Future Imperfect

by Soroka

Summary

Getting his people to Earth is only the beginning of Thor’s problems. With his friends scattered to the winds, allies turned enemies and apocalyptic visions plaguing his dreams, he finds himself torn between his country and his family, when Thaddeus Ross makes him an offer he cannot refuse.

Ends on April 19th.
Lightning in a Bottle

Chapter Summary

In which Asgard lies in ruins and so does its newly-crowned king's peace of mind.

Chapter Notes

A new fandom appears! It's shiny.
A giant thanks to feelsallovertheplace, my beta and partner in crime

Surely there is no way to turn it
Back to the old days
Of bliss and cheerful laughter
Mirror, mirror - Blind Guardian

It comes as no surprise to Thor that Heimdall has managed to save the records of the history of Asgard.

He discovers them almost by accident during the first hectic days of their trip when their priorities are counting their dead, treating their wounded and keeping the living fed and safe. They lie in a reinforced iron chest tucked away in a small storage room he had walked past hundreds of times before noticing its existence. The lock on the heavy lid seems daunting enough to discourage the most determined of thieves but when he tries it, it lifts as easily as an empty glass. It is only when his remaining eye adjusts to the murky gray light that he notices a wax seal cast over the sides of the iron chest with the Asgardian insignia broken neatly in half.

He wonders if Heimdall did it on purpose, like a child who leaves an unassuming strip of paper wedged in the doorframe to check if someone has been in their room. He wonders if he ever came back to discover the seal broken. If he had, his all-seeing eyes never revealed anything and in the following days, Thor’s thoughts quickly shift to more pressing matters.

A nasty fever hits the ship not long after they leave the ruins of Asgard behind and it preys on the children and the elderly. Their healers do the best they can but there’re not enough of them and the supplies they have are stretched paper thin. Miraculously, it passes without claiming anyone but even so, their makeshift infirmary is never empty. He sees gaunt, pale faces walk past him every day, wondering how long will it take for the place to become a floating graveyard when food and water run out. He keeps a lookout for inhabited planets and other ships but for weeks on end, their only companions are the distant stars that never get any closer. Asgard lies wrapped in cold metal, all alone in the night and all he wants is for its people to see the light of day again.

You’re a destroyer, Odinson. See where your power leads.

Heimdall’s words from the vision conjured up by Wanda Maximoff come back to haunt him often in
those weeks. He still cannot tell whether they were just a product of his troubled mind or a grim warning that he failed to heed. Clairvoyance has never been one of his gifts, but he has already seen Asgard burn in his dreams and visions of a large golden gauntlet and six glowing stones still dance in his mind when he closes his eyes. He had spent too long chasing after them, only for every trail to grow cold and now that his home lies in ruins by his own hand, an ominous thought creeps up on him every now and then.

If he can really see the future, it is only a future he cannot change.

That thought weighs on his mind heavier than the crown. He has no way of knowing whether he is right and that very uncertainty chases sleep away from his eyes, so he spends their rough equivalent of nights on the main deck, going through the hundreds of logs and listening to the low hum of electricity flowing through the ship like blood under metal skin. He does not know where his power leads yet, but it is not into the cold, silent darkness of space. He’s the God of Thunder; his very purpose is to bring light, however brief it may be.

And so, on the third week of their trip, he walks down some rusted stairs into the underbelly of the ship, to have a chat with its most unruly passenger.

Having the Hulk on the ship is a whole problem of its own, considering that he was never that fond of flying. Thor treats him like a sloppily constructed firework at the back of a rickety cart, which every sinkhole in the road can set off. Having him around his people can only bring trouble but he knows that he cannot keep him locked up in the storage sector forever. He is not a criminal, in fact, there are people upstairs what would not be alive if it was not for him. He is a vehicle of rage and confusion that is very useful when pointed straight at the enemy but a dangerous liability when cooped up in a steel can surrounded by nothing but vacuum.

So he walks up to the cell separated from the rest of the storage area by a row of thick red energy beams and sits cross-legged on the cold metal floor.

“Good morning, big guy. How is life treating you?”

The Hulk does not answer. Instead, he sits with his back pressed against the wall and stares straight at him. The murky green eyes are giving him a death glare but not a muscle moves on his body and Thor wonders whether it is because he is showing remarkable restraint or because he has learned that the red beams projecting symmetrical reflections across his face will throw him back every time. There are a couple of dents in the steel plates that confirm his theory and for a moment, his stomach sinks. He did what he had to do, to protect everyone on the ship but knowing that does not make him feel any better. If they make it to Earth in one piece, maybe they should have a spar in some isolated canyon, far from the eyes of the world. The guy probably deserves to land more than a couple punches on him.

“Have they been feeding you enough?” he asks and gets the exact same reaction. “I made sure your rations were adjusted to your size. And you haven’t lost weight, exactly.”

That does it. The murky eyes narrow as a low growl escapes his throat. He shoots up from his resting place, his face contorted in fury and Thor suppresses the instinct to back away. Baiting the Hulk is very far from the smartest thing he can do, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

“Sorry, that was a bad choice of words”, he flashes an apologetic smile which only gets him another angry roar. He reaches behind his back and rolls his eyes as he sees the large green hands curl into fists. “Calm down, I’m not here to make your life harder. I even brought you something. Consider if a peace offering it you like.”
The prospect seems to intrigue his unwilling prisoner as the giant fists slowly loosen, though his face is still locked in a surly mask. Thor waits for him to settle down, then slides a small wooden bowl brimming with pale green grapes in his direction. It stops just before the lowest energy beam, still in reach for both of them. Under their faint red light, they look almost translucent, like eggs of an odd alien species.

The Hulk hesitates as he takes one of the delicate orbs and turns it over in his hands. When he carefully sniffs it, Thor is ready to slam a hand over his face in frustration.

“Come on, they are not poisoned!” He reaches over to the bowl, snatches a couple of grapes and pops one in his mouth with a crunching sound. “See, I’m not dead! Not even close! Now you try them.”

He doesn’t need to ask twice. With one swift motion, a massive green hand scoops the bowl from under the energy beam and pours all of its contents in the Hulk’s mouth. Pale juice pours over his chin while he chews noisily and as he does, Thor sees the mad anger melt away from his face, replaced by an eerie expression that almost resembles actual joy.

He looks at the last, sad, wrinkled berry in his hand and sighs. “So you do not like sharing. Fair enough.” He stands up and brushes a thin layer of gray dust from his clothes. “I really hope you enjoyed them because there aren’t any more left.”

The swamp-colored eyes just stare blankly at him, before switching to a glare of pure disdain. Thor waits for him to say something but all he gets is a grunt as the Hulk kicks the wooden bowl so hard it flies all the way across the room, crashes against the rusty stairs and cracks in the middle.

“Thor leave Hulk alone!”

Thor sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose as his fingers run over the metal eyepatch. He can’t remember the last time he felt truly rested. It has been another long night and the day after is turning out to be even longer. A persistent and unhelpful voice at the back of his head keeps repeating that he has no idea what he’s doing. He doesn’t have the power of Natasha’s lullaby and talking his way out of a problem has never been his forte. It didn’t seem like much of an issue until a crown was placed on his head and with it, the responsibility for the lives of nearly eight thousand people. And with time and supplies running out, he better learn as he goes and do so quickly.

He shakes his head, chasing the piercing headache away and steps closer to the glowing red grid. “I can’t, I need your help.”

He’s expecting another angry outburst but the Hulk just lets out a short, barking laugh and goes back to leaning against the dented wall. Before he can find anything else to throw at him, Thor quickly fishes out a small, flat cylinder out of a leather bag clipped to his belt and presses one of its sides. A pale, blue outline of a three-dimensional map slowly blinks into existence and flickers as he gently places the device on the floor.

“Last week I got to the earliest records of this ship and I came across this.” He points to a small insignia tucked away at the bottom of the phantom layout that shows a whip and chain entwined over an alien skull. “Turns out, before it was abandoned on Sakaar, it used to be a slave ship. The kind that was created to roam the galaxy, kidnap unlucky souls from other planets and imprison them until they could be sold. You have to give it to the Grandmaster, he does have an eye for the gruesome and unpleasant.”

If any of his words are making sense to the Hulk, Thor cannot tell. His green prisoner just limits himself to another short grunt but his demeanor seems much calmer so he goes on. “My point is, they
would spend years in space, so they needed a way to feed all those slaves and themselves during that
time. It took three nights to decipher their engineers’ gibberish but in the end, we found out how they
did it. Look!”

He reaches into the blue layout floating before him, pulls out a tiny section and throws the image
onto a wall where it blows up to reveal a large dome under which clusters of long, thin towers rise
almost as high as to touch the curved ceiling. The Hulk looks on, utterly unimpressed.

“See these things?” He points to the thin columns covered from top to bottom in neat circular
orifices. “They are all over the upper deck. At first we thought there were just decoration, but they
are not.” He pauses for what he honestly hopes is dramatic effect and zooms in to a small symbol on
one of the columns that closely resembles a blade of grass. “They are aeroponic towers!” He waits
for a reaction that never comes, then adds helpfully. “It’s a giant greenhouse in space!”

Hulk just stares at him like he has suddenly switched to a foreign language. Thor sighs again and
banishes the image from the wall with a wave of his hand.

“Listen, to be completely honest, I don’t know anything about these things.” he admits and watches
his prisoner sneer. “It seems like no one has used them in years and the entire structure seems a little
fragile. I wouldn’t dare fiddling with it to bring it back to life. Your more agreeable half on the other
hand…”

He doesn’t get to finish the sentence before the Hulk snarls and lunges at him, coming dangerously
close to touching the glowing beams. Thor pulls back and raises his hands in a pacifying gesture but
his eyes remain fixed on the murky green ones, still looking for any sort of recognizable human
emotion behind them besides murderous rage.

“Yes, yes I know, don’t mention puny Banner, got it.” He catches another fleeting glimpse of the
dents in the wall and his treacherous memory flashes an image of similar dents in Loki’s cell back in
Asgard. “Look, don’t get the wrong idea. You risked your life to save my people, I haven’t forgotten
that. We are all forever in your debt and I’m sure you’ll get your own statue next to Loki’s at some
point. Believe me, there is nothing I would like more than to open this door but I cannot trust your
temper more than I can trust a river to flow backwards.” He sees the look of utter contempt on the
green face and scrambles for something more familiar to him. “It’s like in that space movie we all
watched together back on Earth. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of…”

This time the roar is loud enough to make his ears ring. “Thor go to Hell!”

The green fist stops mere inches before the deadly red light and Thor feels the air crackle around him
as anger threatens to spill over. He does not have time for this. There’s eight thousand souls above
them, clinging to life and out in space, life is more fragile than he ever thought possible. They all trust
him to know what to do, to get them out of this cursed ship and to a place where they can build a
new future. And here he is, trying to reason with an avatar of pure destruction that could tear them all
apart in a matter of seconds. Under other circumstances, in another life, he would have just sworn
and walked away.

But his other life has come to an end. And in this new one, he has never been more tired.

He lets out a long, controlled breath as the electricity swarming in the air settles down. “Fine, suit
yourself! I guess you will have to rely on everyone else to pull your weight.” He slips the flat
cylinder in his pocket and turns towards the rusty stairs leading up.

He stands still for a few seconds, then turns around again. “A word of advice, I don’t know how
long it will take us to get to Earth but I promise you, it’s a very long trip to spend only on dried meat
and stale bread. So if you want another one of these…”, he pops the last grape in his mouth and looks straight into the mad, green eyes, “…you better let me talk to Banner.”

He is not sure what button he pushed but it has to be the right one because the Hulk’s dilated irises suddenly lose their crazed look and shrink to regular size. Eventually, his eyes close and he stumbles towards the back of the cell, a strange amalgamation of thick green hide and pale human skin. Thor watches him fall to his knees as his body mass decreases dramatically and wonders if his human form will retain the punishment of the containment grid. When he finally staggers to his feet, however, he looks dazed and confused but well and very much like Bruce Banner.

He grins and taps the wall next to the cell deactivating the red beams. “Welcome back, strongest Avenger.”

For a few moments his former green companion just stands there in mute astonishment. He is still wearing Tony Stark’s jeans which are now torn almost to his knees. His eyes dart across the cell, as if trying to conjure up the memory of some forgotten dream before he looks at Thor and mutters. “How long…?”

The dread in his voice is such that Thor is quick to reassure him. “A few weeks, not even a full month. Nothing close to two years, I promise.”

He gives him a small, weak nod and slowly walks out of the cell, bare feet leaving faint footprints on the dusty floor. “Did we save it? Asgard?”

On especially long nights, Thor often asks himself the same question but for now, he can do nothing else but return the nod.

“We did.” he replies and turns over the flat, steel cylinder in his hands. “You are about to save it again.”

The half-naked scientist in front of him just rolls his eyes and shivers in the cold air of the storage room. “Don’t sweet-talk me, just tell me what to fix. And please tell me you brought some normal clothes along this time.”

Thor dutifully unclips the leather bag from his belt and throws it to him. “Finest cloth in Asgard. Or at the very least, the finest that survived.”

“Thank God for small favors.” The scientist’s voice cracks a bit as the ship suddenly moans around them like a wounded metal whale. “Does that happen often?”

“Only when we get too close to a star’s magnetic field.” Thor does his best to ignore the light fixtures flickering erratically but can’t help wincing when one of them explodes in the background. “After a while you just stop noticing it.”

“Yeah well, I’m a real white-knuckle flyer.” Bruce finishes buttoning up his shirt and grabs the disc from Thor’s hand. “I’ll find my way around. Wherever we are, it can’t be worse than Sakaar.”

Thor’s words of gratitude never leave his mouth as he walks away. For a moment he considers following him and apologizing for the cell and the containment grid but the words his mind conjures sound hollow even to him. He did what he had to do and he would do it again. He can only hope that time will smooth out the rough edges between them though he gets the uneasy feeling that time might not be on his side.

His thoughts are interrupted by the sound of a boot against a metal plate. Brunnhilde kicks the heavy back door ajar and drags a cart of power cells into the room. When she sees the empty cell, she
frowns but as she catches sight of Bruce walking up the stairs, she breathes out a sigh of relief.

“Well, what do you know? It worked!” She leaves the cart behind and walks up to him brushing away traces of machine oil from her face. “As much as I love the guy’s moves, I will definitely sleep easier knowing we no longer have a mine in the basement.”

Thor shrugs and raises his eyes to the metal ceiling where another light fixture begins to flicker. “Don’t let your guard down. The way this trip is going, anything can blow up at any moment. He was just the easiest thing to deal with.”

“And here I thought you were an eternal optimist.” She slams a fist over a power panel on the wall and the light stabilizes. “Do you really think he can make the towers work?”

Thor nods as he fights to suppress a long, exhausted yawn. “He has seven PhD’s. One of them is bound to be in something green.”

“I would avoid those exact words.” She takes a tentative swig out of a stained, metal flask and scrunches her face in disgust as the liquid makes its way down her throat. “We seriously need to improve the quality of booze on this ship. This tastes like expired paint thinner.”

“If we ever get that biodome working, be my guest.”

“You are benevolent king, indeed.” She punches him lightly in the arm and snickers as he flinches. “Get some rest, you look like you’re ready to drop where you stand. My team can help our brainy boy out and Korg has been itching for something to do besides teaching the kids the songs of his people.”

Thor lets out a short laugh at the memory of a loud, deep voice that could not carry a tune to save its life booming over the ship at the oddest hours. “I thought that was the water recycler malfunctioning. I was even about to go hit it with a crowbar to make it stop.”

She grins but her dark eyes give him a long, meaningful look. “I’m serious. You’re no use to anyone dead on your feet and you don’t have to be everywhere at once. Your father understood that.”

She takes another gulp from the flask and for a brief moment, Thor is tempted to join her in her never-ending quest to imbibe every type of alcohol on the ship, just to stop his mind from reeling. He has spent most of this trip agonizing over what his father would do and each time takes him dangerously close to the conclusion that if it weren’t for his father’s actions, they would not be in this mess. He wonders how close those actions take Odin himself to treason against Asgard and how he can ever reconcile those thoughts with the crown he never wears. Loki would scoff at that and welcome him to the cynical side of the family with open arms, one of which would probably be holding a dagger.

But those are questions for another time. Right now, there’s still work to do.

He shrugs off the tiredness and replies, “My father had time on his side. I’ll sleep when we get to Earth.”

The aeroponic towers manage to bear their fruits in the nick of time, when their supplies are almost gone and whispers of a possible famine begin to spread among the refugees of Asgard City. They grow lush and dense, so much that they have to expand the biodome, a job that Korg and his new team are happy to accept. Brunnhilde jokingly suggests they start making wine from the grapes and Bruce is adamant in dedicating at least one of the towers to his favorite variety of coffee. He sees life flow back into the anxious faces around him; they begin to smile again, laugh at each other’s jokes
and even talk about the future. They are no longer pale shadows huddled under a metal sky, wondering if they will make it through another week. A few of them even organize to form a theatre troupe and as he huddles among the rest of the citizens to watch them perform, he feels a giant weight being lifted off his shoulders. They will survive this; what’s more, they will live again. He can ask for nothing else than that.

On the third month of their trip, Loki puts together a play recreating the battle for Asgard in which a teenage girl in a wig made out of discarded branches chews the scenery playing Hela as Loki leads them all to glorious victory. Thor stands in the back of the giant room dedicated to the event, chuckling softly as the audience roars with laughter. It is only after the second act when he notices Heimdall standing next to him, holding a bunch of pale yellow grapes and watching the show with a half-hearted smile.

“He’s a poet at heart, isn’t he?” he says as he tears away a stem and hands it to Thor.

Thor accepts the offer with a grin as another fake explosion conjured entirely out of red paper ribbons envelopes the stage. “A very creative one, too. I don’t remember it happening like that at all.”

Heimdall doesn’t reply right away, his golden eyes fixed on the girl falling dramatically to the floor after a fake dagger buries itself in her back. “History is written by the victors, Odinson.” he says after a while. “They usually pick only the parts they like.”

He walks away as silently as he came, walking through the crowd like a ship parting the waves, leaving Thor standing there with a heavy heart and the faint memory of a reinforced iron chest waiting for him in a secluded storage room.

It takes him a whole week to go back to it. There’s always something to do on the ship, someone needs help, something breaks, there’s some dispute or crisis and he keeps telling himself that the past can wait. He tells himself that the future they are building is more important but in the end, what keeps him from opening that door is not his duties but the dread of knowledge. When he finally breaks and drags the chest into his personal quarters, he locks the crown away in a safe box and out of sight.

The archives start out telling a familiar story, that both he and Loki had drilled into their heads way back when they were children. It conjures up fond memories of studying together, trying to cram the most amount of information into their heads after spending the previous week goofing off and how this gambit always paid off better with Loki than himself. He can’t help smiling at the good old days but as he turns more and more pages, his smile gradually fades and when he picks up an old, cracked volume, that is almost falling apart, he knows that there is no turning back.

He recognizes the faded symbol of a horned helmet pressed into the black leather in flaking gold paint. They are Heimdall’s personal records, probably the only copy that remains after the purge.

He reads about the subjugation of the Nine Realms, of genocide, bloodshed and destruction and every word makes his blood run cold. How many of the citizens of Asgard are old enough to remember? How many would believe it, if he chose to make this hidden history known? Would it even be right, particularly now when their fond memories of home are the only thing that remains?

He has no answers to the questions swirling through his mind so he reads on. He reads night after night, until the words swim before his eyes and the pages he turns become so worn that only ancient spells are holding them together. He reads until the runes turn archaic and he has to summon his deepest memories of Asgardian codexes to understand their meaning. And the more he understands, the colder the world grows and the more sleep seems to elude him altogether.
You cannot blame me for ruining Thor's life when Taika Waititi did it first.

As always, save a writer, leave a comment.
On Solid Ground

Chapter Summary

In which Thor’s first minutes on Earth play out a lot like Valkyrie’s grand entrance on Sakaar. Life is funny like that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I close my eyes, only for a moment
And the moment’s gone
Dust in the Wind- Kansas

The last thing Tony Stark expects to deal with on that cold Saturday morning is an alien spaceship falling out of the sky.

He is the first one on the scene, mostly because it happens right outside the woods that surround the Avengers Compound and the deafening noise wakes him out of a sound sleep. For one, heart-stopping moment, the memory of helicopter gunships flashes in his mind before time and space reassemble around him and reality paints a picture he understands even less. By the time he stumbles out of bed, the sound has ceased, but the ringing in his ears stays with him for a solid minute and the floor under his bare feet still vibrates as he makes his way towards the window. Outside the bulletproof glass panes, flocks of frightened birds scatter over the October sky, like black ink over a misty watercolor painting. Underneath them, treetops sway and topple out of sight, sending up clouds of dead leaves. As he pulls up his pants with one hand, and hastily buttons up his shirt, he watches a thickening billow of smoke pour into the crisp, morning air.

He mutters a short curse under his breath. Of course, out of all the places on Earth where something massive could have crashed, it had to be here. Maybe Vision had a point when he said that they attracted trouble just by existing.

His first thought as he flies to the crash site, clad in his newly-upgraded armor, is that it’s a particularly large meteorite until the erratic, white trail etched in the clouds dispels that theory. It stretches almost deliberately long and changes directions so sharply that it is impossible for it to be a natural phenomenon. It looks like it was trying to avoid something while in freefall and as he checks the map of the area that FRIDAY displays before him, he notices a water-treatment plant, a cluster of fishing lodges around a lake and a few factories directly in its path.

So at the very least their unexpected visitors are considerate. Always something to take into account, especially, with the National Guard helicopters closing in on his radar.

He drops a few firefighting grenades into the dark smoke below and watches them spread their soft, white contents around the alien form lodged firmly between century old trees that seem to have doled out as much damage as they received. By now, Tony has no doubts that it’s a spaceship, and it’s clearly a wreck. Thousands of scratches, dents and burns cover every visible surface, though the front side, which houses the cockpit, has taken the worst part of the impact. It is all but smashed inwards and almost hidden from sight by the overhanging branches of the giant oak trees it snapped like pencils on its way down. What seems to be the main engine is now pitifully sputtering as the
flames inside it suffocate in foam and a viscous, dark substance oozes from a large hole in the fuselage. The aircraft lies ominous and silent, like a black beetle on a large piece of cotton, and whatever is inside is either dead or in no hurry to see the world it was so desperately trying to keep from harm.

Still, given his previous experience with aliens, he lands at a safe distance. “Talk to me, FRIDAY. I enjoy our little chats.”

The interface crackles in his ears with what he can only assume is its equivalent of a sigh. “This ship is not in any known database,” she informs. “The heat signature is growing colder so it doesn’t look like it’s taking off any time soon. No visible weapons either.” She pauses as a translucent beam runs across the debris-scarred walls. “There’s movement inside.”

Her last words are slightly muffled by the National Guard helicopters tearing the air overhead, as they look for a safe spot to land. Tony sighs, not looking forwards to dealing with them. Their usual approach to situations like these has a tendency to make things worse.

“How many?” he asks. “And are there any tentacles involved?”

Another, louder crackle fills his ears. “Hard to say, the walls are too thick.” FRIDAY goes silent for a few seconds, sending streams of data about the air and temperature around the ship across the inner screen of his visor. “I also detect an unusual source of energy.”

The telltale sound of heavy boots spreads around the artificial clearing. He groans in resignation and approaches the ship, deliberately treading on as many branches as he can. “You could stand to be more specific, FRIDAY. Unusual, how?”

She doesn’t answer right away but when she does, she seems to struggle for words. “The readings are similar to those of Vision,” she says eventually, then adds, “and Wanda Maximoff.”

“Huh…”

He can muster nothing else and FRIDAY does not elaborate further. The name of the former Sokovian Avenger still stings in his memory and he wonders whether she has anything to do with Vision’s frequent departures from the compound. Sometimes he disappears for weeks on end, under the excuse of wanting the see the world but Tony suspects that even his artificial friend cannot stand the long, heavy silence that has permeated the building for the past couple of months. They both miss their friends but as the oldest and newest member of the team, they both deal with it in very different ways. He muses whether he should ask Vision about her next time he deigns to show up, carrying a strange souvenir from a country he can’t pronounce and looking a little bit sadder every time.

“Well, if they are anything like those two, let’s hope they are friendly.” He steps into the clearing and finds himself looking straight down the barrel of an automatic rifle.

The young soldier with strawberry-blond hair peeking from under his helmet seems to be more surprised than he is. Blue eyes open wide as Tony takes a few steps back, hands raised in a conciliatory gesture. “Relax, kid, I’m not the enemy. I’m just a friendly neighbor, dropping in.” He looks around to find more tense, pale faces looking at the steaming ship in mute apprehension. “You guys got here fast. This thing hasn’t even had time to cool down.”

“We don’t like to take chances.” A tall, heavy-built man with lieutenant bars on his shoulders and web of thin, spidery scars across his face steps out from behind a tree and waves a hand at the soldiers. “Stand down, we don’t want to kill this one. Yet.”
Tony lets out a short but loud cackle. “Norton, you magnificent bastard! I haven’t seen you since the New York kerfuffle!” He retracts his visor and walks up to the man who led the National Guard against the Chitauri four years ago and caught a blaster discharge in the face for his trouble. “Do you have a particular taste for aliens or do your superiors hate you that much?”

A small smirk tugs at the man’s scarred lips but his tone remains carefully flat. “What are you doing here, Stark? I don’t recall anyone informing us of your presence.”

Tony shrugs and runs a metal-clad hand along the busted fuselage of the ship, monitoring the slowly dissipating heat. “What can I say? I got curious. You don’t see ET making an emergency landing every day.” He side-eyes the rifle hanging on a leather belt over the uniformed shoulder. “Though you guys seem to be running more of a Predator scenario.”

“Like I said, we don’t like to take chances.” Norton follows him, heavy boots sinking into the dark, sticky marsh of dead leaves and leaking fuel. “You wouldn’t have brought the suit if you were so sure they weren’t hostile.”

“Well, you know how the old saying goes. Hope for the best, prepare for the worst, expect nothing.” He frowns, trying to make sense of the faint electrical current running across the surface, like hoarfrost after a cold winter night. “This puppy had some sort of electromagnetic shield around it. It’s nothing like I’ve ever seen before.” A blue, translucent screen flashes before him as his eyes skim over the data FRIDAY is feeding across it. “Weird… it almost seems like it’s alive.”

Norton nods vaguely, looking past the screen towards the dying engine fire. “Then, I assume you’re not here in any official capacity.”

Tony bites back the next sarcastic comeback on the tip of his tongue. Things have been a bit tense for all of them after the Accords and it’s at moments like these when he wishes Steve was still around. He had a face people felt compelled to trust, and after talking to him for ten minutes, take a bullet for. Before she disappeared into hiding, Natasha had called Cap the heart of the team and there were times when Tony asked himself whether, with Steve gone, the Avengers were still the same.

Then again, maybe he doesn’t need Steve’s superpowers, he concludes as he glances at the anxious soldiers clustered around the clearing. Many of them had seen the Chitauri tear apart New York and few of them want to experience it again. They stare at the steaming wreckage like it’s about to sprout legs and rush them. Norton himself seems less than happy to be facing another potential face melting and Tony is all too happy to spare him one.

“Well, they haven’t exactly had time to assemble a committee.” He replies and steps back from the ship, flicking off fuel from his hand. “I can leave if you want. You clearly have this alien hunk of metal under control.” There’s an uneasy shuffling among the soldiers as he continues. “What do you think they look like? Personally, I’m keeping my fingers crossed for tentacles.”

Norton rolls his steel gray eyes at his obvious dirty gambit. He still seems ready to argue but as if on cue, the ship groans and shakes, disturbing the bed of dead leaves underneath it. A large rectangular section on its side slides a few inches forward, then folds out into a narrow ramp. A dark, metal door in the fuselage slowly begins to rise, emitting a soft screeching sound.

They exchange a nervous glance, before the man shrugs and steps into the tree line, leaving him alone in the clearing. “Knock yourself out, Stark. No skin off my back.”

A low, rhythmic thumping resonates through the hull, like a faraway war drum. The door slides open another few inches, spilling dim silver light over the ramp. Tony takes another careful step towards it, feeling like the butt of some elaborate cosmic joke. As ominous as the whole display is, the scene is
straight out of a cheesy movie that a guy and his robot friends should be snarking at. He half-expects little green men to step out and ask to see their leader.

Which is why he is so surprised, when a gigantic green man in shredded clothes smashes down the door and roars at the open sky.

For a few moments, he can only stand there, stunned. A bout of shocked laughter escapes his throat but the situation quickly stops being funny as the clearing comes alive around him. The sound of a hundred rifles cocking fills the air and Norton barks an order he can’t hear but which Tony knows will only make things worse. He spins around to yell at them to hold their fire, but before a single bullet can fly, a very human looking hand slips through the door, grabs the green man’s forearm and drags him back inside.

It takes Tony another few seconds to recognize the second face that steps out.

It might have to do with the fact that an entire side of it is covered in fresh blood, the same side that has a faded, metal eyepatch where a blue eye should be. It might also be the fact that the last time he saw it, was two years ago, when it disappeared in a blinding stream of light leaving a giant, round seal burned into the compound’s lawn. His friend had left with a cryptic warning to look for the rest of the Infinity Stones and every now and then, Tony wondered whether he found the answers he was looking for. The pale, worn out vision with short, disheveled hair that leans heavily against the dented fuselage makes him wonder whether the answers were worth it.

Another muffled roar echoes at the back of the ship. The soldiers take aim again, a futile display that Thor ignores completely as he walks down the ramp, wiping the blood from his face with an unsteady hand.

“Sorry about my friend back there,” he says with a strained smile. “He’s a real white-knuckle flyer.”

And promptly falls from the ramp into the foam-covered grass below.

Another thing Tony Stark does not expect to see that day is Helen Cho’s team hovering over an unconscious Asgardian in the compound’s infirmary.

In fact, it is something he has never expected to see, and the thought troubles him as he stands outside the spacious white, room occasionally glancing through the loosely pulled blinds at the shapes moving across it at a brisk pace. They have been in there for a while and every minute that passes makes him increasingly uneasy. He feels his hands twitching at his sides, like they did during the months he was quitting alcohol and now, the need for a drink is throbbing at the back of his mind like an old wound. He checks his phone for any messages from the Stark Relief Foundation, already on the scene of the crash to assist the crowd of shocked, nervous people that poured out of the ship after a short while, but his inbox is empty and his curiosity unsated. He clicks his tongue in disappointment. In any other circumstances, an army couldn’t stop him from being there, finding out everything he could.

And yet, here he is, spying on busy shadows across the hall, very aware of his own utter futility. He keeps telling himself that he’s being ridiculous. For all he knows, his demi-god friend is practically indestructible. He has seen him plunge into an ice-cold sea as chunks of Sokovia rained around him and reappear at their side later like nothing happened, dripping water all over the helicarrier. In the year and a half he spent on Earth, the guy was pretty much the living embodiment of Cap’s shield, with a sunny disposition and a chronic lack of understanding of pop culture. It hasn’t ever occurred to any of the Avengers to worry about him.
Except when he shows up two years later, looking like death warmed over. Now, Tony might have a reason to start worrying.

He fiddles with the key-like device in his pocket, lined with a row of LEDs flashing red. He has just come back from the Hulk containment chamber he built as a worst case scenario but whose current occupant is in no hurry to test its lead-lined walls and just seems happy to have solid ground under his feet. There’s a spark of recollection in his green eyes when he looks at Tony but any attempts to talk to him through the intercom have been met with nothing but silence. He stares at the reinforced glass separating him from the compound like it’s an inconvenience he has faced before and which will resolve itself in due time. Every once in a while, he casts a cursory glance at the cameras that watch him from every angle, waiting to detect his change into genius scientist Bruce Banner and open the door. Something that Tony knows hasn’t happened yet since the LEDs glowing gently against the fabric of his trousers are still very much red.

This is, without a doubt, the best case scenario which Tony is grateful for yet profoundly confounded by. He had expected a full on rampage, with bullets flying, screams of panic and Veronica rescuing them all once again. But after his initial outburst, their green teammate seemed to enter an odd state of barely contained fury that just made everyone around all the more nervous. Occasionally, he would snarl at the soldiers who dared to step closer or take aim at them but for the most part, he paced restlessly around Tony as he knelt beside Thor in the cold, foam-splattered grass that began to acquire a crimson hue after a few minutes. After the medevac helicopter departed from the clearing, however, Tony could see whatever dam was containing his rage beginning to crack and when a few hundred pale and wary faces peeked out of the smashed door of the ship, there were suddenly more important things to worry about than keeping him in check. Locking him up seemed like the safest option, though guilt still pecked at Tony’s heart as he walked away from the chamber. He’s seen way too many friends locked up in similar cells and the last thing he wanted was to do that himself.

The infirmary door on the other side of the hall cracks open and three people step out, pulling surgical masks from their faces. They greet him with smiles but their sunken eyes betray them as they sit heavily in the nearby chairs and rub their temples. They look like they have pulled a particularly rough all-nighter and even Helen Cho, who stayed behind, looks like she could use some coffee. He gives them a small, thankful nod and steps inside.

The first thought that comes to him is that he needs to get rid of the fluorescent lamps. In the cold, white light that bathes the room, Thor’s face looks even paler and the dark circles under his eyes, more pronounced. His newly-cropped hair is now partially hidden underneath a layer of bandages, which also cover his left arm and shoulder. The blood-stained eyepatch lies discarded in a shallow metal tray, replaced by a square white one held in place with thin surgical tape. His other eye still remains closed and the bluish hue around it makes Tony’s stomach curl into a ball.

“So, how is he?” he asks in a deceptively casual tone and watches Helen’s dark eyes grow warmer.

“Well, he’s got the mother of all concussions for starters,” she replies as she pulls off latex gloves and cracks her long fingers. “Not to mention radiation burns and bruises all over. Plus we just spent around forty minutes fixing a compound fracture that really should have rendered his arm useless but it’s actually already beginning to heal.” He watches a smile ghost across her tired face. “I don’t know what his people are made of but we could all use some of that.”

Tony lets out a small sigh of relief as his eyes are drawn towards the steadily beeping heart monitor. “Probably snips, snails and puppy dog tails or some cryptic stuff that might as well be magic.” He steps closer to the hospital bed and can’t help but grimace at the sight of a purple and black bruise spreading over his friend’s right shoulder. “I guess even magic has limits.”
“There’s very few things in this world that don’t. The good news is, he should make a full recovery.” Helen pulls off the blue surgical cap, letting strands of long black hair fall over her forehead. “The eye is a lost cause, though, the optic nerve is damaged beyond repair. It doesn’t help that the only thing that could have a shot at restoring it blew up two years ago.”

He raises his hands in apology at the gentle reprimand in her voice. “Yeah, sorry about that. How’s the rebuilding going?”

She shrugs and readjusts the oximeter clipped to Thor’s limp hand. “Slower than we expected. The first Cradle was a prototype and after Ultron destroyed our lab, we had to start from scratch. I hear your team got an interesting addition thanks to it.”

Tony thinks of their newest Avenger and wonders if he’s watching the current events unfold on some TV screen abroad. “Vision is interesting, alright. He’s going to regret missing all this excitement.” He pauses, leaning against the wall next to the bed but as Helen is about to reach for the door handle, he speaks up. “Thank you for saving the day again. I really wouldn’t have called if I trusted anyone else.”

She gives him a toothy smile from under her disheveled bangs. “Let me use your lab every now and then and we’re even.” She takes one last look at the room and clicks a button on the window frame to fully close the blinds. “I should get going. The Stark Relief Foundation will need all the help they can get and we can be of assistance. That is, if you want us around.”

She looks back at him, waiting for a confirmation and Tony senses the unbridled excitement masked behind her carefully phrased words. As the brilliant woman she is, Helen has a natural curiosity for everything under the sun and an alien landing is too good to pass up. He nods, checks his phone again and sighs at the zero new emails on the screen.

“There’s the more the merrier,” he replies. “When you guys get there, tell them to finally give me a call. I’d really like to know what the hell is happening.”

His grumpy tone goes completely ignored by Helen, who just gives him a small, polite nod and walks out, leaving him under the buzzing fluorescent lights with only the slow, steady beeping of the heart monitor for company. He shuffles in place, looking for a chair but finds nothing except medical equipment and cupboards arranged in two neat rows around a defibrillator cabinet.

Tony sighs, feeling useless once more. He has one friend who won’t speak to him, another one who’s comatose, and he has no idea how to help either of them. He instinctively fumbles his pockets until he realizes that he picked the wrong time to quit smoking too.

“Credit where it’s due, you know how to make an entrance.” He lays a careful hand on Thor’s shoulder and gives it a gentle shake. “Come on, Point Break, wake up. In case you didn’t notice, you crashed a spaceship full of people in my backyard and the suspense is killing me.” He pauses as his eyes drift towards the bandages woven over the buzzed off hair. “Not to mention the makeover.”

He pauses, waiting for any kind of reaction but his quip falls on deaf ears and he realizes he’s wasting his time. Helen Cho’s team has done all they could and there’s probably a hundred things he should be dealing with right now. Soon the news of the crash will spread, people will start pouring in with questions and he has absolutely no answers. Until he gets some, he better come up with something believable or at least creative to placate them.

So he throws a blanket over the unconscious Asgardian, flicks off the light switch and walks away.
He finds Bruce sitting half-naked in the kitchen, nursing a chipped coffee mug with *World’s Best Avenger* printed on the side.

His first instinct is to immediately check the pager in his pocket to find it flashing green. He curses softly to himself, the damn thing was supposed to buzz to let him know the chamber opened but that’s what he gets for putting it together in the middle of the night and never getting around to the testing phase. He stands in the doorway for a while, watching the pale scientist press his trembling fingers against the warm porcelain as he breathes in the deep, comforting aroma. His glassy eyes have a strange faraway look about them, as if he has just woken up from a long, vivid dream and reality doesn’t quite make sense yet. As he steps closer, Tony notices more gray curls in his hair.

Bruce’s tired expression lights up as he spots him. He turns in the swivel chair and waves him a subdued but friendly greeting. “It’s good to see you again, Tony.”

He doesn’t get to finish his next sentence as Tony rushes towards him, finger pointed straight at his gaunt face. “Don’t you dare ‘Tony’ me! You disappear on us, you don’t call, you don’t even send a goddamn Christmas card!” He watches the brown eyes stare at him in amused shock and feels another wave of indignant fury rise up in his chest. “Goldilocks I understand, he is allergic to Earth technology, but you? You have a lot of explaining to do.”

He catches his breath, trying to stem another outburst but Bruce just shakes his head and grins as he squeezes Tony’s shoulder affectionately. “Yeah, I missed you too.” He takes another sip and closes his eyes in quiet enjoyment. “Trust me, it’s a very long story that gets progressively stupider and that you’re better off not hearing.”

Whatever anger Tony has left in him quickly melts as he returns the firm squeeze. “Try me, won’t you? We just found a couple thousand people in a spaceship in the woods. I think I can handle a little stupid.”

For a moment, panic flashes across Bruce’s face. “Shit, how’s Thor doing? Is he okay?”

“Relax, he’s one tough cookie, he’ll outlive us all.” Tony pours the rest of the coffee pot into a cup, takes a tentative sip, then immediately chucks it down the drain. “Quite literally, now that I think about it.”

“Good, because I want to kill him myself!” Bruce’s voice shifts gears so abruptly that Tony freezes midstep and frowns. “We got hit by a stray solar flare on the home stretch. It fried everything on the main bridge, autopilot, inertial dampeners, radiation shield, you name it. The rest of the ship was luckier but the asteroid belt pummeled the engine into scrap after that so the thing steered like a train. I told him the Hulk had a better chance of surviving landing it and what does he do? He welds the cockpit door shut in my face! Tells me I’ve got seven PhD’s to put to use and Earth already has its own lightning! If I didn’t know better, I’d think he’s trying to get himself killed!”

He swears under his breath as his fingers drum restlessly on the table. Tony can only chuckle in disbelief as he pours hot water over instant coffee.

“Yeah, that sounds about right. He was always a regular Superman.” He turns around to find Bruce raising a questioning eyebrow at him. “Think about it, alien, ridiculously strong, can fly…” he sips his drink and makes a face at the clearly inferior quality of the new brew. “…ditched red cape, which I can tell you, is a massive improvement.”

Bruce laughs along but his laughter has a bitter tone to it. “Destroyed home planet too. Checks out.”

“What?” Tony’s spoon slips from his fingers, sending dark coffee droplets all over the tiled floor.
“Okay, that’s it! What the hell happened? Where have you two been all this time?”

The scientist on the other side of the table gives him a long, weary-eyed look and chugs down the rest of his mug. “Get me some clothes and a truck of Tylenol and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Chapter End Notes

I got a lot of lovely comments for the first chapter, many more than I could’ve expected. Thank you all for putting your faith in this fic. It will update on Fridays, every two weeks, so keep an eye out for it.

And as always, save a writer, leave a comment.
A Bridge over Troubled Water

Chapter Summary

In which the Sokovia Accords rear their ugly head and clairvoyance is a fickle mistress.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I've seen the end of all
Be aware, the storm gets closer
Mirror, mirror – Blind Guardian

Thor knows he is dreaming because his field of vision is complete again.

