rushed to Asgard and helped in rescuing its survivors, Thor was willing to treat them as subjects and friends even. Of course he wasn't under the illusion that all would be like them, but Thor would give them the chance to prove themselves at least.

Thor tried not to grin too wide. "I'm sure. Worry not, any kind of consequences brought by the agreement will be on me."

"Very well." The Grandmaster seemed unhappy at the prospect. "I accept."

It was right then that Thor remembered that the Grandmaster never liked sharing his toys.

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At their last day in Sakaar, Thor wasn't expecting to find Brünnhilde who seemed to be looking for him.

Thor let her approach him this time as he was talking to Sif then. Seeing an unknown woman coming closer, Sif had given Thor a puzzled and dry look. Thor didn't give in to the temptation of explaining that it wasn't what she was thinking.

Sif was about to excuse herself until Thor asked her to stay.

"This is a good friend of mine, Lady Sif," he told Brünnhilde. He turned to Sif. "Lady Sif, she is known as Scrapper 142 here in Sakaar." Thor silently asked for a permission to tell her origin. He took her passiveness as a yes. "Her name is Brünnhilde. She was a Valkyrie."

Sif snapped her attention at her. "It's an honor, my lady." She bowed, placing a palm on her chest.

With the way Brünnhilde was caught off guard, one would think she was awkwardly taking the attention. She dismissively waved a hand, though not unkindly saying, "That was long ago."

"It doesn't matter," Sif told her gently. "I have always admired the Valkyries."

"You look like a fine warrior yourself," Brünnhilde almost whispered, completely forgetting that Thor was with them who appeared to be having difficulty not to snigger.

"Thank you, my lady." Sif wasn't amused at Thor. "If you'll excuse me."

Bruunhilde almost kicked Thor, looking after the direction Sif went. "I hope you're taking care of your woman."

"Sif can take care of herself." Thor frowned. "And she's not 'my woman'. She's a friend."

He didn't miss her exhaling in relief. "Good. That's... good," she mumbled under her breath.

"She's beautiful," he commented, trying to see her reaction. Brünnhilde nodded in agreement absenty. Recognizing her error, she found Thor cracking a knowing, toothy smile. She kicked his shin.

Thor yelped, growling when he asked her if it was her sole purpose for finding him.

"I heard you'll be back in Asgard tonight," she said, composing herself. "I also considered what you said. I suppose I should have given you the benefit of the doubt. Although I won't be apologizing for being wary."

"No need," he assured her. "I understand."
She stared in a distance. "I want to say that I'll stay here for as long as it takes. I will never forget what happened, but I can heal and move on, and that can take me a short time."

"I perfectly understand it too," he reiterated softly. "I could only give you my word last night, but this I hope is a proof of what I meant to convey." Thor pulled out an attire of a Valkyrie that he had kept in his person. He handed the bundle to her. "I found it in Asgard's armory, unused. Take it as a reminder that you have Asgard as your home. Asgard will welcome you with open arms when you think it's finally time to return. It could be months... years... centuries... but know that you have Asgard to fall back on."

She didn't utter any word. Regardless, she took the cream white uniform Thor gave her. He knew she kept her Dragonfang up to this date, well-kept and cared for it if its condition the last time he had seen it was anything to go by.

"I'll keep this then, Your Majesty." She put it inside her small pack to address him again. "As thanks, I ask that you don't die anytime soon." She crossed her arms haughtily. "For a royalty, you're quite interesting."

Thor laughed. "I'll keep that in mind." His eyes twinkled in delight. It wasn't so bad, it seemed.

"Also, it's Thor."

"Father."

Thor was directed to a gazebo at the far eastern side of the palace. The area was populated with dried plants and unkempt hedges as if seiðr never reached this certain perimeter.

"Look at this place," Odin started. "It's as if the life in here followed her."

Thor waited for Odin to continue.

"Your sister used to meditate in this place, even went as far as to claim this spot as her own. I watched her grow with her most favorite companion. Seeing a little girl playing with her pet, never will you think that the same child will grow up as a stranger, estranged to me and to her mother. She ended up wanting to serve her own violent desires. She went beyond control, and so was her ambitions, which I believe I have caused. I further fed her craving by making her my executioner." He peered at Thor with his single eye, looking weary. "I should have done what I must long before, but, no, I'm foolish to think that I could change her by keeping her locked away, and when that wasn't enough, I kept her with me."

Thor paled at the revelation. "What do you mean, father? How can—"

"It means exactly how I phrased it, Thor," the Allfather interrupted patiently. "I am the one left who can handle her. Although I'm afraid it won't be so in the future years." He gave Thor a wistful look. "She grows stronger, your sister. She draws her strength from Asgard and from me. The fact that you knew of her meant that it happened in the time you came from."

"She did get out," Thor simply affirmed, held on the other facts. It wasn't the time for them yet.

"Then you knew I failed her the same way I failed Loki and Frigga... and you, son."

Thor didn't know that Odin had been wallowing in his regrets this early. Before Odin died, he said the same to his sons. Thor never found out how Loki reacted to the apology, with Thor muddled with grief to care, add to that the escape of Hela.
Was Odin truly foolish in his belief that she was beyond their grasp?

Thor, with a different perspective but not unlike Odin's, supposed that the Allfather wasn't done trying his best. The difference this time was that Odin have him, and Thor has his father's back.

He would help him do it right.

"If you're willing to hear me out, I have a proposition, father."

TBC
Twice Fallen

Chapter Summary

Hope was erased from Loki's dictionary for some time now.
What happened to Loki at Thanos' ship as Thor was transported to the past.

Chapter Notes

there's some pips asking for Loki and I can't give yet the Loki who left a few chapters back, so here's a flashback of sorts for you guys.
unbeta-ed, as usual. enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hope had become an elusive idea long ago.

It was a dangerous thing, Loki deemed, that only those at the highest peak of desperation had, and whenever it was blown to smithereens would unleashed a strong force that could cut the fine line between what made up the person—conscience and the like—from their being, resulting in either a complete descent to detachment of the irreversible kind, which made one more ferocious for the lack of fear and understanding what would be lost without any gain, or a tumble to a paralyzing fear of having no options left. As such, Loki never bothered with it. At the face of desperation, adaptability was his substitute for hope. The belief on it had long abandoned him. It did nothing to him starting from hoping for the best with his plan to teach Thor his lesson and showing to Odin that crowning Thor the king six years ago wouldn't be the best for Asgard. Hope was useless when he fell from the Bifrost to the abyss below, where he quietly ask for the Norns to show him the way out. Oh, he was heard, alright, only he escaped with a manipulated mind, his feeling of hatred for Odin and Thor intensified and twisted unkindly to justify what he would be set out to do. They played with his desire to rule alongside with Thor, replacing it with immense greed for the throne and ruling alone with people kneeling obediently on his feet. Maybe there was some truth in the last, at least from the hollow part of him that was driven by his search for Odin's approval and love equal to that of Thor's. Maybe it was also the reason he kept the charade of being the Allfather for a few years. He learned that it wasn't what he wanted after all, with how he, in hindsight, started Ragnarok.

Hope? He balked at that. For Loki, hope would serve its purpose well for Thor and his Midgardian friends. The good bunch of people who continue to seek banishing the evil. Midgard call them superheroes and the likes of Loki a villain. Ironically, it was a black and white classification when there was a supposedly grey area in the middle of the two, which, again, ironically, most were categorized in.

In short, it was a trifle concept, serve to build last minute motivations.

Until Thor gave him exactly that.

Hope.
"Let me rephrase that. Are you sure it's a good idea to bring me back to Earth?"

"Probably not, to be honest," Thor admitted. Loki was glad at least for that. "I wouldn't worry, brother. I feel like everything's gonna work out fine."

Loki couldn't help the small smile.

Trust Thor to simply forget what had transpired between them. Loki still stood by his belief that communication was never their family's strongest asset. The only talk they had was on their way to steal the Grandmaster's ship. Thor might not be as eloquent as him, but he did conveyed what he meant to say. Their paths might be diverged in terms of growing up individually, but in the end the forked road lead to a single one.

Him, here by his brother's side.

He did say he was also looking forward to the day of Thor's coronation. This was it, he supposed, not as grand as it was supposed to but was among his subjects and most trusted people.

And family.

It was looking promising that Loki was seriously considering bending his principles, because secretly, this was what he wanted all along. He was just as equally bereft as the remaining Asgardians, and Thor was standing there like a shining beacon of hope despite coming from a dying realm. Loki's learned instincts wanted to shy away, urging him to escape to some far off part of the universe because if there was another he loathed the most other than his own self, it was Thor readily forgiving, like he has the forgiveness of the world to give. Forget tricking Thor to be banished to Midgard; forget trying to conquer Midgard; forget faking his own death as part of his plan; forget casting Odin among the mortals with his godhood forgotten; forget indirectly causing the escape of Hela; forget betraying Thor numerous times that Loki himself lost count.

Damn him for even getting ensnared at the hope by envisioning the future to come. It was nowhere perfect, and yet Loki was standing perilously close, wanting to give it a try and himself a second chance.

It would be alright.

Then came a great shadow that looked over them—the shadow of a great ship that dwarfed theirs in size.

As Loki recognized the familiar ship within an agonizing split-second, he remembered the Tesseract he snatched that should have been blown into ruins along with Asgard.

"We have to find Heimdall and the others. The ship hasn't proven itself hostile yet, but it will be better to warn the people and calm down the panic a little," Thor told him, with Loki not far behind. "We have to go separate ways, brother. I'll... address those who might be watching us from there." He gestured at Thanos' ship. "You have go help in settling down the unease."

"No," Loki said firmly. "I'm coming with you."

"Loki, this is not up for argu—"

"I know," the trickster cut him short. "I know who that ship belongs to." Thor's single eye zeroed on him, silently inquiring as to whose. "It's from the person I made a deal with and provided me the Chitauri." Loki could almost hear the cogs working in Thor's mind on how this smelled like betrayal.
from Loki once again. The latter couldn't even blame him for it; he has that kind of reputation.

"Alright. Diplomacy was never my skill," Thor said simply, giving the other a mild shrug. '"Come."

Loki paused. Was that it, not even an ounce of disappointment and anger at the possibility that it could have been his fault that Thanos was right outside, ready to obliterate them any second now?

Although, it seemed that Thor wasn't done surprising him for the day by giving him a reassuring smile in return, as if he knew what Loki was thinking. "I still say it's going to be fine."

_You fool._

Only, Loki was a bigger fool for wanting to believe that too.

"We'd like to strike a bargain with you."

Corvus Glaive, Thanos' right hand man, barely concealed a sneer at Loki's nerve. Thanos held out a hand from his throne that served to position him higher than anyone in the room. "And what makes you think I'd agree, Asgardian? You failed me before and I owe you your punishment. Why shouldn't we destroy you right here and now, the whole lot of you?"

Thor, who was silent since they faced Thanos, tensed. From his peripheral vision, Loki could read his brother's body language—Thor was ready to fight his way.

Much to Loki's relief, Thor didn't move an inch.

"You are searching for the infinity stones still," Loki said, eyes meeting the Mad Titan's evenly. Out of thin air, he produced the Tesseract. He held out his palm. "You once set me out for this in exchange for an army. Now, I ask for us to continue our journey safely."

Thanos, renowned as a cruel warlord, was as much of a strategist. The situation might be akin to a boot trampling the ants, but the Mad Titan never relied on such, always weighing the pros and cons by his own measures. He would never underestimate too much, and him seeing the Asgardian prince in the flesh whom he knew nothing of, and Odin's son no less, he wouldn't test Thor spontaneously. He would gauge Thor with his own eyes, would look for his weaknesses and strengths, and see for himself if Thor was as powerful as his sire who Thanos never dared to challenge the whole while the Tesseract was kept in Asgard. His gaze went back to Loki with faint amusement; Thanos knew cleverness when he sees it.

"Very well," his voice made the air imbued with his authority with two simple words. "I accept."

Loki noticed that Thor remained guarded, though he allowed himself a small sigh of relief. He wanted to reprimand his brother for it. What set the Mad Titan apart from common tyrants was that he conducted deals and bargains reasonably and compensated his dues, though it never meant that they were out of hot water already.

"In one condition," Thanos continued. "_You_ will stay behind for that unfinished business we have, Asgardian Prince."

Loki was mildly aware of Corvus Glaive's unhidden mocking smirk. He focused on Thor's incredulous look that was beginning to burn into anger. Loki could feel him about to lunge from an imaginary tether. Out of sheer frustration, Loki invaded Thor's mind, calming him down.

_Don't, _Thor warned him in a manner that made it sound like a plea.
No, Thor.

"I accept."

Loki had imagined how it would have went should it happen differently—a handful of Asgardian lying dead on his feet while he made his way to Thanos and offer the Tesseract to him. Loki himself was bruised and face stained with soot and sweat. He could practically smell the burned parts of the ship mingling with the reek of charred flesh. Thor was nowhere to be found, possibly thrown out for all he knew. The Hulk was disposed of beforehand, and then there was the Valkyrie with them, lifeless by her own blade. Heimdall herded the very few left, standing without fear of death that wasn't quite enough to let him win against a number of Thanos' foot soldiers.

It was ridiculous that merely because he was frightened at the possibility of it, he would sacrifice himself for the people who barely made him feel as one of their own. For what remains of the people of Asgard, he was willing to give up his fate at the hands of the Mad Titan.

At Thor and the other's departure, Loki was walking straight to his death.

Trust Odin to tell the truth about dying being Loki's birthright.

"There's a breach by a single man with some lightning? Come quick and deal with it immediately then, you useless mongrels, or you'll have to answer to our Lord instead!"

Loki's head shot up.

"You bloody idiot," the trickster hissed. "Don't you understand the severity of your action? For once, Thor, use your—"

"Imagination?" Thor grunted in approval at how easy he eased Loki from his shackles. "Because I did, and all I could think of was that there's no way you're getting out of this alive."

"Do you think that I don't know that?"

"I do," Thor relented softly. "Which makes it more terrifying because you're always so sure of your decisions."

"And you wonder how I could fool you with my fake deaths."

"Except that it's not a trick this time, is it?" Thor shot back stubbornly. "You're ready to die."

"I won't be getting the luxury of easy way out of this, Thor, so forgive me if I'm ready to die and wanting it!"

"Well, I'm not ready!"

Loki had difficulty hiding his flinch that wasn't from Thor's roar. "You should be," Loki retorted. "Because right now you're jeopardizing the safety of your subjects."

"It's true that they're not on the clear yet, but I'm sure they're many miles ahead by now."

The trickster opened his mouth to speak. Thor cut him off in an instant. "This is a rescue mission, brother."

"I'm not a damsel in distress that needs rescuing, Thor," Loki snapped. It didn't have any heat as he
would like, too busy comprehending Thor's rashness. He would have scoffed, if only he wasn't occupied on wrapping his mind on Thor's unwillingness to leave without him.

"I know, brother," Thor—the gall of him—gave him a wink, grinning. "Because we may have to fight our way out."

As if on cue, the sound of multiple heavy steps vibrated on the ground. Loki estimated about a dozen, with another following just in case.

Against his better judgement, Loki returned the grin wickedly.

He didn't know if Thor could feel it or refused to acknowledge it.

Thor's power was depleting.

His lightning was gradually getting weaker with his source gone. Like Hela, he drew his power from Asgard. Although give or take some time it would no longer be the case for Thor given that he could tap into the mystical sources of the universe, there was a connection to Mjolnir he was yet to sever. With Thor discovering the extent of his abilities only recently, his life force remained bounded to Asgard.

Their inhuman stamina was beginning to run out, their endurance dwindling. They have to rest and recover their strength.

They were reduced to such state by mere low ranked soldiers of Thanos' army. Loki guessed it was the Mad Titan's way to test Thor, watching from above. Once the entertainment died down, only then would he send one of his prized four to deal the finishing blow on Thor but not on Loki.

He was promised pain, after all.

"Thor, listen—straight up ahead past two doors, turn right and you'll get to shuttles they have. Be careful on the left side, that's where I think the troops are coming from. You can fry the circuitry of the access panel with a bit of electricity. Get into a ship, and fly away as far as you can. I'll hold the back up that will come from the direction we were—"

Thor, who seemed wasn't keen on accepting what Loki was setting him to do, furiously refused with a resounding no. "I'm not doing it without you."

Loki gritted his teeth. Thor's adamancy was taking a toll on his patience. If he wasn't conserving energy, he would hit him in the head to see reasons. He was the only person who was supposed to die today. Not Thor.

Unlike his brother, Loki was expendable without a responsibility of being Asgard's king. If Thor wouldn't reach Heimdall and the rest in time, there was no longer an assurance of their safety on the way to Midgard. If he wasn't wrong, Thanos was already sending a handful after them.

"Our chances are slim to none. Those who are not sent after us are sent after your people, Thor. Your people that you just saved less that 24 hours ago from our murderous sister and the destruction of Asgard. I know that my words never amounted to anything to you, but for once, listen to me when I'm trying to be reasonable!"

"I'm sorry," Thor replied after awhile. "I understand where you're coming from, but I think I already failed them as their king when I chose to be selfish and go after my family first." He smiled wryly. "Besides, I'm glad that I didn't pass up the chance to see that you really care."
Loki managed to get a good look at his older brother ridden with dirt mixed with sweat and blood not his own. He suffered several cuts that were mostly shallow but with some deep. His arms, and perhaps even his covered parts, were mottled with bruises. For a brief moment, Loki was overcome with the urge to summon a light spell and tidy Thor. He might be the younger brother, but with him maturing first, he used to have the doting older brother attitude for a much single-minded Thor.

Thor's hand darted out to reach Loki's forearm in assurance. "I told you that it'll be alright. I still stand by what I said."

As fast as a newfound determination washed over Loki was the thunderous charging that sent Thor and him flying against the wall. Loki compared it to being smashed by the Hulk.

Looking at the newcomer, he was close in his assumption. Cull Obsidian was Thanos' Hulk, almost as large as the green monster and with unbreakable skin.

Thor recovered easily and took it upon himself to handle Cull Obsidian. Fully restored, Thor would be on par with him, but currently… Loki wasn't liking their odds.

He wasn't completely drained that he was confident he could place a protection on Thor, or better yet, produce a small wormhole to escape. Normally, Loki would not dare attempt it after it proved to be an unstable way of travel, but with Thor being overpowered tremendously, it was Loki's last resort as aid to him. His daggers would be useless on an invincible hide that their best firepower would be his seiðr and Thor's—

There was a swish of air that narrowly went past Loki's right. He barely caught sight of it until it returned where it came from—a woman lazily standing on the side, spear on hand.

Just their luck, it had to be Proxima Midnight, one of Thanos' best combatants known for her notorious bloodlust. Loki could think of another person just like her.

"That should be enough," she said with a quick of lips, not making any move from her position as if waiting… and waiting… and…

Loki froze.

He couldn't move an inch.

He could feel a small trickle of blood on his cheek and cursed his carelessness earlier. His Jotun biology was supposed to be immune to plenty of poison and venom, and yet the smallest amount that entered through the nick on his skin was enough to render him immobile.

Thor, who was watching from the sidelines between defending himself from the heavy blows delivered to his already battered body, called him sharply, too distracted to notice an incoming backhand to the side of his head near his healing eye, smacking Thor hard that hurled him through the wall and into the never ending nothingness Thor fell into as if being pulled down by a strong force.