It is also because sound does not carry in a vacuum and he definitely hears a voice amongst the cold stars that blink around him in the vast emptiness of space. It fills his ears, grave and dire, like rocks rumbling on a mountain peak right before an avalanche and dread washes over him when he realizes he has heard it before. It is the same voice that laughed in his head when the Water of Sight showed him the Infinity Stones and the birth of Vision. It speaks with an air of mocking condescension, a tone Thor knows well and has grown to despise.

In time, you will know what it's like to lose. To feel so desperately that you're right, yet to fail all the same.

A gigantic warship sporting plasma cannons large enough to obliterate moons hangs suspended in the void surrounded by a small support fleet bathed in the blue glow of a hydrogen cloud. He searches his memory for every advanced civilization that could build something of this magnitude but if Asgardians ever came across the artificers of this army, their meetings were never recorded. These are not Kree or Shi’ar and clearly not the Chitauri that almost tore him and his friends to shreds in New York. Their shadow stretches long and ominous against the eye-searing glow of Proxima Centauri and as his distant knowledge of star maps catches up with him, he feels a cold stone drop in his stomach. Whoever these beings are, they are too close to Earth for his liking. He can only hope they ignore it and unleash their destructive force elsewhere.

Something tells him his hope is foolish. Asgard did not burn behind his eyelids in vain. The visions come for a reason.

Dread it. Run from it.

The snide, gravelly voice rings in his head like a cracked bell. The fleet blinks out of existence, replaced by the image of massive hand closing into a fist over the Centaurus constellation. The stars swim and blur into a whirlpool of light before exploding into pitch blackness.

Destiny still arrives.

He wakes up to the faraway sound of thunder on an unseen sky.

He lies still for a while, heart still hammering in his chest, as he tries to make sense of his new
surroundings. The lamps above him are switched off but some light manages to seep through the blinds pulled over a large window conferring the room an odd crepuscular darkness that is just enough to see. He turns his head on the pillow and spots the faded logo of Stark Industries stamped on the defibrillator box on the wall. The sight is enough to make him crack a small smile. Back at the tower in New York, the logo was impossible to escape, it was printed on everything, to the point where it became a contest among his teammates to come up with the most ridiculous Stark-branded item but along the way it also became a symbol for a safe haven and of home away from home. Seeing it again on the scratched plastic reminds him of better times, of laughter and friendship and how much he has missed all of them.

Thor wishes he had come back under better circumstances. Or at the very least, with better news. He sits up, feeling his left shoulder protest at the sudden movement. A strip of white gauze falls over his face when he swings his legs off the bed and when he tries to brush it away, the rest of the bandages slip off onto the tiled floor. They must have loosened in his sleep, he realizes, and as he bends to pick them up, he accidentally knocks down a postcard with Hangul characters printed neatly over an intricate pattern. Their meaning escapes him completely until he notices the words next to them, written in fluid, cursive handwriting.

Get well soon, God of Thunder. You owe me a Cradle.

He turns it over in his hands with an amused expression which quickly turns into a frown as the implications of recent events sink in. The crash is still fresh in his mind, as is the memory of the cold, burning feeling on his skin when the electromagnetic shield gave out but everything else after he left the pilot seat is a tangled mess that unweaves itself slowly through a red mist. He vaguely recalls screams, guns pointed at the ship, the Hulk’s angry roar echoing across the clearing and a flash of red and gold before the world grew dark, silent, and a lot less complicated. A round clock with a cracked faceplate ticking on the wall tells him it’s half past eight and as he tries to figure out what time of the day that is exactly, he realizes he is starving.

He steps out of the room into a hallway bathed in the washed out light of an early morning, squinting and profoundly unsure of where to go. He knows Stark Tower like the palm of his hand but the compound is a vague memory at best. The place is also uncharacteristically silent for being the new Avengers headquarters. After wandering around aimlessly for a few minutes, he is ready to give up and just call out but before he can, faint familiar laughter drifts from behind a corner.

He follows it to a narrow door that hangs ajar, letting the smell of coffee waft into the hallway. It swings open soundlessly at the slightest pressure to reveal a small kitchen connected to a spacious living room with tall, slim windows behind which, wind and rain whip the branches of the trees surrounding the compound. A low wide table sits in the middle with stacks of papers scattered all over the wooden surface.

Spread like a cat over one of the largest sofas, Tony Stark snickers into his drink. “So then he tells me ‘I can’t go to Germany. I’ve got homework.’” He turns to Bruce Banner, who is sitting cross legged in a plaid-draped armchair. “The kid is still a bit wet behind the ears but he’s got potential. We’ll make an Avenger out of him yet.”

Bruce just shakes his head and runs his fingers over his own wave grained glass as the ice inside it slowly melts. “Sounds like you’ve had an eventful couple of years.”

Tony scoffs. “Well, it wasn’t anything like being a gladiator on an alien planet but who’s keeping score?” He finally spots Thor standing in the doorway and as he does, a smirk spreads over his face. “Hey, look who’s finally awake! How are you feeling, Kal-El?”
And just like that, it is as if the two years he has been gone never existed. Thor can’t help but laugh at the new indecipherable nickname when he replies, “Like a spaceship landed on me.”

“That’s pretty accurate.” Tony gestures at the eyepatch as he makes his way across the living room. “I see you still have no sense of self-preservation.”

“And you still have your sense of humor.” Thor clasps the engineer’s arm fondly and feels his own grin grow wider as Tony yanks him closer into a brief but almost bone-crushing hug. “I’m glad to see you again, Stark. It’s been too long.”

“Right, whose fault is that again?” Tony steps towards the cooler at the back of the kitchen and tosses him a bright red can with a label so stylized Thor gives up on reading it altogether. “Still no reception in space, I take it?

“No ravens either.” Thor turns to Bruce, relieved to see his human form, but his smile falters when he sees a pen twirl restlessly between his fingers, a telltale sign of trouble. “What’s the damage on the ship? Is everyone alright?”

The scientist doesn’t reply right away, pensive eyes studying the stack of papers stamped with a laurel-wreathed symbol that rings a distant bell in Thor’s mind. Eventually, Bruce just clicks the pen off on his wrist and joins them in the small kitchen, still erratically drumming it on his arm from time to time.

“They’re a bit shaken up by the whole landing experience but they’re fine. No serious injuries, present company excluded.” His voice grows colder for a moment as he stares Thor down. “You’re a colossal asshole, you know that?”

“I’ve been called a lot worse, repeatedly.” Thor leans against a tiled wall as he takes a tentative sip out of the bright can. The sweet and spicy aroma of ginger with a strong lemon aftertaste fills his mouth and he realizes how thirsty he is. He suppresses the overwhelming desire to down the whole thing in one gulp and asks, “How long was I out?”

“Two weeks.” Thor almost chokes on his drink and Tony lets out a short laugh. “I’m kidding, since yesterday morning.” He points at the dark clouds gathering over the compound and spreading over the burned treetops in the distance. “Is that your thing? It started last night and hasn’t let up since. Pretty sure all the meteorologists in the state are freaking out; they have been predicting clear skies for a week.”

Thor watches and frowns as a thin web of lightning flickers across the patchwork sky. Even after four months, his new powers are a mystery to him and he has no idea how being back on Earth will affect them. He thinks back to the vision of the alien fleet etched against the stars and wonders if his dreams are responsible for the temper tantrum the weather is throwing. For a moment, he considers telling his friends about them but changes his mind almost immediately. There’s nothing he can offer but a bunch of vague conjectures and there’s a very real matter at hand waiting for him in the woods; one he has been away from long enough.

“Maybe, I don’t know.” He leans away from the wall and blinks as the world tilts for a split second. “I should get back to the ship.”

He looks up to find unexpected concern flash across Tony’s face. “When was the last time you ate?” he asks and rolls his eyes as Thor returns him a blank look. “That’s what I thought. Sit down before you keel over.” He pulls a couple of plates from a nearby cupboard and shakes his head in dismay. “You guys could really stand to learn from my mistakes. Seniority’s got to be good for something.”
Bruce laughs quietly to himself as he empties the leftover ice from his glass in the kitchen sink. “Says the guy who almost didn’t make the team.”

“Whose side are you on, exactly?” Before Thor can open his mouth, Tony raises a reassuring hand in his direction. “Relax, the Stark Relief Foundation has been there since yesterday and they’ve got everything under control. Nobody is going to die if you don’t show up for another hour.” He lifts the lid from a large pan full to the brim with scrambled eggs and bacon, frowns at it and pops the whole thing in the oven. “Besides, we hadn’t had time for breakfast either. Things came up...”

He trails off as his eyes dart towards the documents behind them. An odd, uneasy silence falls over the room that Thor has no idea how to interpret so he does the only thing he can and sits at the kitchen table, next to Bruce.

“Sure, alright, breakfast it is.” He pours himself the rest of the coffee pot and pauses as the first sip of the drink ignites his tired mind like a slow-burning firework. “So where’s the rest of the team? It’s October, knowing Barton’s obsession with Halloween, the whole place should look black and orange already. Or are we cleaning up our act for the sake of the new members?”

The scientist and the engineer share a meaningful look. Eventually, Tony lets out the long, weary sigh of a man who has been steadily ignoring the elephant in the room until it was ready to trample him.

“Yeah, about that...” he says. “We need to talk.”

By the time Thor makes it back to the ship, the weather has quieted down.

He walks across the tall drenched grass, rainwater soaking into the fabric of his jeans as the remains of the storm drip from broken branches overhead. The air still feels alive, like cold, invisible fire crackling gently on his skin and when he leans on a trunk to kick the dirt off cheap sneakers, tiny droplets crawl from all over the bark towards his hand. He lets go of the tree and watches them hover in place, then stream in a long rivulet over a patch of wild flowers. A lone bee describes confused circles around him, then gives up and loses itself in a cloud of mosquitoes that suddenly decide the safest place to be is as far away from him as possible.

He stands still for a while and closes his eyes as a familiar world breathes around him in an entirely new way. The storm still echoes in him, like a fading note on a plucked string and he wonders how long it will take to bring this little side-effect under control especially considering his current inner turmoil. He hadn’t given much thought to what had happened in Sokovia after they destroyed the city Ultron was planning to use as an improvised asteroid and now his mind is scrambling for memories of the aftermath. News reports of the devastation they left behind might have flickered across a screen somewhere in the background but by then, his attention was already fully focused on the Infinity Stones and all Earthly matters, no matter how important, were put aside. It hadn’t even occurred to him to look closer and now, the same hollow feeling that froze his heart when he read through Heimdall’s records returns to remind him that history has a tendency to repeat itself in unexpected ways.

If that is true, his knowledge of Asgard’s rewritten history gives him an advantage. If his people are going to have a new beginning on Earth, he must start by making amends for past mistakes.

He steps into the clearing and is greeted by a choir of loud, enthusiastic voices floating in the cool morning air. The gigantic trees the falling ship had smashed into have been moved out of the way and the place now looks less like a crash site and more like an improvised camp that has spontaneously sprung up in the middle of the forest. Humans and Asgardians blend together in a
crowd gathered next to a row of tents with the Stark logo emblazoned across them. The smell of something warm and rich hits him as he walks by, looking for familiar faces until he spots Brunnhilde munching on a large green apple next to a stripped part of the fuselage, contemplating the exposed smoking machinery like a frustrated artist before a canvas.

“Behold, the fallen king returns!” She raises an eyebrow at the sight of Earth clothes. “You look… human.”

The word brings a smile to Thor’s lips. “When I lived here, I learned that it pays to blend in.” He pulls off a waterproof gray hood and looks at the fraying end of the wires secured with tape to the dented fuselage. “So, how bad is it?”

She flicks the gnawed apple core into the grass, and steps back with a disheartened sigh. “Well, the main bridge looks like a bomb went out inside, the rest of the ship is repairable if we find the resources. Your shield held on long enough to save the biodome, but everything inside is dead. The expansions we made did not survive either.” She lowers herself on a nearby tree stump and pulls on oil stained work gloves. “When Bruce dropped by he said the seeds were sealed away in the cargo bay so they should be fine but even so, nothing is growing in there in a long time.”

Thor’s face falls slightly as he readjusts the new leather eyepatch. The shield had been a long shot but it served its purpose after the asteroid belt crippled their engine, even though it was conjured out of pure adrenaline and as stable as a leaf on the wind. He had given it all he could until Earth’s electromagnetic field had wreaked havoc with it during reentry and by then, their most dangerous enemy had become gravity itself. He wonders if he can ever recreate it, if the need arises, then quietly prays that it never does.

“We brought those towers back to life before, we can do it again.” He notices a lever covered in peeling red paint propped against the stump and frowns. “Is that the switch to the power grid?

She nods and bends down to rummage in her toolbox. “Yeah, my team’s been trying to repair the damn thing since yesterday but it’s still acting up so the heating system has been unreliable at best. We’ve turned it off for now, until we can reroute the power from the inertial dampeners. It’s not like we’re going to need them, are we?”

Thor follows her gaze to the gaping hole in the ship’s main engine, wreathed in blackened metal shrapnel that pokes out like a charred cadaver’s bones. “Not any time soon. I guess all the logbooks are gone too?”

She cringes as she looks through the open door of the bridge. “You guess correct, the main computer is a pile of junk after the crash. Whoever wants to get it running will need to work some serious magic.” A disgruntled look crosses her tattooed face. “Ah, crap, does that mean we have to start the census all over again?”

Thor cannot help but give her a sympathetic look as he remembers how long the process took last time. “Seems so, let’s hope this one survives a bit longer.” He glances at the crowd gathered on the clearing which is slowly beginning to dissolve into smaller groups. “How are they holding up?”

Brunnhilde’s dark lips part in a smile as she stands next to him, brushing off dirt from her clothes. “Surprisingly well, all things considered. I guess we’re all glad to not be breathing recycled air anymore. Korg and Miek are an overnight sensation, though people were a bit freaked out by the whole knives for hands thing.” Thor raises an eyebrow at the information but says nothing so she goes on. “Plus, it helps to know that not everybody on this planet wants to shoot us on sight. Just a while ago I saw Hod from sector nine have a really passionate debate about spices with the guy in charge of the tents. I can’t believe he had to travel to another planet to find someone who’s as
obsessed with food as him.”

Her chuckle goes unanswered as Thor catches a fleeting glimpse of a figure dressed in green and brown moving among the trees. “Is the army still around?” he asks and watches the Valkyrie’s expression darken.

“I’ve seen a few guys in uniform patrolling the woods,” she says and nods in the direction of the camo-clad figure walking away. “That’s their leader over there, with the face like a cracked windshield. Claimed they were here for protection but I’ve no idea whose exactly. I get the feeling they expect us to slit the humans’ throats the second they turn their back.” She watches him with increasing distaste,lingering on the gun over his shoulder as it reflects the meek sunlight. “What is it with these people? I thought you said Earth liked you.”

The slight disquiet in her voice cuts through Thor like a knife. The past four months have been rough on all of them, and even he could not wait to breathe easy once they reached their destination. Despite their triumph against cold, hunger and sorrow, the journey had felt like a breakneck race against time with unforeseen obstacles piling up as their ingenuity to surmount them stretched thinner. They all deserve a safe haven and he cannot shake the feeling that his best hope for a new beginning is slowly slipping through his fingers.

“They do!” he replies purely on instinct before his own darkening thoughts catch up with him. “Or rather, they did. I might have overestimated their trust.” He sees a perplexed shadow cross her face and adds. “A lot has happened since I was gone, none of it good. I’m still trying to wrap my head around it all.”

The Valkyrie’s brown eyes peer into him, her silence deliberate and inquisitive. “Are we safe here?” she asks when he fails to elaborate.

Thor falls silent for a while, watching the crowd of humans and Asgardians ebb and flow around them like an odd, multicolor tide. Eventually, he replies, “We will be. You have my word.”

She flashes him a crooked smile and returns her attention to the stripped side of the ship. “Good, I’m still keeping an eye on Officer Twitchy over there.” A loud bout of laughter distracts her again as the turns her head towards a group of people who have just seen Korg bend a spoon between his fingers with the mere act of picking it up. “These guys, in turn, don’t seem like the kind that scares easily. Are they friends of yours?”

Her eyes settle on a tall young woman with a Stark Relief Foundation armband engaged in lively conversation with a wiry, teenage Asgardian with a scar running across his right cheek. For a few seconds, Thor is convinced his impaired depth-perception is playing tricks on him. He blinks away the dust in his sight and when the picture doesn’t change, slides a hand over his face in exasperation. The more things change around them, it seems, the more they stay the same.

“To be honest, I never met them in my life,” he replies. “I should go and introduce myself.”

By the time he reaches the pair, the young woman has walked away leaving her companion standing alone under the long shadow of a snapped oak tree. He straightens up when he sees Thor approaching, like a child caught doing something he shouldn’t.

“Good day to you, my liege,” he says in a measured voice, brushing away a mess of red curls. “I see you’re still with us.”

“You sound disappointed.” Thor sighs as he sees nearly genuine shock flash across the gray eyes. “Drop the act, Loki, I know it’s you.”
The hurt look wavers on the freckled face only for a moment before his eyes blur and turn a familiar shade of blue. “Damn it, what gave me away?”

Thor does his best not to smile at the hint of wounded pride in his brother’s voice. “How about the fact that the guy whose face you stole is losing at cards not forty feet away?” The teenage mask looks almost insultingly unimpressed. “Not to mention, the scar is on the wrong side.”

Loki’s eyes roll at the smugness Thor cannot hide in his own voice. “Are you done showing off? We probably all look the same to them, anyway.” He pulls out a small tangerine from his pocket and starts tearing off its skin in smooth, deliberate movements. “You can’t blame me for laying low, brother. My face is not very popular around here.”

He’s right, of course, and the knowledge does nothing to dispel Thor’s growing concerns. Loki’s situation is his own particular elephant in the room that is getting close to stomping all over them if he doesn’t think of something soon. “Do you plan to stay in disguise forever?” he asks. “You will run out of them at some point.”

“Let’s just say, I’ll cross that bridge when I get there.” Loki’s eyes suddenly narrow as he throws the tangerine away and takes a quick glance at his temporary twin through matted curls. “In fact, I better make myself even scarcer. You’ve got very interesting company.”

He saunters away, disappearing into the crowd as the glamour spell closes around him like a soft golden curtain. His new appearance remains a mystery which Thor quickly stops trying to solve when he sees a tall middle-aged man in a suit with graying hair make his way towards him in long confident strides. The crowd dissolves as the humans part around him like the sea before a prow, leaving the confused Asgardians standing alone. The man’s dark gray eyes, however, don’t even register their presence. He walks by them as if they were mere shadows which it is in his best interest not to acknowledge.

It takes a few moments for Thor to remember his face. He has only seen it in photographs and news clips be barely ever paid attention to. His name, on the other hand, had come up enough times in the past couple of hours to ingrain itself in his memory and become inextricably linked to bad news.

Thaddeus Ross reaches the irregular shade thrown by the cracked oak tree and gives him a short welcoming nod. The gray eyes linger over the eyepatch and Thor wonders whether it makes him more or less threatening to a former member of the army.

“It seems our information on the Avengers is grossly out-of-date,” he says instead of a greeting. “Our people in MI were under the impression that your kind was invulnerable.”

Thor’s first instinct is to ask what kind of information he is talking about. Instead, he replies, “They were very optimistic, then.”

The words bring the slightest of smiles out of Ross. “What can I say? For mere mortals like us, it’s comforting to know that even gods can bleed.” He stretches out a leathery hand that feels unusually cold when Thor accepts firm the handshake. “We were never formally introduced but I suppose you already know who I am.”

“I do.” Thor glances over the man’s shoulder at the crowd that is slowly beginning to merge together again. “We need to talk.”

Chapter End Notes
Once again, I can't thank you guys enough for sticking with this fic. Thank you all for your lovely comments. Next chapter drops in two weeks.

As always, save a writer, leave a comment.
In which Ross and Loki do what they do best, which is make Thor's life difficult.

There's battle lines being drawn
Nobody's right if everybody's wrong
For What It's Worth - Buffalo Springfield

The US Secretary of State proves himself to be a man of few words.

In fact, Thor is sure Ross has heard similar stories before, and though his is probably the first one to feature spaceships and fire demons, he has a feeling they all end the same way.

There is a calculated neutral expression on the man’s face when he hears about the fall of Asgard, and he only speaks up to inquire about the number of their survivors and what artifacts they were able to salvage. He doesn’t mention the Tesseract by name but the question hangs in the air, unanswered and Thor wonders if Surtur’s sword was powerful enough to destroy it or whether it is still floating among the debris, along with the rest of Asgard’s lost relics. He and Heimdall had spent a few minutes scanning for it to find nothing except the same death and ruin that were sure to close in on them if they didn’t depart soon. His thoughts still return to it from time to time, but with all said and done, he is glad to spare Earth the burden of dealing with it again. The Mind Stone had wreaked enough havoc before it was safe with Vision, and keeping two Infinity Stones on the same planet was not wise. They never remained hidden for long and always fell into just the right hands to sow nothing but chaos.

“You seem to have landed on your feet, after all.” Ross remarks after Thor finishes speaking.

He lights a cigarette and surveys the camp through a bluish cloud of smoke that dissolves quickly under the chilly morning breeze. Thor isn’t sure what to make of those words, delivered in the same collected tone he has often heard Natasha Romanoff use seconds before unleashing her fury on some poor soul who had decided to make her life difficult. He doesn’t know enough about Ross to reach any conclusions, though the ever growing amount of cigarette butts on the ground betrays a gathering storm behind his unperturbed demeanor. Whether the wind blows in his favor or not is yet to be seen.

“We’ve had a lot of help,” he replies. “More than we expected, in fact. You have to give it to Stark, he knows how to make everything run like clockwork.”

A long stream of smoke escapes Ross’s mouth along with a curt laugh. “And yet he cannot return a single call. For someone who owns two phone companies he can be extremely hard to reach.” He pauses to stub out the cigarette on a nearby rock. “Then again, he’s not the only one with that problem.”

Thor holds back a long sigh as all the memories of his struggles with Midgardian technology hit him
at once. Years ago, he inherited Darcy’s old flip phone which everyone claimed was useless because he kept forgetting to carry it and when he finally did, it got crushed by Steve’s shield not an hour into a mission. Its subsequent replacements met a similar fate in rapid succession until even his teammates became wary of leaving their own phones around him, as if he was the unwilling bearer of a very specific curse.

“I don’t see how that’s a problem,” he says. “You have found us just fine.”

“It wasn’t hard, I merely had to follow the trail of destruction.” Ross raises his head towards the path of singed treetops overhead. “You have an unfortunate talent for it, I’m afraid, but I’m glad you’re starting to see things our way. My sources inform me that you signed the Accords an hour ago. That was the right thing to do.”

There’s a hint of veiled satisfaction in the man’s voice which Thor finds himself very reluctant to share. If someone held a knife to his throat right then and there, he would say that signing hadn’t felt like a decision at all, but like a long-overdue formality. Tony had thrown him a sympathetic look when he impressed his runic signature on the paper but made no attempts to dissuade him. Bruce had hemmed and hawed about the issue for ages, pacing around the room with haunted eyes, occasionally looking back at him but Thor had little counsel to offer. At the end of the day, his friend’s decision remains his own, while he has a whole country to think of. His personal desires have long ago faded into the background leaving only the hope that he is worthy of Asgard’s throne as he was of Mjolnir.

Ross’s words burn in his mind with a cold fire. The right thing. He has spent the better part of fourth months trying to figure out what that is and if there is a lesson Ragnarok has taught him, it’s that not even the right decisions are free from consequences.

He looks up just in time to spot another camo-clad figure walking among the trees. “If that’s true, call off the army. You know we mean you no harm.”

Ross just shakes his head and fishes out another cigarette out of a leather bound case. “I have no doubts about that now, but intentions are fleeting and we need to take every precaution possible. Enhanced individuals are becoming more common these days and you just brought a ship full of them to Earth. That makes everybody a bit on edge.”

Thor lets out a temperate breath and skirts around the urge to ask if he would rather have the Chitauri back. He has read the words “enhanced individuals” about a thousand times in the past few hours but in Ross’s mouth they seem to carry another meaning altogether. He watches the soldier linger around a group of Asgardians, who are busy sorting out the charred scraps of the engine, and adjust the rifle on his shoulder matter-of-factly. The group does its best to ignore him but the simple rattle of the weapon against the man’s belt is enough for them to freeze and their faces to tense up. The fact that Ross seems not to notice the scene at all makes a familiar prickling sensation spread through his body.

“You point guns at unarmed people,” he says as the soldier walks away. “I do not call that protection.”

Ross takes a long drag out of his cigarette and lets the smoke curl into the air. “On my way here, I passed a creature that had knives for hands. I do not call that unarmed.”

Thor resists the temptation to call Miek over and place Ross’s hand over his head, just to watch his reaction. Back on the ship, he had assumed that the alien was a mute for the better part of a month until Korg explained to him that Miek’s species communicated through low-level telepathy. Establishing the link to his mind was easy enough, though for non-telepathic species, it proved a bit
overwhelming. For Thor, it had felt like a colony of ants burrowing inside his brain before the uncomfortable sensation faded and pure abstract thoughts flowed in, bypassing words and language entirely. It had taken some time to get used to this form of communication but after a while, he learned that Miek’s species was native to Sakaar and he was captured to be a gladiator after his entire family was massacred. Since he had shown himself to be a capable fighter, the Grandmaster was considerate enough to replace his missing limbs with deadly weapons but not considerate enough to take him out of the arena. He is about to relay the entire story to Ross before a newfound cynical voice in his head warns him that the man is only likely to pay attention to the gladiator part.

Instead, he replies, “Trust me, he likes those even less than you; they weren’t his idea in the first place. We meant to fit him with better prosthetics but didn’t have the resources and at least knives are better than stumps. All he wants is not to have to use them anymore.” He watches a skeptical look cross the man’s face and adds, “That’s the whole reason we’re here.”

Ross nods at the not very subtle reminder. “Ah yes, you ‘humbly ask the people of Earth for asylum.’” Thor’s face remains carefully blank as his own words are thrown back at him with just enough of an inflection change to irk him. “I’m afraid things aren’t that simple anymore. The world might still see you as a hero but some of us can’t quite get past the fact that your brother was responsible for the New York incident.”

His voice falls into that measured, calm tone that is really starting to get under Thor’s skin. He chooses his next words very carefully. “You would refuse help to eight thousand people because of the reckless actions of one?”

Ross’s lips twist into an unpleasant little smile. “That is not the word I would use for Loki,” he says. “A child who plays with fire is reckless. Someone who kills innocent people without a second thought is usually described under very different terms. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“I know you still haven’t answered my question.”

“I suppose I haven’t.” The man crumples the spent cigarette. “See, you’ve been gone a long time and the thing about time is that it gives us perspective. The truth is that we’re had two potentially world ending events in the past four years and each time we looked closer we found you and your brother at the center of them. Loki had the entire galaxy at his disposal and he just happens to seek war with the planet under your protection. Ultron was Stark’s creation, but he could not have existed without the Mind Stone which Loki brought to Earth.” He pauses, as if daring him to challenge his words but Thor doesn’t, so he goes on. “Come to think of it, it’s the same stone that gave Wanda and Pietro Maximoff their powers so every life they’ve taken leads back to you both as well. You understand how after that track record, I might be inclined to think it’s not a great idea to have more Asgardians living among us.”

Thor fights to suppress the sparks gathering across his fingers. His voice comes out surprisingly steady when he finds it again, “If that’s what you think, then cast us both aside but let my people stay. They don’t need to pay for our mistakes.”

Whatever answer he expects Ross to give is long in coming. Eventually, the man fumbles for the cigarette case again, frowns to find it empty, then turns to him, diplomatic mask back on.

“Fortunately for you, not everybody shares my opinion,” he says. “There were a hundred and seventeen countries behind the Sokovia Accords and last night they all took a vote. They agreed that if you signed, your people would be given help and protection. And since you already have, it seems like I’ve got no case. Democracy in action is a beautiful thing, even when the chips don’t fall in your favor. You should keep that in mind, now that you’re king.”
Thor releases a breath he does not remember holding as relief washes over him. “So my request is granted?”

Ross gives him a brief nod. “From the moment your signature dried on the paper, yes. There was one last minute addition though, Loki is to be placed in the custody of the United States government in the next twenty four hours. I’m sure we can provide you with an updated copy later.”

In the heavy silence that follows, Thor’s heartbeat is almost deafening in his ears. After the situation on the ship stabilized, his thoughts had returned to the matter of Loki again and again, turning progressively darker each time. For a while, he had toyed with the idea of keeping him in the Avengers’ compound, a dangerous plan considering how things turned out last time they were all under the same roof, but still better than the alternative. The worst case scenario had always lingered at the back of his mind but whenever it got too close, he told himself he had nothing to worry about. Loki was, after all, nothing if not predictable and his talent for vanishing at the first sign of trouble was unparalleled. Thor had fully expected him to grab one of the escape pods and lose himself among the cold stars long before they got anywhere near Earth.

But he hadn’t. He had stayed with them through the first hellish weeks and the next perilous months. He was there to devour the first harvest of the biodome and to help draft the plans for its expansion. He appointed himself the head of the theatre troupe and would spend hours in their company, putting his glamour spells to increasingly creative uses. And when the solar flare engulfed the ship in a fiery inferno, he was on the front lines, trying to salvage everything they could and cursing at the Grandmaster’s lackadaisical approach to fire prevention. Thor caught a brief glimpse of his anxious face through the screen of the cockpit door before the ship was inescapably trapped in Earth’s gravity field and allowed himself a small glimmer of hope. His brother’s well-established pattern or backstabbing and treachery was finally beginning to unravel. There might still be a chance for their paths to grow closer.

He thinks back to Heimdall’s records, still hidden away in his quarters, a silent reminder that the past cannot be erased. Loki’s own Ragnarok is inevitable and nobody knows that better than Thor.

“Last time I checked, your country still applied the death penalty,” he hears himself say. “Do you think executing Loki will give you the closure you seek?”

“As much as some would love to see him dead, I think that would start us off on the wrong foot,” The man’s tone turns deceptively conciliatory. “I’m going to be frank with you, a lot of people were very angry when you took Loki back to Asgard. In their eyes, you denied him a fair trial. How do you think the citizens of New York feel about never seeing the murderer of their loved ones brought to justice?”

“Asgard did not spare him if that’s what you fear,” Thor retorts. “He was convicted to life imprisonment.”

“And unless he’s imprisoned as we speak, it doesn’t apply anymore,” Ross counters. “Look, I understand that right now you can’t afford to lock up able-bodied people but your brother racked up a body count of eighty before the Chitauri showed up. Prison is too good for him if you ask me.”

Thor sighs as he flashes back to the short-lived Hulk containment chamber in the helicarrier. “With all due respect, I don’t think you have one that can hold him.”

He’s surprised to hear genuine, amused laughter in response. “With all due respect, you underestimate us. Besides, if we all play our cards right, we may even help each other out.” Ross slides a thin silver phone out of his pocket and swipes through the flickering screen. “What do you know about Centerville, Pennsylvania?”
Despite all his time on Earth, the words still sound like a collection of disjointed syllables with only the vague suggestion of a place behind them. Thor leans forward as the device in Ross’s hands lights up to reveal a bird’s eye view of a valley, tucked between snow-crowned peaks. Neat rows of red and black roofs spread across the green landscape, clustering around a lake fed by a waterfall that spills over the gray stone like a curly, white mane. A long, winding road snakes through the streets before disappearing into the gaping mouth of a tunnel and Thor cannot help noticing that, for a picture taken in broad daylight, there are very few vehicles on it. For the briefest of moments, his thoughts betray him and he thinks of Jane and her collection of rare snow globes crowding the shelves of her tiny apartment. The town would fit perfectly among them, it looks like its own piece of reality, folded away from the rest of the world by the looming mountains and frozen in time.

He looks back and Ross and shakes his head. “Nothing at all,” he says.

“That’s not surprising, even by our standards, it’s old news.” Ross hands the phone over to Thor and slides open a folder, scattering a wide array of pictures over the screen. “It was a prosperous mining town in the seventies until a coal seam fire flooded the entire area with carbon monoxide. It didn’t help that it happened in the middle of the night so I’ll let you draw your own conclusions.”

His grim expression leaves little room for any positive resolutions. “Any survivors?”, Thor asks.

Ross drums his fingers against the leather cigarette case, saying nothing. His diplomatic façade seems to crack as dejection crosses his wrinkled face and Thor feels unexpected sympathy rise within him. He knows what it’s like to mourn the deaths of people he has never met.

“Not as many as we’d hoped,” the man replies eventually, “Mostly those who lived in the outskirts or were out of town. The area was evacuated but by then, the fire had grown too large so the only solution was to let the coal vein burn itself out. The state has been closely monitoring the air since then. It’s been clean for the past five years and they have the records to prove it. However, as you can imagine, nobody is in a hurry to move back. They all think the place is cursed or haunted.”

There’s a tinge of bitterness to his laughter as he looks back at Thor and adds, “Seems as good a place as any for your people to settle down. As soon we secure your brother, that is.”

He lets meaningful silence hang in the air, clearly waiting for an answer but Thor does not give him one. He watches the glowing screen in his hands and thinks of tall, majestic buildings rising up to the clouds, of crowded markets and furnaces powered by water and sun. He thinks of fields of gold, of taverns where music never ceases, and of what the Asgard Library will look like after its remains are joined by new texts written under an entirely different sky. The future he’s been chasing for months unfolds before him and though the vision is hazy, it is captivating enough to make his heart a little lighter.

He allows himself to bask in it before handing back the phone, “An entire town for Loki? That’s quite an uneven exchange for someone who doesn’t want us around.”

Ross shrugs. “Like I said, the countries that drafted the Sokovia Accords have spoken in your favor, so my opinion is irrelevant. I don’t want a bull in my china shop, but if I’m going to have one, I want to know exactly where it is.” He pauses to take another long look at the clearing teeming with humans and Asgardians. “This camp is fine for now but how long do you expect to survive on scraps from the Stark Foundation? I’m offering you a fresh start and ridding you of a nuisance at the same time. I suggest you take it before I change my mind.”

There’s a spark of aggravation in Thor’s mind at the word ‘nuisance’ but it goes ignored as a sinking feeling takes over. He reminds himself that he shouldn’t be surprised at all; the writing on the wall regarding Loki has been there for months. He tries to tell himself that this is the best resolution he could hope for. That it could have been so much worse.
“Where will you be holding him?”, he asks.

Ross lets out a dry laugh. “You should ask Stark, he knows all about it. Do we have a deal or not?”

The last barrier in Thor’s mind crumbles under the weight of the crown as he nods slowly. “Very well, I accept. As long as I am the one to bring him in.”

The wrinkles at the corner of Ross’s mouth grow deeper as he flashes an acrimonious smile. “Last time an Avenger said that to me, a German airport got destroyed and a criminal still got away. I’m not about to make the same mistake again.”

He runs his calloused fingers through graying hair and gives an almost imperceptible nod in the direction of the woods. A shadow dressed in brown and green moves at the edge of Thor’s vision, a few others soon join it. Suddenly, he understands why the army is still around and the realization doesn’t make his increasingly trying day any easier.

“How do you really want to pit your weapons against Loki’s magic?”, he asks and is faced with the unflappable look of a man who has spent too long preparing for battle and is all too eager to show his work.

“You continue to underestimate us,” the reply is punctuated with the sound of cocking rifles. “We’ve learned a lot while you were away. Believe me, we are fully capable of handling him if he doesn’t want to cooperate.”

There’s a kind of obstinate determination in the man’s voice that makes Thor’s patience snap in half. “I’ve spent enough time on Earth to see how you handle things. You will not have bullets flying amongst my people!” He turns around brusquely to see a small squad gathered near the edge of the clearing that freezes the moment he looks upon them. “If you cannot value our lives, then at least value your own.”

The group shuffles in place, suddenly all too aware of the gathering clouds on a very recently clear sky. Five pairs of nervous eyes turn to Ross for guidance and Thor comes close to pitying them if it weren’t for the rifles slung over their shoulders. Their agonizing wait lasts only a few seconds before the man sighs and gestures at them to stand down.

“All right, have it your way,” he concedes grudgingly. “You have thirty minutes; make them count.”

Thor breathes easier as he sees them slowly retreat, doing their best not to look relieved.

“Thank you,” he replies and walks away, leaving Ross standing over the graveyard of cigarette butts scattered across the grass. A parliament of rooks pecking at the ground for worms spooks and takes flight in an even black swoop save for one lone bird that sits perfectly still on the only surviving branch of the oak tree, watching him with beady eyes that carry the faintest hint of blue.

For the first time in months, Loki is surprisingly easy to find.

He lounges in his room, staring at tattered pages spread over his writing desk, crudely fashioned out of an old storage crate. He seems completely engrossed in them but still glances up when Thor walks in to give him a despondent smile. “I know that look. That’s your ‘bad news’ look. I’ve been seeing it a lot lately.”

The carefully constructed scenario in Thor’s head falls apart at those words. These might as well be their last moments of respite, before the last of his family is taken from him. He cannot help but make them last a little bit longer.
“You still read me like a book, brother,” he replies. The blue eyes roll mockingly, suggesting that if Thor is indeed a book, he isn’t a very long one. “Are you planning your next play already? I’ve just passed Nanna mouthing something very dramatic in the hallway. Is she your lead actress again?”

“She wishes. She barely bothered to learn her lines for the last one.” Loki throws one last disapproving look at the pages, then turns to Thor. “So are the rumors true? Have the mighty Avengers fallen out of favor with the good people of Earth?”

Thor would gladly give his other eye to know the real answer to that question. For the moment, he settles on replying, “That depends on who you ask.”

Loki gives him a nonchalant shrug. “Fair enough, I know I’ve seen a lot of young women blush and avert their eyes when you walk past.” The teasing smile soon fades into a scowl. “I suppose your most recent acquaintance had a very different reaction to your presence.”

Thor nods, gathering his thoughts. “He is not too fond of either of us,” he says to fill the creeping silence. “He’s willing to make an exception for one.”

Loki’s thin lips press into a tight line as he holds his gaze with a peculiar stoicism, like an actor committed to a particularly unpleasant script. “Right, no prizes for guessing which one. I assume that’s the reason you’re standing there with your best funeral face.” He pauses, clearly waiting for an explanation, but before Thor can speak again, he interrupts him. “Tell me, do you think throwing me at their mercy will win you their trust back? Do you think they will welcome us with open arms when they don’t even extend the same courtesy to their own kind?”

Thor frowns at the utter contempt on Loki’s face. “What do you think will happen if I refuse? Your actions in New York cannot be easily dismissed.”

“And yet, in your infinite wisdom, you still chose to come here!” For a second, ire bleeds into Loki’s voice but he quickly composes himself and lets out a resentful laugh. “Word is, your actions in Sokovia cannot be dismissed either. Funny how you get to be the people’s hero while I get to rot in a cell. Would you be that understanding if they suddenly decided you were to join me?”

“If that’s the price to pay for peace, then yes.”

The words just make Loki’s sneer grow wider. “Right, I forgot you’re all about diplomacy these days. Someone should really tell that to the very nervous people with guns outside.” He paces briefly across the room in short, deliberate strides before he stops and gives him a clandestine look. “You do realize this will never stop, do you? Anyone with two thoughts to rub together can see they are terrified of us. How long do you think your little experiment will last until they decide we’re more trouble than we’re worth?”

Thor suppresses a sick, slippery feeling rising in his chest. Ever since they were children, Loki has had an unsettling talent for reaching into his mind, plucking out the grimmest thoughts and presenting them in an even darker light. The fact that his brother is often on the right track does nothing to placate the storm inside him. In a bout of selfish fancy, he allows himself to consider the implications of Loki’s words but the moment doesn’t last long. Mistakes were made and need to be amended. Their personal frets pale in comparison to the bigger picture.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” he says. “But I’m willing to take that chance.”

“Then you’re a bigger fool than I thought, brother.”

The blue eyes grow cold with resignation as Loki steps back, towards the heavy desk. His hand goes
straight through the metal, wreathed in a familiar golden sheen that betrays an illusion. Before Thor can even think about being furious, a very faint click grazes the edge of his hearing and he feels the blood drain from his face.

“Loki… what have you done?”

“What I had to do.” There’s frustration in his brother’s voice, laced with sorrow as a small red light peeks between the crevices of the poorly assembled furniture and begins to blink frenetically. “You long for peace so much, you cannot hear the war drums closing in. That will be your doom in the long run. I pray it is not our doom as well.”

The illusion fades in a gilded mist before the intense, high-pitched whine of an alarm buries itself in Thor’s brain. He has just enough time to fling himself out of the room before a cloud of fire and heat bursts out of the desk, consuming everything in its wake. The shockwave slams him hard against the hallway wall, sending red spots across his vision. He can hear screams seeping through the ringing in his ears and when he turns towards them to check if anyone is hurt, he feels a hand grasp his shoulder.

Bruce’s ashen face peers into his, as he hastily puts down a crate of seeds from the cargo bay. “Thor! Are you alright? What the hell happened?”