Loki's breath was stuck in his throat while the scene unfolded right in front of him.

He vaguely registered the burly form and a number of indistinct soldiers surrounding him. A mantra of focus was ringing in his head, clashing against the thought of Thor falling into his demise.

"This dragged on longer that it should have," Proxima declared. "Bring him upstairs," she ordered, gesturing at the nondescript soldier her eyes first landed on.
Ungracefully dragged like a sack of potatoes with no control over his own body, Loki reminded himself that he still have his wits.

Adapt. Survive.

The twitch started from his fingers, then to his arms until the feel of his nerves slowly spread to his system. The very first move he did, however, was boldly grasping the arm holding him and held it firmly.

Along with the shriek of pain was the odor of burned flesh.

Loki's real skin began showing, blue hue forming from his hand that traveled upwards to—

He screamed in agony at spearhead lodged in his gut. Looking over him was an annoyed Proxima clicking her tongue in distaste.

"I changed my mind, Asgardian. I have no patience for your tricks." She hummed thoughtfully. "I can always ask for forgiveness later for being straightforward. It's easier than asking for permission."

She placed a heeled foot down on his chest, roughly freeing her spear from Loki's side with a sickening squelch. Proxima lifted it above her head and brought it down in incredible speed, aiming for Loki's neck.

And then there was only black.

Loki would recognize that face anywhere.

"Mother?"

Frigga looked up to him and gave a fond smile. "Hello, Loki."

Questions were running in his head such as if he was finally dead; if this was the afterlife and why was it designed to resemble his and Frigga's favorite spot at the palace; where Odin was; and if Loki even deserved to be in this place.

"Is Thor dead? Is he here?" Loki opted instead.

"Your brother lives," she told him. "Though I cannot see where he might be. No matter. Thor is more than capable to handle himself, and you know it, don't you?"

Loki nodded weakly. He didn't know if he should take it positively, but it was better than news of death. He had been firm into deciding he was the only person to die that day after all.

"I'm sorry," he spoke after a while, voice like when he was a child caught red-handed in the middle of mischief. "We didn't part in the best circumstances, nor did we part in good terms."

Loki could afford to be honest here at least and release the heaviness of his heart. He had a lot, and half of it was the regret of not being there at Frigga's death.

Frigga shushed him gently. "I understand. Know also that I never stopped loving you. The mother in me won over the queen, which makes me think that, one way or another, I was also partially to blame when you were estranged from us."

Loki shook his head. "No. It was all on me." He smiled wanly. "I have no trouble lying, but at the same time I find it difficult to accept the truth when thrown right at my face. You have nothing to
blame yourself for. You were, and still is, a wonderful mother that I won't ask for any other. I love you, and I'm glad that you're the one I get to see first after I died."

Loki felt warm and safe when she pulled him into a hug and her fingers were on his hair, carding affectionately. He didn't know he missed this.

"I love you too, son," she replied. She let Loki pull away first. "But I'm afraid you're wrong—you're not yet dead." At his puzzlement and surprise, she added, "At the brink of it, yes, but you're currently in a plane where the time outside is at standstill."

"Then what am I doing here when I'm an inch away from death anyway? Why bother?"

"For one, I was longing to see you." She patted his cheek. "Secondly, your father asked me to bid him enough time."

"Time for what?"

"Something for you, he mentioned," Frigga said as vaguely as possible. Her eyes glinted in mild amusement. "If he will be successful, which I know he will, you'll see it once you returned out there."

Loki barely kept himself from saying he didn't want to. Frigga sensed this. "It's not your time yet, nor Thor's. You two have so much ahead of you. I want to see you grow out of your cycle, Loki, and see that you're beyond carefully crafted illusions and mischief. But first and foremost, you'll have to accept who you truly are, and do not think for a second that it will make me and your father less proud."

It dawned to Loki the implication of her words. Was he ready for it though? His whole life, he was unintentionally wearing a glamour to fit in, and when he found out the truth, he kept it as a sign of hatred and shame for his race, more so on his kin.

"I believe your father is done."

Loki was reluctant to return at the horrid place out there where only the terrible was waiting for him. "I don't want to go back."

"Someday, we'll meet again and you get to stay here forever. I will patiently wait for you and Thor at this very same spot, but as of now, you both need each other."

Frigga cradled his head and planted a kiss on his forehead. "Go, Loki, and fear not, my child, for I'm with you in every step you take."

The instant Loki held the object resting under his hand, frost spiked and pierced a number unexpectedly. Proxima, on the verge of dealing the finishing move on Loki, was casted unceremoniously aside by a blinding light.

On the spot where he formerly lay, there stood Loki in his Jotun form of navy blue skin littered with intricate markings on his hands and face. On his hand was Gungnir, giving a thrum of borrowed strength that enabled him to stand despite his injury and the poison that was still running in his veins.

"Interesting," Proxima murmured. "Let's test that toy of yours."

She spun her spear fast and threw it like a lance at Loki as swift as a blink of an eye. There was a loud clang as Gungnir, equally balanced on his hand, deflected it with the same force back to her.
Cull Obsidian came barreling towards him, a huge axe out with the intent of slicing Loki in half. Instead of instinctually casting a duplicate of himself, Loki shapeshifted into a viper and slithered out of the way. He has no time to reach the ships and was left with no choice but to jump in the direction Thor had been gone.

He shifted back to his form, and without any destination in mind, opened a small portal that could lead to anywhere from here. It was too risky, Loki was aware, but more so was facing two high members of Thanos' army alone. He might have Gungnir—which he was clueless as to how Odin could have trusted him with a powerful weapon—but he wasn't insane to push his luck.

In a free fall that defied the physics of space and was being sucked into the wormhole he created, Loki was followed down by Proxima's weapon. It came into a harsh contact with the barrier Loki summoned as if an afterthought, breaking the thin defense easily with the impact sending him further below.

As the opening swallowed him down, Loki's last thought was of Thor and finding his brother. Loki would have to hope for the best.

In an evening of stars and a clear sky in Wakanda, a bright shooting star was seen passing and disappearing behind the snowy mountains.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

and after seeing Black Panther last Wednesday, I just have to make it Wakanda. meh, most of the IW battle will be taking there anyway.
She woke up to a thin sunlight hitting her face from the crack between the curtains. She found the sensation quite odd on the skin, but she felt the light warming her pleasantly as if she had been on a long cold despite the thick, emerald silk blanket draped on her.

“You’re awake,” said a male voice from her left.

She turned to the direction, finding an unknown man sitting on a chair by her bed. The stranger made no other move than offer a tentative smile. She has an inkling that she was supposed to know this man, from his golden hair and stormy, yet gentle, blue eyes—her mind unhelpfully conjured a blank. Nothing. There was nothing at all try as she might to think of anything, even her name.

“Where am I?” she asked with a raspy voice. Instinctually, she raised her guard; against what, she has no idea.

“Asgard.” The answer echoed in her head like some distant memory. “In your room, to be more specific.” The man stood up by the window, about to part the curtains before turning to ask, “Do you mind?”

She vaguely shook her head. She examined her surroundings that didn’t trigger any familiarity, unfortunately, that could have given her a clue about… herself, at least.

“Are you hungry?” the man asked.

It wasn’t her stomach that gave an emptiness. It was of the mind that seemed to have a huge chunk cleared out. “No.”
“Water, then.” The man poured water from the pitcher to a porcelain cup from the night stand. He handed it to her carefully.

Her nose absently sniffed the cup until she knew it in herself that it was safe to drink. She drank in sips.

“Do I know you?” she asked after a moment.

The man returned to his previous position, slumping back to his chair before answering, “I’m Thor.”

“Yes.” Thor’s mouth quirked into another smile. It was softer now.

“And I am… who?”

“Hela.”

_Hela._ There was a spark of something there that she half expected. It wasn’t enough though.

“If you wish to take more rest, I can leave.”

Hela returned under the covers since she has no idea how to proceed. She wondered if Thor would be willing to give her answers to her questions. She could risk it later, she supposed. “Will you be here?”

“Do you want me to?”

Did she want to?

“Yes… I think so.”

Thor seemed satisfied but unaware of the mild dissonance Hela’s own reply caused her. “Very well. I’ll be just here.”

Funny that she didn’t trust him earlier for the plain cup of water, but she was willing to let Thor watch her sleep. Her senses were befuddling sometimes.

She just hoped all would be clearer once she got another decent sleep.

_Wake up._

When she woke up the second time around, it was moonlight that was seeping through the window.

There was a female voice humming by her side, with gentle fingers carding through her hair. It felt… pleasant, she supposed, and the way the fingers massaged her scalp was lulling her again to sleep, only she already did just that for most of the day.

The humming stopped when her eyes fluttered open.

“Hello, child.” The voice sounded kind, fitting for the woman she saw, another person she didn’t
know (remember) of. She has wavy golden locks of the same shade as Thor’s and was sporting the same kind blue eyes as his. Were they related by any chance?

Hela’s eyes darted at Thor’s empty seat. The woman seemed to read her mind. “Thor has been sleeping here for days and missing some meals. I asked him to get some rest for himself.” She pushed a few strands of hair away from Hela’s face. “How are you?”

“I don’t know,” she replied honestly.

*Just like you don’t know what’s going on.*

There was a dry voice talking in her head. It sounded faintly like her own but was bearing ire and contempt.

“It’s alright,” the woman assured her. “Do you know me?”

“No.”

Hela pretended not to see the disappointment flashing on the woman’s handsome features. “My name is Frigga.”

*Stupid woman.*

Hela didn’t know where the hostility of the voice in her head came from. She dismissed it immediately. “Why did you call me child?” she asked instead, because as far as she knew, she no longer felt like one.

Frigga’s eyes twinkled fondly. “Because you’ll always be one to me.”