For a few seconds, the only words Thor can utter are long-winded curses which all drown in a stream of acrid smoke that pours out of the destroyed room. He brushes off the stray sparks dying on his clothes and drags the scientist away from the wreckage. “Loki’s gone…”

“What do you mean gone?” The brown eyes widen in horror as they look back at the gaping hole in the wall that used to house Loki’s quarters. “Is he in there? Is he dead?”

Thor thinks of the army gathered around the ship, waiting for a reason to pounce and feels anger rise in him like a tidal wave. “When I find him, he’s going to wish he was.”

Chapter End Notes

And so, shit hits the fan and the plot thickens.

Your comments keep this fic alive and make its author very happy. Please leave one if you like it so far.
Chapter Summary

In which against all odds, our heroes have time for their sorrows.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

And I'm holding on tight
To a world gone astray
Believe - Savatage

Tony is almost done putting on his shoes when his mobile phone goes off in the distance.

He scrambles for the device, stumbling clumsily towards the living room, but it dies as soon as his hand closes over it, strangling a guitar riff of his favorite AC/DC song. The phone number for the head coordinator of the Stark Relief Foundation blinks at him on a red and gold background prompting a small frustrated sigh. He has been trying to get in touch with them for a long while now, with every attempt resulting in a busy signal or being redirected to a pre-recorded message that fills his ears with Pepper’s voice and reminds him just how much he misses her. She had taken over the Foundation a few months ago but was called off to a conference in Amsterdam last week, right in time for all hell to break loose. Her replacement seemed to be managing well enough, though Tony suspected she was a bit overwhelmed by the sudden turn of events. No matter how capable she was, her training probably didn’t cover a first contact scenario.

He hits the button to return the call, groans as the line goes busy again and slides his feet into rainproof boots, determined to check out the situation at the clearing in person. Bruce had left about half an hour ago, and Tony meant to join him but was interrupted by a barrage of phone calls from media outlets trying to get access to the crash site, all rather unconvinced by his increasingly creative synonyms for things like experimental aircrafts and weather balloons. The calls dwindled down just in time for the sound of helicopter blades to rip into the glorious silence and as he caught a glimpse of a large squadron speeding in the direction of the woods, he wondered what Norton and his boys were playing at. The situation he remembered did not warrant a reenactment of Independence Day, though he was confident that after New York, the military along with everyone else had scrapped the possibility of peaceful aliens altogether. Thor’s case had been its own rare contradiction; helped along by the unquestionable fact that people tended to find him easy on the eyes. Not having spent much time on Earth helped establish him as an oddity in the public eye, an intergalactic tourist on the Avenger’s team to be madly curious about, but not exactly afraid of. The Battle of Sokovia had turned the tide of public opinion enough for that image to crack and by the time a bomb claimed the lives of the Wakandan delegation in Lagos, the same people who obsessed about him were unashamedly glad that he was gone.

A frown descends on Tony’s face as he throws on his coat and steps into the chilly autumn air. If Earth’s honeymoon period with Asgardians was over, he cannot imagine the reaction to eight thousand of them, even if they couldn’t bend lightning to their will.

It takes him a few seconds to realize that the weather has taken a sharp turn for the worse. A vast swathe of clouds he cannot remember seeing ten minutes ago drapes over the gloomy sky, thick as
velvet and dark as the sea after a storm. The meek golden sunlight from this morning has long faded into dull silver that hangs in the air like fog, heavy with the pungent smell of ozone. The world around him lies almost forcibly still, wrapped in the kind of eerie calm that would make his mother’s joints ache and the family dog run for cover. He is about to duck back inside to grab an umbrella before he spots a group of people, dressed in the gray and blue colors of U-GIN Genetics, walking out of the woods, looking crestfallen. A large wheeled robot carrying their equipment is following closely, skipping over the rocks and branches that litter the ground while its load rattles and sways. After a particularly large boulder almost makes the machine topple over, a woman separates from the group and kneels to readjust the straps over the cargo. When she brushes her long bangs away, Tony recognizes Helen Cho.

“Hey! Guys, wait up!” He waves at the group and walks briskly towards them, his gaze instinctively drawn towards the robot in the shape of a shallow mining cart, with two flat headlights welded to its front side, like big round eyes. “That thing could use some serious shock absorbers, you know? I hope it’s not carrying anything fragile.”

Helen smiles through a grimace of effort as she tightens the elastic bands running over the steel frame. “Poor FIDO’s not used to this type of terrain. All he’s ever known is smooth pavements and tiled floors.” She looks down at the thick layer of mud caked on the robot’s massive wheels with something resembling pride. “This is a whole new experience but I think he’s managing well.”

She wipes a layer of moisture off the headlights as if petting the cold metal and Tony cannot help but grin when no one in her team seems to question it. “FIDO, huh? That’s cute.” He points at the gear loaded onto the robot’s flat back. “What’s with all this? I thought you guys requested to stay for another week. Your confirmation came through five minutes ago.”

She shrugs and looks up as another military helicopter tears the air overhead sporting familiar gun turrets that send a chill down Tony’s spine. “Apparently the National Guard has other plans. There was an explosion on the ship so they told everyone to clear the area.” She pauses when she notices his stunned expression. “You didn’t know?”

As if on cue, his phone goes off again, filling the uneasy silence with screaming guitars and loud proclamations about a highway to hell. The tense, formal face of Violet Long, Pepper’s replacement at the Foundation stares at him from the vibrating screen, her picture blurred as raindrops begin to dot the smooth surface. A faint rumble echoes across the clouds like the subdued roar of a caged beast.

“Damn it, why do these guys only call me with bad news?” He picks up the phone and winces when sharp, unexpected static pours into his ears. “Violet, what the hell is going on? I just saw helicopters heading your way, looking ready to blast Fortunate Son. How...?”

He doesn’t get to finish his question or to hear her reply as an alarm erupts behind him, long and piercing, like the cry of an infant left in the cold. He looks back at the compound, where red and orange lights are flooding the third floor and swears.

“Hold on,” he says into the phone as he summons the armor. “I’m going to have to call you back.”

Shortly after their official move from Stark Tower into the compound, Steve and Natasha started calling the third floor the Treasure Chamber.

The nickname had prompted an eye roll from Tony at first but it stuck and when even Happy began to use it offhandedly, it was too late to turn back. It was now added to every plaque in the building along with an icon of a dragon spread over a hoard of gold. The floor’s actual contents were less reminiscent of a large scaly beast though in the right hands, they could be just as dangerous. It
housed the entire team’s gear, the Iron Legion and every iteration of the power armor he created over
the years, including the Hulkbuster that had proven effective enough to be labeled as a weapon of
mass destruction. The thought of someone breaking in sends Tony into a cold sweat as he rushes
towards the scene, the alarm still wailing hysterically around him. Everything in there is locked with
a fingerprint ID but the very fact that they have managed to get past the security system is bad news.
No one should have been able to get through that door without a voice confirmation and a retinal
scan after walking through a long corridor lined with cameras all running his personal brand of facial
recognition software. The place was a fortress, accessible only to the team and for a moment, an
unpleasant suspicion trickles into his mind. He knows next to nothing about the whereabouts of the
rogue Avengers but he hopes that none of them would attempt to retrieve their gear from the
compound. The last thing he wants is to start another fight with the people who still show up in
pictures scattered over his phone memory and which he cannot bring himself to delete.

The heavy machinery in his head screeches to a halt when he reaches the Treasure Chamber door
and finds it neatly locked.

He smashes a hand over the emergency shutdown to kill the alarm and lets silence flood back as he
leans over the retinal scanner. The heavy double door slides aside, revealing a spacious, windowless
room lined with ballistic glass cases, which - he is glad to see - still retain all of their contents. He
runs his hands over them, looking for signs of tampering but finds none and lets out a long sigh of
relief. He is almost ready to believe that this just is a particularly inconvenient hiccup in the security
system but his optimism doesn’t last as he spots a thin steel display stand in the back, crumpled like
aluminum foil. The grips over what it used to hold seem to have been melted right off and when
Tony remembers what it was, he feels incredulous laughter rising in his throat. It has been a while
since he has come across the very definition of petty theft.

The laughter dies immediately when he hears light footsteps behind him. He spins around to aim a
repulsor blaster straight into a familiar face currently missing a blue eye.

“Jesus Christ, Point Break, don’t sneak up on me like that!” He lowers his arm as the surge of power
within the gauntlet dies down. “I’ve just upgraded this thing, it can put a hole through a tank. I’d
rather not test it on you first.”

“It’s hardly sneaking up if the door is open.” Thor flicks his thumb at the wide gap between the steel
panels and walks past him, barely glancing at the deadly weapon. Tony gets the uncomfortable
feeling that his friend has had too many guns pointed at him in the last couple of hours. “He stole the
Scepter, didn’t he?”

There’s only one person he can be talking about, which puts the break-in into a heart-sinking
perspective for Tony. Magic is the one thing he has not accounted for and he is not sure if he ever
can. Back in Stark Tower, he had done his best to study Mjolnir but all his experiments failed to
produce any concrete data and more than once, almost blew up the lab. Thor had insisted many times
that magic and science were one and the same but if there was a connection, Tony failed to see it.
Erik Selvig jokingly stated once that the only proof he needed was that Thor was mediocre at both.

“Your brother keeps finding new ways to get on my nerves,” he says letting the armor fall away
from him and reassemble itself in a corner. “He’s also going to be very disappointed, without the
Mind Stone that thing is a glorified pointy stick.” His eyes skim over the multiple burnt patches
covering Thor’s clothes, as if he had walked through fire. “Are you guys alright back there? I heard
there was an explosion.”

For a split second, the air in the room acquires an odd, fizzy texture. There is echo of a distant storm
in Thor’s voice. “It was Loki’s grand exit and it didn’t do us any favors. The military has locked
down the clearing and is watching our every move. As far as they are concerned, we are all complicit in his escape so we’re their prisoners until they find him.” He twists his foot in irritation and Tony notices the flat but bulky disk of a military electromagnetic beacon peeking from under the scorched hem of his jeans. “Or until I find him first.”

He slides a hand over his face as the picture before him turns uglier with every thought he gives it. “Bruce owes me ten bucks, he said that it would take Loki a week to turn his coat and it didn’t even take him two days. My question is, how didn’t you see it coming?”

“I was hopeful, I guess.” The words are drenched in the kind of bitter cynicism that he would never expect to come out of Thor’s mouth. “It doesn’t matter, I was a fool and Asgard paid the price. The only thing left is to find him before Earth pays it as well.”

Thor stands still for a moment, hands rubbing circles over singled temples. Tony isn’t entirely sure how to respond. Painfully standard words of comfort surge through his mind, but none of them sound particularly useful, so instead he asks, “Do you want to change clothes? You look crispy.”

Thor shakes his head as he resumes pacing among the glass cases, deep in thought. “I’ll be fine. Any idea where Vision is right now?”

“It’s hard to keep track of his comings and goings. Last time he was headed for Oahu.” Tony fishes out his cell phone, quickly goes through his outgoing calls and clicks his tongue in disapproval. “I tried to check up on him several times but he has the bad habit of going completely off the grid. Sometimes I get the feeling he is trying to get as far away from here as possible.”

Thor stops in his tracks and frowns. “Is he alright?”

Tony lets out a long sigh as he ponders if the scientific community will ever truly know what goes on in their friend’s artificial head. “He’s… going through some stuff. The team splitting up was not a rose garden for anyone and Rhody’s injury didn’t exactly help things. Nobody blames him for what happened but I don’t think he is comfortable staying in the compound anymore.” He pauses and throws Thor a disbelieving look. “You don’t seriously think Loki is crazy enough to try to take the Mind Stone back? Because if he is, it’s going to be a very one-sided fight.”

“Good, then the only thing we’ll have to do is pick him up.” Thor makes a beeline for the doorway, shrugging off his jacket as he walks. He only makes it halfway through before turning around and asking, “How do we get to Oahu?”

Tony cannot hide a proud grin at the memory of his engineering team’s most recent achievement. “In style, my friend. The new and improved Quinjet should get us there in about three hours. You’ll love it, it’s all kinds of shiny and still has that new car smell.” His smile wavers a bit as he sees a cotton ball tucked in the crook of Thor’s arm, held in place with a thin strip of medical tape. “Hey, what’s that? Did they give you a flu shot or something?”

Thor looks down at his arm, then casually rips off the tape and chucks it into a nearby bin. “No, they took my blood. Didn’t they do the same to Vision?” He frowns at Tony’s puzzled expression, then rattles off, “All enhanced individuals with innate powers, who sign the Accords must provide their DNA. You did read them, right?”

Tony nods as he pulls up the access codes for the Quinjet on his cellphone. The request had also come from SHIELD in the past though the data had been erased when HYDRA’s infiltration was discovered, courtesy of Black Widow. He was not surprised to see the same requirement in the Sokovia Accords, and though it didn’t apply to people like him, the potential nasty ramifications were not hard to spot. He himself had once refused to turn over the schematics for the Iron Man suit,
in fear of anyone reverse engineering his work. The memory leaves a bitter taste in his mouth. Time has a funny way to rearrange the pieces of his past into a picture he likes less with every passing year.

“I found the style uninspired, the characters flat and the ending disappointing,” He falls into step next to Thor and adds, “Also, Vision is pure vibranium. He doesn’t bleed much.”

“That’s true.” Thor agrees, glancing at the bluish spidery bruise under his skin where the needle has broken a few blood vessels. “Some people have all the luck.”

“Are you sure about this?” Tony insists into the phone as he brings up the command for autopilot on the control panel and reclines in the co-pilot seat. “Not to be a doomsayer, but the situation sounds custom-made to stress you out. Plus, there’s the whole Ross issue, if you get my drift.”

The voice on the other side of the line is drowned in a loud clatter, followed by an even louder curse that belongs in a theatre production, rather than in Bruce’s mouth. Tony has just enough time to chuckle at the word ‘accursed’ before the phone comes alive again. “Trust me, I’d rather be helping out here than sitting at the compound, twiddling my thumbs. These guys have been through enough and they could use a local around without a gun strapped to them.” There’s a long pause, filled with the sound of broken glass crunching under invisible boots before Bruce’s voice breaks through, “Someone should keep an eye on the biodome too, part of it cleaved during the crash. The Relief Foundation left us with some supplies but the sooner we can get back on our feet, the better.”

The unmistakable screeching of metal crates being dragged around floods Tony’s ears, making conversation impossible so he is left to ponder about how seamlessly Bruce switches between ‘they’ and ‘us’ when talking about the Asgardian refugees and how quickly he has adopted some of their expressions. Four months living in close quarters with them has left a mark, and though it took Thor nearly six to stop talking like he was in a Shakespearean production, their scientist friend seems well on his way to start.

He waits for the noise to die down and replies, “Fair enough, just keep your eyes open. Norton hasn’t forgotten New York and he’ll take his payback from anyone he can.”

“They won’t dare antagonize anyone while I’m around. My reputation has its advantages sometimes.” Bruce’s words are laced with the kind of ominous determination he used to reserve for a code green back in the day. Tony hears him walking across broken glass again, before his voice acquires a subtle echo, letting him know he is standing in a hallway. “You two be careful out there, I’ve no idea what’s cooking in Loki’s head but it can’t be good. His little stunt put a hole in the ship you can drive a truck through.”

The phone buzzes against Tony’s ear as a high-definition picture projects itself before him showing a black maw gaping wide on a half-melted metal wall, surrounded by the jagged remnants of what probably used to be a door.

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair, remembering Loki’s overly confident display of power in Stuttgart. “Yeah, well, the guy has always had a flair for the dramatic. Can’t say that it’s a family thing, though.”

Bruce lets out a short, affectionate laugh. “Judging from my personal observations, it skipped the middle child. That or somebody should really confirm if Loki is the adopted one.” There’s a small tap as the phone rests on a flat surface and the camera shows Bruce’s slightly distorted face against a shelf, lined with small pots of sprouting greens. “Tell Vision I send my regards. Oh, and try not to die.”
The image blinks out of existence as he ends the call, leaving Tony hunched over in a seat that still smells like new leather and squeaks with every movement he makes. He’s surprised to find that this irritates him, as does the polished, fresh-out-of-the-box look of everything on the new Quinjet. He had slaved over the design for months, personally overseeing every detail of the project and when it was finished, he had been ready to burst with satisfaction. And yet, now that it has taken off for the first time, he realizes how much space there is to fill and how the heavy silence of the compound has followed him here. He has gotten used to the voices of his teammates in the background comparing notes, discussing strategies of just singing along to whatever happened to be playing on the music system. The new jet is scrubbed clean of all the memories he treasures, like the dark shade of crimson that spread over Steve’s face when he finally realized what Aerosmith’s Love in an Elevator was about or the entire team cheering Clint on as he arm-wrestled Natasha for the last candy bar, all of them agreeing that he was the one who needed the moral support. It seems to lack a purpose without them, like a new leaf turned over because it was necessary, not because he ever wanted to.

He cranes his neck to peek at the passenger area, wondering if his only traveling companion is asleep. Thor may as well have been on another planet since they left New York, sitting in the same spot for the past hour, silent as a grave and just as still. Tony cannot begin to guess what boils beneath that deceptively stoic surface, only that it is not anger. He has seen him angry before, sometimes up close, and though the sight is not exactly comforting, he will take it over seeing him lost to the world.

Thor seems to return to reality just after Bruce hangs up to ask, “How’s everything back there?”

Tony rises from his seat and leans forward to skim over a new report on the AI console embedded in a curved wall. “Tense but quiet for now. That’s all you can really hope for with people like Norton. Good news is, FRIDAY has managed to optimize our course so we might be able to shave off half an hour if the planets align.” He lowers himself in the seat facing Thor. “You okay? You’ve been awfully quiet for a god of thunder.”

Thor returns him a mechanical nod. His voice sounds like he’s still a thousand miles away when he replies, “I’m thinking.”

Tony suppresses a humorless chuckle as he fiddles with the seatbelt, then chooses to not bother and flings it aside. “Thinking about whether you’re okay? That’s not a great start, Kal-El.”

Thor doesn’t answer, slumped shoulders giving him a brief noncommittal shrug. His only surviving eye slips closed as he weaves his hands together and rests his forehead on them. He looks absolutely exhausted, drained by the events of the past couple of days and Tony can relate to that on a molecular level, though he can offer no insight on how to deal with it. His strategy against his own downward spiral had been to cut out every acquired vice that used to numb him and redirect the gears turning perpetually in his head to anything constructive. He is still not entirely sure whether the plan was a success, but progress on the upgrades for Rhodey’s exoskeleton was swift so at the very least, something positive had come out of it.

“I’m sorry about the team,” Thor says out of the blue and Tony practically radiates waves of stunned silence, wondering how on Earth his friend ended up being the one to comfort him. Eventually, he just sighs and leans over one of the armrests, wishing he had splurged for padded ones.

“No point in dwelling on it,” he replies. “I made my choice, Steve made his. We can’t turn back time and even if we could, we would both do it all over again.” He stretches in his seat, his joints cracking too loudly in the pressurized atmosphere. “And let’s face it, nobody wants us wrecking a German airport twice.”

Thor nods against weaved hands. “I know. I just wish there could have been another way.”
“Yeah, we all do.” Tony pauses, gathering words that sound cheap in his mind but infinitely better than the silence. “I’m sorry about Asgard. And about Loki, for what it’s worth.”

Thor’s impassive mask wavers as a fatidic smile slips through. “Loki is as Loki does, there’s no point in dwelling on it either. As for Asgard, cities can be rebuilt. Our people survived, that’s all that matters.” He sits up straight, pulling his jacket tighter around him. “So what did Banner decide? About the Accords, I mean.”

Tony slides a pack of dried blueberries from under his seat and drums his fingers on the bright plastic. “Same as Barton, says he’s done with avenging. Hopefully, for him, it will stick.” He rips open the seal and tosses a handful of berries in his mouth, his voice muffled for a few moments as he munches on them. “Not that I’m surprised that he didn’t sign, there’s no love lost between him and Ross. The guy wanted to dissect him at one point. Can’t say he has let go of that idea entirely.”

Thor’s blue eye narrows at the words. “Not on my watch. Anyone who raises a hand to harm an Asgardian will lose that hand.”

Tony shakes his head in amusement at the thought of Bruce’s quickly expanding vocabulary. “That’s a nice and scary sentiment, but in case you forgot, he’s not Asgardian. He’s very close to talking like one, though.”

Thor’s response is only a passive shrug, as if Tony is arguing a minor technical detail. “What does it matter? He spilled his blood for us and he saved us from starving to death. You will not find a single soul on that ship who thinks he’s not one of their own. They call him ‘the green man’, and not for the reasons you might think.”

Thor lets out the first genuine laugh in two days, one that proves surprisingly contagious. “Yeah, you can tell he’s grown really fond of you guys,” Tony agrees. “Maybe he’s right, he could do more good with you than as an Avenger. There’s bound to be a lot less violence involved.”

“For his sake, I hope that’s true.” Thor’s voice carries a hint of concern as he stands up and walks towards the cockpit, resting his elbows on the back of the co-pilot seat. “His control of the Hulk has been slipping and he has already spent two years as not himself. Quitting is the safest thing he could have done.”

“I have it on good authority that it’s not easy being green.” Tony rolls out the last blueberry onto his hand and gives it an appraising look before chucking it into a bin. “Then again, if it’s so safe, why didn’t you quit? You’ve got a lot on your plate right now.”

He doesn’t get an immediate answer, as the pensive blue gaze drifts over an ocean of clouds unfurling below the massive windshield that serves as the Quinjet’s only window. “To be honest, I thought about it.” Thor admits after a while, “but the Avengers have suffered enough losses and I’ve mourned too many friends as it is. I don’t know what the future will bring, I just know that I don’t want you to stand alone.”

For the second time today, Tony reaches for words, finds none and hopes the condition isn’t permanent. He moves towards the windshield to join his traveling companion over the fluffy, white waves the Quinjet makes as it tears through the sky. Natasha’s parting moniker for Steve bubbles up in his memory and he wonders if Cap and Thor have an unspoken agreement to take turns being the unfathomable and occasionally punchable heart of the team.

“You are killing me, Point Break.” he says eventually and laughs at Thor’s raised eyebrow. “But, you know what they say, misery loves company.”
Before he can add anything else, the AI console behind them flickers back to life and displays a string of wildly contradictory data that sends Tony’s head reeling. He leans over the screen but has no time to attempt to make sense of any of it before a hole rimmed with orange light opens in the jet’s rubber-lined floor, directly under Thor’s feet. His friend just stares at the spatial anomaly in vague recollection before a long exasperated sigh escapes him.

“Ah great, I completely forgot about this guy.” He throws Tony an apologetic look and grimaces, as if bracing himself for something unpleasant. “I’ll be back.”

Tony can only stare at him dumbfounded as the light surrounding the gaping hole into nothingness glows brighter. “What do you mean you’ll be back? We’re thirty five thousand feet in the air!”

Whatever Thor’s answer may have been, it is abruptly cut short when he falls through the portal, leaving behind nothing but a jacket covered in burn marks and the lingering smell of dust.

Chapter End Notes

I can't thank you guys enough for all of your comments. They keep me motivated and writing, even when my job leaves me too drained to do anything but stare at a wall. Please leave one if you liked this chapter.

And to my regular commenters, you know who you are, and you are my sunshine.
A Wizard’s Bargain

Chapter Summary

In which Doctor Strange lends a hand. Sort of.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You’re a damned kind, can’t you see
That tomorrow bears insanity
Mirror, mirror - Blind Guardian

“Keeping us cooped up in here has to be some kind of criminal offense.”

The complaint is uttered in the characteristic mixture of annoyance and boredom Daryl Matthews is used to ignoring. Still, his eyes cannot help flicking towards the Manhattan skyline rising in the distance behind the grimy, narrow windows of their lab. Whoever designed the Raft was not too interested in natural light and given how the entire facility was supposed to remain submerged under the Atlantic ocean, only the upper levels were lucky enough to get anything resembling window panes. Now that the entire structure is above water again, the temptation to open one of them and feel the sea breeze in his face is overwhelming. His hand starts turning the cold metal handle but stops halfway through. If he doesn’t allow himself this simple pleasure, he is less likely to miss it once they inevitably leave it behind.

He turns towards his research partner, leaning in his cheap plastic chair, feet resting against a cluttered desk. “Tell that to Ross, I’m sure he’s very open to suggestions.”

His partner’s freckled face scrunches as he locks his hands behind his head, his tone progressing into terminal stages of boredom. “Come on, doesn’t it bother you? We haven’t seen land in over a year! Suddenly, they decide to drag this entire shebang all the way to New York and they aren’t even going to allow us a few hours off? All I want is a cheeseburger from that one place in Harlem.” He pauses, running his nails against the teeth of a pocket comb. “I wonder if they deliver.”

His eyes drift towards a cell phone on the desk as Daryl considers that living underwater for months is making them all lose their minds. “Sure, Sean! Just call them and tell them to drive to New York Bay and drop it off at the Raft. What could possibly go wrong?”

Sean Murphy groans again and eyes the cell phone with even more dogged determination. “Might as well, if this place is about to become a prison again, the food quality is going to take a nosedive.” He goes back to picking his nails with the comb, as if to distract himself from his growling stomach. “I don’t know who they are planning to lock up in here but he must be something else for us to leave our position. Not to sound crass, but this is literally the mountain coming to Mohammed.”

Daryl can only throw him a surly look in reply. The prospect of the Raft returning to its main function does not exactly make him giddy either. He took the job, knowing that the high-tech cells buried deep in the lower levels were empty and he has always hoped to be out before that changed. Though the prison sector is entirely isolated from the labs, the whole place still looks like a supermax, despite his more chipper colleagues cluttering their workspaces with family pictures and
motivational posters. Working at the Raft feels like working in a haunted building, which can never stop reminding them of its past. Considering the nature of most of their projects, however, they are all going to need a lot more kittens to offset their bad karma.

There are days when he wishes for Steve Rogers to crash the place again and bring an end to all of it. It passes when the paycheck comes in.

“We’re not here for him,” he says. “We’re here to pick up a little something for the guys from the Weapons Development Division.”

The very mention of the team makes Sean’s bushy red eyebrows twitch. “Well, that makes even less sense. Did their brilliant minds forget how to use drones?”

Daryl shrugs, staring through the layer of dirt caked on the glass, which makes the still waters of the bay look like thick chicken soup. “They refused to transport this thing by air or sea. Said it was too unstable. Not to mention, prone to causing gravitational anomalies.”

His reply is a pregnant pause, followed by a long, disbelieving whistle. “Shit, are you serious? What the hell is it?”

“Beats me.” Daryl peers closer at the distant shore where people and vehicles move like ants. “Weapons calls it The Blue Angel, which is almost quaint for them. They usually go for names like The Facemelter.”

Sean rolls his eyes at the grim reminder. “I’ve no idea where they get these people, you can see the crazy in their eyes. It’s like they are itching to blow up the world just so they can sit in first row and eat popcorn.”

“That’s why they pay us the big bucks.” Daryl smirks and pulls out a flat box from his desk, wrapped in clear matte plastic. “This arrived two hours ago, while you were busy putting the moves on the new girl.” His partner gives him the wide grin of a man who regrets nothing. “Let the meatheads play with their supervillain death rays. We are about to show them that brains are better than brawn.”

Sean leans over and rips the plastic seal to reveal a large logo of a red snake biting its own tail on the pristine white surface. “Nice to see we’re finally bothering with branding. What am I supposed to be looking at?”

“Our spot in history, pal.” Daryl dives under his desk to fish out a pale blue folder. “This is the final piece we needed to complete project Your-moon, Jorm… Who comes up with these names?” He peers down at the large print on the folder, sounding out the syllables, then gives up halfway through. “Screw it, from now on, it’s Project J.”

For a few moments, Thor’s world goes cold, empty, and unnaturally quiet.

The silence is almost physical, pressing against his eardrums like thick cotton and drowning out everything except the blood rushing in his ears and his own quickening breath. He curls into a ball, bracing himself for a long overdue impact but it is hard to tell whether he is still falling or just floating in an endless void between worlds where time stands still and his own body seems to dissolve in the all-consuming darkness. Just as he is starting to fear the portal has malfunctioned, sound and light slam back at full force as gravity finally takes hold.

He lands on his feet, driven more by instinct than any conscious thought but immediately loses his balance and crashes face first into a bookshelf, which wobbles dangerously. A row of musty tomes
tumbles to a polished hardwood floor, sending up clouds of dry dust. The comm device lodged in his left ear spits out a garbled mess that quickly devolves into a high-pitched whine, then fizzles into static. He takes the earpiece out to find it furiously blinking red and sighs. Despite his long absence, his curse regarding Midgardian technology is still going strong.

He fights back a wave of dizziness and squints in the bright glow that spills from a massive golden orb spinning gently under a vaulted ceiling. Rows of bookshelves line the walls of a circular room that smells of dust and leather oil. Its only occupant floats five feet in the air in front of a round stained glass window, watching him intently. The slightly amused expression on his face does nothing to mitigate Thor’s irritation as he remembers their last encounter. Doctor Stephen Strange, just like Loki on his most trying days, possessed an uncanny ability to make him doubt his senses and slide the rug from under his feet just as he was ready to let his guard down. The man walked through the world as if it was his own particular stage, moving sets around as he pleased and taking little notice of the confused actors doing their best to adapt.

He shakes his head to clear his blurred vision and leans against a marble column, in a small attempt to reassure himself of the solidity of the room. “We really have to stop meeting like this.”

The man in front of the window banishes the portal and gives him a dismissive shrug. “It’s really what’s most convenient for both of us. Again, this would be much easier if you had a phone.”

Thor throws another dismayed look at the fluttering light on this comm. By now, Tony has to be used to his signal dropping from the Avengers’ common frequency with no warning. He has a long and storied past with earpieces fried by electric surges, getting knocked out of his ears, and in their latest mission, becoming hopelessly waterlogged after he fell into the sea along with the remains of a Sokovian city. He thinks of linking their minds with magic, but the idea is short-lived. After what happened with Wanda Maximoff, none of his team is likely to let anyone else into their heads.

He taps the device in a half-hearted attempt to bring it back to life only to watch the tiny red dot fade to black. “You don’t seem like the type to call ahead,” he says. “Plus, your reception could use some work.”

In response, a wiry hand points to a shelf where a thin laptop is humming away, plugged directly into the mouth of a red-scaled dragon the size of a housecat. Thor is convinced it is just a well-crafted statue, before he sees the vertical pupils shrink in the multicolored light seeping through the stained glass. The self-described Master of the Mystic Arts appears to almost revel in his confusion.

“Technology takes some time to adjust to the magic field,” he says, “but in the end, they learn to co-exist. The New York Sanctum would not last long otherwise.” The green eyes narrow as they give him a quick appraising glance. “You look a lot worse for wear since I last saw you. I take it things didn’t go well in Norway.”

“They didn’t go much better after Norway either.” Thor walks along the bookshelves, pressed tightly against one another, wondering if he was deliberately dropped into a room without any visible doors. “What do you want, Strange? I’m in the middle of something right now.”

“Yes, I noticed. Trust me, it can wait.” The man descends into a leather armchair before a large oval table that sits in the middle of the room like an altar carved out of green marble. “There’s been some disturbing rumors about Asgard’s fate going around Kamar-Taj. I’ve been quite skeptical until I saw your less than graceful landing two days ago.” He rests his elbows on the cracked wooden armrests and steeples his hands. “I suppose you are stranded until your ship is repaired.”

The tone of his voice is depressingly familiar and after his latest exchanges with Ross, Thor is growing weary of it. He stops his aimless pacing and throws a hard glance in the sorcerer’s direction.
“We’re not stranded, we’re exactly where we want to be.”

“I see.” Strange nods, thin black eyebrows knitted in recollection. “It was to be expected, I suppose. Way back in the day, when I was compiling information on the Avengers, I came across this.” He traces a circle over his head, conjuring up a portal small enough for him to reach into and pull out a folded newspaper clipping. “The New York Times did quite a detailed piece on all of you, right after The Incident. Your part was relatively short, but there was one particular line in it that caught my eye.” He slides the article across the smooth green surface towards Thor. “You said that you felt very protective of humans. That you considered Earth your second home.”

Thor picks up the yellowed page and lets out a mirthless laugh at his own still two-eyed face smiling at him from a faded photograph. It’s been only four years since the sky opened above Stark Tower, a cosmic blink for any Asgardian, yet to him, it feels like a lifetime ago. Back then, he still allowed himself a glimmer of hope that their family could be healed and Loki’s actions, reversed. He had even considered the possibility of his brother joining the Avengers to protect Earth following an ancient tradition of Asgardian warriors providing for the children whose parents they had slain in battle. The idea seems downright ridiculous now and the very thought of it makes shame rise within him. His past foolishness tends to reveal itself only in bits and pieces and always at the most inopportune moments.

He looks up from the smudged print and asks. “You don’t believe me?”

Strange shakes his head as he beckons the article with his finger, making it slide out of Thor’s grasp. “Quite the opposite, actually, I think you meant every word. Which is what makes your latest actions rather vexing.” He leans forward in the armchair, tapping his index fingers together. “Why would someone who claims to love this planet insist in bringing along a criminal who came very close to taking over it? What’s more, why would they allow him to roam free instead of chaining him up in the most guarded location they could find?”

The green eyes bore twin holes through him and Thor thinks of the crimson light of the containment grid reflected on the Hulk’s face in the storage sector. Even if it had been operational a few hours ago, he doubts it would have done much good.

“I’m working on that, we’ve had a rough couple of days,” He gives up on finding a door in the seamless circular line of bookshelves and sinks into the only other armchair in the room. “You dragged me here easily enough, why not do the same with him?”

His question seems to hit a raw spot as the gaunt cheekbones rise in distaste. When Strange speaks again, he does so in the low, measured tone of a man loath to admit defeat.

“It seems I’ve underestimated your brother’s magical talent. He’s been blocking all of my attempts to reach him, which is quite a feat in itself.” His hand closes around an eye-shaped amulet resting against his chest as a weak, wavering portal materializes before him only to fizzle out in a matter of seconds. Strange mutters an expletive under his breath, then eyes Thor with growing frustration. “I guess he is the smart one in the family.”

His jab goes ignored as Thor frowns at the memory of Heimdall’s impressed face when he realized Loki had successfully cloaked himself from him. If his brother has managed to evade even the insufferably smug Stephen Strange, his power has grown far beyond illusions and mind tricks. He wonders if Ross fully understands who he is planning to lock up or if he even bothered to have contingencies in place for Loki’s centuries-long lifespan.

“Did you summon me here to insult me?”, he asks. “If so, several people beat you to it.”
“I summoned you here to warn you.” The man’s eyes turn cold and hard. “I happen to be quite fond of this planet too and I would very much like it to remain in one piece. Loki’s continuing presence here is, let’s say, very troubling."

There’s a thinly veiled edge of a knife hidden in his voice, which Thor is quick to deflect. “I agree, but whether we like it or not, my brother has crimes to answer for. I can’t just launch him into space, even if we had a working ship.”

Strange just lets out a dark, sarcastic laugh. “I don’t see why not, there’s no better punishment for him than exile. I’m sure he’ll be ecstatic, given how many people want him torn to pieces in New York alone.”

“He might be, the countries behind the Sokovia Accords have other ideas.” Thor watches the man irk an eyebrow and clarifies. “Loki’s imprisonment is the price for Asgard’s new beginning. One that I’m willing to pay.”

“Interesting...” For a long while, that is the only word out of the sorcerer’s mouth. Steepled hands rest against his lips, pressed into a tight line until eventually, he asks, “Tell me, do you believe in destiny?”

His calm, unhurried tone makes anger spark through Thor as he is reminded of the army gathered around the clearing. “I really don’t have time for your mind games, Strange! If you can help me find Loki, do it! If you can’t, take me back!”

He briskly rises from the leather armchair, resuming his fruitless search for an exit. Strange shrugs as he draws a complicated sign over the table, blue glow trailing behind every movement. “Sounds like a ‘no’ to me. Can’t say I blame you, the concept is not exactly comforting. However, over time, I came to see that it doesn’t really matter what we believe.” He stops, as if forgetting where to place the next stroke in the intricate web of light, then adds almost offhandedly, “Destiny still arrives.”

The words may as well have delivered a blow to his gut. The deliberate pause after them almost makes Thor trip over his feet as he stops pacing and turns around in a cold sweat. “What did you just say?”

In response, Strange gives him a self-satisfied smile as he retracts his hand from the gleaming sign. “So you see it too. I had a feeling you would, the Odinson lineage is rumored to be clairvoyant. It is not, however, rumored to be very patient.” There’s an inrush of air and suddenly Thor finds himself sitting in the armchair again, watching the blue sigil sink into the stone as if it was green, oily water. “Don’t fret, God of Thunder, your brother can’t hide from the Eye of Agamotto forever. But until he shows himself, we might as well compare scrying notes.”

The sigil slowly vanishes from sight as it consumes all the light reflected off the smooth table. Eventually, the marble surface loses its sheen and becomes an impenetrable black pool, so deep and heavy that the entire room seems to gravitate towards it. The darkness ripples at the touch of Strange’s hand, then freckles with distant stars. A formidable fleet of warships sprawls across them in a formation closely resembling a large spider.

“Looks familiar?” he asks and Thor nods mechanically, his gaze fixed upon the main ship, drifting like an eldritch beast across the Centauri constellation. “Good, keep looking.”

Another tap of the finger sends a wave of ripples across the dark void, this time revealing a massive, golden gauntlet sitting on a ringed pedestal. A purple-skinned hand ceremoniously takes it from its resting place and slides into it before flexing stubby fingers front of a creased face with a heavy chin and narrow, reddish eyes. The wearer’s other hand is sporting a much less impressive bracer and as
Thor peers closer at it, he feels the last remains of his hope for Earth shatter. It bears the same intricate symbols that decorate the side of every ship in the fleet. His long search for the greatest power in the Universe might soon come to a very abrupt end.

The image blurs and fades as more ripples coarse over the increasingly unstable surface, until Strange taps the table again, returning it to its former state. “Do you have any idea who that is?”, he asks.

“Never seen him before in my life,” Thor watches Strange’s high cheekbones twitch in disappointment and adds, “The gauntlet is another story, Asgard had a replica in its vaults. It was a gift from the master artisans of Nidavellir, to commemorate a peace treaty. It was made to be a perfect copy of the original, except fitted for the wrong hand.” He frowns as he recalls the nervous look on the dwarven king’s face when he asked him about it before heading out to face Surtur. “I guess they were scared of what would happen if their craftsmanship was a bit too flawless.”

“That one looked like the real thing to me.” Strange stands up and takes a few steps towards the stained glass window hanging over the library like a patchwork moon. His hand runs over the thick leather cord of the amulet on his neck. “I probably don’t need to explain what it was created to hold.”

Thor shakes his head, suddenly very aware of the subtle gravity creeping into the sorcerer’s voice. “You don’t, I spent two years searching for the Infinity Stones and the more I looked, the more I realized I was not the only one. I tracked the Power Stone to the Nova Corps Headquarters in Xandar but by the time I got there, it had already been stolen by a Chitauri spy. The Aether has been in the wind since Tivan’s collection was destroyed. The Soul Stone last surfaced in Nornheim centuries ago but no one there has heard anything about it since. As for the Time Stone...” Strange turns around abruptly and Thor lets out an ironic chuckle, “…turns out I could have saved myself a very long trip. Some Dormammu cultists on the Outer Rim told me quite a riveting tale about your encounter.”

The irony in the man’s tone does not escape Thor and neither does the underlying accusation. “We didn’t bring that fleet here,” he says under the sorcerer’s thoroughly unconvinced look. “The Tesseract was lost after Asgard was destroyed; most of our relics were. If I know anything about Surtur, it’s probably sitting in Muspelheim’s trophy hall next to anything else he could scavenge.”

His dejection falls on deaf ears as Strange’s scathing laughter fills the room. “Maybe you should tell them that when they land, I’m sure they’ll turn right back.” He cuts off Thor’s attempt at reassurance. “Honestly, I don’t care if you brought them here or not. I’ve had enough time on my hands to research Asgard’s royal bloodline. It wasn’t an easy task, but I’ve learned enough to see that when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.”

For a moment, the image of Hela holding Mjolnir aloft with a sadistic grin flashes across Thor’s mind. The thought occurs to him that it is probably the only image left of her after the purge. “You will be glad to hear that the hammer is gone, then.”

“The hammer was the least of your problems.” Strange looks straight at him, and for a moment, his voice bristles with thorns. “Your family has always thrived in destruction even when they claimed to strive for peace. You can’t help it, I suppose, doom just trails behind you, like the tail of a comet. It is your birthright, your destiny. I’d rather not have this destiny follow you here.”

Thor heaves a long sigh as he is reminded of Loki’s penchant for ominous warnings. Strange and his
brother would probably get along quite well under different circumstances and the possibility is unsettling at best. He throws a meaningful look at the amulet resting against the man’s robes. “If that ship is coming for the Infinity Stones, that destiny is yours already. When I joined the Avengers, I took an oath to protect this planet to my dying breath. I intend to keep it.”

“Brave words, but in the end, that’s all they are.” Before Thor can try to argue, Strange shakes his head and raises a hand to silence him. “You may mean them now, but when that hand in the Infinity Gauntlet grabs you by the throat and makes you choose between Asgard and Earth, I doubt you will pick us. If you think I’m going to stand aside and let this planet become a bargaining chip for the lives of your people, you are sorely mistaken. So do us all a favor and take a third option while you still can.”

Frustration seeps into Thor’s voice as his patience for the man’s riddles grows thinner. “What are you talking about? What third option?”

Strange gives him a small shrug and walks towards the shelf where the red-scaled dragon is resting to scratch the creature’s spine. “I could repair your ship,” he says. “I could even set you up for a long space journey. The galaxy is big enough for you to find a new second home where your brother isn’t a murderer.” He lets out a short laugh as he taps the dragon on the head and it fades into a cloud of glittering mist. “I don’t know how long that will last though. The Odinson lineage is also rumored to be not great at keeping their temper in check. Midgard, as you call it, doesn’t need more of that either.”

It takes Thor a few moments to break the cold silence that falls between them. “So you would have me abandon you in your time of need? Who exactly does that help?”

A dark resolve gathers behind Strange’s eyes. “You overestimate your worth, God of Thunder. Earth has survived just fine before you came along and it has more than enough champions to fight for it. You, as it seems, have your hands full with keeping your own family under control.” His face suddenly lights up in a triumphant grin when a short flare bursts from the golden eye. “Speak of the Devil…”

He starts tracing a circle in the air, then, without warning, reaches out and plucks out a strand of Thor’s hair. A swarm of green and orange sparks fills the air and coalesces into a vague circular shape of a portal the size of a plate. Strange holds a hand towards it, then immediately winces as he yanks it back.

“Son of a...!” He rubs his fingers, as if they had just been burnt, then turns to Thor. “Go ahead, let’s see if Asgardian flesh is immune to your brother’s tricks.”

Thor hesitates just for a split second before reaching a tentative hand towards the wobbling ring of sparks. He has been on the receiving end of Loki’s magic enough times to expect his arm to wither but instead the spell stabilizes and expands to the size of a full body mirror. Cold wind blows from the other side and as the sparks slowly settle on the rim of the portal, they reveal a foggy image of Loki leaning against a statue of a roaring lion, pensively contemplating a glowing blue object in his hand. It doesn’t take Thor long to recognize it and it takes even less for his blood to boil.

“Told you he wouldn’t be able to hide for long.” Strange’s voice still echoes smugness but the smile on the thin lips is fading fast, his unblinking gaze fixated upon the Tesseract. “The gate is stable for now but I’m not sure how long I can keep it open. I would hurry, looks like you two have a lot to talk about.”

Thor feels the air around him crackle like a bonfire as his words turn to steel. “I’m going to kill him.”
Strange lets out a grim chuckle. “Then, by all means, be my guest.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your wonderful comments. Each and every one of them makes my day and I cannot tell you how much I appreciate so many of you supporting this fic. As always, please leave one if you liked this chapter.
A Crown of Thorns

Chapter Summary

In which there's a confrontation and a wavy flashback.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*I've gone beyond the truth*

*It's just another lie*

Mordred’s Song- Blind Guardian

*I've been falling for thirty minutes!*

The memory of Loki’s furious voice rings in Thor’s head when he steps through the swirling rim of sparks and into oblivion. A queasy, slippery feeling soon takes over, just like when Strange first hurled a portal at him but this new trip proves to be far from instantaneous. Instead, he stands in an ocean of fog, so thick he can barely see his own hands and where his very voice seems to drown. Time, if it even exists in this place, slows down to an agonizing crawl and soon, he finds himself counting the seconds, and then, the minutes.

He gets to five before calling it quits and takes a few tentative steps forward, groping blindly through the mist, that curls and blooms in the most intricate shapes, like a stream of milk poured into a glass of water. The ground he walks on feels solid, though it makes no sound under his feet. When he reaches down to touch it, his fingers slip through empty air.

He quickens his pace, trying not to think about how likely he is to get lost between dimensions as a result of Loki and Strange’s wizarding spat. The immaterial plane ebbs and flows around him, like a tide pulled by a fickle moon, though he has no idea which one of them is actually winning. Magic has never been his strong suit. Despite spending half his childhood pouring over sorcery scrolls, even the simplest spell has always stubbornly refused to bend to his will, much to his brother’s amusement and his own exasperation. He could only ever master simple sleight of hand tricks, which had lacked any practical purpose until he was locked in a room with a peeved Valkyrie who held the remote to his Obedience Disk. Real magic has always felt like a frustrating foreign language, made for an entirely different set of vocal chords.

He has come to understand it though, and judging by the way the air vibrates, Strange and Loki aren’t exactly exchanging pleasantries.

A particularly rough shift in the atmosphere makes him stop in his tracks. Without warning, the grounds drops away and an invisible current tugs at him, slowly gaining momentum as the wild contortions of the interdimensional plane settle down. Someone must have finally won and whoever they are, they are eager to gain all the advantage they can, before their rival recovers and resumes their offensive.

The white, endless void closes in on him. He drifts through it, like a ship lost at sea, and his mind drifts as well.
Sometimes during his long nights on the main deck, Thor wonders if the ship should have a new name.

The logs from before it was unceremoniously dumped on Sakaar refer to it as The Soulcatcher or at least that is the closest translation he can think of. Given its previous purpose as a slave transporter, the name sounds rather grim, which is why the Grandmaster, in his eternal quest to put some shine on his regime, dubbed it The Ark. Among the Asgardians, it is known simply as “the ship”, “the damned ship”, whenever something breaks or, in the case of the most optimistic ones, “home”.

In his mind, Thor calls it “Asgard City” and he hesitates to say the words aloud, out of a very human fear of jinxing the rest of the trip. Bad luck is the last thing they need, especially now that the massive shape of Jupiter blinks lazily on the radar as the ship passes it by. If they maintain their current speed and keep at prudent distance from the planet’s gravitational field, they should reach their final destination in less than fourteen cycles, much sooner than they first envisioned. Already, the news has spread like wildfire through the population, thanks in no small part to Bruce’s giddiness to be coming back home. His scientist friend seizes any opportunity to drop by the main deck and check their itinerary. His eyes light up every time the distance between the vessel and Earth grows shorter as he jokes about eating nothing but monosodium glutamate for three days. Thor remembers Tony claiming the team had paid the mortgage of the guy running the take-out joint next to Stark Tower and cannot help but laugh along.

A general atmosphere of excitement and nervousness extends through the ship, which soon turns to mild apprehension when the reality of their situation sinks in. People begin to ask him more and more questions about Earth, some of which only Bruce can answer. Loki starts avoiding his company and their conversations turn increasingly monosyllabic as unspoken words and unasked questions hang between them. Even Brunnhilde, who has so far weathered the trip by finding new things to fix every day and downing every batch of wine as soon as it finished fermenting begins to grow restless. Thor can hardly blame her; they all see the light at the end of a very long tunnel and they can only hope that it is not a moving train.

So he keeps busy, tries to put everyone’s minds at ease and drafts and re-drafts his plan, as if repeating it compulsively back to himself could set it in motion any faster. And as their hypothetical future unfolds in his mind’s eye, what he ultimately needs to do becomes crystal clear.

The main bridge is particularly cold at night and not even the dark brew in the dented metal mug he clasps can keep his fingers from freezing. The power from the heating panels in the walls has been getting redirected into the thrusters for the past weeks, something that Brunnhilde assured him would cut their remaining trip by thirty percent. The temperature is low enough to make him uncomfortable, but also to keep his mind active as he sweeps through the recent logs, checking off updates to repairs, re-adjustments to the energy rationing, the progress on the ongoing battle with the blight affecting the biodome’s expansions—

The thin steel panels of the main door sigh softly and seconds later, he hears footsteps on the naked metal floor. Heimdall’s voice carries a slight echo. “So our resident Valkyrie was right. You don’t sleep anymore.”

Thor takes another sip of the dark, aromatic concoction and twists his mouth at its fading warmth. “I do, just not for long.”

“Banner’s latest coffee strain probably doesn’t help.” Heimdall glances meaningfully at the mug. “Bad dreams again?”

“Everyone has them around here.” Thor finishes his drink in one gulp and sighs as he slides away a new tab on the repair log. “Except Korg, apparently, he sleeps like a baby. We had to add another
layer of insulation to his room because his neighbors couldn’t stand the snoring any longer. Miek has agreed to stay as his roommate, though. I’m beginning to suspect that his species is either deaf, or doesn’t process sound like we do.”

“We all have our way of coping, I suppose.” The man’s voice is heavy with reproach when he leans over to examine the long list of charts etched in blue light on the holographic screen. “The team working on the recent harvest tells me you’ve cut your rations by a third. I hope you realize that we still need you alive after we get to Midgard.”

“I’ve been reading things that have put me off food, lately.” Thor flicks to another tab of the log and points to a storage crate, tucked away in a corner, where a black leather-bound tome lies among scattered batteries. “How could this have stayed hidden for so long? How could none of us know?”

A shadow crosses Heimdall’s expression as his eyes follow Thor’s. He walks across the room and picks up the tattered volume as if it was a glass brimming with poison. The faint crimson glow of the spell keeping it together spills across his hands and robes. Thor sees him frown through the ghost of the log screen.

“Up until a few months ago, you didn’t know either,” the man replies as he turns the pages. “The truth is not something you happen upon without seeking it first. Especially when it’s an unpleasant one.”

“All hidden truths usually are.” Thor’s head feels like it’s on a rusty swivel joint when he turns back to the log and skims through the newly updated census. “This is going to be hard on all of them, they just lost their home. Fulla’s twins were born a week ago, they will never get to see Asgard. All they will have is everyone else’s stories about it. It brings me no joy to pour darkness all over them before they can even learn to speak.”

“They might thank you for that darkness once they are old enough to understand.” The names scrolling over the hologram cast a pale light on Heimdall’s face as he looks up from the tome. “At the end of the day, history is nothing but a long list of mistakes. We can’t learn from them if it’s kept under wraps.” He closes the musty leather covers and walks over to the gently whirring console projecting the screen. “Your father also thought he could turn over a new leaf when he banished Hela, give us all a fresh start. He saw his purge of our records as a message of hope.”

A subdued laugh escapes Thor as he spots that one of Hod and Fulla’s boys bears Loki’s name. It quickly acquires a bitter taste as he turns to face Heimdall. “Hope that his future children wouldn’t turn out like her, you mean. Something tells me she didn’t get a chance to come back if she proved her worth.”

“Maybe she never took that chance. Even I don’t know all the secrets Odin kept.” The guardian’s pensive eyes settle upon the tome again. “I know his actions seem cruel in hindsight but he had good intentions.”

“Midgardians claim the road to hell is paved with them.” Thor turns off the log and blinks away the remnants of the hologram seared behind his closed eyelids. “I’m tired of secrets, Heimdall, so I won’t ask you to keep mine. I do have one request, though. Or rather, an offer.”

A quizzical smile settles upon the man’s face. “You know, when you said you needed to talk, I thought you meant something completely different.”

“I distinctly remember saying that we needed to talk.” Thor is met with a resigned shrug so he weaves his fingers together to stave off the cold and says. “I want you to know that once we’re safe on Earth and we have rebuilt our home, those records will be made public. The moment that
happens, I will step down as king of Asgard.”

It feels oddly liberating to finally say the words, after having them roll around in his head for weeks. It is less liberating to hear a long silence in reply. When Heimdall speaks again, his voice is grave but quiet, “May I know why?”

“You hold the reason in your hand.” Thor gestures at the leather tome still in the grasp of the ebony fingers. “My mother used to say that a tree cannot escape its roots, no matter how tall it grows. I also know that when those begin to rot, you cut the tree down.”

A small disbelieving chuckle touches the corners of Heimdall’s mouth. “Is that what you think you are, rotten?”

Thor shakes his head under the man’s scrutinizing look, feeling the dull ache the coffee banished creeping back. “This isn’t about me, Heimdall, it’s about those who came before. We’ve tried to rewrite history and brought doom not just upon ourselves, but everyone we swore to protect.” He juggles bits and pieces of what he hopes is a convincing speech, then decides to speak plainly. “The truth is, we don’t deserve to keep sitting on that throne. You on the other hand, were born for it.”

The golden eyes widen slightly under the dim light of the ship’s night illumination but that is all the answer the guardian gives him. He watches Heimdall’s frown deepen as he walks towards the gigantic viewport in slow, measured strides. “You are mistaken. I was born to be loyal to the crown, not to wear it.”

“We both know that your loyalty has always laid with our people. Not many in my family can say the same.” Thor reaches for a small cylindrical thermos containing the rest of Bruce’s magic coffee blend and joins him before the star-dotted void which yawns endless around the ship. “You were the one who kept them safe during Hela’s occupation. We wouldn’t have had many left to save if it weren’t for you.”

A hesitant frown crosses Heimdall’s face. “Yet we and the rest of the Nine Realms are safe because of you,” he says. “Do not make this decision lightly, my friend. Odin’s mistakes are his alone and everyone on this ship knows that. Asgard will still need you, even on new land.”

Thor shakes his head at the man’s reassuring tone. “I don’t need a crown on my head to serve my people,” he says. “I know I can’t erase my family’s legacy but I also can’t ignore the blood on our hands. My father and sister waged war on our neighbors until they crushed them and my brother came very close to wiping out Jotunheim. And then there’s the matter of his crimes on Midgard—”

Heimdall’s pensive reflection in the viewport acquires a hint of commiseration. “Loki will no doubt have something to say about this decision of yours. He is the next one in line for the throne, frost giant or not.”

Thor heaves a long sigh at the thought of that conversation. “Loki doesn’t have much leverage after banishing father and usurping the throne for two years. He might have saved us all in the end, but Hela would still be locked away if it weren’t for him.” He pauses, letting dejection wash off his last words and continues. “As king, I have the ultimate authority to appoint my successor. I say it is time for the Odinson dynasty to come to an end. What do you say?”

In response, Heimdall stands locked in deep thought, his gaze roaming across the distant stars. His fingers close tighter around the leather-bound tome, running along the creased spine as a red glow dances across them. Eventually, he returns it to its resting place among the spent batteries and gives Thor a long, solemn look.
I say, you place a great deal of faith in me,” he replies. “Odin did the same with you. I know you would have exceeded his expectations. I do not know if I will.”

Thor cannot help a faint, complicit smile. “You forget that clairvoyance runs in my family. I see Asgard City prospering under your rule. Am I wrong?”

“You’re not.” The guardian’s hand clasps his shoulder fondly as the dark lips mirror Thor’s subtle grin. “It will be an honor to wear the crown in your stead, but remember that the future is everflowing. Perhaps there is still one where you change your mind.”

“I doubt there is.” Thor’s next words quickly die in his throat as the console next to him lights up like a supernova, then flashes blood red. A moment later, every screen next to it bursts to life and the low crackle of static electricity builds up in his ears.

“Damn it!” He instinctively turns to the screen displaying information on the ship’s surroundings. “What the hell is happening?”

He gets his answer when a long string of radiation data scrolls feverishly across the flickering plasma surface. It goes by too fast for him to take in but the last number is all he needs to know that the ship’s ion barriers are about to give. It only takes another second to understand what could cause a surge of this magnitude in such a short amount of time.

A solar flare. One that is too big for the slow, lumbering ship to avoid.

He turns to Heimdall and yells, “Run!”

Neither of them gets too far before a wave of searing light floods the main bridge and sets every console ablaze. Broken glass rains from the light fixtures that burst above them like squashed grapes. Thor slams his hand over the switch to the main door and feels his blood run cold when he realizes it is jammed.

Before he can curse himself for daring to speak the words ‘Asgard City’ out loud, Heimdall grabs his arm and points directly overhead. “Look!”

It takes Thor a few moments to notice that the blinding wave of energy is not peeling away their skin like it’s supposed to. It probably has something to do with a pale electromagnetic shield closing tightly over them, quivering dangerously at every gust of solar wind and sending needles and pins through his skin. He stands motionless, letting it coarse through him and, all of a sudden, feels unbelievably drained.

“What in the Nine Realms is that?” Heimdall’s questioning eyes are practically boring holes through him. “Is that your doing?”

The consoles before the viewport fizzle and spark as the solar flare dies down. Thor leans against the jammed door, watching the shield blink out of existence and mutters, “I hope so. We might need it again.”

Thor’s journey into mystery ends as abruptly as it began.

The invisible hand pulling at him lets go right before the interdimensional plane fades like frost under a warm breath and once again, he finds himself falling into blinding light. He lands on a wooden surface that creaks ominously when he takes a stumbling step forward. It turns out to be a rickety pier extending deep into a lake, over a rows of boats that rot among overgrown reeds in the harbor. A waterfall curls its way along the gray side of familiar snow-crowned mountains, overlooking a
windswept park. Dilapidated gazebos and cracked stone benches tell a story of long neglect as does the absence of the usual graffiti he has come to expect in abandoned areas. People have not just forsaken this place, they seem to have done their best to forget it ever existed.


He has to give Loki credit, it took him remarkably little time to find it.

The object of the anger burning inside Thor is currently too absorbed in his task to even hear him approach across the withering grass. He stands, Chitauri scepter in hand, tapping his foot restlessly over a lion statue which now lies scattered in pieces around the Tesseract. As Thor steps closer, the lion’s disembodied head shatters as if struck by a sledgehammer, burying itself halfway in the rain-soaked turf. Blue light bursts forth in a chaotic flare, refracting in impossible ways through the magic field converging upon it but the cosmic cube stays intact, the Infinity Stone inside glowing softly, like a firefly in a painted jar. Loki mouths a complicated curse and takes a step back to reevaluate his strategy.

Blood drains away from his face when lightning scorches the spot where he just stood. He tosses the Chitauri scepter aside and whirls around, brandishing twin daggers. He stops when Thor lowers his hand, thin lips twisted in scorn. “You missed me, brother. I hardly expected that from you.”

Thor surveys the remains of the marble lion crumbling in the faint light of the magic barrier. If he moves in to claim it now, he might as well be crushed to death himself so he stands still, the clear sky above quickly fading into dull gray. “I gave you a warning, it’s the only one you’re going to have. Hand over the Tesseract and turn yourself in. This doesn’t need to go any further.”

Loki barks out a laugh, not breaking his battle stance. “It really tears my heart to pieces, seeing you turned into these people’s personal lapdog.” He casts a quick glance at the beacon peeking from under Thor’s scorched jeans. “Even if by some miracle I agreed, your new friends would waste no time to claim it as their own. Do you really want that, considering their track record?”

Thor suppresses a growl in his voice. “What I want is to shove it down your throat! How could you have kept it from us this whole time?”

“Don’t look at me like that, brother.” A wet crunch, like a bone snapping under a wolf’s teeth, interrupts him. For a second, Loki’s eyes dart towards the invisible force crushing the grass around the glowing cube into green paste. “I absolutely would have, if we were ever in dire straits.”

Lightning sparks across Thor’s hands, draining away the scarce warmth of the gray autumn sun. “Is that so? Like when whiterot nearly wiped out our harvest in the secondary biodome? How about when we lost our radar and the thrusters? Were those not dire straits in your book?”

Loki’s sneer is undercut by a slight flinch when thunder booms overhead. “Don’t sell yourself so short. We got here in one piece, didn’t we? I had complete trust in your wise leadership.” Bile laces his last words. “Or I did, until you decided to sell me out for an abandoned town.”

He waves a hand over to the distant roofs beyond a line of autumn-ragged trees. Thor lets out a weary sigh. “I don’t have time for a redress of your grievances, Loki. Are you coming with me or are you going to make me drag you?”

Loki bares his teeth in contempt. “To be locked up in some crude human contraption? No, thanks. You can just tell them I died in a glorious fight and be done with this whole affair.” He scoffs at Thor’s cynical laugh as another magic field flows discreetly across the long fingers. “I could even give you a convincing corpse to throw at their feet. It has worked before.”
A painfully familiar ashen pallor spreads over Loki’s face, his eyes growing dull and unfocused. Something snaps in Thor’s mind, something so deep and primal he can only define it by the gaping wound it leaves behind. Rage builds within him, pure and unfiltered, burning his throat like poison.

His voice, however, comes out as calm as the air, holding its breath in anticipation around him. “After all these years, you don’t seem to know me at all.”

The sky splits open when Thor charges forward, spears of lightning raining across the grass. A bolt strikes Loki in the back, tearing out a cry of agony as he stumbles back, narrowly avoiding the force field reducing the lion statue to gravel. He recovers quickly and slashes at Thor’s face, aiming for the eyepatch before another surge of electricity ignites the air and drops him to his knees. He looks up through a mask of pain, blue eyes slowly turning a shade of purple as blood pools behind them.

The sight is enough for Thor to delay his next blow just in time to see a dagger lunging for his side. He swerves and winces when it skips over a rib, sending stray crimson flecks over the grass. The grin on the thin pale lips is short-lived when a moment later, Thor’s fist connects with his jaw and sends him flying into a gazebo column that cracks under the impact. The structure holds out for three seconds before collapsing in on itself, like a house of cards, burying Loki under pristine white marble.

By the time he reappears from beneath the rubble, Thor is standing over him, right foot pressed firmly against a cracked slab across his chest. “Stay down, brother, or we might not need a fake corpse in the end.”

Loki’s breath is shallow as he clutches at his split forehead with his only free hand. “If you’re going to kill me, just do it, for mercy’s sake.” Thor’s only reply is a warning look which does nothing to deter him from continuing. “Just out of curiosity, whose side do you think you’re on here? For someone who loves humans so much, you know nothing about human nature. They have clawed their way to the top of this world and they will not share it with superior beings, no matter how much we pretend to be like them.”

For a moment, Thor’s mind flashes back to a lifetime ago, when Natasha Romanoff happily recited ridiculously overblown facts about Asgardians at him from her smartphone screen. “You think us better than them?”

Resigned annoyance finds its way into Loki’s tone, as if he was explaining something to a particularly slow child. “I think us incompatible. No amount of accords or treaties will change that.” He groans at Thor’s silence as he ferociously blinks blood away from his eyes. “Come on, Thor, be reasonable! We’ve made our own way in space, how much human help do you think we need? You might have forgotten that we are gods in their eyes, but I can promise you, they haven’t. That’s why they are scrambling for guns while you talk diplomacy.” He lets out a pained moan as another crimson streak slides down his temple and into a mess of tangled dark hair. “You would do well to give them a real reason to fear us.”

“You mean a reason to kill us in our sleep?”

Loki lets out a dark laugh. “I would like to see them try.”

“I wouldn’t!” Hot, incandescent fury floods Thor’s sight again as he struggles to keep the lightning swarming across the bruised clouds under control. “I did not bring us here to engage in another pointless war! Asgard needed your loyalty today and you chose your freedom!”

“Do not dare talk to me about loyalty when you left for Midgard the moment a pretty girl batted her eyelashes at you!” Loki’s voice comes out in short gasps as he pushes himself up against the slab
until blood oozes from a corner of his mouth. “You should have stayed here, Thor, away from the royal duties that weigh on you so much! Everything was going just fine while I was king. Then you came back and, lo and behold, the entire planet goes up in flames! Do you see a pattern?”

He spits the question as if it was venom through blood-flecked teeth. Thor is tempted not to answer but a stronger, more stubborn urge overpowers him. “You’re quick to forget your part in our tragedy, brother. It has done our family no good to rewrite the past as we see fit.”

Loki’s thin frame twists under the marble slab. “That’s the difference between you and me. I look to the future, while you remain blinded by our sister’s ghastly deeds.” He stops struggling, pouring his remaining strength into one last burst of ire. “You should have seen yourself when you walked through my door, almost tripping over your moral high ground! You were ready to sacrifice me and anyone they pointed at, because deep-down, you think we’re all tainted! You think we deserved Ragnarok! Would you bury us all to quell your pointless guilt?”

In the world-crushing silence that follows, Thor can barely feel the unmistakable heat of a magic field flaring across his skin. Panic creeps into Loki’s pained grimace as a tremor slithers through the ground, sending specks of rain and dirt into the air. He immediately glances back at the Tesseract just in time to see the force field around it waver, then burst, fracturing the meek autumn sunlight.

Thor’s foot lets go of the slab pinning Loki down. Before its former prisoner can make a move, he reaches out to the sky and weaves a lightning cage around the collapsed gazebo.

“Stay where you are, Loki,” he hears himself say. “Don’t make your injuries worse.”

He walks across the scorched earth and picks up the Tesseract from among the crushed remnants of the marble lion. The warmth of the gravity spell still permeates the smooth white stone but the glowing cube is cold against his fingers, impervious to any magic except its own. For a moment, Thor expects anger to consume him but finds that it has forsaken him along with every other feeling except bone-deep fatigue. Slowly, as if moving through water, he makes his way back to where Loki lies under a stone slab and lowers himself on a fallen column. His hand travels mechanically down the grass-stained hem of his jeans towards the electromagnetic beacon clamped around his ankle. It lingers on the button that would summon the National Guard to his position.

It moves away from it when Loki starts laughing.

It starts as a weak, brittle sound which soon grows into a caustic guffaw as he peers closely at the fading spidery bruise healing in the crook of Thor’s arm. “You absolute fool! Can’t you see? The humans couldn’t care less about me! They want any Asgardian to poke with sticks until they find one that breaks our bones! And you just can’t wait to hand them a test subject!” He painfully drags himself to his feet and kicks away the slab, blue eyes clouded as they stare him down. “Tell me, would you be willing to give them our dear Valkyrie? Or one of Fulla’s babies?”

If the desperation seeping into the pale features is genuine, or just an act, Thor can no longer tell. For a second time, his attempt to stay silent is thwarted by a compulsion he cannot resist. “Neither of them brought the Chitauri down upon an innocent city,” he bites back and watches the crimson-stained teeth flash a sarcastic grin

“Which, you have to admit, is awfully convenient for them. I bet, even asking for your blood had a reasonable explanation. It’s all in the name of cooperation, until they find a reason not to be cooperative anymore.” Loki flecks off dirt mixed with sweat from his forehead and leans dangerously close to the lightning keeping him prisoner. “If you can’t trust me, brother, trust human nature.”
He stumbles back towards the rubble when the lightning-woven prison tightens around him like a muscle after a blow. Whatever will to quarrel left in Thor is sapped away as he thinks of Vision and his detached, yet unquestionably optimistic view of humanity. He wonders if two years spent living among humans have tarnished that optimism of whether that has anything to do with his longing for the most remote places on Earth. His hand moves towards the beacon again, then stops.

A faint light fluttering against the fabric of his jeans catches his attention.

He reaches into his pocket and fishes out the comm Strange’s portal rendered useless. A tiny red dot blinks rapidly on its side, until it stabilizes and switches to a bright, flickering green. For a few seconds, his hand lingers on both devices until eventually he curses, rises to his feet and tucks the comm into his ear.

He winces at the cacophony spilling from the booting device. “Stark, do you read me?”

The garbled nonsense slowly dies down until it distills into words, spoken in a familiar vexed tone usually reserved for malfunctioning equipment. “Thor, is that you? Where the hell have you been?”

“I’ll explain later.” Thor walks away from the lightning dome and hears the crackling static lessen. “For now, we could use a lift. Can you track my position from the comm?”

“Questions like that hurt my feelings and you know it.” There’s a pause as the device emits a round of short high-pitched signals but it doesn’t last long before Tony’s voice crackles in his ears again. “Wait, who’s we, exactly?”

Thor turns around against his better judgement to find Loki’s unwavering gaze still fixed on him. “Like I said, I’ll explain later.”

Chapter End Notes

Guys, I’m absolutely blown away by the attention this fic got. However, I’m afraid I have some good and bad news.

The bad news is that I’ve just run out of my backlog and I’ve had precious little time to catch up due to work. The good news is that I know exactly where this story is going, I just need some time to rebuild the backlog. I work really hard on this fic, and I wouldn’t want the quality to drop.

Future Imperfect will return on June 1st or sooner if I can. Join me then for the third act.

Does Loki have a point of is he just trying to weasel out of prison? What is the Blue Angel? And most importantly, will Thor and Tony ever catch a break? (Magic eight ball says "Ask again later")

In the meantime, you like it, author says put a review on it!
Blood of the Covenant

Chapter Summary

In which our heroes get by with a little help from friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tomorrow all will be known
And you're not alone
The Bard’s Song- Blind Guardian

Out of all the words to describe Thor Odinson, ‘subdued’ was not even in the top twenty on Tony’s list.

And yet, the person they pick up in a desolate park in Pennsylvania fits that description to an unsettling degree.

He doesn’t say much at first, just gives Tony a thankful nod and steps into the Quinjet, dragging a grim-faced Loki in tow. He shakes hands with Vision, whose blue eyes widen when they settle upon the Tesseract but if the Mind Stone gives him any insight into the cosmic cube, his expression betrays none of it. Tony’s heart sinks a bit when he sees it being locked away in the Quinjet’s safe as he is assaulted by memories of a Chitauri ship silently bursting into flames in the cold vastness of space. He wonders if those will ever leave him or whether they are doomed to forever compete with every other dark thought that ever crossed his mind. If so, they have some pretty stiff competition.

Thor’s voice is somber when he starts explaining and his words, scarce but troubling. Tony can’t help but feel dismayed to learn that the world has actual wizards living among them, though the revelation does shed light on the Hong Kong incident a year ago. Shame prickles at the back of his neck when he thinks of Ultron and his dream of a shield of armor around the world. He has always despised the word ‘hubris’, particularly in the mouths of those who tell him that man was not meant to meddle in the affairs of God. He has always said that without hubris, humanity would have remained in caves, dressing in animal skins and depending on the cruel mercy of nature to survive. And yet, whenever he hears Thor talk about races older than light seeking to reshape reality or beings that live beyond time and space, he feels still very much at the mercy of the universe and the word acquires a new, terrifying perspective.

He thought he could protect them from anything that hid among the stars. He couldn’t have been more wrong.

“Are you hurt?”

The question comes from Vision as he glances at the blood-stained tear on Thor’s clothes. It prompts an eye roll from a handcuffed Loki, squirming in his seat at the back of the Quinjet, teeth sinking into a gag made out of a braided strip of cloth

“Trust me, I’ve had it worse,” Thor lets out a joyless smile as he glances at his brother, then back at Tony. “Is that really necessary?”
“It became necessary when you stopped making sense.” Tony sighs as he watches Thor’s surviving eye narrow. “Lie detectors choke on your brother, Point Break. And now he suddenly wants to convince us that the United States government wants to go Goldfinger on him to make kryptonite of all things?”

His response is a blank stare before Thor’s eyelid slips closed in pure exhaustion. “Tony… I really need you to speak a language I can understand.”

Tony blinks in puzzlement. In all the time he has known their resident god of thunder, he has never used his first name, or anyone’s except for Jane and Darcy. He can’t tell if it slipped out because of his changing speech pattern or because he’s dead tired but he’s leaning heavily towards the latter.

He sighs and drags him towards the darkening evening sky behind the Quinjet’s windshield. “Look, you’ve obviously had a long day. Have you considered that Reindeer Games here is just trying to avoid the Raft a little longer? I’ve known the guy for a day and a half and even I can see that he’s messing with your head.”

Thor’s toe cap, drenched in mud and crushed grass, taps a slow, deliberate rhythm against the rubber-lined floor. The stained gray bulk of the beacon slides over to his ankle, revealing a wide belt of reddened skin. He twists his foot in discomfort and rubs circles over his temples with green-stained fingers.

“Of course he’s messing with my head,” he replies. “But even a shot fired in the dark can sometimes hit the target. It would be unwise not to turn on the light and check.”

Tony groans as he runs a hand through his matted hair. The treacherous shadow of doubt is beginning to creep into his mind as well and he doesn’t like it one bit. He throws a pleading glance at Vision, watching them with inscrutable eyes from his seat but gets no help from him.

“Come on, you’ve read the Accords, the whole biometric data thing is a glorified power gauge. SHIELD did the same thing back in the day, remember?” He holds Thor’s weary look, then leans against the co-pilot seat, drumming his fingers against the polished leather. “Thor, this is the United Nations we’re talking about. You can say whatever you want about their effectiveness, but they are the kind of people that frown upon genocide. Which is more than I can say about him.”

He thumbs Loki, sagging in its seat after giving up the fight with the restraints. The icy blue eyes give him a look that could freeze boiling water, then shift to his brother’s silent frame. His glare goes completely ignored as Thor picks up the singed jacket draped over the pilot seat and slings it over his shoulder as he turns to Vision.

“I know,” he says with a resigned determination that Tony knows too well. “That’s why I need your help.”

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Thor is nowhere near used to sharing Heimdall’s sight.

Walking around the ship next to him feels like an odd lucid dream, especially when he forgets that he cannot interact with anything and keeps reaching for control panels just to watch his hand slip through like a cheap hologram. He cannot even access his voice-locked quarters and none of the ship’s automatic doors detect his presence so he needs to wait for the guardian to catch up. Children run straight through him, bounding across the hallways without a care in the world and are quickly ushered away by their parents as the lights above them dim to save energy. Brunnhilde’s team must have finally managed to repair the grid which explains the warm golden glow in the common break room where a group of people gather around a crate, talking in hushed voices and letting out an
occasional, short laugh.

Bruce is among them, graying curls knotted between his fingers while he studies a layout of the ship’s power nodule. Thor calls out to him on instinct, then realizes he cannot hear him and walks away, leaving him rubbing at his tired, baggy eyes. His magic coffee strain is clearly taking a toll and though Thor considers it a small scientific achievement, he doubts it should completely replace regular food and drink.

He tries to remember the last time he has eaten anything. It seems like several days ago and yet, he still cannot feel any hunger or thirst. His body feels like a perpetual motion device from Nidavellir, turning its gears relentlessly, because it doesn’t know how to do anything else. So he walks on, listening to Heimdall talk about their troubles with the heating panels, the cleaved dome above the aeroponic towers and the malfunctioning water treatment system. He offers help and advice where he can, but with he knows that while they remain cut off from the rest of the world, their ingenuity can only stretch so far. He wants to tell him it will all be over soon.

He can’t. Not yet.

The main bridge is still in shambles from the crash. The door that Hulk tore open has not been repaired either. Cold autumn wind seeps through, dragging along dead leaves and small branches across the charred floor. Outside, night is quickly painting the sky a dark shade of blue and the first stars blink around a half-crescent moon. They walk out to the narrow ramp leading to the clearing and lean against the busted frame.

“How is everyone holding up?” Thor asks.

Heimdall glances at the tall line of trees surrounding the ship. “They are nervous but hopeful. The army seems to have abandoned the idea that we are harboring Loki so for now they are content to guard the perimeter.” The golden eyes throw him a quizzical look. “How did you find him so fast?”

Thor walks down the ramp onto the dew-dotted grass that remains undisturbed beneath his weightless feet. “Turns out I have friends in unexpected places who like me just enough to point in the right direction. Then again, ‘friends’ might be pushing it.” He frowns at the human shapes moving in the distance, still sporting the unmistakable bulks of rifles on their backs. “It doesn’t matter; we could have bigger problems than Loki right now.”

“How do you think he might be onto something?”

Heimdall’s real question lingers beneath the surface but Thor doesn’t need to hear it to understand. He has spent months wondering whether he could truly trust his brother and each time he has found himself walking in circles around the duality of Loki’s nature. At the end of the day, he can never truly separate the brother he grew up with from the God of Mischief lurking inside him. The only real answer he could ever find was given to him by Loki himself, while he was tied to a chair in Brunnhilde’s quarters back on Sakaar.

*It varies from moment to moment.*

“If he is, we’ll find out in a few hours,” he replies. “Stark and Vision are combing through Ross’s files and anything else they can get their hands on. I owe them an unpayable debt, even if it turns out Loki’s words are nothing but hot air.”

Heimdall weaves his hands together in the biting evening wind as he walks towards him across the soaked grass. “You’ve been away from Midgard for a long time,” he says. “Do you still trust them?”
"With my life." Thor holds the amused stare of the golden eyes and wonders whether he might have answered too quickly. "We spilled our blood together countless times," he adds. "We both know such a covenant is hard to break. They might be divided right now but they are still my friends. I can swear on my mother's grave they mean us no harm."

The guardian gives him a slight nod. "Then they have my gratitude as well." He pauses for a second before asking, "You still haven't changed your mind?"

There's a hopeful hint in his voice which Thor can only shake his head at. "We've talked about this, my friend. Our people will not reap much from clinging to the past. Asgard is much more than the Odinson dynasty. It deserves a future that's free from its legacy."

"I don't mean about that."

The guardian peers down at the tracker anklet blinking softly in the crepuscular darkness. Thor watches a fleeting shadow cross his face as he brushes away dark locks swept by the wind.

"Loki didn't leave me much choice," he says. "I tried to bring him in peacefully and he blew up a hole in the ship and fled. Any concessions they felt inclined to granting were bound to come with a price after that." He lets out a long sigh and scratches his foot against a misshapen tree stump, wondering how can the itch around his ankle persist even in a vision. "He's the only family I have left. I don't want to lose him as well."

Heimdall's frown only deepens at his words. "Loki is the artificer of his own fate. You do not need to share it."

There's no reproach in his voice, just a kind of quiet acceptance which cuts Thor like a blade regardless. He moves towards the center of the clearing and walks across the patch of stomped grass left behind by a Stark Relief Foundation tent where his last conversation with Ross had taken place. It had been a short, tense exchange during which Loki's name burned his mouth every time he spoke it. Ross's cold gray eyes had given him a look of utter contempt throughout it all but there was a vague glint of relief in them as their deal was sealed and the anklet clicked around his leg. He sighs as he considers the practical aspects of living with the unwieldy device twenty-four hours a day and hopes it's lightning proof or at the very least, waterproof.

"I'm hardly a prisoner," he replies and watches the world around him flicker.

"Thor?"

The question comes at him faint and distorted. When he looks up, the night blurs at the edges, like a watercolor painting left in the rain. He can see Heimdall's lips moving but their meaning does not reach him. When he tries to move, he finds himself frozen in place.

"Are you in there?"

A familiar queasy feeling comes over him as the clearing falls away, swallowed by an endless, black abyss. Heimdall's voice becomes nothing but a murmur which soon morphs into a familiar New York accent.

It takes Tony a few seconds to realize Thor is not listening to a word he's saying.

It takes him another few to notice the faraway look and the fact that he doesn't react at all to his intentionally loud footsteps across the hardwood floor of the compound's living room. His friend stands unnaturally still, arms fallen at his sides, his breathing even and slow. His cropped hair is still
wet from the shower and soaked in the smell of glycerin soap but even in new clothes, untouched by fire and blood, he looks like a pale, re-animated version of himself. The odd golden glow over his eye does nothing to alleviate Tony’s unease as he joins him before the window overlooking a grassy yard hemmed by the distant woods. He can’t begin to understand a thing about Asgardian biology but the memory of a college roommate who sleepwalked when under extreme stress suddenly pops into his mind and immediately turns sour. They all used to think it was hilarious back then, so much that they never bothered to learn what they were supposed to do, apart from tying him to the bed and hope the problem solved itself.

He gingerly reaches out to lay a hand on his shoulder. “Thor? Are you in there?”

He expects to be backhanded across the room, like it used to happen with his roommate but instead, he watches the golden sheen slowly blink back into a deep blue. Thor runs his hand over his face, as if waking from a trance, sending a small rivulet of water across his temples.

“I’m sorry, what?” he asks.

Tony wonders if he’ll ever get used to the low, thoughtful tone. It sounds oddly unnatural in the mouth of a god of thunder, like a quiet lullaby plucked on the strings of an electric guitar. He also does not find the shade of sorrow in it particularly encouraging.

“You really need to stop spacing out on me like that,” he says as he tears the tab off a soda can and pushes another one into Thor’s hand. “Are you alright?”

Thor gives him a quick, grateful nod and drums his fingers on the glossy aluminum. “I’m fine,” he replies. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

Tony suppresses the urge to hang his head in his hands. “I know I don’t have to, Kal-El. Believe it or not, it kind of happens on its own.” He takes a long gulp of his drink and lets the caffeine work its magic before fiddling with the light switch to adjust the fluorescent glow of the living room, burning away the gathering night. “You should get some sleep, you have that thousand-yard stare going on.”

“So do you.” Rain begins to tap an irregular, hectic rhythm against the glass as Thor walks away from the window. “I thought you would be in the Intelligence Room, helping Vision.”

Tony shrugs and sinks into an armchair, holding the can between his knees. “I can try, but there’s no helping Vision. I designed Jarvis to be better than me at hacking and our vibranium friend has surpassed all expectations. It’s like having two cooks in a very cramped kitchen and one of them has eight hands.” He chuckles as he is reminded of Vision’s trance-like state whenever he communicates with any computer. “I guess as his de-facto father I should be very proud.”

“You should be,” A smile ghosts across Thor’s face, which quickly fades as he turns to face him. “Thank you for doing this, I know you’re both violating the Accords to help us. I never would have asked you to, if I had any other option.”

There’s a gravity to his voice Tony is physically compelled to break. “Hey, what are friends for if not breaking into the government’s files to find out if they have anything shady on their hands? Brings back memories from my senior year of high school.” He deflates a bit, when his quip goes unnoticed and fiddles with the tab. “So that scary ship from your vision, you really don’t know what it is?”