“I’m your child?”

“Eldest.”

Oh. “And Thor?”

“The second child and is my first son. Your younger brother.”

Although she and Thor were related, they look nothing alike; so was she and Frigga. She sat up, her hand absently touching the tips of her black hair. Was Frigga sure they were related?

“Of course I’m sure.” Hela didn’t know she asked it aloud. “I still remember when I had you. You were quite active, and you wanted to see the outside world already. You kept me up most of the nights,” Frigga recounted. “You were even more of a terror as an infant,” she added in amusement.

“Tell me more.” Even if she has all of her missing memories, she wouldn’t have remembered her days that young, but she was liking Frigga’s voice. Frigga was her mother, and this was the very same voice that she grew up to and sang her to sleep.

*You’re letting her talk too much while you’re being gullible. Spare yourself this nonsense.*

Except it didn’t sound like nonsense. Not really.

She listened to Frigga with rapt attention, all the while suppressing the insulting words that would rise occasionally among her conscious thoughts. Did these really came from her? Were they from the deepest corner of her mind? She did like to listen to her mother speak though, and she wanted to hear more.
To have two contradicting thoughts in her head was far disorienting than the largely missing information.

A movement from the doorway caught her attention. It was Thor, quietly watching the two of them fondly.

“Would you like to go out today?” Thor offered first thing after he brought her breakfast. If Hela didn’t know he was her brother, she would have thought he was her personal servant with his attentiveness. Not that the sentiment was lost on Hela, but she could manage most on her own.

“Can I?”

“You’re not a prisoner here, you know.”

Yes. Yes, you are. Look around, you fool.

“This is your home. You grew up here,” Thor said with a kind smile. “Come. I can show you where you usually frequent.”

He gave her the privacy to dress. There was one prepared made of viridescent silk and black velvet—those two colors were the most prominent around her, she noticed. She let her hair hang on her back, unbounded since she has no clue on how and what to fashion it to. There was a mirror nearby, and only then did she get a good look at her own face. She was oddly different from the two people who introduced themselves as her family. Somehow, she could imagine that she was nothing like her father as well.

You’re breaking your poor father’s heart, the voice in her head said before cackling in that disembodied tone, startling Hela. There was neither mirth nor loathing in it, and yet it sent shivers down her spine. If only he can hear you say that.

She quietly joined Thor’s side, not paying attention where they might be heading. The voice, as what she began calling it and not completely acknowledging hers, was a steady companion and an occupant of her mostly empty mind. The more Hela dwelled on the voice, the more she could imagine a corporeal form for it.

It was as if it resembled—

“Was she lying?” Hela abruptly asked. Thor tilted his head in confusion. “When Frigga told me she remembered carrying me inside her. Was it… was it a lie?” She refused to call her mother, because for all she knew, she could be adopted.

“It’s true,” Thor said simply, meeting Hela’s eyes to convey his honesty. “What makes you think otherwise?”

“I don’t resemble any of you.”

He blinked, a bit surprised, before grinning boyishly. “If it makes you feel better, I’m actually the one thinking whether I’m the adopted.” At Hela’s puzzled stare, he elaborated, “We have a younger brother, and he’s the one who looks like you. Can you imagine how I feel as a middle child?”
There was something amusing at Thor’s expression at feeling the odd one out. Hela’s unfounded fear receded, akin to a knot in her chest unfurling, paving way for a bubble of mirth. She stifled the incoming chuckle by pursing her lips instead. Thor didn’t appear to miss it though.

“Are you laughing?” he asked. He wasn’t offended but was tad surprised. Hela figured that she must have been not the kind to show too much emotions.

“No,” she assured him innocently. “Not at all.” Lying, albeit on a small thing such as this, seemed to come easy on her. “Where is he, our other brother?”

She wondered if she posed the wrong question when the amusement died from Thor’s features, replaced by gloom and what appeared to be longing. It was fascinating that even if she couldn’t remember anything, she recognized what longing looked like. Hela didn’t want to jump to conclusions, wanting to hear it from Thor.

“He’s… away at the moment.” There was a careful note in his answer. “And only he knows when he’ll be back,” he whispered. He shook his head, a beam making itself known. “His name is Loki.”

*The Jotun runt.*

“Who?” She wasn’t sure whether she intended to ask it to Thor or the voice.

“Loki is our brother’s name,” he repeated patiently. “He’s a bit mischievous, but you’ll like him. He stabbed me once.”

She paused. Did she hear that properly?

“Alright, I’m lying—I already lost count.”

And Thor—Thor was actually sheepish.

“But I’m telling the truth when I said that you’ll like him,” he amended hastily.

Thor mentioned Loki’s penchant of transforming into a snake, an animal he knew Thor loved, and would surprise his older brother by shifting back once Thor got ahold of him, before stabbing him with a small knife. Hela might not remember it for herself, but she could hilariously picture the story Thor was telling her.

This time, she didn’t hold back her laugh.

The place was quiet, she realized; not that Hela minded. She might not be ready for any raucous noise.

Thor led her to a gazebo by the far eastern side of the palace. Frigga was there, her face alighting with joy upon her children’s arrival. She was more radiant outside where the sunlight would touch her head.

Hela went conscious of her hand when Frigga held on it tight, her touch full of affection. Where her mother’s skin was sun-kissed, Hela was pale; her pallor accentuated by the contrast of her and Frigga’s complexion. Where Frigga’s touch was warm, Hela was a little cold in comparison.
Frigga never let go.

Hela squeezed her hand in return.

*Pathetic.*

And whenever Hela’s resolve declined, Frigga held stronger.

When Hela returned to her chambers, it occurred to her that she had seen no one else aside from Thor and Frigga.

She could ask Thor about it tomorrow. Maybe.

She slept, knowing she had a nice day.

Thor toured him around the palace.

It escaped her mind what she was supposed to ask. How could she when Thor was enthusiastically recounting stories of his adventures with his friends, of worlds outside Asgard, of an all-seeing Gatekeeper, and tales of their young brother that Hela never saw even a shadow of?

Loki was far away from Asgard, Thor had simply said.

“Why?”

“I was an idiot,” he replied softly, and to Thor, it was enough to explain it all.

*The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,* the first and last thing the voice said that day.

Thor would bring her to anywhere she wished to explore, but there was an exception: a certain pair of huge doors that led to the largest part of the castle.

She never asked what was inside, and Thor was more than glad to divert her attention from it whenever they passed by.

She got the feeling that she could ask Thor to go to the ends of Asgard with her but never inside what laid beyond.
They rode farther within the kingdom than they usually did.

Halfway to their destination was a site with several mounds of earth that could be seen as far as the horizon. Thor stopped as well when she did, and from her position, she could tell that he was being hesitant.

“What is this place?”

“A graveyard.”

“For the citizens of Asgard?”

“For a certain group of warriors who fought valiantly centuries ago,” Thor said grimly. “They were formidable warriors whom the Valhalla received with honor befitting them.”

“What did they face?”

For a while, she expected him to say they fought a vicious monster, but what he said was, “The Goddess of Death.”

That was unfair, Hela thought.

But what do you know of fair?

Later in the night, she dreamt of women clad in silver armors and royal blue capes, each riding winged white horses. Hela stood there, mesmerized at the beauty of their formation where the grey skies with the gleaming golden hue behind them painted a picture of surrealism—the same aspect that made her realized that she was dreaming lucidly.

When a blade pierced her side, she felt no pain.

But when one of the several swords that shot out of her hands cut through multiple bodies at once, Hela screamed.

There was a storm the following morning.

Which was, in a way, for the best since Hela wasn’t in the mood to go outside. She hardly slept at all, troubled by a nightmare that had felt real.

Or perhaps it wasn’t about the dream at all.
Thor dropped by a little later bringing food. She wondered who actually fixed them if there were no other people to be seen. She wouldn’t think about that now, her mind too preoccupied.

Thor was more perceptive than she gave him credit for. Although he didn’t pry, there was curiosity and a touch of expectancy in his subtle glances.

Also, he could make an annoyingly convincing puppy eyes.

He was sitting on the floor, back against the side of the bed, when she told him.

“You’ve seen the Valkyries,” Thor told her. There was neither shock nor worry in his tone. Was he expecting this perhaps?

“What are Valkyries?”

“Do you remember the graveyard we passed by?”

Oh... Oh.

She wasn’t a bit comforted after knowing that.

*How long are you planning to keep up this terrible act?*

---

In the evening of thunder and hard rain, Hela dreamt of a woman with horns, eradicating armies and bringing soldiers on their knees who were sometimes brought down alive or sometimes with just their lower half intact.

From a different perspective this time, she saw the Valkyries again, raining down on the horned woman who was standing where Hela stood previously.

If that was indeed the Goddess of Death, Hela wondered why it was her own face she saw looking back at her.

---

The following night, the Goddess of Death visited once again in her dreams.

She was on the edge of a cliff tonight, and Thor was there beside her. They were talking in muffled voices, and Hela was a good distance away where she couldn’t make out their words. The closer she got, the farther away they were to her.

When Hela could finally hear them, it was only Thor’s cry of pain that rang in her ears when his eye was taken away by the Goddess of Death.

Thor has already fallen below before Hela could reach him.
Her brother fell.

Out of sheer desperation to save Thor, Hela followed him down without thinking.

She woke up to a thin sunlight hitting her face from the crack between the curtains. She found the sensation quite odd on the skin, but she felt the light warming her pleasantly as if she had been on a long cold despite the thick, emerald silk blanket draped on her.

“You’re awake,” said a male voice from her left.

She turned to the direction, finding an unknown man sitting on a chair by her bed. The stranger made no other move than offer a tentative smile. She has an inkling that she was supposed to know this man, from his golden hair and stormy, yet gentle, blue eyes—her mind unhelpfully conjured a blank.