Thor shakes his head and sits on the armrest of the nearest sofa, hands planted firmly on his knees. “The fleet around it resembled Chitauri war cruisers but the mother ship is too distinct to be part of a hive mind. I do know one thing, we need the team back.”
The words bring out a short laugh out of Tony. “That can be tricky. Steve said that he would be
there if we needed him, but he didn’t exactly gain popularity when he broke out his team from the
Raft. The king of Wakanda seems to have given him a safe haven but knowing him, I doubt he will
stay there when there’s criminal ass to kick all over the world.” He pulls the tab off the can and rolls
it across his knuckles pensively. “Ross called us vigilantes when he presented us with the Accords.
Seems ironic that our Cap has become the very embodiment of that.”

Thor’s eyebrows furrow at the dejection in his voice. “Have you been in touch with any of them
since then?”

“They covered their tracks a little too well.” Tony flicks the tab from his hand and clicks his tongue
as he watches it miss the bin and disappear in the fluffy carpet. “Last time Steve and I spoke face to
face, we... disagreed. Violently.” He pushes away the memories of crimson flecks freezing on the
metal floor of a Siberian bunker and quips, “Plus, I took his shield, so there might be some bad blood
there.”

Thor’s only reply is a silent nod as he sips his drink. “I’m sorry,” he says after a while, “I know you
were close.”

The quiet words are enough to send ripples across Tony’s mind as he remembers a distant morning
of an early spring that saw the three of them walking across the newly-renovated compound
discussing artificial intelligence, Infinity Stones and whether Mjolnir could ride in elevators. He
wants to say it was a happier time, but even those memories are marred by the battle of Sokovia,
Bruce’s sudden disappearance and the death of Pietro Maximoff. He wonders if there truly is some
golden moment he can go back to, one that doesn’t bear any kind of darkness but the question
doesn’t linger in his mind too long. Darkness has marched in lockstep next to all of them, at some
point or another, but it was easier to ignore when they had each other. He hopes the bonds they
developed over the years are harder to break than an arc reactor or a magic hammer.

He laughs and chugs down the rest of his drink. “Yeah, don’t remind me! Every trashy tabloid in the
city had theories about that particular topic.” He hurls the empty can across the room and beams as it
lands in the bin this time. “In Steve’s defense, he sent me a very nice, old-school apology letter. You
can’t really hate the guy even when you want to punch his perfect teeth out of his head.”

“Family can be rough sometimes.”

Tony grins at the resignation in Thor’s voice. “We’re a very dysfunctional one, then,” he says,
glancing towards their reflections in the window, crisp against the night pressing against the
windowpanes. “We also look nothing alike.”

“I’m used to that.” Thor’s smile wavers when he stands up and takes a few short, calculated steps
across the room, as if to stop himself from pacing. “How’s Loki?”

If it’s concern Tony hears in his curt question, he cannot find it in himself to match it. “Fine,
according to the scans. He’s licking his wounds in the Hulk containment chamber.” He fiddles with
the key-shaped pager flashing a bright red in his jacket pocket and makes a mental note to upgrade it
later. “After all the times he lied to you, you’re still willing to listen to anything that comes out of his
mouth? I know he’s your brother and all, but we seriously need to have an intervention about him.”

He doesn’t expect Thor’s subdued laughter, nor does he expect the bitter tinge that coats it. “You
forget that I know him better than anyone left among the living. I can trust him not to lie if he can use
the truth to his advantage.” The blue gaze travels briefly towards the open door of the living room.
“Whether he has any truth to bargain with is in Vision’s hands right now.”
Thor’s fingers run across a faint blue shadow under his skin, the only trace left of the spidery bruise left by the hypodermic needle. In the silence fallen between them, Tony can distinctly hear every window in the compound pelted by heavy rain as thunder rolls across the invisible clouds. Whatever words his friend is holding back, Tony doesn’t need to hear. He knows that look, he has seen it every day for the past couple of months, mostly in his own mirror.

He shifts in the armchair and picks up a pen from the table before him, the same pen Thor had used that morning to imprint his odd, runic signature on the pristine white paper. "Listen, I know exactly what you’re going through. The Accords weren’t easy to sign for me either. Back in the day, we all had trust issues regarding this whole affair, but in the end, I thought the world would be a better place if we compromised.” He clicks the pen absentmindedly a few times and adds, “I still hope I wasn’t wrong.”

“Trust issues, you say?” Thor’s pensive look clouds even further as he stops his low-key pacing and sinks into a large white sofa next to Tony’s armchair. “The Asgard Library holds a scroll that all royal descendants are presented with before the age of twelve. It tells the story of an otter with a snake on its back crossing a dangerous river in the middle of the night. Halfway through their journey, the otter starts to think that it is in the snake’s nature to bite otters so it should tear its head off, just to be sure. But the night is dark and the snake has better eyes to spot sharp rocks in their way. The snake, in the meantime, thinks that the otter will try to kill it at some point so it should strike first. But the current is strong and the snake might be no match for it, while the otter is a natural swimmer.”

Tony rolls the pen on the edge of his hand as he finds himself on the other end of what he can only consider to be cultural differences. “Sounds a bit dark for a children’s story,” he says. “So how does it all end?”

There’s a short bout of silence punctuated by the storm tap-dancing madly against the bulletproof glass. “It doesn’t,” Thor replies eventually. “The bottom part of the scroll is purposefully torn off. There’s only one certainty, though, if neither makes a move, they will make it across the river unharmed. Which I would argue is the ultimate goal for both of them.” He raises his head at a distant blink of lightning behind the window and adds, “The keeper of that scroll said that peace is achieved through cooperation and understanding. Those can only happen if someone decides to take the first step. That counts as double when there’re reparations to consider on my part.”

It takes Tony a few moments to figure out the meaning behind his last words and even when he does, he can only shake his head and look at Thor like he has lost his mind. “Reparations is a bit extreme, don’t you think? Stuttgart was years ago so my memory might be fuzzy but I think I would remember if you showed up with golden horns on your head telling people to kneel. Or if you scrambled Selvig’s brain to magic up a death portal in the sky.”

His levity goes unnoticed for the second time when Thor weaves his fingers together and rests his elbows on his knees, deep in thought. Outside, the rain intensifies as the sky above the compound rips itself apart, exposing the bone-white core underneath. An identical storm roars at the back of Thor’s throat, but never makes it to the surface as his voice remains almost deliberately stoic.

“That hardly matters,” he says. “You were not behind the accident that killed the Wakandan delegation and Rogers did not create Ultron. Yet those actions rest on the team as a whole and the shadow of Loki’s crimes falls over all of Asgard.” He grows quiet again, then continues softly, as if talking to himself. “I did what I did as a show of good faith. Because I couldn’t afford to go against the ruling of the United Nations and jeopardize our chances of asylum. Because it was our best hope for peace.”
The clouded blue gaze peers deep into the night that knocks irregularly at the window. For a moment, Tony’s stomach twists into several knots as he thinks of Wanda and her confinement in the compound while the Accords debate raged on. He still wonders if it could have ended differently had he been given more time but the ending of that particular scroll is torn off as well. Though his heart still breaks for her, he cannot find the same sympathy for the current occupant of the Hulk containment chamber. Wanda had been thoroughly devastated by the Lagos incident while Loki’s remorseless mask never cracked. On the last day he spent on Earth, his cold eyes had looked over the muzzle in impressed mockery, as if he was watching ants, gathering around a boot to push it off a cliff. Tony’s mind wanders back to what happened on the helicarrier and he hopes the compound won’t blow up while Loki is in their custody. Or at least, not while they are still inside.

He heaves a sigh and rests the pen he’s been fidgeting with back on the table. “You don’t need to convince me. I’ve walked a couple thousand miles in your shoes and I didn’t have a bunch of refugees behind me. What I did have was people who had my back when things went to hell in a handbasket.” He leans forward in the armchair and watches Thor’s distant look break as it focuses on him. “Back on the Quinjet, you said that you didn’t want us to stand alone. You don’t have to either.”

For a split second, Tony is convinced he sees a genuine smile touch the corners of Thor’s mouth. His answer, however, is buried in a short but high-pitched signal pouring from the anklet, sending waves of tinnitus across his skull.

He winces and shuts his eyes against the phantom sound burying itself in his ears. “What the hell was that?”

“A reminder.” A subtle darkness bleeds into Thor’s voice as he looks down at the gray plastic band. “This morning, Ross gave me forty-eight hours to bring in Loki, before deploying the full bulk of the army on him. It’s good that Strange sped things along. From the looks of the soldiers at the clearing, they don’t seem to share his enthusiasm.”

Tony sighs and tugs at his hair as a similar scenario from months ago replays in his head. “Can’t really blame those poor bastards,” he says stifling a yawn. “Let’s just hope Vision doesn’t take all night. The sooner we confirm your brother is full of it, the sooner we can all put this behind us and go back to our normal lives.” He catches Thor’s meaningful look and shrugs. “For a given value of normal, that is.”

“What’s with the long faces, guys?”

The question comes from an out-of-breath Bruce Banner, stumbling into the living room as he squints in the bright glow of the lamps. He shakes his messy curls, dripping rainwater all over the floor, then walks across the fluffy carpet towards them.

“It’s been a long day.” Tony glances at the storm wreaking havoc across the obsidian sky. “Did you walk here from the ship through all that mess?”

Bruce shrugs and takes out a can from a mini fridge stuck under the table. “You were taking forever. I got tired of waiting for you.” He gulps down the fizzy beverage like he hasn’t drunk in ages, then turns to face them. “So, what’s the story?”

Before anyone can reply, a second set of footsteps echoes across the hall. Vision lingers in the doorway, electric blue eyes somber under the fluorescent light. “I think you better come and see for yourselves.”
Guys, I cannot thank you enough for all the lovely reviews I got during my break. Thank you so much for being patient! I've had a rough couple of months, but I'm slowly building up my backlog again. The third act kicks off with this chapter, and I'm super excited to finally be sharing it with all of you.

Next chapter drops in two weeks. In the meantime, if you like it, author says put a comment on it.
A Storm Unleashed

Chapter Summary

In which blood is spilled and a Blue Angel flaps its wings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Looks like we’re in for nasty weather*
*One eye is taken for an eye*
Bad Moon Rising - Creedence Clearwater Revival

Bruce seems to be oddly preoccupied with the Tesseract.

Given the artifact’s gruesome history on Earth, Thor understands his friend’s unease. He also understands Tony’s paranoia when he insists Vision not let it out of his sight. And yet, there’s something troubling in the way the brown eyes keep glancing at the vibranium hand holding the cosmic cube, as if they are waiting for it to explode. Its glowing presence is especially hard to ignore in the half-light of the Intelligence Room as it drags away some of the eye-searing brightness of the monitors, like a thin, glittering spider web. At the corner of his eye, Thor watches Bruce twitch and pick at his hands but his concern soon fades into the background when he focuses on the screen projected on the wall, showing a familiar birdview of New York Bay and a less familiar shape positioned right in the middle of it.

Tony is the first one to break the silence as he zooms in on the image. “Do my eyes deceive me or is that the Raft?” He frowns when the screen explodes into a flurry of pixels, eventually settling into a picture of a gigantic facility rising out of the water. “Last time I saw this thing, it was gathering seaweed in the middle of the Atlantic. What the hell is it doing all the way up here?”

Vision’s fingers tap across a thin tablet, adjusting the frame rate. “That was my first question too. There seems to be some sort of transport scheduled but even their official communications are vague, so I decided to look into their database. That is where I found this.”

He slides the picture aside and scatters screenshots of digitized files across the darkened screen. The ink on them is a dull, faded color that contrasts poorly against the blinding whiteness of the paper but there are two words stamped inside a bright seal that grab Thor’s attention and dig into him like claws. *Project Jormungandr.*

Tony drags a hand over his mouth. “Right, I’m not even going to try to pronounce that.” He glances at Thor, eyes narrowing in the sharp light pouring from the screen. “Ring any bells?”

Thor’s voice tightens as he takes the tablet from Vision’s outstretched hand. “Not very pleasant ones. It’s an old Asgardian legend; Jormungandr was a sea serpent that grew so large it had to be cast out to Midgard. It is said that at the end of all things it will come out of the ocean and poison the sky.”

“In that case, it is a fitting name for a chemical weapon.”

There’s no inflection to Vision’s words, as if the neutral tone robbed them of their meaning, yet they
cast a silent spell in which Thor’s blood grows colder with every heartbeat. He scrolls over reports stamped with the red logo of a snake biting its own tail and feels a hollow laugh carve out his chest. A similar image was a household staple of Asgard, drawn crudely by teenage hands using red clay dyed with berries. It was a petty exercise in overstatement screaming “deadly poison” from something as innocuous as a fruit stand selling wilted apples or a tavern daring to serve flat beer. Looking at it now, under carefully documented predictions of sickness and decay, feels like a cruel joke of its own.

The air bristles when he looks up at the projected screen. “How long?” he hears himself ask.

Vision swipes the digitized files away and brings up a new row of documents, sporting a stylized logo of an eagle. “From what I can tell, this project started after the Incident, with the first biometric data SHIELD gathered,” he replies. “The original intention was to study Asgardian biology in case you ever needed medical attention but somewhere along the line the focus changed and it became about synthesizing a nerve gas targeted specifically against your kind.”

A stone rises in Thor’s throat and becomes a sharp edge in his mouth. “Somewhere along the line? They turned peaceful research into an instrument of death. Whatever line that was, they couldn’t have drawn it hard enough.”

Vision’s eyes harden when he moves to a new row of files, as if he is in a hurry to leave their contents behind. “Nothing at the start of the project indicates this was the ultimate goal,” he says. “The records are sketchy, though, and not all of them survived. It’s hard to pinpoint why the shift happened, only that it was fourteen months in, which is when it gained the name Jormungandr. Everything after that date bears the signature of a Jasper Sitwell.”

Tony mutters an unintelligible curse before zooming into a sharp, angled signature. “I remember him, slippery bastard. He was a HYDRA spy who Manchurian Candidate threw in front of a semi.” He walks away from the screen, then turns around, as frustrated anger flashes across his eyes. “How is it even possible? HYDRA was burned out of SHIELD for good. Strucker was their last line of defense and we nabbed his ass in Sokovia years ago. Why is this unpronounceable thing still going on?”

Vision shakes his head. “That I don’t know. What I do know is that the team working on the final phase was relocated to the Raft after SHIELD signed the Accords. The latest update states that progress is stagnant due to lack of new biological samples.”

Not anymore.

The words hang unspoken on Thor’s lips, freezing his breath. He looks away from the tablet as a scarlet hand takes it from his unresisting fingers, wondering if the strange emptiness inside him will last forever or if blind rage is bound to replace it first. He wants to feel anger so badly now, he longs for the liberating rush of liquid fire under his skin but it doesn’t come. Instead, a cold hand reaches into his chest and squeezes his heart like a winepress. The memory of Brunnhilde’s dark eyes, watching the soldiers becomes a dagger. He promised them Asgard would find a safe haven on Earth. He swore an oath to protect both worlds at any cost. What good is his protection if they perish from an attack they never saw coming? What new beginning can he give them if the survivors and the military tear each other apart in the aftermath?

The image burns itself across his mind’s eye, vivid enough to still the small, hopeful voice telling him they have done nothing to be attacked. The deck was stacked against them before the Accords were even an idea. All he has on his side now is knowledge and a ticking clock that renders it less valuable with every passing second. They cannot remain at the clearing any longer; as long as they stay around a crippled ship, they are vulnerable. He doesn’t know where they would go yet, but he knows exactly what he has to do to get there.
He turns to Vision and asks, “How fast can you get to New York if you leave now?”

“Less than an hour, probably.” The pale eyes give him a puzzled look. “What’s in New York?”

“A third option.” Thor steps towards a desk, tears a page from a notepad and hastily scribbles on it with a gnawed pencil. “I need you to go to 177A Bleecker Street. Find Stephen Strange and tell him that I accept his offer. He’ll know what to do next.”

Before Vision can finish the question rising in his eyes, he’s interrupted by a screaming guitar lick, followed by a soft buzzing sound. Tony’s smartphone comes to life in his pocket and soon, the screen on the wall plunges into soft darkness to display the picture of a familiar smiling face framed by black curls.

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“Bruce?” Tony’s tone shifts from puzzlement to incredulity when he picks up the phone and glances at the empty spot where the scientist had been standing just a moment ago. “Did you get lost or something? What’s with the phone call?”

Bruce’s profile picture blinks as a video feed tries and fails to establish itself. His voice, however, comes through the loudspeakers clear as a bell and audibly annoyed. “What do you think? I haven’t heard anything from you two since this morning! You were the one who lectured me about disappearing!”

Tony shakes his head in utter confusion. “What do you mean ‘since this morning’? You’re right—”

He goes quiet when the video finally manages to load, showing a worn-out Bruce Banner sitting on the edge of a narrow bed, as a night-illumination fixture spills a reddish glow over him. “You’re still at the ship.”

The crack in his voice goes completely unnoticed by the scientist. “Where else would I be? There’s one monster of a storm outside and it has been getting worse for the past hour. No sane man would walk across the woods in this weather and we don’t exactly have reliable transportation either.” The small room tilts when Bruce places his phone on a table to steady the wobbling image. “Is everything alright? You both look really pale.”

Tony’s face falls when he pulls out a key-shaped pager out of his pocket, flashing bright green. His fingers fly over the thin tablet, splitting the projected screen in two and pushing the feed from Bruce’s camera to the right. The new image on the left shows a recording of Loki standing in the Hulk containment chamber, peering closely at the cameras following his every movement. After a while, he stands still in the center of the room and cloaks himself in a golden sheen. When it falls away, it reveals a spitting image of Bruce Banner, prompting a whirr from the cameras. A few seconds later, the large, lead-lined door behind him whirrs as well and slowly begins to slide open.

“Sonofa...” Tony tosses the pager aside and presses a fist against his forehead. When he speaks again, he does it through clenched teeth. “I goddamn hate magic.”

The gaunt-faced scientist on the right side of the screen frowns as he leans closer. “Guys, can anyone explain to me what’s happening? Did you find Loki or not?”

The brown eyes look straight at Thor across the empty void yawning around him and the growing concern in them is enough for his mind to become crystal clear. A familiar pattern soon takes over, one that is only concerned with dealing with what is in front of him and pushing aside the cold grip of dread. He suspects that it developed over the months they spent in a malfunctioning ship and a cynical voice tells him he should be grateful for the practice. A ship permanently teetering on the edge of breakdown is an apt metaphor for his existence right now.
He turns around to find Vision and his directions gone. A small weight drops off his shoulders as he glances at the picture of the Raft still wedged in a corner of the screen.

“He got away,” he replies. “But I know exactly where he’s going.”

Daryl Matthews finally understands why they call it the Blue Angel.

The device in question is about size of a brick and does emit a blue glow from under hair-thin cracks spread over a dull, gray surface. From where he’s standing, it looks almost underwhelming, hanging in magnetic suspension between two spinning disks and he feels a strange disappointment rise in him. After all the hushed whispers floating around the Raft, he expected something more impressive but their newest acquisition looks too fragile and tiny to hold the unspeakable power everyone claims.

He peeks inside the lab to attract the attention of Leah Green, blond, freckled and too damn peppy for the Weapons Development Division. “So, is this thing safe or what?”

“If it was, it would be in a museum.” She closes the notepad with a snap and chuckles at his baffled expression. “This right here is the prototype of the first Tesseract battery, developed by Arnim Zola. It was recovered in Europe some time ago, but the logistics of transporting it have been a mess. At least the Tesseract’s behavior was predictable. The Blue Angel… can be a bit of a pain in the neck.”

Daryl drums his fingers on the metal door jam. “Yeah, I heard the horror stories. They should have left it alone, if you ask me. I don’t know if I’m that comfortable working next to the mother of all bombs.”

“Do what I do then, learn to stop worrying and love it.” She beckons him closer and her mouth acquires a teasing crook when Daryl doesn’t budge from his position. “Don’t be such a baby, the magnetic field will keep it stable! If we apply ourselves, maybe we can even learn to replicate its energy in the future.”

Daryl sighs, wondering if the unbridled optimism he is so hopelessly drawn to is just a defense mechanism developed by the grim reality of their jobs. “We won’t have a future if we keep this thing around. Rumor has it, it can level the city if someone coughs on it too hard.” He looks down as a distant but unmistakable thumping of feet travels across the metal floor. “Hey, do you hear screaming?”

Leah’s answer is lost in a deafening wail that tears across the sound system. It lasts about ten seconds before cutting off as an even louder voice replaces it. “Attention, denizens of the Raft! This is your only warning to evacuate the premises in the most quick and orderly fashion possible.”

Static floods in, leaving them both staring at each other in stunned silence. It doesn’t last long before the speakers crackle back to life and the voice bursts through again, with increased exasperation. “I’m not kidding. Get moving, now!”

Daryl can only blink when silence slams back around them. “Am I going nuts or was that Tony Stark?” He looks up to see Leah’s face twisted in a mask of mute horror. “What...?”

The rest of his question is a drowned gurgle as he feels something slam into his back, followed by a sharp, suffocating pain. He looks down in a daze to see a blade protruding from his chest.

A second later, it is brutally yanked out, stealing the breath from his lungs. He stumbles back, sliding down the wall of the hallway and watches a tall, dark-haired figure step inside the lab. Leah’s scream lasts a split second before she collapses, empty-eyed, blood gushing from a slit throat. Through a
cloud of agony, Daryl sees their attacker reach into the magnetic field and pull out the Tesseract battery. His tongue clicks in distaste as he turns it over in his hand, like a collector, examining a well-crafted fake.

A voice, tinged with disappointment, is the last thing Daryl hears before he sinks into darkness. “I guess you will have to do.”

The sheer size of Loki’s would-be prison leaves Thaddeus Ross somewhat dismayed.

He stands before five hundred square feet of gray walls lined top to bottom with disruptor panels originally created to fend off Wanda Maximoff. In an infuriating fit of creativity, so suited to their profession, its architects dubbed it the Oubliette, though the name never stuck with the crew assigned to its construction. The final result of their hard work takes up most of the Raft’s lowest level and is separated by a reinforced glass barrier that looks much too fragile as it reflects Thaddeus’s lined face. If held at gunpoint, he would admit that his faith in it fluctuates more than he is comfortable with, despite the repeated reassurance of the Engineering Department. They had thrown their best minds and resources at the project but for they all knew, it would never be finished unless circumstances forced their hand. Now, that the dragon they were waiting for had shown up, the only thing they could do is hope that they could reinforce its cage faster than he could melt it down.

He flips through the final report and feels his phone go off in his pocket. Before he can reach for it, an invisible force rips it out and flings it against the wall. A second later, the door behind him blows off its hinges and slams into the glass barrier, half an inch away from his head. The alarm screams in distress and is promptly silenced by a stab from a Chitauri spear.

Loki of Asgard steps inside the room in slow, deliberate strides. Thin lips twist in scorn as he spots Thaddeus still reaching for the shattered phone.

“I wouldn’t bother, nobody’s coming.” The words come out deceptively levelled but there’s a tremor in the hand that holds the spear when it presses sharply against the torn breast pocket of his suit. “Do you fear me?”

It is only now that Thaddeus spots the ghostly glow of the Tesseract battery in the Asgardian’s hand. His mended heart skips several beats as he wonders whether he would even feel his body disintegrating. He takes comfort in thinking that if it comes to that, the explosion will take them both.

“You wish,” he says against his better judgement and pays for it as pain tears through him like a hail of needles.

“You’re a poor liar for a politician,” he hears through a crimson haze. “So Project Jormungandr, is it? I have to say I’m impressed but not surprised. My brother has this idealistic notion that we can coexist but you and I know this was a pointless endeavor from the start.” He feels thin fingers wrap around his neck, lifting him up against the glass. “So, I’ll ask again, do you fear me?”

For the second time, Thaddeus feels tempted to play chicken with the cold fire burning in the blue eyes. “Do you need an ego boost?” he spits out. “Or do you get off on torture?”

“I don’t know. Which one is it for you?” Silence is met with a condescending smirk as Loki steps back to glance briefly at the cell behind the barrier. “Come on, don’t act like you haven’t been sharpening your knives for the past couple of years. I might have been gone a long time but I’m not stupid.”

The overwhelming conviction in his voice turns Thaddeus’s coughing fit into laughter as he recalls
his endless meetings with the architects of the Oubliette. “Could have fooled me,” he rasps. “Give me a goddamn break, even your food delivery is automatic. Nobody wants to touch you with a ten-foot pole and many here have at least a beloved pet that died during the Incident.” He catches his failing breath and sneers through clouding vision. “But say, we really were to tie you to a rack and peel your flesh away. How long do you think it would take for your brother to find out? How do you think that would play out for us, genius?”

He lets out a short cry of pain as he is unceremoniously dropped to the floor. Something cold and hard flashes in the blue eyes before they roll. “Bold of you to think he would deign to visit.”

The memory of a tense conversation in a Stark Relief Foundation tent floats up in Thaddeus’s pain-ridden mind. The dark, solemn look on the Asgardian king’s face suddenly takes on a new perspective, one that is enough to send him into another pained guffaw.

“You don’t like him very much, do you?” he says as a metallic taste coats his tongue. “I can’t imagine the feeling is mutual. This morning he accepted to be kept on a leash unless the UN authorizes him for a mission. All in exchange to look at your face every once in a while.” He points a shaking hand at a screen embedded in a gray wall and adds, “I’m going to assume, he didn’t tell you.”

Loki’s face pales under the flickering light fixtures. His answer cracks into a roar. “You lie!”

The sharp prickling in Thaddeus’s chest explodes into an agony that makes him double over. “Keep telling yourself that if it helps you sleep at night,” he wheezes. “Honestly, I almost feel sorry for the guy. He had a forty-eight-hour grace period to find you and he actually chose to do that when I would have left your ass high and dry.” He struggles back to his feet but immediately backs away when the Chitauri spear presses against his neck. “I’d think twice about that. You can’t make your situation worse but your people are a different story.”

The disdain in the Asgardian’s voice is punctuated by a flare from the Tesseract battery. “Worried about them, are you?” he seethes, baring unnaturally white teeth. “Given your recent flirtation with poison, you will forgive me if I doubt your sincerity.”

Thaddeus winces as sticky warmth makes its way down his throat. The thought occurs to him that he is about to die and the anger born out of it, flows from his mouth unrestrained.

“You will forgive me if I doubt your moral authority!” he snarls. “How many do you think are dead because of you? Dozens? Hundreds? I doubt you cared to count when you unleashed the Chitauri on us!” He leans forward, staring straight into the blue eyes, feeling the spear dig further into his skin. “I do not give a damn about what you think in your twisted, little mind! I have a duty to my people and I will do whatever it takes to keep them safe! Just because you lost the war, doesn’t mean we’ve forgotten it!”

“So you plant the seed for another and call it peace?”

The familiar deep voice echoing against the cold metal walls is enough to turn Loki’s scowl into an irritated grimace. He yanks the spear away and turns around to reveal Thor Odinson standing in the doorway, his face a mask of pale, tranquil fury. For a fleeting moment, Thaddeus has doubts about whether he is here to stop his brother or to join him. They are quickly settled when he sees lightning run across his fingers as he looks at both of them.

He stumbles away from the wall, wiping away the blood running down his chin. “We call it reasonable caution,” he says under the heavy stare that pins him in place as effectively as the Chitauri spear. “The UN might think you’re worthy of trust but the sky didn’t open over any of them. One
tends to get overly wary after something like that.”

At the corner of his eye, he watches Loki mouth the words ‘told you’. The storm-clad look does not even register this mockery as Thor takes an ominous step towards them that makes the metal floor shake beneath his feet. The doubts running across Thaddeus’s mind soon switch towards who he is more likely to kill first and hopes he is not beyond words yet.

“We only would have used it in self-defense,” he continues. “You, of all people, should understand that we had to protect ourselves. Tell me, can you vouch for every single Asgardian on that ship?”

“Can you do the same for every human?”

The homicidal rage Thaddeus expects is completely absent from Thor’s voice. Instead, he hears bone-deep exhaustion laced with the kind of stunted sorrow he saw on the sunken faces of his brothers in arms when they returned from Vietnam. He never expected to hear that tone from an alien mouth and for a brief, depressing moment, wonders if war is the one common denominator all life in the universe shares.

He takes another step back on pure instinct but the Asgardian king stands still, lightning fading away from his look. Whatever answer he is waiting for never comes close to formulating in Thaddeus’s mind as a blue flare momentarily blinds them both. It is followed by faint cracking, like a glass being crushed underfoot.

A new hair-thin crack runs across the Tesseract battery in Loki’s hand. It immediately sprouts new ones, flowing in an irregular spider web that leaks cold, blue light. It is an odd, alien glow that robs the room of its fading warmth and when the cracks widen, so do the icy eyes of the Asgardian holding it.

His panicked expression is quickly mirrored by his brother when he rushes forward and yells, “Loki, don’t!”

The warning falls on deaf ears as the long, slender fingers let go of the battery. It drops with a sickening crunch, searing Thaddeus’s eyes with another flare. He sees Thor reaching for the device and is about to scream at him not to touch it but before he can open his mouth, the Asgardian king is already backing away, a terrible recognition imprinted upon his face. For a few hopeful seconds, the battery seems to stabilize before cracking again, this time straight along the welded seam holding it together. As it continues to hemorrhage light, Thaddeus has no more doubts. If the device is disturbed in any way, it will take them all with it immediately. If it is left alone, it will do the same, within a few minutes at most.

He wonders if the alarm blaring all around the Raft will do anybody any good. They have nowhere to run, as do the eight and a half million New Yorkers sleeping in their beds, unaware of their impending doom. Bile rises in his throat, along with dismal laughter. In a way, they will be the lucky ones.

A heavy silence falls over the room. It is broken only when Thor looks him dead in the eye and says, “Get everybody out of here, now.”

For the third time in his life, Thor can hear his blood singing in his ears.

It is an odd song, completely different from the war-drums that beat under his skin when he was tearing his way through Hela’s undead army. This one, he seldom gets to hear and he dreads its quiet cadence as it spills through him like a river, unstoppable and relentless. It might be subdued in its
nature, but the circumstances around it are normally anything but.

He first heard its echoes at the end of a long night on the main bridge, when a solar flare burst through their radiation barriers and threatened to cook him and Heimdall alive. The second time was not long after, when their crippled engine finally breathed its last and left them crashing towards Earth, pulled along by the planet’s gravity. Hearing it now, in a relatively calm environment, Thor can finally begin to understand it as a natural response, like hair standing on end in cold weather or pupils dilating in darkness. He finds the thought comforting, as he watches a pale barrier form around the cracking battery. If he can understand it, he can control it. If he can control it, they might still have a chance.

It’s proving a lot harder with a constant stream of Loki’s voice in the background.

“For all their primitiveness, humans are really crafty,” he says as he casually props the Chitauri spear against a wall. “I never would have thought they could bottle the Tesseract’s energy like that. It’s good that we will be leaving this place behind soon. Earth is becoming too unpredictable for my taste.”

He seems much more relaxed, now that Ross has left the room. The initial panic in his eyes is gone too, replaced by an almost cheerful demeanor. Thor knows this means his brother already has a plan in place, but he forces himself to ignore him and concentrate on the blue shield coalescing around the battery, like a miniature lake flowing upwards. His hold on it is tenuous at first, as if he is trying to control the light trapped behind his eyelids but, like his connection with Heimdall, it grows stronger with every second he spends concentrating. He stands motionless, trying to slow down his breathing and does his best to shut out the world.

Still, he can’t ignore the centuries-old instinct compelling him to reply, “Shut up, Loki.”

He gets a short snicker in response as Loki walks across the room, confident as a peacock. “Don’t be such a sore loser. If you had deigned to listen this morning, I could have told you this was not going to last.” He nods at the anklet around Thor’s leg. “I am touched by your commitment to our family bond, though. Were you really planning to follow through or did your clever friends provide you with a way out?”

Thor lets out a temperate breath, as he feels a familiar draining sensation tiptoe across his skin. The barrier around the battery flows higher and starts to gently curve inwards.

“Do you really want to talk about this now?” he asks.

“Not really, but we must pass the time somehow while I finish weaving my spell.” Loki waves a hand over the battery, sending ripples across the closing dome, which fracture the light in their wake. “We are in luck, turns out, the very thing that can doom us can also provide our escape. They don’t call it the Space Stone for nothing.”

Thor’s concentration breaks as he raises his head to watch him pull a thin thread of light from the battery and spin it around his wrist. Loki steps away, like a conjurer performing a trick and extends his arm towards the reinforced glass. The thread uncurls itself and flows down his arm to form a portal at the end of his fingertips, which soon settles on the glass. Darkness flows from the blue rim inwards and after a few seconds, a cold night breeze touches Thor’s face, carrying a faint smell of grass and wet turf.

Loki lowers his hand and bows as an actor on stage. “After you, brother. You can thank me later. Or not, why break a time-honored tradition?”
The anger Thor longs for still doesn’t come. Instead, he feels something break within him as he looks away. “You still don’t know me at all.”

Frustration crosses Loki’s face, the kind Thor knows well and has actively contributed to cultivating. “I know that even a magically-challenged idiot like you can feel the amount of energy leaking from this damned thing! If we stay here any longer, we will turn to ash along with the rest of the city!”

A short laugh escapes Thor when he refocuses his attention on the pale dome now fully formed around the battery. “Remind me whose fault that is again.”

"Don’t put this on me, they brought it on themselves the moment they began messing with the Tesseract.” Loki steps towards the portal but it doesn’t take him long to turn his back on it, as something akin to pleading seeps into his tone. “Thor, this is ridiculous! This shield of yours barely held up when we were crashing! What chance does it have against a diluted Infinity Stone?” He pauses, waiting for an answer that doesn’t come and stressfully runs a hand through dark hair. “Come on, this city is living on borrowed time already! You might not be able to help these people but surely, you don’t have to die with them!”

Thor allows himself to look up into Loki’s eyes. They glisten ever so slightly under the sterile white light of the Raft and for a split second, his own vision blurs as well. He blinks the veil away and closes his hand into a fist as the air in the room vibrates like a disturbed beehive.

“Goodbye, brother,” he says and lets lightning fall.

It strikes right in front of Loki’s face, singing his blood-stained boots. He flinches, staggers backwards and falls through the portal into the grass-smelling darkness beyond. The spell stays stable for about a second before immediately folding in on itself and imploding with a soft popping sound. For a moment, Thor stands still, letting the rushing in his ears settle into a familiar cadence, then raises his hand to the miraculously still surviving comm in his ear.

“Stark, can you hear me?” he says. “I need a favor.”

Chapter End Notes

Once again, I'm absolutely blown away by the fact that you guys are still reading this fic. I cannot thank you enough for all the comments (yes, even the ones that argue my stance regarding Loki). I was supposed to drop this chapter yesterday but my lovely beta is swarmed in work and unfortunately so am I. This is why I'll be taking another break until August 3rd, to finish my workload, rest and try to rebuild the backlog. I will try to post sooner, but in the meantime, enjoy the cliffhanger and do not despair. Future Imperfect will return.

As always, if you like it, author says put a review on it.
What Heroes Do

Chapter Summary

In which Hell breaks loose, but not for long.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Don't give up now
I'm back from the city of heroes
The city of hope
City of Heroes - Kiske/Somerville

Tony is about a mile away from New York Harbor when he hears a sharp crackling in his helmet.

He winces and stops mid-flight to hang in the air over the dark mass of water below. On the distant shore, the Manhattan skyline casts a sleepless light over the Iron Legion scattered across the area along with Stark Foundation vehicles. He switches to their frequency to hear Violet Long’s confident voice giving instructions and allows himself a momentary sigh of relief. He has heard too many screams in the past hour; too many faces have looked at him in dull shock. The tiny island of order assembling within the chaos is enough to momentarily quell his anger about how the one responsible for it still remains at large.

The feeling of reassurance ebbs away when he tunes back to the mechanical sputtering bouncing around his helmet. “Say that again, Point Break. Something is seriously messing with your signal.”

It takes another couple of seconds for Thor’s words to reach him. When they do, they still carry a warped, fuzzy echo. “I said, I need a favor. How’s the evacuation going?”

Without any prompting FRIDAY zooms on a small group disembarking from lifeboats on the docks ahead. Tony spots people pouring out of a nearby ambulance, unfolding stretchers and wonders how many of the less fortunate Raft employees will live through the night. An intrusive thought slips through, inquiring if the world would be a better place with Thaddeus Ross among them.

“The Stark Relief Foundation just secured the last stragglers,” he flicks through the notifications sweeping the inner screen of his visor and swears quietly to see his worst fears confirmed. “Not everyone made it. There was a massacre in Bioengineering, some of them bled out long before we arrived.” He feels his words sink in the droning electric silence and adds, “There was nothing we could do to save them.”

The same nasty voice pipes up again, asking whether he’s trying to convince Thor or himself. He pushes aside the vision of a young man convulsing among broken test tubes, freckled face frozen in terror before the light went out in his eyes. The wide gash in his neck will definitely show up again in Tony’s nightmares, gaping like a gory cavern torn into pale skin. A lot of the people in that lab went the same way, their heads almost severed with a blade so sharp it cut through bone and cartilage with ease. Their bodies bore no defensive wounds but upon closer inspection, Tony had noticed missing fingers and ears as well as one unlucky soul who had his eyes gouged out. He holds no illusions about it happening post mortem and sincerely hopes Thor finds Loki before him. He is
not sure if he can restrain himself from firing the armor’s most powerful blast between his eyes and then another.

He waits for an answer, but the line is awash with persistent crackling. A sober, more practical voice replaces the dark snarker in Tony’s head, pointing out that their communication issues have never been this bad. After a frustrating list of incidents, he had learned to tweak Thor’s earpieces to isolate them from the swarm of electricity perpetually surrounding him during combat but whatever happened while he was gone has rendered even those protections useless. The interference is constant now, rising and falling erratically, like a failing heartbeat. When the God of Thunder speaks again, his voice is strained.

“Then we make sure nobody else dies tonight.” There’s a spike in the feedback from the comm before Tony hears him continue, “I need you to scan the bay for any remaining people.”

The request raises an eyebrow under Tony’s visor, but he complies. At his command, FRIDAY casts a thin net of lasers over the lumbering shape of the Raft. Her all-seeing gaze lingers on Thor’s heat signature before the scan yawns in a wide circle sweeping the cold vasts and over the cruise ships in the harbor. The blue ghost of a map materializes before Tony and as he studies it, he’s overcome with an odd sense of detachment. It looks surreally desolate, as if a crude filter was layered over New York in a cheap attempt to create a post-apocalyptic scenario. He checks his proximity counter, stuck at one for the last ninety seconds, and watches it flick to two as the scan passes over him.

“We have the whole place to ourselves,” he says. “They must have diverted all traffic when this hunk of metal sailed in.” He frowns when he hears Thor’s vague mutter of acknowledgement. “I know that tone, Kal-El. What’s wrong?”

Thor’s answer comes on the wave of another pained, electrical sputter. “We have a problem.”

There’s a deceptive composure in it that Tony finds disturbingly familiar. His mind rewinds the clock a few years, to a leather chair in his workshop where Pepper switched the arc reactor in his chest with trembling fingers and breathless determination. He remembers his struggle to stay calm in the wake of an impending cardiac arrest and now that his strategy is used against him, he realizes it doesn’t work as intended at all.

He glances at the distant silhouette etched in warmth, a lone Jonah in the belly of a metal whale. In the time it takes Tony to save the map to FRIDAY’s database, it drops from white and yellow hues to a dull, desaturated crimson.

“When don’t we?” He turns towards the Raft and switches the repulsor blasts from hover mode to full power. “Hang in there, I’m on my way.”

“Wait!” The sudden shift in Thor’s voice is like a thunderclap, stopping Tony dead before he can cover half a mile. “Stark, listen to me, get clear of the bay and form a perimeter around the harbor. No matter what happens, nobody gets close to the water, understood?”

Whatever answer Tony could have given him would have been lost in the rising sea of static that floods their channel. Even so, FRIDAY wastes no time in turning the instructions into ones and zeroes and transmitting them to the Iron Legion, a formless mass of silver and blue on the brightly lit shore. Her silent mode tugs at Tony’s attention on the corner of the visor, informing him of an unexpected change in air pressure as a faint electric charge builds up across a restless sea. The inky sky rumbles and he feels his hair stand on end beneath the power armor. The ozone-charged night grows still, as if waiting to be torn apart.

“Stark?” Thor’s voice breaks through the static again. “Stark, do you read me?”
“Loud and clear, with huge reservations on the ‘clear’ part.” Tony makes a reluctant beeline towards the skyline as the sea ripples below, seeding the air with droplets of white foam. “Not gonna lie, Point Break, you’re making me extremely antsy. Care to explain what the hell you’re doing?”

“I don’t know.” The words would have made Tony roll his eyes if it wasn’t for the hint of fatigue behind them. “But just in case it doesn’t work, I assure you, it’s been an—”

The comm gags and sputters, as if choking on its own signal. A sharp surge of electricity soon burns the rest of Thor’s words out of Tony’s ears.

And then, the night around him explodes.

Stephen Strange has not laid eyes on many spaceships in his lifetime.