Nothing. There was nothing at all try as she might to think of anything, even her name.

“Where am I?” she asked with a raspy voice. Instinctually, she raised her guard; against what, she has no idea.

“Asgard.” The answer echoed in her head like some distant memory. “In your room, to be more specific.” The man stood up by the window, about to part the curtains before turning to ask, “Do you mind?”

She vaguely shook her head. She examined her surroundings that didn’t trigger any familiarity, unfortunately, that could have given her a clue about… herself, at least.

“Are you hungry?” the man asked.

It wasn’t her stomach that gave an emptiness. It was of the mind that seemed to have a huge chunk cleared out. “No.”

“Water, then.” The man poured water from the pitcher to a porcelain cup from the night stand. He handed it to her carefully.

Her nose absently sniffed the cup until she knew it in herself that it was safe to drink. She drank in sips.

“Do I know you?” she asked after a moment.

The man returned to his previous position, slumping back to his chair before answering, “I’m Thor.”

“Thor,” she repeated. Has she heard that name before?

“Yes.” Thor’s mouth quirked into another smile. It was softer now.

“And I am… who?”

“Hela.”

Hela. There was a spark of something there that she half expected. It wasn’t enough though.
“If you wish to take more rest, I can leave.”

Hela returned under the covers since she has no idea how to proceed. She wondered if Thor would be willing to give her answers to her questions. She could risk it later, she supposed. “Will you be here?”

“Do you want me to?”

Did she want to?

“Yes… I think so.”

Thor seemed satisfied but unaware of the mild dissonance Hela’s own reply caused her. “Very well. I’ll be just here.”

Funny that she didn’t trust him earlier for the plain cup of water, and yet she was willing to let Thor watch her sleep. Her senses were befuddling sometimes.

She just hoped all would be clearer once she got another decent sleep.

She must be mad when she followed Thor down.

There was nothing but the dark below, gnawing at her vision the further she fell.

The last thing she saw was the Goddess of Death sneering at her foolishness.

No matter, this was only a nightmare.

She woke up to a thin sunlight hitting her face from the crack between the curtains. She found the sensation quite odd on the skin, but she felt the light warming her pleasantly as if she had been on a long cold despite the thick, emerald silk blanket draped on her.

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“So you want me to?”

Did she want to?

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Funny that she didn’t trust him earlier for the plain cup of water, and yet she was willing to let Thor watch her sleep. Her senses were befuddling sometimes.

She just hoped all would be clearer once she got another decent sleep.
Her mother was tending to an injured young wolf when Hela next saw Frigga, seeking her without Thor accompanying her.

“She’s weak,” Frigga said as Hela watched her mother heal the poor animal.

*They reduced her to this.*

The wolf gave a pained whine, and Hela admired it for being able to stay alive despite its multiple injuries. She could only imagine what attacked it.

“You can hold her,” Frigga told her gently, mending the long gash on the wolf’s head.

“I don’t know how to heal her,” Hela admitted, feeling useless at the moment.

Frigga smiled encouragingly. “You don’t have to. A touch will suffice.”

Tentatively, Hela ran a fingertip on its soft back. It was breathing weakly, but what mattered was it was still breathing. Emboldened, she carded the smooth jet-black fur.

When it—she, nudged herself to her careful touch, Hela couldn’t fight back the smile that grazed her lips.

She woke up to a thin sunlight hitting her face from the crack between the curtains. She found the sensation quite odd on the skin, but she felt the light warming her pleasantly as if she had been on a long cold despite the thick, emerald silk blanket draped on her.

“You’re awake,” said a male voice from her left.

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Did she want to?

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Funny that she didn’t trust him earlier for the plain cup of water, and yet she was willing to let Thor watch her sleep. Her senses were befuddling sometimes.

She just hoped all would be clearer once she got another decent sleep.

Fenris was like a protector when she slept, always on guard by the foot of her bed. She slept whenever Hela did, but not without remaining alert and stout. She has taken a liking on Thor, and on some occasion, her brother would offer to take Fenris out with him.

Fenris never agreed to leave Hela’s side.

Hela’s only regret was that she couldn’t remember anything at all to warrant such loyalty.
Fenris nudged her awake in the middle of the night.

Groggily, she relented to open the door when she began scratching on it. At first, she thought she wanted to get out, perhaps wanting fresh air; Fenris was inside the room the whole day, occupying the foot of the bed.

Fenris bit the hem of her sleeping gown, pulling her along with her with an impressive set of strong jaws. She followed her with a sigh, wondering what Fenris could have wanted in the late hour.

They stopped on the double doors of the Great Hall Thor never brought her—and forbidden her—to.

“Fenris, no!” she hissed in warning when Fenris pushed one of the doors open with her head.

Hela was met with a gleaming hall when she followed her inside. Tall columns adorned the great hall where the walls were enriched with murals from bottom to top. Her eyes traveled around, wanting to take in the history depicted through paint and etching, when Hela’s attention was diverted to the far end of the long hall, where a throne was situated and a person sat.

She knew then that she has been there and walked the same path, except it hadn’t been as deathly silent as it currently was, and her steps weren’t as easy as it was now.

When her gaze met the eye of the old man she caught glimpse of, Hela found herself being swallowed by the ground.

She woke up to a thin sunlight hitting her face from the crack between the curtains. She found the sensation quite odd on the skin, but she felt the light warming her pleasantly as if she had been on a long cold despite the thick, emerald silk blanket draped on her.

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Her mind gave unintelligible flashes.

A cliff.

A woman.

A wolf.

There was a sound akin to a loud rattle of a cage. Her head shot up to the man who merely looked back in confusion.

“Did you hear that?”

“I hear nothing.”
Ah.

It was all in her head.

The conclusion she formed on her own made her sick.

But there could be no other explanation as to why she kept dreaming of the fallen Valkyries and their deaths in her hands.

She must be the Goddess of Death.

She woke up to a thin sunlight hitting her face from the crack between the curtains. She found the sensation quite odd on the skin, but she felt the light warming her pleasantly as if she had been on a long cold despite the thick, emerald silk blanket draped on her.

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Her mind was telling her that he was no stranger.

“Thor?”

Thor’s tentative smile cracked into disbelief before he rushed to her, gathering her with his thick arms. It was almost crushing if it wasn’t for her own embrace. Thor was here, very much alive.

Fenris jumped on the bed. She had grown larger than she last saw her. She nipped Hela’s arm affectionately before tucking herself under her elbow.

Absently massaging Fenris behind her ear, she asked, “What happened? I thought—”

*What is this?* The voice roared, followed by the metal clang that sounded distant… and louder… louder...

Pain suddenly flooded her mind as if her head was being split open. Images invaded her perception as fast as the speed of light—she was no longer in her chamber, Thor was no longer there, and in Fenris’s place was a snarling, giant black wolf advancing menacingly towards her.

Hela moved back, and what used to be the mattress underneath her was now an unsteady ground with sharp rocks cutting on her palms.

She took an inch backward. Hela could grasp nothing with her palm.
“Settle down, darling,” somebody said, the voice sounding familiar. “To me, Fenris.”

Behind Fenris’s huge built was the woman that plagued Hela as of late, both in sleep and waking moments.

“Finally,” the Goddess of Death said, looking down on Hela with a glint of hunger in her eyes. “That was quite a cage. I’m impressed.”

Hela’s chest heave, heart beating loud that she could hear it in her hears. “What? Who—”

“None of that now,” she said, waving her hand disinterestedly. “You do know me. You simply don’t want to acknowledge my presence in here.” She gestured at her temple.

“You’re the voice,” Hela said in realization. “You’re me.”

“No.” The Goddess of Death scoffed. “Of course I’m not you. I don’t go soft with a mere motherly touches.” Hela’s fury rose at her mocking of Frigga. “Nor do I get carried away by a younger brother who is a huge oaf.” She paused, thoughtful for a second, shrugging. “But on second thought—yes, you can say I’m you, and you’re me,” she told her nonchalantly. “It’s stupid, but unfortunately we share a body, and between the two of us, you, who happen to be the worst part, is the dominating one. I’d like my position back, please. Thank you.”

Hela didn’t know whether there was relief in knowing she wasn’t entirely this… this woman who killed hundreds, if not more.

The person who she saw threw Thor.

“Where’s Thor?”

The Goddess of Death rolled her eyes at her. “You’re dying, but you’re looking for—oh, for Norns sake, they actually succeeded!” She crouched low. “Did you know that Odin is messing with your head to reform you back into a mindless soldier? He’s benevolent now so he won’t be using the term executioner, but he’ll basically want you to kill for him again, just not to commit anymore genocide, which is a pity. Somebody has to tell that old man that he shouldn’t stop within the Nine Realms.”

“Where’s Thor,” Hela repeated forcefully. “What did you do to him?”

“Nothing… yet. Do you think a single eye like Odin’s will suit him? To be honest, I was having high hopes for Thor. He’s an idiot, which is a bonus spite to Odin, and once he’s at the throne, he’s sure to topple over the petty alliances our father worked hard to achieve. How dramatic that will be, the golden son of Odin warring against Asgard’s friends.” The Goddess of Death’s expression turned sour. “Until Thor proved to be as altruistic as the Allfather. Shame that he got Frigga’s big heart.” She traced Hela’s chin idly. “Not that it’ll do him any good,” she murmured.

“Do you envy him?” Hela asked. “Are you my manifestation for that envy?” She was smacked across the cheek. It should be painful, but the adrenaline was currently numbing her of pain.

“You think so low of me?” The Goddess of Death seethed. “I’m your ambitions, your desire to rule beyond the Nine Realms. I’m the predator in you, a perfect warrior that brought empires to their knees. I’m the greater part of you that doesn’t want to live in the shadows of stupid younger brothers who know nothing of what it took to have Asgard the mightiest of all!” She dragged Hela by her dress, bringing the top half of Hela away from purchase of the ground. “I am the part of you that hated her father for feeding her bloodlust to create a monster, only to lock you away for the same reasons when he could no longer control you.”
Only the arms of the Goddess of Death kept her from falling, and yet, it was understanding that dawned on Hela.