In fact, this is the first one he sees that isn’t on a movie screen and the experience is a bit bizarre as he runs his fingers across the polished metal of the navigation console that was a twisted wreck only a moment ago. The thought occurs to him that he should be awestruck but after the Incident in New York, the idea of alien life doesn’t pack the same punch as it used to. Being awakened in the middle of the night to perform a task he’s severely under-caffeinated for, has diminished his ability to be surprised ever further. He had barely raised an eyebrow at a heavily built rock creature that waved him a friendly greeting in the restored biodome, then walked away whistling some happy tune.

He stifles a yawn and begrudgingly admits that he’s in a mess of his own making. It was completely foolish for him to assume that Thor Odinson would accept his offer at a convenient time.

A stray spark catches his eye as he glances at the jumbled mess of cables knitting itself back into shape on the ceiling. Fortunately, his ignorance of alien engineering is irrelevant to the magic field cast around the ship. It only sees a device that needs fixing and dutifully peels off layers of time, until it is restored to its optimal state. It needs little monitoring since it doesn’t burden itself with the dicey aspects of living organisms but he lets it linger at the back of his mind, while he watches Vision fiddle with the main computer. The barrier between living and inanimate has become a bit distorted recently and he isn’t sure where magic stands with regards to artificial intelligence.

He lets the spell run its course and steps down the exit ramp to breathe in the cold graying night. He keeps to the shadows, to avoid the eyes of the soldiers but mostly, so that nobody can unleash another barrage of questions upon him. Ever since he arrived, he has been interrogated by a tall, dark-skinned man with golden eyes, a brown-haired woman with a flask clipped to her belt and a small child who asked him to fix his wind-up toy before inquiring if he was here to join the theater troupe. That last encounter was what ultimately convinced him to make himself scarce. It tugged at a memory of Thor’s haunted look in the Circular Library and spurred other thoughts which made looking into the anxious faces of the Asgardians a lot harder.

Another shadow walks down and hangs its legs from the ramp. The step lights over the rugged surface shine just enough for him to recognize Bruce Banner, carrying mugs that smell strongly of coffee. Stephen quietly blesses the man’s sense of timing.

“I think the ship looks newer than when we first got it.” The scientist raps on the hull, as if checking its structural integrity, then hands him a steaming mug. “Are you Thor’s wizard friend?”

“If that’s how he described me, no, I’m not.” Stephen takes a sip and pauses as the caffeine sets his brain ablaze. “It’s good to have you back, Doctor Banner. I hope you will stay with us this time.”

The man gives him a tense look over furrowed eyebrows. “Yeah, about that,” he says. “Everyone is
Stephen just shrugs and leans pensively against the metal fuselage, slick with cold dew. The irritation he felt when Vision knocked on his door has by now given way to a troubled premonition he cannot shake. If the God of Thunder was indeed considering his proposal to leave Earth, he didn’t bother to share his plans with anyone. The fact that he isn’t here to explain himself either, does nothing to improve his mood.

“You should ask Thor, he’s the one who sent an android to break into the New York Sanctum.” he replies. “Whatever he’s doing, I hope it’s important enough to drag me out of bed in the middle of the night to do his grunt work.”

“Last thing I know, he and Tony were heading for New York to retrieve Loki. Haven’t heard anything from them since.” Bruce tugs at knotted curls, a long-suffering expression upon his face. “I honestly cannot believe those two. I resigned from the Avengers yesterday, and suddenly they think they can keep me out of the loop.”

“Count yourself lucky, Doctor; I was never in the loop.” Stephen’s tone of commiseration quickly turns into a groan. “Wait, what do you mean ‘retrieve’? I practically handed him over on a silver platter. Do I have to do everything myself?”

A loud chime from the scientist’s ragged pocket spares him from hearing a disappointing answer. He watches Bruce pull out a smartphone and click on a video icon which opens to blurry darkness dotted with city lights. The audio takes a second to kick in, but when it does, the quiet night air is filled with sounds of distress and the distant wail of ambulance sirens.

Stephen’s heart drops to his feet when he leans forward, angling his neck towards the screen. He is faced with a grainy footage of a large crowd spread across New York harbor. Before he can get a clearer picture, the camera jolts and tilts upwards to capture a maelstrom of clouds over a rough sea. A familiar silhouette hangs against the night sky, then lunges towards the docks in a blur of red and gold. The moment it leaves the water behind, a flash sears the lens among a choir or surprised voices. There’s a muffled scream followed by a soft clatter as the screen freezes and crashes back to black.

“Was that…?” He slides the phone out of Bruce’s grasp and replays the footage only to turn back to the scientist, none the wiser. “What the hell was that?”

Bruce doesn’t reply. He clicks the play button to revisit the sequence of events but the screen is immediately obscured by Vision’s wiry frame in the doorway. The bright yellow gem in his forehead gleams as he phases through the ramp to step down to their level.

“Hard to tell,” he says. “A local news crew was on the scene when their live-stream was cut off. I tried to reach Stark but there’s a strong interference in his comm. Thor’s channel is dead altogether.” The android’s blue eyes have a determined glow about them which Stephen finds reassuringly human. “I have to leave, they may need my help.”

Bruce shakes his head, sending a mass of graying curls into a frenzy. “Absolutely not, I need you to stay here and get the main computer running. You speak its language better than any of us.” He jumps down from the ramp and eyes the amulet around Stephen’s neck. “Can you magic me to their location or something like that?”

An uneasy feeling settles at the bottom of Stephen’s stomach as he wonders if Tony Stark has bothered to keep Veronica operational. “Something like that, yes,” he replies, not bothering to disguise the hesitation in his voice. “I would highly encourage you to reconsider, though. Your
presence can be rather destructive. Ours, on the other hand...”

He throws a tentative look at Vision, expecting the android to back him up. His hopes are dashed when he nods in agreement at Bruce, who gives Stephen a look that leaves no room for discussion.

“You two are the only ones who can get us off the ground if things go south. Thor knew that, or he wouldn’t have sent you ahead.” Stephen is about to counter that he is not anyone’s errand boy when Bruce interjects, “You came because you trusted his judgement, didn’t you? You’re going to have to trust mine as well.”

There’s no exhortation in his voice, just a steadfast resolve Stephen has no desire to get in the way of. “Trust is a big word, Doctor Banner,” he says as he traces a circle in the air and watches the orange rim of a portal tear a hole in the receding night. “I hope you know what you’re doing. I would hate to lock you away in a pocket dimension if your alter ego gets out of control.”

His warning goes unheeded as the scientist glances towards the soldiers camped around the clearing, then throws one last, anxious glance at the ship. “Just make sure the refugees are safe. The National Guard is bound to notice what’s going on here eventually. I doubt they will be happy once they see that footage either.”

He turns around and licks his lips in anticipation of a thoroughly unpleasant change, then steps through the portal. The spell fades the moment he is out of sight, but a second later, the light pouring from the main bridge bends under a different magic field.

A gust of wind combs through the trees when a blue-rimmed gate opens ten feet in the air. It spits out a dark-haired figure whose loud curse is cut short when it plummets to the ground. As the new portal meekly explodes into indigo mist, Stephen recognizes the voice and aims a triumphant smile at Vision.

“What do you know?”, he says, outlining a containment seal on the dew-drenched grass. “Christmas came early this year.”

The all-consuming light leaves Tony completely disoriented.

The safest direction seems to be up so he shoots towards the hidden sky, guided only by FRIDAY’s autopilot. It is not until he has gained enough altitude that night touches his eyes, along with the multicolored glow of the city and he can release a breath he doesn’t remember holding. Four years had not been enough to erase the memory of Fury’s voice, telling him a nuke was headed for New York and he had spent the better part of them plagued by vivid scenarios of it hitting its mark. The burning incandescence had felt eerily similar to the phantoms created by his mind but as he looks down, he is met not by a barren, white light of the apocalypse, but by something entirely different.

A pale blue dome encloses almost all of New York Bay, rising two hundred feet into the dying night. Its glowing surface shifts and ripples as if under incredible strain but never tears. Something roars behind it, something big enough to wreak havoc with the radar which can only grope tentatively through the frenzied air. Tony detects a growing maelstrom mirroring the vortex of clouds overhead but anything beyond that is an empty void in which chaos suggests itself only in the vaguest of shapes. Trying to get closer sends a flurry of hiccups across the reconnaissance system but by the time FRIDAY manages to filter out all junk data, Tony has little doubt left. The energy behind the dome is a perfect match for the one she first detected in the crashed ship. It is also a perfect match for the Tesseract.

His heart skips a beat when he casts a scan across the bay but finds no signs of any of it spilling
beyond the dome. He is, however, thoroughly dismayed to see the crowd of onlookers in the harbor growing larger, as smartphone screens light up all around.

He tells himself he shouldn’t be so quick to judge. Here he is, after all, staring at the same scene, with a mixture of dread and awe, feeling like the last survivor of a battle he can hardly understand. Wanda’s vision peeks into his mind, uninvited, and is forcibly pushed back when he reactivates the crashed communication channel.

“Thor, I could really use an explanation right now. This city has been through a lot but not enough to consider this normal.” He winces in anticipation of a scrambled signal but dead silence pours into his ears instead. “Thor, can you hear me? Are you alri—?

He gets a thoroughly comprehensive answer when the sky cracks open and chain lightning ignites the air. Heavy caliber rain thuds against his suit, nearly throwing Tony off balance. The Avenger in him swears and scours the failing radar for the shape of the Raft. The scientist ignores his concern in favor of documenting every detail of the storm.

The rest of him almost has an aneurysm when he sees a portal open on the docks and the unmistakable shape of Hulk fall through it.

The concrete cracks under his bare feet when he lands heavily among the ambulances. People scream and scatter as the Iron Legion aims stun blasters at the massive green torso. For a moment, Tony regrets neglecting the upgrades on Veronica but soon realizes their recently retired Avenger is far from being on a mindless rampage. He stands among the dissolving crowd, eyes locked on Tony’s position as if checking that he is indeed alive and well. He responds to Tony’s thumbs-up with the briefest of nods, then rushes towards the harbor and leaps into the light.

As the world sinks into chaos around him, Thor is met with an unexpected feeling of déjà-vu.

It begins with a memory of a gleaming pool in a dark Norwegian cave that sent his mind wandering on even darker paths. He had walked into it knowing the price the Norns demanded for their glimpses into the future and to this day, he cannot forget the liquid agony under his skin while his life bled away into the Water of Sight. The same draining sensation now returns two-fold along with a twisted vision of Valhalla that echoes with screams, instead of song. A pearl-eyed Heimdall lays an iron grip on his arm, dark lips contorted in a mad grin as they whisper words of doom. Asgard’s last moments present themselves before him with terrifying clarity before he banishes them and forces his mind to focus. He has lived through one Ragnarok already and he will face death a thousand times before he allows another one to happen.

He floats weightless among the jagged remains of the Raft, a disassembled puzzle box trapped in the electromagnetic field that permeates the air. He can still feel the wrath of the caged sea, so he knows his plan to contain the explosion has worked, but his relief doesn’t last when the barrier throbs like an open wound and shudders under the strain. The bastard child of the Tesseract is relentless, rampaging around the sealed bay like a blizzard in a snowglobe, but there is an end to every storm and Thor can feel the dying throes of this one. Darkness bleeds into his sight and he finds himself mouthing a quiet prayer to fate itself. If her infatuation with him has come to an end, all he asks is to grant him a few more seconds.

Dampened thunder rolls across an unseen sky as the last waves of the Space Stone energy break against the force field. Its searing blue light flashes across the settling sea, then fades completely.

Thor isn’t sure if he is the one who lets go or if it’s the barrier that breaks its hold on him. All he knows is that the moment it happens, he falls.
The sea robs him of his last breath when it closes over his head, heavy and cold. He feels the debris from the Raft sinking into the dense watery shroud tangled around his limbs and thinks of the battle of Sokovia. The irony of a similar scenario repeating itself does not escape him as he raises a clumsy hand to the comm and almost laughs to find it gone. It was dislodged back then too, which is why it took him and Tony so long to rendezvous with the rest of the Avengers. The engineer had spent most of their trip home cursing at him in an exasperated tone Thor was beginning to get used to. Steve Rogers had just affectionately clapped both their shoulders and dragged them inside the helicarrier, his eyes weary but relieved. He wonders if he will ever get to see his friends as a team again, and not as two sides pitted against each other.

Something dull and heavy slams into his back, dragging him deeper down. Air escapes his lungs in a stream of bubbles that brush softly against his face as his thoughts begin to cloud.

A weak light flickering somewhere below catches his attention. It soon becomes a ripped out emergency lamp, rocked back and forth by the steadying current. Through a numb haze, Thor watches a slender figure crowned in shadows, lean into the tenuous glow. Green eyes burn in the dark water as she stretches a long-fingered hand towards him.

Come, little brother. We have much to talk about.

Hela’s smile is unnaturally wide, gleaming between pale lips like a dagger. The anger Thor so desperately longs for denies him a third time and instead, he’s overcome with a foolish longing for a bond he never got to experience. He wants to ask her if she was given a chance to return to Asgard had she proved herself worthy but finds the word laced with poison. Whatever meaning worth held in his father’s mouth has long been lost to him.

Maybe it is fitting that his sister was the one to shatter Mjolnir. He isn’t sure if he would be able to lift it anymore.

The freezing sea parts between Thor’s fingers when he reaches out to meet her grasp. He only gets to graze her pale fingertips before an arm the size of a tree trunk wraps itself around his chest and pulls him away into rippling darkness. The lamp casts a washed out glow over massive legs kicking the debris to propel their owner upwards. It is the last thing he sees before his world becomes dark, cold and silent as a grave.

When Tony manages to locate the Hulk again, it is much further away than FRIDAY’s calculations predicted.

He finds him climbing out of the water at the far end of the docks, a wide, open area, destined to unloading cargo from arriving ships. He shambles in a daze among discarded crates, awkwardly holding an arm close to his chest. The current must have dragged him along, or he must be injured though Tony finds either hard to believe. He has seen the Hulk shrug off an arctic blizzard during a raid of an inconveniently located HYDRA base while everyone else gave him dirty looks. Perhaps the years spent as gladiator have taken their toll after all.

He lunges towards the docks and lands at a prudent distance. The Hulk, however, barely notices he has company. His attention is fixed squarely on the unconscious god of thunder he clutches like a cracked doll that only his hold is keeping from falling apart. In civilian clothes, dripping seawater on the soaked concrete, Thor looks almost frighteningly human and the thought lands like a lump of ice in Tony’s stomach. In his experience, human faces bearing this kind of pallor rarely opened their eyes again.

FRIDAY practically reads his mind. The bright red medevac signal flashes across his visor when he
takes a few cautious steps closer and reaches out a slow hand. The Hulk hunches over protectively but does not move from his spot, giant hands tightening their grasp. The thought occurs to Tony that he is still trying to shield the fallen Avenger from the debris floating in the water and wonders if his friend is in a state to be reasoned with. The ruthlessly practical voice in his head pipes up to suggest tranquilizers but before he can resort to such drastic measures, the training from years ago kicks in.

He takes another step closer and says, “Hey, big guy.”

The words elicit the completely opposite effect he is hoping for. The Hulk throws him a look that says Tony risks being smashed into paste if he starts talking about the sun or its position in the sky. He raises his hands in a defensive gesture and tries to keep his voice slow and calm.

“Easy there. It’s me, remember? The asshole that locked you up?” A spark of recognition in the swamp green eyes burns brighter when Tony steps out of the suit and gives him a slight apologetic shrug. “Sorry about that, by the way. You know what they say about the needs of the many.”

For reasons Tony isn’t quite clear on, this gets him closer to his goal. The mask of barely restrained fury slips back into concern as the Hulk casts a glance at Thor’s pale face. Tony takes the chance to sidle closer and lay a cautious hand on a tense arm.

“It’s okay, it’s over. You can let go.”

The steel cables running under the green skin finally loosen up and something resembling a long sigh escapes the Hulk’s throat. He crashes to his knees, then gently deposits the limp form in his arms on the concrete. Tony darts forward to cushion Thor’s head, doing his best to quiet the dull thudding against his ribs. His analytical mind is miles away by now, calculating how far away the Stark Relief Foundation team is and whether they can spare one of their ambulances.

The practical side of his mind is quietly counting the seconds as he fishes for a pulse on an ice-cold wrist.

“Thor? Come on, buddy, talk to me!” He closes his eyes to drown out distractions and swears when he still can’t feel a thing. “FRIDAY, give me his vitals!”

He hears a whirr as the armor’s sentry mode activates and the status scanner skims a red light across the motionless figure. The comm device spits out a choir of crackles, trying to overcome the damage dealt by the electromagnetic barrier. When it recovers, it still sounds like someone has put FRIDAY’s voice through a blender.

“Blood pressure dropping. Core temperature approaching hypothermia.” She pauses, the scan flickering an irregular crimson hue. “He’s also—”

“Not breathing.” Tony concludes and feels his own breath falter as he interlaces his hands on Thor’s chest and begins compressions. “We seriously need to get your priorities in order, old girl.”

Chapter End Notes

Phew! I promised I’d be back, didn’t I?

Not gonna lie, guys, summer has been rough both for me and my beta. I’ve tried my best to rebuild my backlog but so far, work is being a pain and August promises to be even
worse. Still, I've made good progress in planning the rest of this fic. There's 4 chapters left at most and I hope to write more regularly and start updating every two weeks, as I used to.

Chapter 11 drops on September 28th or sooner, if I can. Please take pity on this poor writer who's doing her very best. And in the meantime, if you liked it, author says, put a review on it. I miss my regulars. Y'all know who you are. :)}
The Edge of Valhalla

Chapter Summary

In which the brave live forever.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They call me a hero
But I'm not made of stone
City of Heroes - Kiske/Somerville

There are times when eleven-year-old Thor doesn’t understand his brother.

He tells himself it will get better but his optimism wanes with every year as he watches their interests drift in hopelessly opposite directions. Soon, he has to practically drag Loki by the hand to join Thor’s growing group of friends in their daily escapades. More often than not, he fails and when he comes back, he finds his brother in the same position he left him, hunched over some strange, new magic scroll, in a room where candlelight pools in unnatural shapes. The sight often fills Thor with sadness and he rushes to fill him in on everything he missed, like their daunting expedition into forgotten ruins of Vanheim or their battle with the monsters beneath Asgard’s deepest lake, that ended up being a family of overgrown carps. His exhortations to join them next time are met with the briefest nods and an eye roll, when Loki spots his dirt-covered clothes. An annoyed eyebrow twitch soon follows, and after having his hair scorched numerous times, Thor knows to leave him to his own devices.

Next morning he usually finds Loki yawning into his oatmeal at the breakfast table, dark moons beneath his eyes. He seldom talks to Thor about his nightly ventures, mostly likely assuming that he wouldn’t understand but his mouth splits into a proud grin when their mother walks into the room. It doesn’t take him long to start recounting how thoroughly he’s mastered the spell she has taught him, and his mother’s soft smile never wavers throughout it all. Loki’s own smile shines the brightest on those mornings and Thor finds himself thinking that his sadness was misplaced. Magic makes his brother much happier than running around abandoned ruins and his endless perseverance is something Thor can only admire. His own misadventures in the realm of thaumaturgy garnered him little more than frustration and, contrary to Loki, he never had the patience to break through his natural lack of talent. Any task that required more effort than it was worth, he would drop in favor of something more rewarding. Loki could toil over a problem for months, accumulating unhealthy amounts of sleepless nights. Whenever Thor teases him over it, Loki bites back how that Asgard should weep if they are to have Thor as a king.

Their education drifts apart too, as the years go by. Thor ends up learning only the theory of magic and focusing on history and culture of the Realms, along with a language credit most of his teachers raised an eyebrow at. His combat training, however, ends up consuming most of his free time, which gradually becomes more and more of an illusion. There are weeks when he barely sees his family and he comes to miss them desperately. When he admits it to his father, his reply is a hearty reassurance that he shouldn’t worry about them and focus on his own instruction more. Thor never clarifies it isn’t worry what he feels but he comes to cherish the moments he spends with Loki, even
as their list of conversation topics dwindles down. He wonders if his brother will become a spell-weaver for the court of even Asgard’s Arch-Sorcerer, though his skill with daggers shows a side that hasn’t given up on combat and often leaves blood on Thor’s clothes when he is foolish enough to underestimate him. It is there, on the palace’s training grounds, where Thor first comes face to face with Loki’s anger.

Thor himself is no stranger to anger. It has landed him in trouble enough times to matter and it has left more than a few dents in this bedroom wall. The fact that his temper is linked to his growing power adds another troublesome layer but just like lightning, it vanishes as fast as it strikes. Loki’s anger is a storm what brews quietly and when it boils over, it is frightening to behold. His brother’s stubbornness is only equal to his ability to hold a grudge, which manifested in creative pranks when he was a young child but bleeds into something darker once all of his baby teeth are gone. Sometimes, he catches glimpses of that darkness when Loki claims Thor is an only child to their father, with a smile that bears as much mirth as a funeral pyre. He is quick to act nonchalant about it, but venom continues to lace his words and reassurances are met the same curt laugh Loki reserves for clumsy servants. When Thor tries to lift his spirits by suggesting he join his father’s hunting party, milk turns to vinegar in his glass.

Combat is where Loki’s mask falls away and all that caged fury is released into a formidable opponent. Thor enjoys their sparring matches but even he can’t deny that sometimes there’s an edge to them that makes him uneasy. He suspects that Loki wishes to prove himself in the eyes of their father, who usually oversees the training grounds, but in his eagerness, he is not above using every underhanded tactic in the book. Thor calls his cloaking spells ‘mere tricks’, which does nothing to quell his anger, especially when victory is snatched from him at the last moment and Loki walks away with gritted teeth, dark strands of hair clinging to his sweat-drenched forehead. They meet again later, under a giant oak tree in the palace’s garden, and just sit next to each other, like feral cats trying to find common ground after a squabble. Thor’s stunted apology prompts an angry huff and when he tries to elaborate, Loki says he needn’t feel sorry for winning. When awkward silence falls between them again, Thor decides not to press the matter further. The only thing Loki hates more than being bested is being pitied.

He hopes that the upcoming celebration will improve his brother’s mood. Thor’s twelfth birthday is only a few days away and he is looking forward to see his friends reunited. Hogun’s schooling has required him to return to Vanaheim and his letters are becoming scarcer every week. Fandral, whose mother is determined to make a scholar out of him, has been confined to his family estate, sweating over literature scrolls day and night. Sif’s training keeps her so busy they only meet on the training grounds, where she has kicked him into the dust a hundred times. He longs to forget about his duties and have everyone do the same, so his attention span suffers, much to the dismay of his teachers. This distracted state plagues him throughout the entire week, and leaves him somewhat confused when, on the eve of the big event, he and Loki find themselves standing before the Keeper of the Royal Archives instead of their History teacher.

He is even more confused when instead of a lesson, an ancient scroll is placed before them and they are assigned one single task.

An hour later, when they walk out into the sun-drenched palace grounds, Loki’s morose demeanor is hard to ignore.

He walks beside Thor, stone-faced and sullen, paying little attention to a very one-sided conversation. Thor has learned not to ask questions when his brother is in such a foul mood. He’s never given straight answers and those that he gets are delivered with a sharp tongue that gradually loses its edge after a few hours of solitude. The subject of his unspoken grievance is dropped entirely then and any attempt to bring it up starts the process all over again. He is tempted to just let Loki cool
down, but on that day, the silence becomes impossible to bear.

He stops under a wooden archway hemming the palace courtyard and turns around to block his brother’s path. “Are you planning to tell me what’s bothering you so much?”

Lost in his own world as he is, Loki nearly runs into him. Blue eyes widen, startled by such a blunt invasion of his privacy, then immediately give him a cold stare. “What would be the point? You can’t explain the color of the sky to a blind man.”

Thor holds back a sigh. Another frustrating side-effect of Loki’s moods is using twenty words when five would have been enough. He lets brief silence hang in the air and asks, “You mean I wouldn’t understand?”

Loki’s reply is punctuated by a fatalistic snicker as he leans against an ornamented column. “I mean you wouldn’t care. You have a talent for getting your way, no matter what. Do you wish to find the Aether and make reality itself bend to your will?”

He squints and pretends to shield his face from the blinding sun, clearly seeking an end to their conversation. Thor just returns him a baffled look. “Are you implying that I cheated somehow?”

Loki’s laughter is a joyless bark as he drops all pretense of control. “Of course I don’t! Cheating implies effort! You have to understand the rules to cheat. You would rather flip the table when you can’t think your way out of a problem.”

Thor stands still, sensing a bleeding wound behind the mockery. He is well-acquainted with his brother’s competitive side but he rarely gets to meet it outside of combat. He watches Loki pick at his ink-stained hands and thinks of the old scroll depicting a snake on the back of an otter. The pair’s perilous journey across a river was told entirely through pictures and was left unfinished by a careless hand tearing off the bottom half. Loki had initially scoffed at the childlike nature of the drawings but by the time they were bidding farewell to the Keeper, his face was a mask of disappointment that soon became fuming indignation. Thor still cannot understand this sudden change. Perhaps is has to do with the odd look the Keeper had given Loki, which lingered a bit too long and carried just a little bit of sadness.

“What was there to think about?” he asks. “The Keeper said we could end the story however we wanted. He gave us no rules to break.”

The words just add another subtle twitch to Loki’s mouth. “He did, you hapless oaf! You just failed to see them!” His sneer grows wider at Thor’s confused expression. “Think about it, you’ve got two animals that are incompatible, on purpose. No matter what happens, they will tear each other apart. It’s best for them is to part ways and take their own chances with the river. That is the only right answer and I’m sure the Keeper sees it too.”

Thor just shakes his head and fails to suppress an incredulous smile. Ever since he had learned to speak, Loki has been fascinated with puzzles and would become extremely upset if a solution eluded him or worse, was kept from him. A riddle with an open answer was probably the most vexing thing to face but explaining there wasn’t a right one, would just make him look for it harder.

Instead, he replies. “They might both drown before they reach the shore. How is that a good ending?”

“It’s better than what you came up with!” Thor’s response is more questioning silence that makes a thin vein pulse on Loki’s forehead. “Seriously, Thor? A whale appears and carries them to safety? Do I need to explain in how many ways this is stupid? When was the last time you saw a whale in a
“Maybe it’s a very big river. Or a very small whale.” Thor shrugs off Loki’s glare and rummages his pockets for a quill he is sure to have left behind. “Otters and snakes do not talk either. The Keeper never specified what was possible in a world like that.”

He glances up to see the blue eyes roll in contempt. “The Keeper took pity on you, brother. That’s the only reason you weren’t laughed out of the room.” Loki scrubs the ink from his fingernails and resumes his stride beneath the wooden arches as Thor falls into step beside him. “Not to mention, the whale is a giant compared to the otter and the snake. It wouldn’t even notice their presence. And even if it did, why would it care to save them?”

“I thought that was obvious.”

This time, it is Loki’s turn to throw a questioning look. Thor doesn’t acknowledge it right away, still digging through his pockets for the missing quill. His search is instead rewarded with a hazelnut he cracks absentmindedly and pops in his mouth before replying, “It doesn’t want them to die.”

Of all the intrusive thoughts to slip through Tony’s mind in the past few minutes, the most unwelcome one concerns True Asgardian Facts.

To this day, no one knows where the joke came from, only that it gained unholy popularity after the Battle of New York and became insufferable once the Times published their piece on the Avengers. The bulk of Thor’s interviews went down when he was about to return to Asgard, so his section turned out considerably shorter than the rest. Tony was sure the reporter didn’t know what to make of an alien god, who looked very much human, and played it safe so as not to appear insensitive. This cast an unintentional veil of mystery around him that the Internet denizens ripped to shreds. Soon, images of viking-looking warriors started popping up all over social media, with captions that went from questionable to downright ridiculous. Rhodey found them hilarious and would constantly text him things like ‘An Asgardian can kill two stones with one bird’ or ‘Giraffes were created when an Asgardian uppercutted a horse’. There were times when Tony wondered if this was people’s way to deal with their own fragility in a world, which now contained hostile aliens along with Captain America but regardless, these statements got a chuckle out of all of them. For a long while, a fridge in Stark Tower even sported a magnet proclaiming in dramatic Impact font that an Asgardian could make onions cry.

The whole thing lost its novelty around the time of the London Incident, shortly before Thor’s return to Earth. He found it all more confounding that funny, but at the time, none of them realized how the joke had colored their perception of him. In their defense, their resident god of thunder lived up to the Internet hype. If the Hulk was the Avengers’ nuke, to be used sparingly but effectively, Thor was an unstoppable force of nature, who wielded lightning with surgical precision and whom nothing in the universe could touch. Bruce’s epic recounting of the Battle for Asgard has done little to dispel that notion for Tony.

And yet, here he is, keeping count of compressions over Thor’s drenched hoodie, as time slows to a painful crawl. The Avengers logo printed on it stares at him like a wordless epitaph, one that Tony refuses to accept.

“Come on, Kal-El, don’t do this!” What feels like an unnerved exclamation comes out as a winded mutter, punctuated by phantom gusts of cold breath. “You said nobody else would die today! That means you too!”

His voice drowns in silence, so deep he can hear the faint, thumping sound of his hands against the
lifeless chest beneath them. Tony doesn’t know if he has cracked a rib, nor if he is strong enough to do that to an Asgardian body. His mouth closes over Thor’s, twice, and a numb feeling crawls across it, along with the bitter taste of seasalt. He stops, checks for breath and curses loudly when he finds none. When he leans away to resume compressions, a treacherous memory empties a bucket of lead in his stomach.

*I’ve mourned too many friends as it is. I don’t want you to stand alone.*

Tony fights back a burning sensation in his nose and sucks in a sharp breath. There was a time when he feared mourning his friends too, a time when he would have done anything to keep this planet safe from whatever Eldritch horrors lurked in the empty darkness of space. His troubled mind ended up giving birth to the very thing he feared and though his worst nightmare never came to pass, he never wants to step an inch closer to it. The rogue Avengers might be on the run or locked under house arrest but they are alive and he will do whatever it takes to keep them that way.

He will not have Thor come back to Earth only to die on him.

He counts out another thirty compressions and leans down to return air to Thor’s lungs. When his efforts are fruitless, he does it again. And again. And again.

When his muscles are beginning to lock from exertion, the freezing water pooling between his fingers flows upwards in a thin stream and hangs suspended in the air. The sight is enough to break Tony out of his mechanical trance, just in time to see Thor let out a weak, watery cough.

A thin web of lightning flashes across twitching hands before another, louder one follows. The Hulk, who has been a motionless statue throughout the ordeal, lets out a roar which scares a flock of seagulls off the crates. Tony ignores it all as he shrugs off his jacket and slides it under Thor’s head before rolling him on his side. Thor convulses in his grasp, spewing seawater over the concrete, the air around him alive with a magnetic field that sends needles and pins across Tony’s bare arms. He holds him in place, rubbing circles on the soaked back until the spasms settle down and the hacking becomes shaky, wheezing sighs.

“Yes! That’s it! That’s what I’m talking about!” Staggering relief wells up in his chest, draining what is left of his strength as he slumps back on his heels. “Breathe! Whatever Asgardian weirdness you just pulled, the heavy lifting is over. All you have to do now is breathe.”

He isn’t sure if Thor can hear him, only that the clutches of cold mist hanging before his face begin to flow into a regular pattern. Tiny droplets, still hovering above ground, lose their shape and crash around them as the discolored lips move soundlessly. Tony has to strain to catch a single word with the faintest questioning inflection.

“...City...?”

Tony looks across the settling waters of the harbor. The distant skyline looks deceptively peaceful in the gray morning light but he can only guess the chaos some of their citizens are waking up to. When he tries to tune in to a local radio station, garbled nonsense pours into his ears. The electromagnetic barrier must have scrambled his tech worse than he thought and he gets the sinking feeling that request for medevac might not have reached the Compound at all.

“In one piece, like we left it,” he says. “The explosion never even came close, though probably everyone in Manhattan saw the light show.” Thor’s attempt to answer is thwarted by another coughing fit as Tony lays a hand on his shoulder. “Easy, Point Break. Don’t talk, just breathe.”

Thor doesn’t listen to him for long. The question is gone from his next hoarse whisper, replaced by
breathless urgency. “...Asgard…”

Tony has no answers for him so he turns to the looming shape of the Hulk. The other offers only a reassuring nod and reaches out when Thor struggles to sit up. His friend leans against the gigantic hand for a moment but bolts to his feet when the air on the other side of the docks bursts into sparks, like hot metal under a blacksmith’s hammer. Soon after, a portal yawns wide, letting through a dark-haired figure in a red cloak.

The clouded blue gaze swims into focus, as Thor finally finds his voice. “Strange? What are you doing here?”

The newcomer walks towards them at a leisurely pace, eyebrows knitting together on a tall forehead. “Reconnaissance,” he says. “Every single camera around Manhattan is fried and each one that gets close to the bay starts acting up. Also, someone has to make sure none of you do anything stupid.”

He nods briefly at Tony and the Hulk, then looks around, surveying the empty docks with the look of a man expecting a house on fire. Puddles of water begin to contort into odd shapes on the concrete when Thor speaks again. “You are supposed to be fixing the ship! We had a deal!”

The sorcerer’s mouth presses into a thin line, as if deliberating whether offense is in order. “Have a little faith, God of Thunder,” he replies. “Your ship is ready to go but nobody would leave without you. A black fellow with golden eyes was very adamant about that.”

“Then take me back!” There’s unspoken dread behind Thor’s resolve, as the little color he has managed to recover drains away from his face. “People are dead, Strange! By Loki’s hand. If the National Guard was looking for an excuse, he just gave them one. If I don’t get there soon, that place will become a battlefield!”

The man’s green eyes darken as they give the Asgardian a long, appraising look. He looks ready to press him for details, but decides against it as he lowers himself on an empty crate. “I wouldn’t hurry,” he says. “The National Guard began packing up five minutes ago. Might as well take a break, we’ve all had a long night.”

It takes a stunned Thor some time to articulate a reply. When he does, it’s not very eloquent. “What?”

In response, Stephen Strange opens his hand to produce a greenish thread of light that breaks in irregular angles over his palm. Jacob Norton’s muffled voice fills the cold air, giving retreat orders against the sound of a dozen feet trampling on dry leaves. When Tony opens his mouth to ask a very loaded question, the sorcerer seems to read his mind.

“I didn’t trick them into it if that’s you’re thinking. We picked this up after your vibranium friend hacked into their communication channels.” This time he fails to get any answer at all so he turns back to Thor and continues. “Your stunt has made quite an impression but just in case, I left an obfuscating barrier behind. Anyone who approaches the ship with hostile intentions will immediately forget why they came.” He pauses, when he is met by more resounding silence. “Are you impressed or do you still not believe me?”

There’s a very cautious note in Thor’s voice, one that teeters on the edge of hope. “I don’t understand. What happened to doom trailing behind us like the tail of a comet?”

Gaunt shoulders rise in a dismissive shrug under the red cloak. “You shield my people, I shield yours. Call it a sign of interplanetary friendship.” His smugness wavers when nobody speaks up again. “A ‘thank you’ wouldn’t go amiss, though.”
At the corner of his eye, Tony spots the Hulk sneering. He is tempted to do the same until a helpful memory reminds him how subtle and quick to anger wizards are supposed to be. He shares a commiserating glance with Thor, who just runs a hand over his eyepatch with a pained grimace. Whatever invisible force has been keeping him on his feet is quickly giving out and as he watches a lone blue eye slip closed, Tony wonders how long has his friend been running on fumes, even before his ship crashed in the Avengers’ backyard.

Thor lets out a long, exhausted sigh. “Thank you”, he mutters and folds like a rag doll.

A roar echoes across the docks when Hulk darts forward to catch him but Strange is faster. His cloak flies off his shoulders, like a scarlet bat, and breaks Thor’s fall, carefully lowering him to the ground. For a few seconds, the man hesitates to come closer, wide eyes watching Hulk’s every move, until Tony walks between them and raises a calming hand.

“Relax, big guy! This one is on our side. I think.” He turns to the sorcerer kneeling beside the prone form. “Is he —?”

“An idiot? No doubt about it.” Strange clicks his tongue in disapproval as he presses two fingers to the pale neck. “That shield feeds on his life force and he cut it way too close. He seriously has to get it under control. It could consume him completely next time.”

Tony swears under his breath and chucks the officially dead comm device into the harbor. “Let’s hope there isn’t a next time. There are eight thousand Asgardians on that ship and I am not telling them their king is dead. Not when Reindeer Games is their back-up plan.” He rolls his eyes at a swarm of orange sparks swirling before his face. “Cut it out, Gandalf! He needs medical attention, not magic tricks.”

He trails off when the sparks rush up to form into a giant circular gate above the docks. Green eyes give Tony a smug look as Strange draws the portal down. “Then it’s a good thing I specialize in both.”

After spending half an hour at 177A Bleecker Street, Tony still can’t get over the dragon plugged into a laptop.

The beast, about the size of a dachshund, is largely uninterested in his presence. Sometimes, it lifts its head from the gently purring machine, gives him a three-lidded blink, then returns to gnawing on the plug in its mouth, as if it was a chew toy. Glittering scales click against one another, capturing the sun that pours through a massive skylight, that takes up the entire ceiling. It serves as the room’s only window and from what Tony can tell, its only door. The discovery does not amuse him as he searches around for his power armor and is relieved to find it standing in a corner. Strange might have dropped him in a nicely furnished cage, but at least, he left him a means of escape if it happened to explode.

With the way this week has been going, he is fully expecting that to happen.

An armchair sits invitingly before a full-body mirror framed in malachite. Tony takes one look at the burn marks on the cracked leather and chooses to walk around the giant room that is very much what he’d expect an alchemist’s lab to look like. Erlenmeyer flasks and beakers line the shelves and crowd on a large marble table. A noticeable layer of dust, tells Tony they haven’t been used in some time, but the acrid smell of sulphur still floats over them. He decides his curiosity is not worth it, and goes on to pace among rows of mahogany cabinets packed with flasks filled with every color of the visible spectrum. When he starts wondering which one turns lead into gold, he hears discreet knocking on a glass surface.
He glances up but sees only ragged clouds drifting across a dim autumn sun. A moment later, he hears it again, coming from the mirror.

He turns around, painfully aware of the cheap horror movie vibe. When he finds a pale, slender figure standing in the frame instead of his own reflection, he is ready to laugh. “Please, tell me you’re dead and haunting this place. After the day I’ve had, I need something to cheer me up.”

Loki brushes dark locks aside, with a scowl that would fit a vampire. “I’m not planning to die any time soon,” he says. “So, do I still have a brother or not?”

Tony is almost ready to mistake the subtle tension in his question for concern. “You have one in a coma,” he replies and frowns at the grim chuckle thrown his way. “You find that funny?”

Loki’s grin bleeds sarcasm as he walks deeper into the reflected room. “I find that hilarious. First he loses his eye and now he has his own Odinsleep. Every day he takes more and more after our dearly departed father.”

“Don’t test me, I’ve been itching to punch you for days now.” Tony holds his long, condescending look. “Do you have some quota to fill every time you come back to Earth? Why kill all those people?”

Loki drags a hand across an old oak cabinet, making a grand show of ignoring him. When he tries the handle, it vanishes between his fingers, prompting a dejected sigh. He reaches for the flasks on the shelf beside it and immediately yanks his hand back, as if it was bitten. Anger crosses his pale features along with a desperation Tony finds way too familiar. He had often fiddled with forgotten projects in his workshop when he was overcome with unpleasant thoughts. Working on something, however pointless it was, banished them for just long enough and as Tony watches him carefully survey the rest of the room, he is convinced Loki is seeking to escape his mind by any means.

A small part of him feels compassion for their shared misery. And then, visions of empty eyes and slashed throats return.

Loki turns to face him again, lacking any other form of entertainment. “Because I couldn’t trust Thor to do it,” he replies. “He talks a big game but he’s too fond of you humans. So fond that I often forget where his loyalties lie.”

“You think he needs to choose?” Condescension reaches critical mass in Loki’s eyes and Tony sighs at the absurdity of arguing ethics with him. Still, he asks, “Don’t you have enough blood on your hands?”

A subtle twitch crosses the face in the mirror. “Blood is the only thing you people understand.” Jaw muscles lock behind sharp cheekbones, before he exhales sharply and returns to examining the reflected room. “If my brother can’t protect Asgard, I will.”

“Right, because you did everyone such a favor when you blew up your room and ran with your tail between your legs!” Loki does not deign to reply this time, so Tony presses on. “I heard, you weren’t too keen on protecting them when your sister showed up. Is the great Loki of Asgard only brave enough to fight ants?”

Loki’s preoccupation with the trinkets in the rooms stops as he stands menacingly still. “Only when those ants create something to kill my people,” he seethes. “Of course, as a former merchant of death, you probably believe they did what was necessary.”

The would-be snark in Tony’s answer slips into a dark pit in his stomach. “I don’t,” he says. “But I
would have them face justice, not an execution.”

The serpent hiding behind Loki’s gritted teeth finally lashes out. “Don’t make me laugh!” he snarls. “I hear, your little pet-project came close to ending the planet and all you got was a slap on the wrist. Your kind plays favorites when it’s convenient and you expect me to believe Midgard would not band together to wipe us out? Spare me your talk of justice, Stark! You would not grant us any so I will gladly forge my own!”