“No,” Hela said evenly, staring up and meeting defiantly the eyes of the Goddess of Death.

“No?”

Up close, where Hela could see clearly how the features of the Goddess of Death, she wondered how she could say that she resembled this woman who gave an ugly snarl, her eyes manic and wide with thirst for power and blood. This wasn’t the same face that would reflect Hela in the mirror.

It was too different… wrong.

It was saddening to think she had fallen this low already. “No,” she repeated. “But I know you. You are my savagery, vanity, hubris, and odium.”

Hela must be mad to provoke the very last person she should.

“I’m a Goddess!”

“You are a daughter first and an older sister. You are nothing without the Princess of Asgard.”

Hela’s voice was firm even when she reached on the arms of Death. She didn’t have to apply force on her grip for when she met the skin of her other self, the Goddess of Death gradually disintegrated into thin air, powerless and voiceless were her cries of terror as she dissolved.

When the force that held her aloft was gone, Hela no longer feared the fall.

But once she learned to embrace the nothingness that awaited her, she floated.

When the scene shifted, she was back in the throne room, standing before the king with one eye.

Odin, the Allfather. Her father.

Frigga was by Odin’s side, her proud smile tainted with melancholy. Thor, who was beside Hela, was quiet. She held his forearm comfortingly. For somebody who never grew up knowing her, and Hela who was never there to witness Thor stepping after the shadows of her steps, he sparked Hela’s protective side.

Hela already knew what facing the Allfather meant.

Odin sentenced her of banishment to Hel for her crimes, which Hela accepted with the grace befitting of a royalty.

“You’ll be given the title of the Goddess of Death, the keeper of Hel, and the governess of the dead. Within the realm of Hel, you rule over those who are not honored to be granted passage to Valhalla,” Odin declared. “Hel is no longer your cage. It is now your territory where you are tasked to keep the fallen, unjudging. I trust that you understand that while this is the sentence to you of your king, this is also a heavy responsibility given to you by the Allfather.” Odin peered at her with his eye. “Bearing the whole confidence of your sire, Odin Borson, to his first born Hela Odinsdottir.”
She kneeled in front of the king, and when she looked up, she smiled to her father and mother as expression of gratitude for letting her be escorted with her dignity intact.

“I—” Thor began, pausing. “I’ll be seeing you around, probably.”

Hela raised an eyebrow. “I do hope not anytime soon.”

“Oh, right, Hel. Dead.” She could see that Thor was close to slapping himself with the stupidity of the statement. “Whatever,” he muttered, his mouth forming a grin. “Farewell, sister,” Thor said, offering a formal handshake.

“Farewell to you too, brother.” She accepted the proffered hand, her expression softening. She need not speak more, for her nod said it all.

*Thank you.*

They could call her mad.

But when she finally set foot on the familiar ground, there was something oddly freeing at the prospect of being in Hel alone for forever.

This was home.

---

**TBC**

Chapter End Notes

*Hela is a magical princess now :D*

if anybody's interested, it all happened in Hela's mind, and the time loop thingy occurred for a least a thousand times before they could get it right.
Wakanda

Chapter Summary

Loki wakes to an unknown location in Midgard.

Chapter Notes

heh. this is what an almost three months of writer's block looks like.

this is a continuation of chapter 7.

and, yes, this fic is now an AU of Infinity War. :)

In all honesty, T'Challa didn't know what he was expecting to find when M'Baku arrived to Wakanda regarding an urgent matter, asking the king to personally see a visitor that had come from the sky and was found barely alive at the snowy mountains within the Jabari Tribe's territory.

Extraterrestrial life was long acknowledged by the world, Wakanda included, that T'Challa was no longer surprised if the visitor who had crashed would turn out to be another being of a different world, like the famous hammer-wielding Avenger, Thor.

While the Jabari Tribe, with their seclusion from the mainstream Wakanda and refusal to adapt its technology, were not aware of such—The Avengers, at the very least—M'Baku had taken the news with a stride for someone who still heavily embraced the traditional way. Not that T'Challa was expecting any less.

"With the vast skies out there, a man has to wonder if he's a mere speckle," M'Baku said afterwards.

T'Challa agreed. He once wondered the same thing during bouts of pensiveness.

He was led to the same location where he had been placed during his short comatose, and at the spot where T'Challa had lain down was a man with blue skin, almost as dark as midnight, with intricate markings etched on his face.

The stranger wasn't clearly human, nor the same as The Avenger, Thor, but apart from the skin, the unknown man's features gave a sense of familiarity that T'Challa was sure he had seen the same person somewhere.

His breathing was shallow, and small cuts were littered on different parts of his body. To T'Challa's fascination though, a small laceration closed itself right in front of his eyes.

"He could heal himself fast," M'Baku told him after seeing T'Challa's expression. "When we found him last night, he was bleeding on the side of his stomach. Come morning, the injury healed without a scar."
"Did he wake?"

M'Baku shook his head. "The healers mentioned that he never did. They said it could be because his body was conserving energy. For healing magic, they suspect."

Being in an era of superheroes and aliens and growing up with the belief that magic was one of the fundamental forces of Earth, T'Challa was no longer surprised at the concept of magic moving freely as the air. M'Baku must have shared the belief as well.

"He will come with me to Wakanda to bring him to Shuri. She will take care of the rest. Thank you for bringing this to my immediate attention. I will make sure that he knows who he owes his survival first."

A few Jabari hauled the gurney aboard the jet as T'Challa, M'Baku, and Okeye oversaw the process. The visitor—what T'Challa formally dubbed him as with his refusal to call him simply a man or an alien—didn't once twitch at the whole duration of the ride back.

Okeye, who has been quiet for a while, set the jet on autopilot, staring at T'Challa like she was figuring him out. T'Challa would have been miffed if it was somebody else. He was used to this gesture of hers.

"What is it?" he asked, faintly amused.

"Not that I'm questioning your decision, but do you think it's a good idea to bring an unknown entity with us? We know nothing of him or his kind."

It was true that they didn't, or anything in regards to extraterrestrial life for that matter. The Wakandans used to be too focused on their own country that they barely paid attention to what was outside them, until T'Challa opened the real Wakanda to the United Nations. He wouldn't call the Wakandans ignorant of the foreign affairs, but like him, they were still learning. In way, it was as if they existed in their own world and were blind to the significant change for the better that they could contribute to the rest. T'Challa had inherited the same prejudice of his predecessors to the people living outside Wakanda, always thinking that the Vibranium would fall in the wrong hands, and while it did happen in an unpleasant way, T'Challa wouldn't generalize the foreigners anymore just because of the actions of a single man.

"We'll take precautions to make sure Shuri will be safe with the presence of our visitor since. We know not of his intentions and why he landed here," T'Challa said. "But the same reason can also be applied as to why we couldn't judge him for something he has not committed yet. As long as he is on the soul of Wakanda, we treat him as guest, and this guest of ours needs a better medical attention after the Jabari did their best."

Okeye was somehow placated by his reply, though her guard remained (and T'Challa supposed it was something she would never let down seeing as she was the head of the king's security). "And the council?"

"I will handle them once we arrive. And while I am occupied proving my stance in this, I want you to bring the visitor as soon as possible to Shuri."

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When Loki awoke, his vision was bathed with soft lighting from above him.

He could feel the soft padding of the surface he was lying down that wasn't a bed. He heard a low whirring nearby that seemed to be emanating from the machine arching over him. Distracted by the three beeps, Loki saw a few feet to his right a large display of what appeared to be his vitals that
displayed the Midgardian alphabet and numerical systems.

He was successful in his escape then. Although as to where exactly he was in Midgard, Loki was yet to find out.

Judging by his surroundings, he was in a laboratory that also served as a workshop heavily riddled with technology far advanced than what he knew of Earth. It reminded him of that tower in New York that belonged to Stark. He didn't get the chance to look around that time, but he could tell that it was the pinnacle of technology of New York, or perhaps of the whole country even.

There was a wall of looking glass that Loki approached—and stopped when he heard the oncoming footsteps.

Loki whirled around and saw six females clad in red and silver. Ironic that it wasn't their weapons at hand that gave them away as guards; Loki could detect hostility mingling with wary underneath their rigid stances. In the midst of the female warriors though was a girl no more than a child in his eyes, holding a strange tablet of sorts. She paused upon seeing him awake and standing, surprised and… in awe?

She put away the object she was holding, approaching him ahead of her escorts much to their worry. She raised her hands with the intention of placating him perhaps. "Hello? Do you—Do you understand me?" she asked in a heavily accented English.

Loki could pretend that he didn't; he could gather more information by acting naïve, but he needed help too. He needed to find Thor soon. Be damned if Midgard could still recognize him.

"Do you not know of me?" Loki asked back.

"Oh, you speak perfect English," she murmured. "Should I?"

"Then you do not remember the last time I was here in Midgard?"

She tilted her head, confused. "Assuming what you mean by Midgard is Earth, I don't think we had an encounter with you… or your kind."

Your kind. Loki looked at his hand, taking note of his Jotun skin.

Frigga had advised him, in that brief moment during his brink of death, to embrace his true nature. In fact, this form would give him a lot of advantage in terms of survival. Still, easier said than done.

"Where am I?"

"You're in Wakanda." She sidled beside Loki, barely minding the personal space. The tablet she was holding was pushed to his hand while she tapped on the glass screen that displayed the planet of Midgard as a sphere of blue and green. She pressed on a particular spot in the eastern hemisphere. "You're here. This is the continent of Africa, and you are here in Wakanda. The whole Nation of Wakanda used to be hidden from the rest of the world until recently."