He strides towards the malachite frame, blue rage burning in his eyes. Whatever threat he is about to throw at him next is cut short when the rust-stained surface turns a dull black. A redwood cupboard behind Tony rattles, then turns on a hidden hinge as Strange and a haggard-looking Bruce step through. For a moment, Tony questions the need of a secret passage in a room that badly needs a real door, then realizes, Strange is the kind of man who would just fill that space with another bookshelf.

The wizard’s eyes narrow when they fall upon the mirror. “I keep forgetting to block that connection to our plane.” He throws an inquisitive glance at Tony. “He has a point, though. One week Sokovia is demanding life imprisonment for you and the next, the Stark Relief Foundation is helping rebuild their country. What the hell happened?”

Tony sinks a hand into matter hair as the memories of a very stressful couple of days re-visit him. “That story requires copious amounts of alcohol and I don’t drink anymore.” He side-eyes the mirror locked behind an obsidian slab. “So how reliable is this thing? We’ve had our own mishaps with keeping this guy behind bars.”

Strange leans closer to study the frame, his face locked in concentration. “It will contain him for now,” he says. “Or until the government takes him off my hands. Whatever comes first.”

“I wouldn’t count on that happening soon, their hyper-tech prison is now fish food.” Tony looks at Bruce, who’s inspecting the flasks on the table with a tentative curiosity. “You alright there?”

Bruce aims a suffering glance at him. “I’m fine, this isn’t my first rodeo. I wish everyone would stop acting like I’m seconds away from climbing Stark Tower with a damsel in my fist.” He rolls up the sleeves of a shirt that is too big for him, then turns to Strange. “What about Thor? Is he any better?”

Strange’s reply bears a slight hint of hesitation. “He’s stable now, which is as much good news as I can give you. I didn’t exactly major in Asgardian biology, much less in the kind that can throw lightning around.” He spots Bruce’s narrowing eyes and adds, “His vitals are still on the weak side, though. Alien coma or not, I’d rather keep him here. I’ve seen that ship’s medical deck and it’s laughable. And you —”

He turns to Tony and trails off when he meets his look. The silence lasts just long enough to get uncomfortable before Tony breaks it with a curt nod. “I trust your judgement.”

“Good.” Before any of them can add anything else, Strange tears the air into a portal and pulls his cloak tighter around his shoulders. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I’ve got places to be. Kamar-Taj needs to know the world isn’t ending yet and they might offer some insight into your friend’s condition.” He makes it halfway across the room before turning around again. “Don’t touch anything. The Sanctum won’t eat you but it will leave a mark.”

The portal closes into a pinprick of orange light behind him. Tony watches it blink into nothingness, then leans beside Bruce against the marble table, as a feeling akin to jet-lag washes over him. An ache creeps over his neck and a powerful craving gnaws at his stimulant-starved brain. He wonders absentmindedly if the people at the nearest Starbucks would freak if he landed there in a full power armor and ordered a pumpkin spice latte with as much whipped cream as they could heap on top.
Bruce is the first one to break the long silence. “Don’t listen to him. Every time he opens his mouth, nothing pleasant comes out.”

Tony gives him a blank look, suppressing a yawn. “Who, Strange?”

Bruce shakes his head and thumbs the blackened mirror. “Loki. We shared a very cramped spaceship for months and I’ve seen his mindgames up close. If you let him, he’ll scramble your brain and eat it for breakfast. I’m not letting that happen on my watch.”

Tony raises an amused eyebrow at him, unused to the determination in his voice. “Did you rehearse this speech or have you given it before?”

“Both, actually, but my point still stands.” Bruce reaches into his pocket and fishes out a flat orange pebble that gleams softly in his palm. “Strange gave me a fast getaway to the Compound. Want to test it together?”

The numb sensation wearing him down flows away from Tony’s limbs faster than he thought possible. “All yours, I’ve had enough magic for two lifetimes.” He gestures meaningfully at the power armor in the corner. “I could use some wind in my face right about now. Helps me think.”

“Suit yourself.” Bruce shrugs and turns the pebble in his hands with increasing fascination. The thin wrinkles around his eyes deepen when he gives him a warm smile. “Don’t look so glum, Tony! We dodged a mini-apocalypse today. I have a feeling everything’s going to be just fine.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm back, dear readers! It's been a very difficult couple of months and I appreciate you sticking around. I've been drowning in work and covering for two people in the office. Things have been kind of hectic, which is why I didn't manage to work on my backlog at all. But, a promise is a promise, and at least I managed to keep this deadline. This fic is slowly coming to a close and I know exactly how it's going to end. My biggest challenge is to pace it well and tell it in a compelling and fun to read way. I know I can count on you guys to be patient. :)

Next chapter drops November 16th or sooner. In the meantime, if you like it, author says put a review on it.
Shifting Tides

Chapter Summary

In which there's a press conference, a whole lot of worrying and clairvoyance is still a fickle mistress

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*When it's over so they say*
*It'll rain a sunny day*
*I know shinin' down like water*

Have You Ever Seen the Rain - Creedence Clearwater Revival

The auxiliary comm in the power armor springs back to life when Tony is two miles away from the Compound.

It screeches like a wind-up demon, so loud and piercing that even his caffeine-addled mind can’t take it. He winces and jerks to a halt in mid-air, as his inner visor goes into a strobing frenzy. By the time he manages to reorient himself and lands among thinning trees, an equally dazed FRIDAY cobbles together a profile picture of a smiling James Rhodes.

The voice that echoes in his helmet, however, sounds a lot less happy. “Tony! Pick up your phone, damn it! Are you alright?”

Whatever drastic measures were going to follow are cut short by another ear-shattering wail. Tony reroutes all auxiliary power to the comm system and sighs when the channel stabilizes just enough to be intelligible.

Tony? I know you’re in there!” A sound that resembles gravel in an ice crusher ripples across the helmet. “I swear, if I have to listen to your voicemail one more time—!”

Whatever drastic measures were going to follow are cut short by another ear-shattering wail. Tony reroutes all auxiliary power to the comm system and sighs when the channel stabilizes just enough to be intelligible.

“I’m here, I’m here. Give me a minute, I’m having a really bad case of technical difficulties.” He engages his end of the line, as quick and dirty math falls shakily into place in his head. “Isn’t it like two in the morning over there? Are you sitting in your pajamas watching weird Korean infomercials?”

He grins but Rhodey doesn’t take the bait. “Stop messing around, man. The twenty-four-hour news channels have been having a collective fit since midnight. What the hell is going on?”
A loading icon hovers over his pixelated profile. Tony’s hopes for establishing a video feed die when the screen does its best impression of a rave, then crashes to black. A part of him starts to regret not taking Strange’s shortcut with Bruce. The trip here has taken everything out of the power armor, and as a numb feeling works its way back into his brain, he can relate to its plight.

He flips up his visor to let the autumn breeze cool his flushed skin. “That depends. What have you heard?”

The low droning hum of a television in the background drops into silence. “That someone dropped a nuke on New York but the Avengers stopped it. That some maniac broke out of the Raft and slaughtered half the place. Fox is beating their alien invasion drum but that’s just a regular Tuesday for them.” He trails off in exhaustion as his voice wavers between hope and dread. “Any of that true?”

Tony cracks his tired shoulders, secretly grateful for the busted Wi-Fi signal in the suit. “Bits and pieces, and not the helpful kind. The maniac they’re talking about actually broke into the Raft. Nuke is an oversimplification, it was an unstable Tesseract battery. And as for us stopping it—” He runs a metal-gloved hand through his hair and feels stray static electricity drag it upwards. “It wasn’t what I would call a team effort.”

“Right.” Tony doesn’t need the video feed to see Rhodey’s tense frown. “You want to elaborate on that?”

“If I do, it’s going to be a long night.”

Invisible floorboards groan in his ears, a sign that his friend’s habit of pacing knows no obstacles. Tony wants to tell him to get some rest, but the meaningful, expectant silence in the comm is its own answer. He knows Rhodey well enough to guess he will spend the night surfing through every news broadcast, going madder by the minute. It would be kinder to explain everything now, while the events are fresh in Tony’s mind and retain some amount of sense.

“Fair enough,” he says, “So it all began on Saturday when aliens crashed in the woods.”

He recounts the events of the last couple of days, though the hiss of boiling water and the crinkling of coffee filters at the edge of the comm. It takes him longer than intended and exhausts him more than he expects. Dismay tugs at his stomach when he realizes that soon, he will have to repeat the whole thing in front of cameras. For a moment, he considers emailing a recorded statement to every media outlet in the country, then passing out for the rest of the day. A vindictive voice at the back of his mind curses Thor for being ahead of him in that regard.

Rhodey doesn’t speak much throughout it all. It is only when Tony falls silent that he asks, “How are you holding up?”

The answer continues to elude Tony, so he goes for the most practical approach. “Not bad, all things considered. The press has been hounding me for days but I think my grace period with them is over. They’re probably camped out at our doorstep as we speak.”

His reply is a small laugh of commiseration. “Can you blame them? I’m watching CNN right now. They’ve dug up images from a weather drone that managed to record everything without being fried.” He can feel Rhodey’s struggle to find the right words when pregnant silence fills the comm. “Do you remember the singularity from Akira? It looks a lot like that.”

Tony shakes his head at the memory of the pale blue dome around the bay. “I don’t need to remember, I had front row seats for the whole thing. But this morning, I swung by a coffee shop at
the harbor and it was still standing. So is the rest of Manhattan. I’ll try to make them focus on that.”

He suspects his optimism is wasted and knows for sure when he hears a troubled sigh. “I’d say your chances are slim, but I’d be giving you false hope.” There’s a long pause, filled by the rising volume of the television in the background. “These are messy times, Tony. People aren’t exactly in love with the Avengers anymore.”

Tony chuckles at the memory of limited-edition Starbucks coasters printed to resemble Cap’s shield. “I thought that was why you chose me as your liaison. I’m very loveable.”

“I don’t remember anyone else wanting the job.” Rhodey’s light-hearted tone is soon replaced by a grave determination. “Look, I can reschedule all my future tests and be on the first plane to New York tomorrow. You’re not getting eaten alive alone.” Floorboards creak when he fails to get an answer. “Tony?”

Tony’s attention, however, is already somewhere else. Specifically, on a white van parked brazenly before the Compound, digging up dew-soaked turf. As far as media mobs go, this one is small but just as unwelcome, especially while he’s dragging himself home in a busted suit with a rearranged face. He is about to discreetly slip back into the woods until he spots the logo of the postal service.

An old man in a blue uniform waves at him. “Hey! Are you Tony—?”

An all-too-recent memory screams across Tony mind, prompting him to put Rhodey on hold. “Stark, yes, the very same.” He moves closer, eyeing the shabby van with suspicion. “I was not expecting anything.”

The man peers at him over his glasses, raising white, bushy eyebrows. “Don’t know what to tell you, pal. Most of these didn’t have a name, only this address.” He taps his shoes together to knock off crushed grass. “Sorry about your lawn. In our defense, no one told us we couldn’t roll all the way up to the front door.”

Tony nods a vague acknowledgment, still watching the van closely. Its back doors hang ajar, but not enough to spot anything except vague shapes of boxes. He wonders if he’s paranoid enough to perform an in-depth scan, then decides he doesn’t want to be.

“Well, neither snow nor rain nor gloom of night stays you guys from your duty so why should we?” He angles his stance for a better view, then turns around, perplexed. “I’m sorry, most of what?”

As if on cue, the doors swing open and a skinny, freckled young woman jumps onto the turf. Her oversized uniform hangs on her like a blue sack on a scarecrow. She waves a quick greeting at him, rolls up her sleeves and reaches into the back of the van. When she reappears, her head is completely hidden by a giant mass of flowers.

“Where do you want these?” she asks.

Tony doesn’t reply. It isn’t for lack of trying. After a long bout of stunned silence, she peeks out impatiently from behind her burden. “Well?”

Tony’s second attempt doesn’t go much better, as he stares at the haphazardly assembled bundle in her hands. The flowers are cheap, especially for this time of year, but there are a lot of them. Daisies, carnations, and baby’s breath press tightly against one another, stems wrapped in a plastic bag, half-filled with water. It is all sealed rather precariously with a rubber band, which also holds together a stack of postcards.

Something must have changed in his expression because the postal worker suddenly gives him a
suffering look. “I know this isn’t ideal but they all arrived at the same time. We had no choice but to tie them all together and hope they wouldn’t wilt.” Her face twitches, as the delicate petals brush against her nose. “Otherwise, we could never keep up.”

She twitches again, trying to stifle a sneeze. Tony takes the bundle from her and watches a relieved expression cross her face. “Wait, what do you mean keep up?”

The woman ignores him as she immediately ducks back into the van and proceeds to busy herself with rummaging through cardboard boxes. It is only then that Tony spots more tire marks on the grass, the thin, sharp kind left by lightweight bicycles favored by the city’s messengers. He follows their crisscrossing trail to the Compound and stops dead in his tracks.

More flowers pile up on the porch, still wet from the rain that has chased him all the way here. Small chocolate boxes are tucked into every available space, wrapped in plastic to protect them from the elements. An entire army of postcards is pinned to the door, like giant colorful moths. A few plush toys slump awkwardly among it all, each bearing the same word on their plump bellies.

*Thank you.*

If any coherent sentence could coalesce from Tony’s spiraling thoughts, it goes unsaid as he goes through the crumpled postcards in his hand with hesitant fingers. The same word stares at him again and again, dragging him back in time, to when he was first faced with this same scenario. Shortly after the Chitauri army was halted at Earth’s doorstep, a cornucopia of gifts started pouring into Stark Tower. A man from Queens mailed them his own weight in beer, claiming Clint had snatched him from under a collapsing building just in the nick of time. Two women sent in a wedding invitation and scribbled on the back that they wouldn’t be getting married if it weren’t for Steve’s quick reflexes. About five pounds of strawberry pastila showed up at the tower after Natasha let slip that it was her favorite dessert. And then, of course, there were the cards. Store-bought and hand-made, written in English, Spanish, Chinese and every language spoken by the citizens of the Big Apple, all repeating the same, grateful words.

The avalanche lasted for about a month, its spoils still tucked away in boxes in the Treasure Chamber. Steve had kept it all, and Tony made sure none were lost in their official move from Stark Tower. He thought about them every now and then, never for too long. In the light of Ultron, Sokovia and the Accords, dwelling on their existence felt shameful, as if they had failed to live up to an oath. He never thought he would live to see it all happen again.

His comm buzzes frantically and Tony swears when he remembers he’s left Rhodey on hold. When he re-engages the signal, the voice on the other end of the line is grave. “Tony? What’s happening? Is everything okay?”

Tony peers down at the moist petals clinging to the chipped red paint of the suit. “I’m not sure,” he replies. “I think it could be.”

Pepper’s plane lands in New York a few hours later.

They have precious little time to spend together, as Tony’s forecasted media mob begins blowing up his phone. The temptation to record a message returns tenfold but instead, he gulps down even more coffee and calls a press conference. A crowd of reporters assembles at the Compound the next morning, all doing their best to hide their uneasiness. He scans their faces with the defeated feeling of a firefighter choosing how much fuel to add to a potential flame. The city’s elation after surviving a brush with death threatens to be short-lived, considering they have feared a repeat of the Battle of New York for years.
There’s a short, but ominous silence as he shuffles through his cards, then puts them down. Nothing about the past few days translates easily into a simple, scripted statement. He may as well quit while he is ahead.

He speaks to them in the calm, neutral voice, sparing no detail about the crash in the woods, as well as the military’s response to it. He talks about the Asgardian refugees awaiting help and Loki’s flight before his imminent arrest. He discusses the attack on the Raft and watches the crowd’s faces darken, as he offers his condolences to the families of the dead. When he moves on to what followed, he pauses.

It is to no avail, as he finds himself buried in questions, many of which he flounders to answer. Part of him regrets not roping Bruce into standing by his side. His grasp on Thor’s powers has always been tenuous and it has only grown weaker since his return to Earth. He stumbles through the science behind it, reassuring everyone that all they have to fear from the barrier is a lot of busted tech and their hair standing on end for the next couple of days. He has a feeling they almost believe him.

A stern-looking woman from the New York Times takes advantage of a lull following a long explanation of electromagnetic fields to raise her hand. She asks, “Is he still alive?”

A shadow descends over Tony’s thoughts as he taps his forgotten notes against one another. As army of heads turns in his direction, he replies, “For now, yes.”

He spends the rest of the week watching the world take in the news.

He is vaguely aware of the fact that he’s witnessing a historic moment. The words ‘first contact’ are repeated ad nauseam by every newscaster. Pundits argue relentlessly whether they apply to the Asgardian ship, given the failed Chitauri invasion. Others go back even further, to the incident in New Mexico, which is where Tony usually turns off the television and feels a headache coming on. By then, he has stopped trying to keep up with the beehive social media has become and relies on Pepper and Rhodey to send him every new hot take on Twitter. He scrolls past them sometimes, reading theories about ancient aliens returning to bestow even more wisdom upon them, and chuckles in disbelief.

Public shock becomes indignation when project Jormungandr lines the front page of every newspaper. He expects Ross or anyone from the government to contact him at some point but they never do. SHIELD has been remarkably silent as well, which Tony isn’t sure how to interpret. For a while, he walks on eggshells, convinced that they have discovered the hack into their database, despite Vision painstakingly erasing their traces and leading a false trail of breadcrumbs to the Rising Tide. The suspicion haunts him for days until he decides to stop chasing ghosts and focus on the many tasks competing for his attention.

So he goes back to work, steals any time he can with Pepper and oversees the Stark Relief Foundation as they resume their work with the refugees. When the weekend rolls around, he decides to join them.

It is a particularly cold morning, which sees dew turn to frost over the yellowing grass. It leaves a powdery precursor of snow on his boots as he walks next to half a dozen people carrying basic supplies. A deer-legged robot makes its way through the carpet of fallen leaves, burdened with less delicate items. Every once in a while, it stops to course correct, then resumes its trek, whirring in distress.

The dense canopies begin to thin after an hour in an overhead trail of destruction that leads them straight to their destination. A small group of Asgardians stands at the edge of the camp, chatting
quietly among themselves. Their faces light up when they see them approach and before Tony knows it, a female employee carrying a stack of blankets yells an unpronounceable name and breaks into a run. A young Asgardian woman meets her half-way and throws her arms around her petite frame, lifting her off the ground by a good five inches. Laughter drifts through the air, voices grow louder as both groups merge together, leaving to Tony walk away amused, wondering how they managed to grow so close so quickly. A foggy memory of a night when he and Thor drank two crates of beer while discussing the stupidest moments in their lives brings a smile to his face and gives him the answer.

He finds Heimdall sitting on a tree stump, tin mug resting on his knees. Dull, yellow light seeps through the open door behind him, flowing down the lowered ramp. The ground around the ship is damp and as Tony’s fingers graze the outer hull, they find it pleasantly warm.

The man drops his hood over his shoulders and gives him a polite nod. “Well met, Stark.”

Tony returns the gesture on instinct, only now realizing how completely unused he has become to the standard Asgardian talk. “Well met,” he echoes, “I’ve come to borrow my former bio-organics expert from you. Stark Industries has a clotting gel project that has been stuck in development for a year. I could use another pair of eyes on that.”

“If you mean Doctor Banner, he has been doing inventory at the cargo bay since dawn.” Heimdall pours more coffee into his mug from a dented thermos. “He said he would head for the Sanctum soon so you have probably just missed each other.”

Tony thinks of the two-way portal tucked away in his wallet in the form of a flat pebble. The perspective of using it to catch up to Bruce still isn’t enticing. While Asgardian science might as well be magic to him, the existence of actual magic makes him paranoid enough to avoid it as much as possible. The last thing he needs in his life is clocks running backwards whenever he walks into a room.

“Guess it can wait a little longer.” He sighs and presses his freezing hands against the hull. “So, how are you guys doing? Do you need anything? I mean, apart from the obvious.”

“Answers.” There’s a grim note in Heimdall’s voice, as he glances over Tony’s shoulder towards the lively reunion on the other side of the camp. “People are starting to grow restless. Some of the children have already been sneaking out to nearby towns. Their mothers reprimand them but I cannot condemn their actions when their prison has no doors.”

Something in the golden eyes tells Tony he speaks from experience. He remembers Bruce’s description of the fortress that hid Asgard’s civilian population from slaughter and looks up at the massive hull rising before him. Though the scientist had jokingly called it ‘home’ throughout the entire week, it had probably been little more than another cell for the people basking in the meager autumn rays not half a mile away.

He shuffles his feet, not sure what he can say to make it better. “You aren’t prisoners,” he replies. “No one here wants you to be.”

“It feels like we are when I cannot tell if we’re safe outside that barrier.” Heimdall gestures at Strange’s protective spell woven around the trees in a web of gossamer and gray fog. “We still know nothing about our future and the news we get are as scarce as they are troubling. Your leaders could save everyone a lot of grief if they bothered to talk to us.”

“If it’s any consolation, they tend to talk mostly at you.” Tony’s frustrated sigh becomes mist in the cold air. “Give them time, they can’t keep you in limbo forever. After the Jormungandr leak, public
opinion is strongly on your side. Having an unstable nuke near a civilian population didn’t do wonders for their image either. It’s in their best interest to deal with this as quickly and painlessly possible.”

Heimdall pauses, still looking at the group at the edge of the woods. “I fear they might do exactly that.”

Tony’s tentative optimism wobbles like a house of cards as any words or reassurance fizzle out. He has little more than speculations to offer, which would only turn him into the world’s least creative conspiracy theorist. Instead, his mind walks a tightrope over a question he has rebelled against for days. “Say, did Thor happen to make a transfer of authority? Or a will of any kind?”

He feels his skin crawl at his own forced casual tone. The former guardian of the Bifrost takes a small, diplomatic sip, as if pretending not to hear him. Silence falls again, so deep and hollow that Tony scrambles to fill it himself. “You know, just in case?”

If Heimdall is aware of the abyss opening up in his stomach, his taut face betrays none of it. Golden eyes ignore Tony’s surprise and meet his straight on.

“He was going to abdicate in my favor when the time was right,” he says. “But he hasn’t yet, the time isn’t right, and I’m in no hurry to force the hand of fate. He has always been there in our time of need. I trust him to return to us.”

He brushes sawdust from his clothes and walks towards the ship to join a small group gathering around the consoles. Vision is among them, vibranium skin reflecting the timid glow of the light fixtures embedded in the walls. Tony’s overdue curiosity about alien aircrafts gets the best of him and he is about to walk up the ramp after him before a familiar figure walking out of the woods catches his attention.

His first theory is that his overstimulated brain is playing tricks on him. His second one is a lot more fluid. It goes from full-body holograms to secret twins, to androids in the time it takes for the newcomer to exchange a few words with an SRF employee. When a young woman nods and points in Tony’s direction, he is forced to accept a much more straightforward explanation.

A multi-step curse unravels in his throat as he watches the man approach him. “Let me guess. Rumors of your death have been greatly exaggerated?”

New wrinkles cluster around the blue-gray eyes giving him an apologetic look. “It’s a long story. One we have no time for now.”

Tony’s annoyance is frustratingly short-lived as he finds himself smiling, against all odds. “Fine, I’m a patient man. Pepper’s the one who’s going to take your head off when she finds out.” His android theory returns when he clasps an offered hand and finds it too smooth, nearly synthetic to the touch. “I have to say, resurrection doesn’t suit you. You look a lot balder than I remember.”

“I blame most of it on this week.” There’s a sort of fatalistic humor in his tone that is definitely human. “Can you just point me towards Thor?”

Tony steps towards the ship to linger in the radiating warmth of the hull. “What for? The man is in a coma. Don’t tell me you’ve come back from the dead to watch him sleep too?”

“Certain disagreeable elements are convinced that story is just a tactic to buy time while Asgard finds a way to put Loki on the throne.” Tony’s sarcastic expression is met by a mild shrug. “Don’t shoot the messenger, Stark. I’m only trying to help.”
“I thought I was the paranoid one.” Tony pulls out his wallet and unfolds it, letting a flat pebble drop onto his palm. It vibrates against his skin, as if impatient to be put to use. He picks it up, watching a faint, orange glow spill over his fingers in an intricate pattern.

“Your king is in another castle, I’m afraid,” he says. “But if you’re feeling adventurous today, I will gladly give you a lift.”

Thor has been here before.

The memory washes over him in stages, like a rolling tide, bringing something new with every wave. It was late summer then, his favorite threshold between Midgardian seasons when the leaves were still green but the scorching heat was beginning to recede into cool, temperate weather. An autumn chill had already crept into the breeze tossing about Loki’s curls when they stumbled out of a dissolving portal in search of their father. The hollow log they found him sitting on remains in place, polished smooth by the elements. It is the only thing resembling a grave they both have left to visit.

He stands in almost reverential silence, wind combing through his clothes. It is early spring now and the air smells like fading snow, mixed with the scent of the ocean that stretches into infinity beneath the jagged rocks below. Puffy clouds drift lazily across a calm sky. Somewhere in the distance, gulls give out long, piercing cries.

He wonders if he could hear his parents’ calling to him if he cleared his mind. Or if he has to wait until his time comes to hear their voices again.

His thoughts are interrupted by peals of laughter at his back, followed by loud, excited barks. He turns around to see Brunnhilde running up the beaten bath, strands of curly hair falling out a tightly woven bun. A large, cream-colored Labrador bounds in circles around her, skidding over patches of stubborn snow. When it reaches Thor, it drops a rubber ball at his feet.

Wide, chocolate eyes stare up at him in expectation. Thor sinks his fingers into the warm fur but the dog receives the petting reluctantly, tail drumming restless against his legs. After a while, it lets out a dejected whine and paws at the ground.

Brunnhilde’s face is a mask of amused exasperation when she catches up to them. “You’re the worst,” she says as she picks up the ball and hurls it away with the skill of a professional pitcher. “She’s waiting for you to throw it, your majesty. Haven’t you ever had a dog before?”

Thor snickers when the animal becomes a blur across the frosted grass. “I had two pet goats when I was a kid. They just ate all of their toys.” He pulls his growing hair out of his eyes and gathers it into a knot at the back of his head. “You should stop calling me that. I still have to remind people not to bow in my presence and we’re holding parliamentary elections in a month. We can’t build a new future if we keep leaning on our past.”

“Old habits die hard, I suppose. And ‘ambassador’, just doesn’t have the same ring to it.” Dark eyes linger on him as she greedily gulps down water from a plastic bottle. “Are you alright? You’ve been quiet ever since we got here.”

Thor nods and rubs at the cold lump his mechanical eye becomes in chilly weather. He’s still not used to the prosthetic, nor will he ever be. There are days when he considers ditching it completely but in his new role, scars are an unwelcome sight. Most Midgardians find them intimidating instead of a sign of endurance.

He shakes his head to dispel the dizzy feeling creeping up on him as the world slowly drifts back into
focus. “I know this place.”

“I had a feeling you did,” A knowing smirk dances on Brunnhilde’s lips. “Come, I want to show you something.”

She tucks the bottle into her backpack and beckons him to follow the Labrador sprinting ahead. Warm fingers wrap firmly around his hand as she leads him away, towards rocky hills that lie like sleeping giants under the thick, morning mist.

When he opens his eyes, his vision is halved again.

It doesn’t matter much since for few moments, all he can see is a slow dance of light and shadows. He hangs in limbo, disentangling thoughts from memories, hopes, and fears from a mind that has a hard time telling them apart. He drags clumsy fingers over his forehead and finds the leather eyepatch intact. The coarse surface is enough to anchor him to reality as he slowly blinks the rest of the physical plane into existence.

When he does, he remains as perplexed as before.

The first thing that catches his attention is the intravenous drip in his arm. He looks up, following the thin tube to a plastic bag on a metal stand, dispensing clear liquid in small, regular drops. It suggests a hospital, but a suggestion is all it remains. The rest of the room is a void, flooded by washed-out light that seems to be coming from all directions. A medical monitor beeps steadily above his head, supported by white nothingness. Its faint sound is the only sign he gets of the passage of time.

He props himself up on his elbows, searching for walls, even padded ones. His search is in vain as even his bed seems to float weightless. The only indication of a floor comes from an old armchair floating at roughly the same level. As Thor wonders what an extravagance like this is doing in a place so bare, a door materializes behind it.

Bruce Banner slips awkwardly into the void, balancing a mug on a dog-eared book. Brown eyes widen behind thin-rimmed glasses when he notices Thor’s perplexed stare. He shakes his head softly and leans on an invisible door frame, mouth spread in a wide, relieved grin.

“ Took you long enough,” he says. “Welcome back, strongest Avenger.”

Chapter End Notes

Guys... I can explain...

Actually, there isn't much to say except that life, work and a whole lot of personal stuff hit me like a train. Plus, I think I needed to step away from this fic and take a breather if I wanted to do the finale justice. But rest assured, chapters 13 and 14 are finished and will be coming out over the next two weeks. I'm also furiously writing an epilogue which I hope to publish before Endgame hits theaters.

As always, if you are still reading, please leave a comment. Also, the one who guesses the identity of the newcomer talking to Tony gets a cookie.
Winds of Change

Chapter Summary

In which old friends deal with new problems and change is in the air

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*The future's in the air*
*I can feel it everywhere*
*Blowing with the wind of change*
Winds of Change - Scorpions

The prickling of cold metal against tender flesh persists within Thor’s empty eye socket.

He rubs at it instinctively but the discomfort does not lessen. It slips through his fingers like the pain of a phantom limb as does the nonexistent strands of long hair he tries to brush away. The white void around the narrow cot only contributes to his disorientation, as he turns his head, struggling to adjust to his failing depth-perception all over again. An ocean breeze haunts his senses and he feels himself drift away with it.

Warmth closes gently over his arm, pulling him back into focus. He glances up to find brown eyes peering down at him in concern. A familiar echo fills his ears. “Thor? Come back to me. Are you okay?”

The touch lingers for a few seconds before Bruce steps aside as if to give him some space. Thor gives him a small reassuring smile and sits up on the bed. A premonition had not come over him with such intensity since his dreams of the fall of Asgard and even those failed to leave such a long-lasting imprint. He had seen them unfold as a distant spectator, frozen before an ever-shifting stage, but this vision had been different. Fragments of preoccupations, joys, and sorrows that are not yet his lie scattered around his memory, in a shattered puzzle. As he grasps tentatively at its fragile pieces, he reflects on the contradiction of remembering the future.

He wonders if this is how his mother felt when her gift of prophecy began to manifest. If so, he is several years late to understanding the mask of worry she wore on the days preceding his failed coronation. Or the look of consternation that never left her eyes when she summoned all her power to send him to Earth in search of Loki.

Perhaps he was right when he assumed that what his visions showed him was set in stone. If so, his mother must have come to dread them as much as he does.

He listens to Bruce speak about the aftermath of the harbor incident, not knowing whether it turned out better or exactly as he had expected. The underlying anxiety in the twitching of his hands does not go unnoticed, nor do the deep shadows over his cheekbones or the crumpled Asgardian clothes. Questions pile up ever higher in his mind, but he isn’t sure if they are the right ones. A technical mishap on Jane’s computer had once scrambled the episodes of a popular show, causing him to experience the plot out of order. It is the closest simile he finds to the chaos that reigns within him and he can only be grateful for Bruce’s quiet tone while he recounts the events of the past week.
“Six days?” he asks. “Are you sure?”

Bruce leans forward in the armchair that is practically a miniature couch for him. “Pretty sure. I’ve been counting them and I was far from the only one. A lot of ink has been spilled about us recently so I also have the newspapers to prove it. And speaking of newspapers—”

He glances around as if he had misplaced something in the endless white expanse. The room only seems to remember its contents as they become relevant, a theory that gets confirmed when Bruce’s forgotten mug and book vanish from sight. The metal hook beside the bed that used to hold an IV bag blinks out of existence with a popping sound. In its place now stands a folded out plastic table crowded with flowers.

“These are for you,” he says. “They started coming to the Compound after Tony’s press conference and this place is the only thing keeping them fresh.” He catches Thor’s widening eyes and throws him a small smirk. “Nothing says ‘get well soon’ like peonies, I suppose.”

Thor’s absolute failure at an answer is mercifully glossed over as he reaches out to the pale pink petals. They bend slowly under his hand, betraying a well-concealed veil of frozen time. A voice that sounds a lot like Tony pipes up in his head, swiftly correcting his terminology to ‘stasis field’.

The warmth spreading over his chest is replaced by cold, sharp doubt as he turns to the scientist. “Does Strange’s barrier hold?”

“It never had the chance to fail. I think he caught your paranoia because he reinforced it against physical threats but those never happened either. What we did have was a lot of reporters try to talk to us after the Jormungandr story broke.” Bruce rubs his graying temples and looks up at Thor with bemused resignation. “Rumor has it, there’s a movie about Loki in the works. Can’t tell if it’s going to be a documentary or a biopic.”

Thor sighs as he recalls Darcy showering him with wildly contradictory stories Midgardians had shared over centuries about him and his family. “They can’t go wrong with either. Heimdall told me that The Tragedy of Loki of Asgard was quite a hit back home. I am convinced he managed to save that script in the evacuation.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him.” Bruce’s snicker is brief as Thor tosses the bedsheets aside. “Hey, what do you think you’re doing? Strange said you shouldn’t be walking around yet. That shield almost bled you dry.”

Thor shrugs and dives for a folded pile of clothes materializing on the pillows. The familiar, comforting smell of petrichor and ozone washes over him when he pulls on a hooded sweater.

“I heard him,” he replies. “He also said he had no idea how to treat such a thing. What would be the purpose of staying?”

“That is not the point, you need to rest. Not to mention eat something that isn’t an intravenous cocktail.” Bruce’s frown deepens as Thor tests the ivory nothingness beneath his feet and takes a few hesitant steps. “Look in a mirror, will you? You’re still pale as death.”

“There are no mirrors here and I’ve rested long enough.” Thor’s mouth tugs apologetically under his friend’s worried stare. “I’m sorry, Banner. I didn’t mean to leave all of you stranded for so long. The sooner I get back, the sooner we can get things moving again.”

He is met with a somewhat confused look. Bruce opens his mouth, but his question remains unvoiced as a slit pries itself open behind him and soon becomes a heavy wooden door. It swings
open soundlessly, with a caution which manages to put Thor on edge. He steps in front of Bruce on instinct and comes face to face with Phillip Coulson.

The man just stares at him dumbstruck. He stands upon the invisible threshold between the void and the room at his back, like a cat stricken by a bout of indecisiveness. He scans the hospital cot as it melts into nothingness, then casts a wary look at Thor, as if expecting him to do the same.

“You’re awake,” he states blankly.

Thor cannot dispute that so he just takes in the welcome sight of another familiar face. Centuries in Loki’s company have taught him enough about illusions to know that what he is looking at is real. He fails to hold back a smile at the man’s attempts to maintain his cool demeanor in the presence of a spun-off pocket of reality. For an agency that prided itself on being able to handle just about anything, SHIELD agents tended to react to new wonders of the universe with mild apprehension at best and extreme defensiveness at worst.

“You’re alive,” he says. “I wish I could have found out at a less troubled time.”

“Don’t we all?” The humor in Coulson’s voice fails to reach the leaden-blue eyes. “We need to talk.”

He backs away from the vanishing abyss as if fearing it would swallow him too. Thor simply nods and follows him into the dim, flowing light of the physical plane.

“Yes,” he replies. “Yes, we do.”

It’s hard for Phil to ignore what feels like an intentional lack of doors.

Thor, in turn, seems completely unbothered by it. He walks among the closed circle of bookshelves with the confidence of a frequent visitor, ignoring even the invisible hand that slides a heavy curtain away from a stained glass window. Patches of multicolored light dance over the marble floor and scatter across two armchairs bound in cracked leather. Cold air gradually turns warmer as if the room realizes it has guests.

He turns to Bruce Banner, hoping for a sympathetic shoulder, but finds him gone. The sparks of a disappearing portal fizzle out among floating motes of dust, leaving Phil to raise an eyebrow at the Avengers’ unexpected familiarity with magic. He closes his hand around the warm, quivering pebble in his pocket and tells himself that this is no different than teleportation. If there’s anything SHIELD has learned from their encounters with Asgardians it is that sufficiently advanced technology should not be mistaken for sorcery.

But this is real sorcery. Tony Stark had told him so. And considering the week the man was having, he didn’t expect him to be in the mood for jokes.

Thor stops before a smooth stone table with a silver tray in the middle. His mouth presses in a tight, resolute line when he turns around, ice-water in hand.

“Are you a sign of good will or a precaution?” he asks, “Did your superiors fear I would strangle anyone else?”

“Were they right?”

His honesty is rewarded by a strained laugh. Thor slowly drains his drink in lieu of a proper answer. There’s an unhealthy pallor to his face, typical of the aftermath of a long illness and a faint tremor in his hand as he puts the empty glass down. The blue gaze that pierces through Phil, however, has iron
behind it and the longer it lingers on him, the less inclined he is to continue down that particular conversation path.

He opts for the truth instead, “I volunteered.”

Thor looks at him in surprise. “For negotiations? I had the feeling you preferred field work to politics.”

“So did you, last time we spoke. Look at us both.” He walks over to the stone slab, all too aware of the sound of his footsteps in the impossible silence of a building in the heart of New York City. “I came because I’d like to think we’re still friends. I hoped you would believe me if I said I was sorry.”

He watches Thor’s mouth twist, holding back the much more eloquent lightning in his look. “Your government tried to create a chemical weapon against my people. Sorry is not good enough.”

The stillness of the library acquires a subtle edge that is hard to blame on an overactive imagination. Phil tries to suppress the unpleasant feeling of his stomach shrinking to half its size. “You’re right,” he says, “but the truth is. I thought you’d want to hear it before making any rash decisions.”

“If it’s retaliation you fear, there has been enough violence already.” Thor’s impassivity is only compounded by his calm, leveled tone. “You said you were here to talk. I’m listening.”

He lowers himself into one of the old armchairs and glances at him in silent expectation. Amusement tugs at Phil as a long-trained observation habit kicks in and he wonders if Asgardian royalty is taught the same things as Earth politicians. If that’s the case, putting oneself at the same level as their conversation partner proves a bit difficult for Thor. Even sitting down, he’s at least a half a head taller than a standing Phil.

All levity in him fades when his thoughts turn to more grisly matters. “When HYDRA infiltrated SHIELD, they got their hands on the biomaterial we collected before you left Earth. That was when they started seriously considering human enhancement. We believe their initial plan was to use it to give themselves Asgardian traits but that project was a failure. Apparently, our genetic codes just refuse to mix.”

He fights back dryness in his throat as he remembers the experimentation sites left behind after HYDRA fell. The sick, twisted bodies that littered them still show up in his nightmares, skeletal faces forever frozen in a mute mask of agony. The fact that he experienced most of it through the lens of a camera did nothing to lessen the horror or to chase away the infernal smell that clung to him for days. He thinks of those that did not survive the Mind Stone in Strucker’s lair and pities those who did.

Thor weaves his fingers on his knees, his face grave under the room’s filtered light. “So they went for the next best thing?” he ventures.

Phil returns a quiet nod. “By the time we caught up with the unit developing Jormungandr, the project was in its final phase. I was field director at the time. When I found out, I wanted to wipe out all traces of it.” He weighs his next words as if he is measuring out gunpowder, before giving up and speaking plainly. “I was strongly encouraged to reconsider.”

A restrained storm echoes in Thor’s voice as he looks away. “Was a strong encouragement all it took? My people are your allies. What would you have done, had we ever sought your destruction?”

“Your brother did. Twice, if memory serves me right.” He suddenly finds himself nostalgic for the days when the Asgardian Destroyer in New Mexico was the most dangerous thing they had to face.
“Not that we would’ve been safer with Loki on our side. My sources claim he finds it hard to commit to a long-term alliance even when his family is involved. What chance could we possibly stand?”

“My brother is not Asgard. The SHIELD I remember understood that.”

Phil frowns at the poorly disguised resentment. “You’ve been gone for a long time. You weren’t even here for the Sokovia aftermath, not to mention for the months of chaos that followed when Strucker was put behind bars. There were countless hearings, investigations, nobody could be trusted. At the time, the general belief was that we had to be prepared for our closest friends to stab us in the back. Considering we were betrayed from the inside, the idea wasn’t too far-fetched.” He pauses but gets no reply so he presses on. “Safeguards had to be put in place. It doesn’t mean we liked the shape they took.”

“What makes you different from HYDRA?”

The question pins Phil to the spot with the intensity of a bullet. It digs deeper than he expects it to and turns his blood to ice when he realizes he doesn’t have an immediate answer.

He flashes back to his badge being blown to pieces by a turret in the Canadian wilderness. The hollow impotence that came over him as he hurled it away into the snow proves all too resilient, no matter how many years separate him from that moment. HYDRA destroying everything he stood for is a scenario he would give his other hand never to experience again and the possibility of their poison seeping into SHIELD had haunted him for months. Its only worthy opponent was the ever-present thought that it didn’t need to. His erased memories of the TAHITI project are proof enough that SHIELD’s own secrets were dark enough.