Loki let her rambled on the basic information on Midgard that he already knew. When she finished talking, he gave her a querying glance at the tablet she was holding, and once she excitedly passed it to him, he imitated her gestures, tapping on the western hemisphere of the digital rendition of Earth. The screen flashed him numerical values alongside the familiar Midgardian metric system for distances. He didn't have to do a quick mental calculation to know he was too far from New York, and with his magic that was yet to replenish after pulling that escape from Thanos's ship and healing himself after sustaining life-threatening injuries, Loki would only reach half of the distance in
between. Time was what Loki didn't have with Thanos in possession of two stones already. He knew there were two hidden in Midgard, and he was bound for this planet any minute, if they haven't already.

"You know New York?" she asked, pulling Loki out of his thoughts. When she peered at him, he could almost see her piecing the clues together. She might be young, but she looked intelligent for an average human. "You've been here before," she concluded.

Loki knew he had to be careful—he might be lucky to land in a place where he wasn't known as the invader, but it was obvious that Wakanda has the means to figure out his identity now that they were no longer isolated, and if he was correct, they also have the better means to stop him. There was also the matter concerning Heimdall and the Asgardians. While they likely arrived safely on Norway, on that place where Odin passed away, he still had to make sure, and only then he would have to get into contact with Thor's Midgardian friends.

Loki couldn't believe it himself, but he was actually thinking they might stand a chance if the fight was brought here in Midgard.

As much as it pained Loki to admit it, these were tasks that he couldn't accomplish with the current resources he has and with the clock ticking on his back.

"I was here before, trying to invade New York," Loki finally said, holding her gaze. He opted for honesty, all the while wishing he could lie his way out of this. "I am Loki."

There was a pin drop the moment the words left him, leaving him fully aware of the odd machines beeping and whirring within the room. With his true form in display, his senses were much sharper compared when he was wearing his Asgardian skin. He could feel the women's more intense wave of alertness and animosity as they start to form a closing position around him, although Loki was confident that they wouldn't charge in with this girl this close to him.

While Loki was sure his red eyes were terrifying as they could get, the girl didn't break the stare, her eyes narrow instead and arms crossed on her chest.

"Last time I checked Loki is not blue, and he has horns."

Of course. Of course her concern would be his appearance. Midgardians.

Loki shifted to his Asgardian skin, letting the guise dominate without breaking the eye contact. Let them see. If his name alone was enough to warrant a non-friendly reaction, more so would his Asgardian form. He was itching to conjure a small blade for self-defense, but he knew that as swift as he called forth his magic was the pointed ends of five spears that would stab him in an instant on his vital points.

He paid them no mind for the mean time. If he wanted to gain their trust, he would have to display a semblance of vulnerability. Loki turned his attention back to the girl whose reaction was of immense surprise mixed with… he paused, staring evenly.

The girl stood, mesmerized as she took in his new form from up to down. "I've never seen magic in action before."

Loki blinked.

"That's shapeshifting, isn't it? You're a shapeshifter. Does that mean you can turn into animals and inanimate objects too? Are all your kind like you? Your magic must be something."
That… That wasn't the response he expected.

"Sadly, the monitor can't pick those up and study them. I might have to do a tweak with them later on. Are you from some far away planet? You're not from any of the planets of the Solar System, are you? I have more questions to ask you if you'll be willing to—"

"Alright, stop," Loki said tersely.

"Sorry. I rarely babble like this, except when I'm excited. Please don't think of me as an evil scientist." Loki barely suppressed a snort. She was too young to know about the evil in the heart of men. "I'm just curious. That's all."

Loki straightened, refraining to show how he was momentarily thrown off guard. He mustered a disarming smile, raising his empty hands. "How about I let you study me, and in return I get to have an audience with your king?"

"Why would you like to meet him?"

"Princess, this man is dangerous," the leader of the female soldiers hissed, aiming her spear threateningly to Loki, the movement imitated by the others.

"Princess, is it?" Loki said, interested. It would explain the number of escorts flanking her. "Allow me to reintroduce myself, from one royalty to another. I am Loki, Prince of Asgard." He considered something briefly. "Odin's son and the rightful king of Jotunheim." He made a grand gesture of bowing down to appeal to the human girl's vain side, knowing any person of royalty possessed even the tiniest bit of vanity. More so a human.

"I'm Shuri," she replied rather enthusiastically. "And we no longer do the bowing down thing here anymore."

Loki twitched internally. He easily recovered, giving her a delighted grin. "Whatever you say, Princess."

"Shuri is fine," she said dismissively as Loki's eyes followed her fingers flying across her tablet again. "Back to my question. You said you want to meet the king. What for?"

"I can explain once he's here, if you don't mind. You are free to listen to what I have to say. When is the soonest I can get an audience with His Excellency?" Loki asked politely, knowing at least five people who would take his eagerness the other way.

"I'd say in a few minutes if the council will not be a pain in his ass. Don't worry, he'll find my message more interesting than them so he'll come up with any excuse to get here as fast as he could," Shuri assured him.

Loki raised an eyebrow. That was fast for a king to respond to a summon from a mere princess, although it would explain it if Shuri happened to be the king's beloved daughter that he would even personally go here than face him in his throne room.

"Thank you. I suppose I can answer any inquiries you have while we wait."

"Before that," she said, turning to her escorts with a sigh. "You can stand down, Xoliswa."

"Princess, we have orders from the king to ensure your safety from this man."

"Yes, yes. I know. I'm not asking you to leave me alone with him, just… ease up a bit? I'll be fine."
Reluctantly, they did as told but kept their close distance just in case. Shuri grinned at them in gratitude.

Loki remained unfazed at the scowls directed at him. Message received.

Shuri walked to the monitor where Loki's vitals were currently in display, making a swiping gesture to change screen. The glass also functioned without physical buttons too, Loki noted.

"This shows that the toxin is finally out of your body. We only speed up the process since your body already began to naturally treat you. To be fair, it was quite a toxin. I took a sample to make an antidote for it, just in case. If you don't mind."

"Not at all." He also wanted to know what lethal toxin was laced on Proxima's weapon. With a feeling that he would be seeing her again, Loki had hopes that he developed an immunity that could serve as an advantage on their next encounter. Proxima dominated him in their previous fight, and Loki would have been a sure picking if it wasn't for Gungnir.

*Speaking of which.*

Gungnir remained concealed to his person, it seemed. Loki wasn't planning to reveal it in the presence of humans after establishing that he was unarmed of any physical weaponry.

"You didn't land directly here in the Golden City. The Jabari Tribe found you in their mountains yesterday morning. They informed the king, and you were brought here since you needed a more advanced medical assistance," Shuri said.

Loki entertained the possibility that some parts of Wakanda wasn't as technologically advanced like where he presently was, which was obviously the capital.

He dismissed the thought away, focusing on something else at the moment, thinking mainly of the right approach he should take on a Midgardian King that he never met.

Not that it mattered anyway. He wasn't called a silver tongue for nothing.

It was finally clear why their guest looked familiar to T'Challa.

He had only seen images and video coverages of the attempted invasion in New York six years ago, where The Avengers was founded to defend Earth. The Avengers became an independent team that protected the Earth against inner and extraterrestrial threats, working with the peaceful interest of the whole world rather than a specific country or organization. Until the United Nations noticed the casualties they caused during battles that left much to be desired, where a rift within the team itself began with the debate of whether to sign on the Sokovian Accords or not. With the government of Wakanda one of those that signed the Sokovian Accords, T'Challa was informed of the events that led to the death of the former king of Wakanda.

If T'Challa was to see the big picture, it all began with Loki and his invasion.

It could all be an act, T'Challa reminded himself, when Loki dropped the pleasant expression he has while entertaining Shuri's inquiries, putting a more solemn one upon T'Challa's and Okoye's arrival. It didn't escape T'Challa that the Dora Milaje he assigned to be Shuri's guard were on edge than usual.

"Shuri," he called firmly, betraying none of his wariness, but far from the tone he usually reserved for her. "If you will please leave us and our guest here. It will not take long," he promised.
Shuri was momentarily hesitant to be kicked out of her own laboratory, though she agreed without a word once she felt the tense atmosphere that appeared when her brother arrived. Besides, she could always watch the security camera later. T'Challa wouldn't mind.

Only two females escorted Shuri out, while the rest were left by T'Challa's side. "I see that you have healed completely."

"I did, in expense of most of my magic, but you have my thanks for coming to my rescue as well. Your aid kept the poison from infecting me further."

"The Jabari Tribe did their best first. They deserve your gratitude the most."

"Then I will give it to them once I have the chance."

T'Challa allowed the small talk as a respite. "What is your business with Wakanda?" he asked, directly going straight to the matter at hand.

"Would you believe me if I said that this isn't an intended destination of mine?" Loki asked back. He shook his head. "Pardon, I do not mean to reply with a question. What I said is true—this isn't a destination in mind that I have. I only wished to escape from where I came from."

"In Asgard, where you were imprisoned?" Although, if Loki had indeed escaped his prison, he shouldn't be here wasting his time by asking for an audience.

Loki shook his head. "Asgard is gone. An enemy invaded after the death of King Odin. The battle that commenced resulted to the destruction of Asgard. I escaped with my brother, Thor, along with the Asgardians who survived. Hopefully, they arrived in Norway safely."

T'Challa immediately caught on. "What happened on your way here?"

"Thanos went after us since I have the Tesseract with me. The Tesseract contained a stone, one of the Infinity Stones that Thanos is searching for. There are six of them, and counting the Space Stone that was inside the Tesseract, Thanos is already in possession of two. Two more are here in Earth and one of it is in the scepter that I had with me during the invasion, so I assume that it is in New York, in possession of The Avengers. As for the other... I could be wrong, but it's possibly being guarded by a person that I only met briefly. His name is Doctor Strange."

T'Challa frowned. "But you escaped," he said, despite the huge who this Thanos was.

"Thor didn't agree with the conditions." Loki gave a wry smile. "But since he was the king of Asgard then, he restrained himself until our ship left safely. He said he already passed the mantle of king to somebody aboard before he asked to be left behind. He tried to rescue me." Something flashed briefly across Loki's features that was too quick for T'Challa to pick up on before his expression became neutral, continuing his story about Thanos that T'Challa was wanted to know.

Loki spoke concisely of Thanos, a Titan warlord who has been on the quest of gathering the six Infinity Stones for years. Loki even told him about these stones that seemed to be deeply sought for in space—which wasn't surprising if each one possessed immense power and beyond comprehension if together. These items and Thanos's existence only served to remind T'Challa how insignificant he was in the universe, like a small grain of sand on a desert.
"Thanos was the one who sent me in New York," Loki said. "He provided me the army and the scepter to help me conquer Earth while I give him the Tesseract in return."

"You were once an ally of this person who you said will be coming down here on Earth, and for all we know you are an ally of his again. You might be working for him in exchange of your freedom. How can I be sure that I should trust the words of an enemy of this world?" T'Challa asked reasonably.

"I understand." Loki nodded. He looked like he was expecting the question. "I told you that there should be Asgardians that arrived in Norwa. Among them is Bruce Banner, The Hulk. It's a long story, but my brother and I came across him in another planet. He should be with them, and he can tell you himself the encounter with Thanos."

It was difficult to see past Loki's persona as the invader, but T'Challa didn't fail to see the determination and the hint of desperation behind his carefully blank mask. And while T'Challa, as a king protecting his people from threats, remained clueless as to Loki's true agenda in his return to Earth, he did appreciate the civil way of Loki's approach.

"And if Bruce Banner can vouch for your character, what then?"

"I need help," Loki replied. "I need to reach The Avengers to give warning and prepare them for what is coming, but I doubt it will go down peacefully once they see me even with Banner's account of the events." T'Challa withheld the information about the break up of the team, knowing Loki might exploit the knowledge to his benefit. T'Challa had to be very careful and logical. "That's why I need to find Thor."

Although he didn't show, T'Challa was puzzled. For a second, he thought Loki would be asking him to contact The Avengers.

"No offense, Your Highness, but I don't think they will trust you if they find out that you have been talking to me. They're not above suspecting that you are under mind control after I've been known for that technique."

Ah, so Loki wasn't aware of the recent events in Earth if he didn't know the alliance the Black Panther has with both Tony Stark and Captain America, the leaders of the newly divided Avengers.

"What happened to your brother?"

Loki was somewhat hesitant to answer. "Frankly, I do not know. He was thrown in space in the middle of the battle we have against two of Thanos's children."

T'Challa had no knowledge of Asgardian physiology, but being lost in space meant sure death.

No. He's not dead, a voice that sounded like Loki's rang inside T'Challa's head. I can feel that he's alive somewhere, that's why I need to find Thor immediately.

T'Challa had no idea how to guard himself against telepathy, and thankfully it didn't come as an attack, for now. Still, it was disconcerting to know that this was also an ability of Loki. T'Challa schooled his expression easily. Loki appeared to be unable to accept the possibility of his brother's death of he couldn't speak it aloud.

"How will you look for him?"

"I need a room."
"He is using you, My King," Okoye said, steadfast by T'Challa's side as he gave instructions to a servant to prepare an empty spacious room that was ideal for deep meditation.

_I have a staff with me that can hopefully aid me on my search. I do not intend to show it now, they might not take it well_, Loki had said telepathically before their conversation ended. T'Challa initially thought that was the end of it, until Loki spoke again in his mind, saying, _I will be indebted to you after this. To express my gratitude, allow me to share the knowledge of sorcery that I have. Although to be fair, Wakanda isn't far behind magic. Magic is only science that is yet to be understood._

"And you're letting him," Okoye said accusingly, with a huge tone of concern.

"Because he has no resources at hand." _And he's desperate._ "The room is something that I can allow."

T'Challa understood where Okoye was coming from. They have no idea what would be going on once Loki started his meditation while using his staff. He could be contacting Thanos, and he could also be giving his location to the enemy. T'Challa would be none the wiser.

Loki was the God of Mischief and was a known liesmith—to believe in his words was a foolish venture. But somewhere in T'Challa detected sincerity, no matter how ironic that sounded even to his own ears.

T'Challa entertained an imagination where the situation was reversed, where he was the one searching for a lost sibling that he was firm to believe had lived despite the impossibility of it, despite being a lone man where the whole world was his enemy. Could he swallow his pride to ask them for help?

T'Challa knew he wouldn't do it differently.

Strange already detected the presence of Loki here on Earth beforehand. His life force was incredibly low then that it almost went past Strange's detection.

Though the most baffling was the lack of Thor's presence accompanying his brother.

When Strange tried to search for Loki's current whereabouts, he came across interferences that he wasn't expecting. Whether it was Loki's doing, Strange couldn't be sure. It was nothing that he could get through, only it would take him a day perhaps, since to his understanding the obstacle didn't feel like sorcery—the kind he was practicing, at least. In fact, Strange could compare it to an electromagnetic interference.

At his second attempt of locating Loki, Strange was startled when Loki himself appeared in his astral form to him. Instinctively, Strange left his body cross-legged, deep in trance.

"Well, at least you are this easy to get ahold of," Loki said with a slight smirk.

"What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you."

Strange frowned. Was Loki aware of Strange's search? "Why?" Strange asked carefully.

"I need you to check whether the Agardians arrived in Norway in one piece," Loki said. "I need to know if they escaped."
"Why would they escape here?"

"Asgard is destroyed, and Thor left instructions for them to continue here on Earth. Bruce Banner should be among them. He needs to tell his old team about the threat of Thanos." Loki's gaze lowered at where the Eye of Agamotto was sitting. "You have to know, too, that Thanos will also come looking for that stone on your neck."

Strange's hand closed protectively on the necklace automatically. "Are you in league with him? You seem to know an awful lot of this plans."

Loki snorted. "Doesn't take a genius to know. He went after us the moment Odin and Asgard are out of the picture. He already got the Space Stone and the Power Stone. We don't want him to get another one, do we?"

"I will protect this stone with my life. It's a sworn oath of the Masters of the Mystic Arts," Strange replied, irritated at the subtle insult on his capabilities.

Oddly enough, Strange caught Loki's approval on his answer. "Gather reinforcements, Thanos and his children could be here any moment. I don't have the time to tell you all about Thanos. You'll have to hear it from Banner."

"Wait," Strange called when Loki began to leave. "Thor? Is he de—"

"No!" Loki interrupted forcefully, surprising Strange. "No," he repeated calmly. "I don't know where he might be, but I'm working on it now. Do not look for me," he warned before disappearing completely.

Strange, meanwhile, wasted no time to open a portal to Norway, where he sent Thor and Loki previously to Odin's location.

His mind was already brimming with questions that needed answers soon.

________________________________________________________________________________________________________

The first thing Banner touched was the grass.

It felt surreal, as if it was only a few days ago that he left Earth. In the last twenty-four hours, he did a last minute escape from a planet that was about to be wrecked, and earlier, he was running for his life with the rest of his companions while they left Thor and Loki at the hands of Thanos.

Banner was glad to be back home, but at the same time he knew he should have been there, or he should have been more persuasive to keep Thor from his suicidal rescue of Loki. He had been afraid to complain to Thor's decision of how he should go out in his own way. Thor was a warrior, and his choice would be to die in battle. But was it worth it in the end? Thor was sacrificing himself for his brother who barely appreciated his love and forgiveness. Banner knew he was kept in the dark about their history, just like the rest outside of their family, and he could be speaking out of his bitterness too, not completely forgetting how The Hulk was manipulated before. Banner never understood where Thor's positive outlook regarding Loki came from. Sometimes, Banner couldn't help but compare Thor to a loyal dog, sticking around no matter how many times he was kicked by his owner.

_He's the only family I have left_, Thor had said. _It's something that I can never change despite what he became. I let him fall once, and I don't plan on repeating the same mistake._

The sound of sniffles brought him back to the present. The boy he helped on the ground was shivering and had been sobbing. Banner deftly tightened the blanket around the small frame; the
breeze was frigid when it swept past them. He didn't utter any assurances, though he did place a palm on top of the small head. It was a close call, if not for Heimdall, and they might not be out of the clear yet, with Thanos's next destination that was clearly Earth.

It was strangely quiet, as oppose to Banner's expectation of being flooded around with media—their ship was large enough to attract attention, and their arrival wasn't entirely silent either. Banner took it as a short reprieve, the calm before the storm.

The otherwise peaceful state was broken when Banner heard a number of frightened gasps and whispers. He stood, on edge and ready to release The Hulk if needed, while Heimdall and Valkyrie guided the Asgardians backwards from a large ring of orange sparks that seemingly appeared out of nowhere. Korg and his companions from Sakaar formed a line of defense as a glowing orange circle was formed, looking more of a portal of sorts. It revealed a single Caucasian man with red cape and blue kimono tunic, appearing very human as he surveyed the assorted bunch with fascination and confusion.

"I am looking for Doctor Banner."

TBC

Chapter End Notes

I actually have a tumblr acct. I don't post my fanfics here, so the blog is just a mess of fandoms that I like, together with some shitposts and memes. You can DM me about fic stuffs (chapter stuffs, etc. If spoilers are your thing, I might give you one also), fangirl together with me, or just talk if you need somebody to talk to. I don't mind.

also, also, the number of chapters of this fic is still tentative but will not exceed 30 chapters. Maybe 20-25 if I'm gonna change it.

ciao-ssu!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!