He meets Thor’s iron-clad look with nothing left to add but bitter sincerity. “We are willing to set things right.”

Thor listens to him in an odd, knowing silence. It becomes unnerving after a while, especially as he seems to nod before Phil has the chance to finish a sentence. Still, he goes on, listing the details of the proposal hammered out over the past week, in a stuffy room soaked in the smell of cigarettes and surprisingly cheap coffee for Washington. His new surroundings fill him with just as much apprehension. Back there, he was absolutely sure that every word was being recorded. Here, he only has a vague suspicion.

An ironic smile ghosts across Thor’s lips as Phil confirms the removal of his tracker anklet. As far as he can tell, the device was vaporized in the explosion and in the chaos that ensued, Thor’s status as a fugitive had not been anyone’s top priority. He moves on to granting him full access to the Jormungandr project and watches the blue gaze turn to stone. It never wavers, not even at the promise that all remaining funds for it would be redirected into an assistance program and that the Asgardians’ refugee status would be waived in favor of a full American citizenship. When he mentions the chance of Asgard remaining an independent state on American territory, Thor just shakes his head and reaches for another glass of water.

He takes only a small sip before asking, “What about Loki?”

Phil drums his fingers on the dossier over his knees. In the end, he has chosen to make use of the second armchair, even if it makes him strain his neck every once in a while. “The UN’s word on that is final,” he replies. “So is ours. He killed fifteen people before the Raft was evacuated and permanently crippled a dozen more. A lot of them had nothing to do with the Jormungandr lab, not that any of us approve of cold-blooded murder. Would you allow him to roam free?”
Thor leans back in his seat with a deep sigh. “No, but you don’t have a suitable prison anymore. Chances are, you never did. Unless you somehow manage to create one by tomorrow, the custody you demand is unenforceable.” There’s an audible sharpness to his tone. “Or rather, a humane one isn’t.”

“We have no intention to harm him if that’s what you’re implying.” Phil watches skepticism flicker across Thor’s face and comes close to rolling his eyes. “Would you rather we handcuff him to you twenty-four seven?”

“Hardly. There’s nothing I can do to keep him restrained. Not even the Avengers’ countermeasures held against his magic for long.” There’s a brief pause between them that grows longer as Thor looks pensively over Phil’s shoulder. “But actual magic might.”

Unease slithers down Phil’s back as he turns around. He doesn’t remember the pattern on the round window being arranged into the shape of an eye but he is willing to accept a momentary slip in observation. He is also willing to accept that he sees it acquire an almost organic glisten, as the light flowing through it grows dimmer. His spy instincts scream that he is indeed being watched.

He leaves his seat, peering at the stained glass intently. “I see,” he replies. “I assume our invisible host is willing to accommodate us in that regard.”

He is tempted to ask it to blink once for yes and twice for no, but Thor doesn’t give him the chance. “Our invisible host will gain a lot of peace of mind that way,” he says. “It would also help strengthen his position as Sorcerer Supreme. If there’s anyone who can challenge him for the title, it is my brother.”

A gust of cold air blows through the room in response. The sound of fluttering pages catches Phil’s attention along with the smell of fresh ink. When he turns back to the table, he spots a thin stack of paper next to the silver tray, filled with fine but readable print. He flips through what appears to be a contract and finds a flowery signature at the end, only barely making out the name ‘Stephen Strange’.

He raises an eyebrow and gingerly puts the document back. “This doesn’t need to be signed in blood, does it?”

Thor’s reply is a thoroughly humorless chuckle. “Not unless you want to,” he says. “Now tell me, what does your government expect in return for their generosity?”

“A fresh start with your people. And joint ownership of the Tesseract.”

He watches Thor sigh and rub the bridge of his nose in aggravation. “You cannot be serious. This city was almost destroyed by your attempts to harness its power. What is it that compels humans to keep tripping over the same stone?”

In what is probably a smart move, Phil decides against asking if his time in Jane Foster’s company had taught him nothing. “It’s because we want to understand it. You once said that Asgard’s science and ours isn’t incompatible. Don’t you want to see what we can achieve together?”

If the appeal manages to strike a chord, it is not very loud. “Nothing would keep me further from a sound sleep. So far, you have only used it to sow destruction and I have seen enough of that to last me a lifetime. The Tesseract stays with us.”

“It’s an infinite source of clean energy. Do you have any idea how long we’ve been waiting for something like that? You can’t in good conscience keep it locked away!”
Maybe Thor can sense his frustration boiling over because he shakes his head and reaches out a pacifying hand. “I don’t intend to,” he says. “But if anyone is to access it, it will be on our terms. We came to Earth hoping for a safe haven. It is in everyone’s best interests to make sure it stays safe. Don’t you agree?”

Phil can’t find the will to hold back a groan. “Is that your idea of a negotiation?”

“You don’t have much to negotiate with.” Thor’s voice remains carefully leveled, his footsteps, somehow soundless on the marble floor. “What remained of Jormungandr was destroyed with the Raft so there isn’t anything left for us to inspect. As for the files, I believe the Avengers were entrusted with the unredacted version before the leak happened and have been kind enough to share it with the Keeper of Asgard’s Archives. Doctor Banner was telling me all about that before you came in.”

“Of course he was.” A flurry of headlines, ranging from informative to the shamelessly bombastic roll across Phil’s mind as he lets out a low, incredulous laugh. “You know nobody is buying the Rising Tide explanation, right? Or at least nobody at SHIELD is.”

His reply is merely a shrug. “I’m as surprised as you are. But it is nice to find out that we have friends in places we didn’t even know existed.”

Phil runs a hand through his thinning hair, wondering if he will have any left by the time he steps out of the room. “Your ‘friends’ are treading on very thin ice. So are you if you take their side should they attempt another ‘friendly’ gesture.”

“Which is why this does not need to go any further.” Thor nods in the direction of the densely printed contract. “As far as I am concerned, we have fulfilled our obligations to each other. We wish you no harm, but this is where your country and mine part ways.”

“You would leave Asgard stranded because you refuse to trust us?”

“Asgard will accept Norway’s offer of asylum instead.” Phil can only dull his shock with persuasion, but his budding protest is voiceless under a look that could puncture the fuselage of a helicarrier. “That is my final word. Move against us in any way and you will not like the consequences. Prosecute those who took part in the Jormungandr project and we may work together in the future. This is the only fresh start you will get from me.”

The unwavering determination makes Phil’s stomach sink. “I understand that you’re angry, Thor. You have every reason to be, but don’t let that anger blind you. I’m offering you a partnership, one that will benefit both our countries. Don’t throw that away without at least considering it.”

“I’m offering you peace, Phil. Isn’t that enough?”

The drop in formality manages to cut through him like a razorblade. The million burning questions in his mind coalesce into the only one that matters. “How did you know about Norway? They made their decision only an hour ago. It hasn’t even been publicly announced yet.”

Thor takes another slow sip from a grained glass. The sudden veiled look lasts only for a moment before he looks straight into Phil’s eyes and replies, “I know.”

The Labrador runs far ahead of them.

It weaves fearless between smooth boulders peeking from under the thawing grass, eager paws kicking up late snow. Its fresh, earthy smell is all around Thor as he tries not to lose track of the
elusive shape flickering back and forth among the foggy landscape. The milky air has grown clearer as they trek deeper into the sleeping hills but even with the ocean at their backs, he feels like he is walking through a herd of clouds which has chosen an unlikely place to rest. Moisture settles on the lens of his mechanical eye as he furiously blinks it away. Perhaps he is long overdue for a replacement.

Warm fur crashes against his legs, almost knocking him down. He smiles at the playful growl as he wrestles the ball from the dog’s teeth and throws it. His attempt doesn’t provide much of a challenge as the animal sprints away and leaps two feet into the crisp air, effortlessly catching the toy. There’s a proud gleam in its eyes when it runs towards him and cocks its head, demanding he try harder.

“Good girl!” He pets the dog’s neck and drops to one knee to run a hand over the quivering hind legs. “Alright, that’s enough running around for today. We don’t want to put too much strain on your hips.” He opens a hand under the stubbornly clenched jaw. “I mean it, Lyn. Give it back.”

He hears a low whine in reply, but eventually the ball drops into his palm, sticky with drool. He tucks it away into his backpack and fiddles with a knotted leash as the dog traces circles around him, enjoying a few last moments of freedom. The restless pacing stops when Brunnhilde crouches down and places a treat between grass-stained paws.

“She’s doing great. You can’t even tell she needed a wheelchair a month ago.” She lays a hand on Thor’s shoulder to keep her balance. “Does she still hide from every third person?”

Thor takes advantage of the distraction to clasp a harness over the light, brown fur. Eyes, dark as molasses, glance up from the half-eaten treat in profound disappointment. He tells himself that he should figure out another way to get her used to being restrained but a better idea never crosses his mind. He figures if he was a dog, he wouldn’t like it either.

“It’s probably every fifth person now. I call that progress.” He sighs as the dog turns its attention back to the strip of jerky. “The shelter said it might take a while for her to trust humans again. Can’t say I blame her after what she’s been through.”

“I know, I read her adoption records. What kind of twisted asshole throws a dog into traffic?” Brunnhilde’s fingers brush against the floppy ears, torn to ribbons at the edges. “You two seem to have clicked in record time, though.”

“Well, I’m not human, and not all of them are twisted assholes. Hopefully, one day she’ll heal enough to realize that.” Thor readjusts the harness across a singed patch of skin, where fur is only now beginning to grow back. “We did.”

A clever smile touches the corners of Brunnhilde’s mouth. “Is that the former king of Asgard speaking? Or its ambassador?”

“Neither, it’s just Thor Odinson. I find him to be the most honest of the three.”

Lyn tugs at the leash in his hand as a gust of cold wind thins out the herded clouds rolling over the grass. He squints at the vague shapes of cottages in the distance. “What’s that?”

Brunnhilde straightens up and gathers a walking pole in her hand. “We’re here,” she says with a satisfied grin and sets forth across the green slope.

Thor is beginning to wonder if the Water of Sight isn’t the only imprint Nornheim has left upon Earth.
Time was a much more malleable thing to the Norns. They moved through it like the rest of the Nine Realms moved through doors, which made any engagement with them confusing in times of peace and dangerous in times of war. He had only been to their world once, as a young prince with a thirst for glory and disregard for anyone warning him to keep away from treacherous mists that dragged foolish Asgardians into the past. He was lucky enough not to stumble upon them, but if he had, it would probably feel a lot like what he is experiencing now.

He walks among ancient wooden houses fashioned out of thick logs with moss growing on the slanted roofs. Most stand elevated on boulders as fog gathers under them, giving the impression that they have been placed on strips of cotton. Wildflowers grow in the cracks in the walls. A windmill turns its blades lazily under the light breeze. Small square windows bear silent witness to their intrusion as they wander through the narrow streets.

He stops before a massive stave temple and stands awestruck, admiring the elaborate carvings on the wooden door. “Where are we?”

Brunnhilde tilts her head, eyebrows raised. “You really don’t know?”

Thor’s thorough search of every corner of his memory comes up empty. He has been cramming Earth’s history incessantly for the past few months but starting with the most relevant events has forced him to learn everything in reverse order. “Should I?”

“I hoped you would.” She places down her backpack and walks unburdened towards a sign nailed to a tree. “This is a reconstruction of an early tenth-century village. I stumbled upon it back in August, when I was looking for a good training spot for the new recruits. This place is so remote that they only do guided tours in summer. So I figured, what's the harm in checking it out.”

He lets out a soft chuckle. “I didn’t think you were interested in history.”

“I’m not, but I also don’t turn down anything that’s free.” She turns a corner, following an arrow laid out of stones on the beaten path. “Turns out, it was one of the better-preserved settlements of that era. Which is kind of a feat, considering it almost burned to the ground in one night.”

She catches his questioning glance and points at a faded yellow circle drawn before what looks like a storehouse. “The fire started here. It isn’t clear how or why, only that it soon grew out of control.” She pauses, casting a rather underwhelmed look around. “I’m not surprised, this place is built like a tinderbox. A loose spark would set everything aflame in minutes. And if it spread to the fields, they would definitely starve to death before they could plant the next crop.”

A familiar smirk returns to her lips when she’s faced with his puzzled expression. “That’s when according to legend, a huge storm rolled in. The kind and I’m quoting here, ‘that floods the very air and splits the sky from side to side.’ It didn’t last long, just enough to put out the flames, which allowed them to get back on their feet and survive.” She thumbs the temple at her back casually. “That’s why they built that thing over there. In response to what they called an act of divine intervention.”

She lets another significant pause hang in the air. Thor’s jaw drops wide open as he struggles to find words again. “Wait, you don’t seriously think—?”

She laughs and bends down to gather Lyn’s leash as it slips from his fingers. “I don’t know, your majesty, you tell me. Does this place ring any bells now?”

Thor has no answers for her as he longs for the Norn’s talent to conjure up the past as easily as taking a breath. The best he can do is frayed glimpses of a promise broken, endless sneaking around
the palace and a hushed reunion under the stars, followed by a heartfelt plea to Heimdall as the Bifrost’s light swallowed him and his companions. He remembers stark wind in hair, remembers sinking into the embrace of Midgard’s natural forces and joy so intense his heart was bound to burst. Fandral’s laughter echoes in his mind and for the first time in a while, it brings fondness instead of a deep lash of sorrow.

Was there a village anywhere near their revels on that night? Would they have even noticed if there was?

Brunnhilde’s dark eyes seek his as she steps closer. “Thor? Come back to me. Are you okay?”

He nods and wanders forward pensively, trying to jog dormant memories. His aimless steps take him straight through the doorway of a nearby house. The smell of sawdust and rotting wood soaks into his clothes as his eyes are drawn to an inscription etched above a primitive stone fireplace. The sound arrives in his head meaningless and a few seconds later, becomes a last name. Haugen.

He comes close to laughing out loud when he recognizes the surname of the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs. The tantalizing spark of a self-indulgent scenario burns within him and is immediately extinguished. Jan Haugen was born to very unimaginative parents. You could not throw a rock in Norway without hitting the man’s namesake. Surely, fate’s fixation on Thor would never reach such an extent.

Surely.

He shakes his head, tracing his fingers over the faded runes. “I’m sorry, I can’t remember.”

Brunnhilde shrugs under his apologetic glance. “Ah well, it was a long shot. I guess, some stories sound too good to be true.” She leans on the heavy wooden windowsill and stares straight ahead, with a dreamy expression. “Still, coming here is worth it every single time. You really can’t beat the view.”

Thor follows her gaze outside. Morning is, by now, giving way to noon and the early spring sun grows ever stronger on the wide open sky. It shines bright, reflecting off hundreds of rooftops that pepper the mountain range in the distance and streams over the fields below. Asgard unfolds before him in all its new glory, wreathed in silver, wood and white stone as it rises tall and proud towards the clouds. He is not surprised to realize he doesn’t miss its previous golden veneer, nor the towering presence of the royal palace. In its place, now stands the Archives building, surrounded by a garden speckled with flowers that are only now beginning to bloom.

An unfamiliar calm washes over him as he joins Brunnhilde beside the narrow window. If this is what inner peace feels like, he wants nothing else for the rest of his life.

And so, he wakes up.

Chapter End Notes

And lo and behold, another chapter appears. In other news, my epilogue ended up turning into its own chapter, but it is finished and in the safe hands of my beta. If the stars align, this fic will be finished a week before Endgame.

Next chapter drops next Friday. And as always, if you’re still reading this fic, leave a
comment. If you're a new reader, I'd love to hear your voice as well. See you all in seven days.
An Immigrant’s Song

Chapter Summary

In which the future is almost perfect. Emphasis on almost.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*So now you'd better stop and rebuild all your ruins*
*For peace and trust can win the day despite of all your losing*
Immigrant Song - Led Zeppelin

Thor is here way too early.

So early, in fact, that the coffee machine he’s been hanging around for the past fifteen minutes hasn’t been refilled yet. The red-haired employee currently doing that seems nervous, glancing in his direction several times as he pushes capsules into slots. When he finishes, he throws him an unexpected thumbs-up.

Thor mouths a quiet thank you in what he assumes is German. He’s never sure what language his words might translate to in a city like Vienna or in the UN Office Building for that matter. The melting pot of Earth’s cultures and nationalities has only ever been fascinating to him, but his new position makes him acutely aware of connotations and creates a constant paranoia of putting his foot in his mouth. On Old Asgard, Allspeak was treated as a convenient blessing or as a helpful crutch for other races to communicate with them, depending on who you asked. Not even the idlest scholar has ever strived to understand it further.

It would be ironic if the destruction of their planet led to them doing exactly that.

His doubts are assuaged when the young man turns around, signs ‘I like the new eye’ at him and walks away. A sting of disappointment follows as Thor realizes that though his gift extends to understanding sign language, it does not extend to speaking it back.

He looks at the distorted reflection of his face in the concave windows that line the hall. His first appearance before the UN had been right after Asgard’s resettlement in Norway and there were more important things to consider than a replacement for his eyepatch. Reactions were split among his friends when the prosthetic was completed, even though it matched his eye-color perfectly and Tony’s jokes about ‘keeping an eye on him’ made the painful regeneration of his optic nerve a lot more bearable. It still stings from time to time, especially when he is sleep-deprived. Like he is now, as he watches the city drag itself out of slumber, to the low murmur of traffic.

He yawns and walks towards the restocked coffee machine, searching his pockets for loose change. For a moment, he worries about becoming as addicted to caffeine as everyone around him but the smell of freshly ground beans is compelling. He reaches for the drink and breathes in its warm bitterness. If he is to weather the long day ahead, he might as well share another Midgardian affliction.

He stops mid-sip at the sound of a glass door sliding open. A tall, black man dressed impeccably in a
dark blue suit steps through, carrying two paper cups. As he approaches him in long, confident strides, Thor recognizes king T’Challa of Wakanda.

“I wouldn’t drink that if I were you,” he says. “No amount of sugar can make whatever comes out of that machine taste good. I thought I’d spare you what passes for a hazing ritual in this building.”

Thor, who has never been a fan of sweetened coffee, throws a cautious look at the dark sludge in this hand. What began as a strong, inviting aroma quickly turns to a charred smell that slithers down his throat like tar and nearly makes him gag. He twists his nose in disgust and chucks the drink into a bin, before accepting the cup from T’Challa’s hand.

“Thank you for the warning,” he inclines his head slightly. “And for the rescue.”

Onyx eyes gleam softly at the deferential gesture. “Not even my own people bow to me, Thor Odinson. Neither should you.”

“As you wish. But the newest country on Earth should at least pay its respects to the oldest.” He watches the man’s mouth tug at the edges and asks, “Have you heard from our common friend?”

T’Challa’s attentive look sifts through the people going about their business on the other side of the door. “I see it’s still a lost cause trying to keep a secret around here,” he replies. “He’s glad to hear you aren’t dead. He also wants you to know that he will be watching today’s events very closely.”

Thor taps his fingers against a silver acorn tucked in his pocket as a good luck charm. He has come to miss the company of Steve Rogers as well as the rest of the scattered team, but reuniting them has been proven next to impossible. Natasha has done such a thorough job in disappearing that the only person who could find her is Clint, whose whereabouts are just as unknown. He has the feeling Vision is keeping in close touch with Wanda, but he could never bring himself to ask. He doesn’t remember much about the young Sokovian except sharing her grief at the loss of her brother, knowing what it was like to mourn someone no one else would. As for Sam Wilson, his trail had grown cold in Lebanon a long time ago and wherever he was now, he had made sure he could not be tracked down.

He rakes back strands of growing hair that refuse to stay in place. “He really shouldn’t get his hopes up. It’s just a vote and it’s going to be a contested one. The real hard work will begin if the ayes have it. That will be worth following.”

“It is a vote to rewrite the Sokovia Accords. I’d say it was worth following when the motion was first put forward.” T’Challa looks down at the stirring city and empties a sugar packet into his cup. “That was a bold move, considering they had been in place for less than a year. I’m surprised you’ve managed to make it this far.”

Thor is inclined to agree as he remembers the anxiety coiling up in his stomach on that day. A part of him would have happily preferred a Jotun axe to the chest but a glorious death would turn out to be a poor substitute for a life spent making a difference. An old Asgardian joke about there being no politicians in Valhalla resurfaces and brings him nothing but dismay. They might have to rewrite a few rules on their views of combat and war.

“I didn’t make it this far alone,” he says. “There are others on my side, who are very vocal about how damaging the Accords have been to the state of the world. This is our chance to undo that damage. Or at least to stop it from spreading further.”

The man’s chest rises and falls under the blue suit in an almost imperceptible sigh. “That’s precisely what I’m worried about. There are countries that have been claiming the first version did not go far
enough from the moment they put down their signature. They will fight tooth and nail to see their vision fulfilled. And they will have their supporters too.”

Thor shakes his head, knowing exactly who he is talking about. “Then we will fight back harder and we will win” he replies. “I understand this is not going to be easy but things will get worse if we don’t try to improve them now. Asgard is the hundred and eighteenth country to sign those Accords for a reason. We weren’t around for the first decision and if our future is being discussed, we might as well have a seat at the table. That way we will make sure those changes are for the better.”

There’s a pause from T’Challa, as a question wells up in his eyes, held back by what Thor assumes is common courtesy. “Very reputable sources tell me you can see the future. Do you happen to know something I don’t?”

Two very contradictory answers collide as Thor wonders if he can call himself a true clairvoyant. His visions only come in dreams and though their accuracy sometimes makes him uneasy, their reach has been severely limited. His latest premonition was the one that shone the clearest and none had followed since then. If he is still in fate’s good graces, she has chosen to let him shape his own path.

He prays to every ancestor he can remember for guidance. And immediately wonders if he should, considering their track record.

“I don’t know how the vote will turn out,” he says. “All I know is that when the Accords were drafted, nobody stopped to consider protections for enhanced individuals. That isn’t an oversight we can ignore anymore. The world couldn’t have foreseen Asgardian refugees but this is much bigger than us. There are quite a few Inhumans who have legitimate reasons to be concerned.”

T’Challa sighs, as he looks down at the steady trickle of cars fill the winding roads below. “Wakanda has received a lot of asylum requests in the past couple of months. We’re having a hard time keeping up with them.” He throws a questioning look at Thor. “I hear a fair number have taken refuge in Asgard as well.”

Thor returns a small nod. “They have, and we will never turn anyone away. But they shouldn’t be fleeing their homes for a chance to live without hiding their powers. Nor should they be treated as a loaded weapon because of what happened in Lagos. Don’t you agree?”

A dark cloud descends over T’Challa’s face as a grim note slips into his voice. “I lost many friends in Lagos,” he replies. “Lost some in Johannesburg too. They were good people who wanted to make the world a better place and they were taken from it instead.” There’s a subtle crack in his restrained solemnity, as the world leader fades and the Black Panther stares through Thor’s very soul. “I wake up every day wishing it didn’t happen. But it did and all we could do back then was make sure it never happened again. Power is only a crime when it is wielded against those without it. That is where Steve Rogers and I can find common ground.”

For a few moments, the only sound between them is the rising hum of the crowd flowing into the building. Thor’s impulse at sympathy rings painfully hollow. He is well acquainted with loss and rage and crushing despair as well as with the empty acceptance that follows it all. No amount of words have managed to close the gaping wound they left behind. He suspects the same is true for the Wakandan king.

“I’m sorry for the grief you carry,” he says, deciding to try anyway. “I never meant to imply the Accords were a mistake, but the truth is, they were rushed. That is how the American government could develop a neural gas against my people and I don’t want anybody else getting similar ideas. Nor do I want them used as a shield for unlawful imprisonment. Wakanda supported the Accords once because it believed in protecting innocent lives. All Asgard wants is to keep that promise. Can I
count on your support?”

He turns away from the window to face the scrutiny of the dark eyes. Eventually, T’Challa’s long, thoughtful look softens just enough to resemble agreement.

“You will need all the votes you can get,” he replies. “We will stand with you, Thor Odinson. As long as the Wakandan Design Group is allowed to study the Tesseract’s potential for interstellar travel.”

The bright face of a teenage girl on the front page of a prominent science magazine flickers across Thor’s memory. “Is that your research division?” he asks. “Led by Princess Shuri? She and her team will be more than welcome to visit our labs. I have an astrophysicist friend working there who would love to meet her.”

“Doctor Jane Foster, if I’m not mistaken? I think the pleasure will be mutual.” T’Challa raises a paper cup in a subdued gesture that still carries the full weight of an Asgardian toast. “To the future, then.”

Thor mirrors him, as the permanent uncertainty within him fades into hope once more. “To the future,” he echoes. “May it shine forever bright.”

The camera flash three inches from his face comes really close to blinding him.

He stops in his tracks and blinks the searing yellow spots away. In his disoriented state, it takes him a few seconds to realize he has accidentally walked into someone else’s shot. By the time he starts apologizing the photographer has already moved to a different spot, juggling a camera and a glass of champagne in the same hand. The precarious balance suffers even further as he ducks out the path of a waiter.

Thor chuckles and walks away brushing off stray confetti from his hair. Around him, lively conversations flow into one another, hundreds of voices blend into a cheerful choir and laughter floats over the garden, rising and falling like a tide. A live band, sheltered from the sun under a large blue gazebo, plays something he finds only vaguely familiar. It is only after a few notes sound like they belong in a screaming guitar riff that he recognizes a very mild-mannered cover of a Black Sabbath song, that happens to match Tony’s alter ego.

You had to hand it to him, he thinks as the melody worms its way into his head. The man’s taste in music was contagious.

A short figure standing next to a tall wooden table waves at him from afar. He waves back and makes its way towards it through the partying crowd. “Banner! How does it feel to finally see the sun?”

Bruce’s pretend offense doesn’t last as he steps aside to seek the shade of a tree. “You’re going to eat those words when we finish what we’re working on. It might revolutionize everything we know about molecular biology.” He raises an inquiring eyebrow. “So where’s your plus one?”

“You’re the only one who wants to know so far.”

“That’s because everyone else has a vested interest not to.” Bruce pops a canape in his mouth with a knowing look. “You know what they say about weddings.”

Thor tries his best to recall anything about Midgardian nuptial traditions. “No, I don’t,” he confesses. “What do they say about weddings?”
His confusion only increases when Bruce lays what feels like an almost comforting hand on his shoulder. “Then I won’t be the one to tarnish your innocence,” he laughs. “What happened? Did Brunnhilde shoot you down?”

“She didn’t have to.” Thor grabs a thin glass from a nearby tray and takes an experimental sip of the bubbly golden liquid. “I can’t stay long and I didn’t want to leave her alone at the party. Besides, she’s been busy with her new recruits. She probably has less time than me nowadays.”

Bruce regards him with crushing disappointment. “Come on, you didn’t even ask her? If not for the pleasure of your company, she would have come for the free drinks.” He runs an exasperated hand through combed-back curls at Thor’s slight shrug. “You two need to have a serious talk. Half of Asgard can see the way you look at each other at council meetings. Whatever courting ritual you have, it’s been going on for way too long.”

The remaining contents of the glass nearly come out of Thor’s nose as he feels his face flare up. “Courting —“ he coughs, wiping away droplets of champagne. “Fine, smart guy! What’s your excuse?”

“Technically I count as two people.” Brown eyes narrow, as if trying to figure out a particularly vexing riddle. “Which may cause problems with my Asgardian citizenship, now that I think about it. I don’t need two IDs, do I?”

Thor’s heart soars, his indignation quickly forgotten. “So, it’s official then? You’re staying with us?”

“Where else am I going to find affordable rent at this point?” The joke is diluted by an unexpected wistfulness as Bruce glances towards the swaying branches overhead. “Of course Tony was all about me staying at the Compound. I was tempted to take him up on that but then I went back to New York and it was like walking into a past life. No matter how familiar everything was, it just didn’t feel the same as before.” He fidgets with his now empty glass and rests his back against the knotty trunk of the young white oak. “Nothing like spending two years on an alien planet to change your perspective, I suppose.”

“Is it easier when the alien planet comes to you?”

Bruce aims a smile at him as the band switches to a slow-paced song about running to the hills for your life. “It’s a middle ground,” he says. “I never felt like I belonged anywhere in the first place. Even on Sakaar, I wouldn’t have survived as anyone else but Hulk. But I belong on Asgard, as Hulk, and as Bruce Banner. That’s not something I can walk away from. Even if I could, I don’t want to.”

“Then Asgard is fortunate to have you both.” Thor grips the man’s shoulder tight and guffaws as he playfully wrestles away from his touch. “Now let’s go get you something better than sweet wine.”

Pepper Potts in a flowing wedding dress catches up to them in the middle of their quest.

She glides effortlessly through the sea of people, gathering the long hems of her skirt in one hand. Red hair cascades over her bare shoulders, spilling from under a delicate veil held in place by a small army of silver hairpins. A slight pang of discomfort crosses her face only when she stops and discreetly toes off her heels to walk barefoot over the trimmed grass.

“Hey, you guys made it!” She wraps her arms around Bruce and beams at the formal Asgardian attire. “You look… interesting.”

Thor lets out a suffering chuckle. He wishes he could have gotten rid of the cape, but whoever
Tony’s eyes glow with the warmth of a constellation as he closes the distance between them. “I’m a married man, Point Break. You’ve had four years to steal my heart away from this lady.” He clasps Thor’s forearm affectionately. “How’ve you been? I’ve seen your face on the news more than in real life in the past months.”

Thor can only muster a small, apologetic shrug as he pulls him into a tight hug. “I know, and I’m sorry about that. But wild horses couldn’t drag me away from the social event of the year.” He beckons them towards a less crowded spot beside a babbling fountain. “I brought you something. A little token of appreciation from the Asgardian people.”

He digs into his pocket and pulls out a flat, leather-bound box the size of his palm. Tony’s eyebrows rise as he pulls at the silver ribbon around it and lifts the lid to reveal a glossy picture of a gray kitten sleeping on a chair.

“That’s... neat?” He trails off, then peers back at Thor. “Not to look a gift horse in the mouth but you know that you can find those for free on the Internet, right?”

Thor smirks at the amused confusion in his voice. “On Asgard, cats are a symbol of love,” he explains. “It’s tradition to give kittens to newlyweds to wish them eternal happiness. The real thing is tearing up Brunnhilde’s furniture as we speak. I was going to pick him up after you came back from your trip” He presses the box into Tony’s suddenly very stiff hands and frowns. “Sorry, are you more of a dog person? Because he has a second home lined up, just in case.”

Before Tony has the chance to break the deepening silence, Pepper takes the box from him and squeezes Thor’s hand warmly. “He loves it, we both do,” she says and pulls at the wrist of the scientist standing beside her. “Bruce, you have to meet Helen’s wife, Seo-Yoon. She’s been building on your work on anti-electron collisions and she’s dying to talk to someone who understands anything she’s saying.”

Bruce’s face lights up like a Christmas tree as he allows himself to be led away. Thor watches them disappear into the crowd, wondering if he’s committed some sort of faux-pas. “Stark? Is everything alright?”

Tony nods, hands tugging nervously at the lapels of his suit. “Yeah, sure, everything’s fine. It’s just that pets are usually considered training wheels for children around here. And you know how people get the moment you have that ring on your finger. Suddenly it’s all about heirs to the Stark empire and other nonsense straight out of Game of Thrones.” He sits on the marble edge of the fountain, completely ignoring a row of chairs right beside him. “You probably know all about that, huh?”

Thor suppresses an eyeroll of his own. “All too well. That’s why we’re electing the next king after Heimdall.” He drums his fingers on his knees. “Is that something you want? Children, that is?”

Tony stares pensively at a group of young boys chasing one another around a rosebush. “I do, to be honest. So does Pepper. We talked about this some time ago, but we sort of hit a ‘three-is-a-crowd” scenario.” He chews on the inside of his cheek, slipping into another bout of silence. “Tony Stark can have children, I’m not sure if Iron Man can. Frankly, I’m not sure if he should.”

Thor casts a meaningful glance in his direction. “I happen to know both of them quite well. They’re good men. I’m sure they would be even better fathers.”

His reply is a half-hearted sigh that turns into a soft laugh. “I’ll take that with a grain of salt, Kal-El.
But even if you were right, it’s a dangerous world to raise a child in. With everything that’s happening lately, I’d be constantly terrified for their well-being. I’m not sure my anxiety can take it.”

He shrugs and focuses his attention on the band, as if discarding the subject from his mind. Thor suspects that Tony’s doubts have as much to do with Howard Stark’s parenting as with Midgard’s potential for trouble but takes the hint not to prod him further. His reassurances, however sincere, tend to fall on deaf ears unless actively sought out. The fact that he’s curious about watching Tony’s kids grow up doesn’t make him the most impartial person either.

“I need a favor,” he says instead. “I need to borrow your BARF device for a few days. Is that okay?”

Tony seems to hesitate for a moment. “Sure,” he says eventually before quickly adding, “Look, I made that thing to deal with traumatic memories but I’ll be the first one to admit it’s not a miracle worker. With everything you went through, you might be better off with actual therapy. I know I was.”

“That’s not what I had in mind,” Thor smiles at the lingering concern in the brown eyes. “I’m fine, Stark, really, I am. You should be thinking about your honeymoon now, not fretting about my mental state.”

“I can multitask, you know? Don’t let Rhodey or Pepper tell you otherwise.” Tony rises to his feet and stretches like a black cat in the sun. “What is it then? Are you feeling nostalgic all of a sudden?”

Thor shakes his head and steps out of the way of a romping child, holding a foam sword. “Quite the opposite,” he replies. “It’s the future I’m worried about.”

The uniform landscape before him seems to go on forever.

Ripe wheat ripples under a cloudless sky, like a golden sea, that parts before Thor as he walks leisurely through the sun-drenched field. The delicate scent of wildflowers hidden among the heavy stalks wafts in the gentle breeze. Sparrows flicker to and fro, pecking at fallen grains. A family of mice scurries off from under a hollow stump when he puts his foot through their fragile nest.

He crouches and tries to rearrange the twigs and withered grass into its previous shape. When he looks up, a familiar figure dressed in black and green is making its way towards him across pale-yellow straw.

“You’re dressed way too elegant for me.” Loki’s lips curve slightly as he points at a rose petal still stuck in Thor’s hair. “I pity your poor bride if you’ve decided to ditch her for a prison cell.”

Thor chuckles and pulls the petal out of a rapidly unraveling braid. “It wasn’t my wedding,” he replies. “And I wouldn’t call it a cell when I can see the horizon.”

Resentment finds its way through Loki’s faint smile. “The illusion of freedom is still an illusion,” he says with a shrug. “And this one is mediocre at best. Next time you cross paths with the so-called Sorcerer Supreme, tell him that I am profoundly disappointed.”

He knocks straw off soft leather boots and snaps his fingers nonchalantly. The world becomes a colorful blur, rushing past Thor in a stream of blinding light. When his head stops spinning, he finds himself standing at the very precipice of what he soon recognizes as the Niagara Falls.

“I have to say that having a pocket dimension to myself is not entirely unpleasant.” Loki continues. “I can go wherever I please, see the sights, read until my eyes fall out...”
He snaps his fingers again and the foaming water drops away from Thor. A sharp, musty smell hits his nose and as he sneezes, he notices rows of bookshelves stretching as far as the eye can see. Before he can try leaning on something to regain his failing balance, he hears another snap and falls into nothingness.

He lands heavily on the edge of a bed, in a room that looks like an exact replica of his quarters in Asgard. Loki stands before him, holding a hot dog, with the expression of a cat that lost its appetite in the middle of disemboweling a mouse. He peers at it for a moment, then tosses the whole thing into the air, where it vanishes.

“I can even develop a taste for Midgardian cuisine,” he concludes. “But at the end of the day, I’m in a cell all the same. The real question is, which crimes am I really paying for?”

Thor suppresses a queasy feeling and holds his head in his hands with a groan. “There was a trial, brother. You were there.”

Loki stares at the vaulted ceiling in mocked recollection. “Ah, yes, that,” he drawls. “Honestly, I’m inclined to forgive them the whole pantomime. Humans soothe themselves with those all the time. But I had much higher standards for you.”

Thor glances at him, nausea slowly dying down. “What are you talking about?”

There’s a glint in Loki’s eyes that could cut steel. “How about the entire reason we ended up here?” he replies. “Vanaheim would have taken us in, same with Nidavellir. The elves don’t like Asgardians much but even Alfheim wouldn’t have been an unreasonable option. Yet here were are, in the only place in the universe that has a serious bone to pick with me. It’s almost childishly petty, don’t you think?”

The longest sigh winds up in Thor’s chest as he decides against reminding him of Jotunheim’s close call. “You think I chose Earth out of spite?”

“I think our father’s dark secrets messed with your head more than you want to admit.” Loki strides across the room, throwing a contemptuous look at Thor’s collection of shed snake skins. “You couldn’t imprison him for his reign of terror over the Nine Realms. You couldn’t imprison our lovely sister either. So you found a way to imprison me instead.”

He raises his hand in a theatrical flourish and Thor grimaces as he braces himself for another snap. His childhood quarters plummet into weightless darkness before gravity returns and he stumbles through a white-walled enclosure bathed in warm, amber light. He finds Loki sitting in an intricately carved wooden chair, in the middle of what used to be his prison cell under the royal palace.

“Well, congratulations, you’ve succeeded!” he sneers. “Does that make you feel better? Does it cauterize your bleeding heart?”

Thor closes a weary hand over his face. “This was never about you. Midgard was our best option, it would have taken us close to a year to reach any other world in the Nine Realms. I wasn’t taking those chances with the ship falling apart and you weren’t in a hurry to tell us you stole the Tesseract.” He suppresses an instinctive surge of anger at the memory and adds coolly, “Not to mention that last time I was on Vanaheim, they weren’t very happy to see me. They felt like Odin had forgotten their agreement to exchange Asgardian protection for Vanir magic. Does that sound familiar?”

Loki’s shoulders rise in a disparaging shrug. “Asgard had been neglecting its own magical talent. We were becoming too dependent on them, just as we were on the dwarves’ craftsmanship.” Annoyance
flashes in his eyes at Thor’s pointed silence. “I was going to make us stand on our own feet. Vanaheim should have learned to do the same, instead of depending on our strength to protect them forever. Don’t you think?”

Thor dedicated refusal to take the bait wavers, if only for a moment. “You’ll have to face your mistakes at some point. We can’t keep having dead-end arguments for the rest of our lives.”

“You underestimate my endurance.” Loki’s tone becomes distant, as disinterest floods his pale features. “Did you seriously come here to lecture me?”

Thor shakes his head and leans against the dented wall on the opposite side of the room. No matter how much he misses Loki, talking to him can be an ordeal, depending on what kind of fey mood he is in that day. Trying to get him to listen, without actively composing a comeback, can be even harder, which makes this particular conversation an even more daunting task.

“I’ve come to face my own mistakes,” he says. “I didn’t always treat you right when we were young. I was too wrapped up in my own fame and glory to notice you had been pushed to the side. But I guess that’s not much of an excuse.” He runs a hand through loosening braids as shame prickles at his skin. “I’m sorry I didn’t see the darkness growing within you. I’m sorry I fed it. And I’m sorry you had to wait to hear it until you were locked up.”

He falls silent, not really expecting Loki to reply. When he still does, there’s a forced quality to his derision as blue eyes glisten with disbelief. “You’re sorry?” he echoes and points at the shimmering barrier sealing the room. “Do you seriously think ‘sorry’ makes up for all this?”

Thor lets out a disheartened laugh. “No, you got here all on your own. But I hope it can start making up for everything that came before.”

He is prepared for another jab, but instead, long, thin fingers snap again without warning. Thor’s stomach swoops in the endless dark and churns when he is unceremoniously dropped into a low couch of Strange’s Circular Library. Loki snickers at the shade of green that is probably descending over his face.

“Even when you’re penitent you manage to be insufferable.” He sits on the marble table among scattered scrolls and as he looks down, his sharp smile loses some of its edge. “Alright then, consider yourself graciously forgiven. Now all you have to do is release me and we can put it all behind us.”

Thor rubs his creased forehead, chasing away a magic-induced hangover. “You know I can’t do that. Not without your help.”

Loki tilts his head, interest piqued. What remains of his sardonic expression freezes into a mask when Thor pulls out a small, metal sphere out of his pocket and presses the top side to project a hologram over his open palm. Blue eyes grow tense as they stare at a gigantic warship drifting against the pale glow of the distant stars.

“You’ve met these people before, haven’t you?” The shocked pause is a clearer answer he could have hoped for. “I suspect they were the ones who gave you the Chitauri Scepter and showed you the true power of the Tesseract. Whoever they are, they are headed straight for Earth, so now would be a good time to tell me everything you know about them.” He clicks off the ghostly image to tear Loki’s gaze away from it and continues, “You tried to conquer this world once. Help me save it and I’ll do everything in my power to get your sentence reduced.”

“My freedom would be very short-lived if he’s really coming here.” What Thor had initially mistaken for hesitation becomes stone-cold fear as blood drains away from Loki’s cheeks. “You have no idea
what you’re up against, brother.”

“You’re right,” Thor stands up and sweeps the scrolls off the table to sit next to him. “So why don’t you explain.”

Chapter End Notes

It is another chapter! Only one more until the end. Yes, this fic will end on April 19th. It's been a long time coming.

As always, if you liked it, author says put a review on it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!