Above All Shadows
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>Gen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Marvel Cinematic Universe, Thor (Movies), Marvel, The Avengers (Marvel Movies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Loki &amp; Thor (Marvel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Loki (Marvel), Thor (Marvel), Odin (Marvel), Heimdall (Marvel), Warriors Three, Thanos (Marvel), Nebula (Marvel), Brunnhilde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Post-Avengers: Infinity War Part 1 (Movie), Avengers: Infinity War Part 1 (Movie) Spoilers, Time Travel, Fix-It, Time Travel Fix-It, Family Drama, POV Loki (Marvel), Angst, Second Chances, Sakaar (Marvel), Jötunheimr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 1 of Above All Shadows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collections:</td>
<td>My Heart Adores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2018-05-08 Completed: 2019-10-10 Chapters: 45/45 Words: 141852</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Above All Shadows
by wedgetail

Summary

The plan failed. Nebula’s dead, Thor captured – Stark

After the Infinity War, the Avengers made one last attempt to take down Thanos. They failed.

Loki, stranded back on Earth, and certain that his brother won’t survive another encounter with the Mad Titan, believes only one possible solution remains – time travel. The problem with experimental magic, however, is that you can never be sure of the consequences. Loki ends up far further back than he had intended. He finds Asgard at peace, his mother among the living and Odin about to proclaim Thor king.

After years of flitting from one calamity to another, Loki finds a spark of hope. This isn’t just about Thanos. Here is his chance to start at the beginning and, this time, do it right. But turning that hope to reality isn’t going to be easy.

[formerly titled "Out of Season"]
Loki’s stomach twisted with nausea as he stared at Stark’s message.

Thanos hadn’t remained idle for long. He realised soon enough that his Snap had sparked as many conflicts as it had finished. Now his fleets were tearing through one planet after another, trying to pacify what was left of the universe. And for two years, Thor and his motley crew of companions had shadowed Thanos in hope of finding a way to overcome him.

Loki hadn’t actually seen his brother since that fateful day when Thanos had found their ship and decided to bring balance to what few Asgardians had survived Ragnarok. By the time Loki managed to find his way to Midgard, Thor had already left in pursuit of vengeance. Communication was difficult — the distances were vast and secrecy paramount, so Loki had to content himself with mere snippets about Thor’s locations and plans. The last he had heard, things were looking up — they thought they found a way to Thanos. Loki had even dared to hope that Stark would finally come through. Evidently, he hadn’t.

‘Loki?’ Wong asked in a hesitant tone.

‘My brother is captured,’ Loki replied and thrust out Stark’s curt missive for Wong to see. ‘No, he’s dead. Thor already survived not one, but two encounters with Thanos. There wouldn’t be a third — Thanos wouldn’t permit that.’

Wong crossed his arms and sighed. ‘Your brother is resourceful. He nearly killed Thanos once, don’t forget that.’

‘I’m sure Thanos hasn’t forgotten.’

Loki examined the message again. No date. How long ago had Stark sent this?

Thor had probably been dead for weeks.

At that thought, another wave of nausea assailed him. Loki wrapped his arms around himself and clenched his eyes in an effort to prevent himself from dissolving into a blubbering mess in front of Wong. But it made little difference, he could feel his self-control slipping.

No, this won’t do.

Loki gritted his teeth and forced himself to straighten his body.

‘Hey, are you —’

‘I can’t sit around here weeping and moping like a useless invalid,’ Loki said. ‘I’ve given them the chance to do it their way. They failed. There’s no alternative left.’

‘No way.’ Wong thrust himself between Loki and the passageway to the Sanctum library.
‘Stand aside! I’m only doing what I should’ve done the day I found that notebook.’

‘Look, you’re upset. This isn’t the time to be making any decisions, let alone trying to do this. What’s the chance the spell will work? Most likely you’ll blow yourself to pieces and take half of New York with you.’

Loki tilted his head wearily. ‘Quarter. Half of New York’s already gone.’

Before Wong could reply, Loki flicked his hand and sent Wong flying towards the windows at the far end of the room. Loki muttered an apology under his breath. After the care Wong had taken with Loki after he found Loki on the Sanctum’s doorstep, the man deserved better from him. But in the end, it was simple — Loki’s mind was made up and Wong had stood in his way.

Loki knew he would need every spark of magic contained within him, so as he walked, he dropped the cloaking spells wrapped around him. A cold, blue hue spread over his skin, revealing with it a patchwork of rope-like scars over his limbs and head. His smooth stride acquired a haltering limp and he felt his prosthetic rubbing painfully against the stump of his right leg. Loki had never thought his trick with the knife had much chance of success against Thanos and had planned accordingly. But he hadn’t anticipated the fire.

Setting down Stark’s note on the mahogany desk in the centre of the Sanctum library, Loki pulled out the right notebook out of the stacks scattered around the room. He didn’t need much time to prepare. He had worked on the spell day in and day out for months after he had pieced it together from the jumbled theoretical posturings one of Strange’s predecessors had left behind. Nevertheless, he fingers trembled — that is, more than they usually did nowadays — as he flicked to the right page and began the spell-work.

The movements came swiftly and the words that he had recited in his mind a thousand times flowed, one line melting into the next. But at the very last line, his breath hitched.

In truth, the spell was anathema to him. Loki had learned long ago that a hedged bet was the only sure way in life, but the spell didn’t permit such indulgence. This was a one-way route.

Loki took a deep breath and glanced over to Tony’s message, rereading the few words it contained one more time. If this was the world you were escaping, a one-way route wasn’t so bad, was it?

All it took was the four last words of the incantation and a flick of Loki’s wrist.
A toneless howl assaulted his ears.

Up, down. Future, past.

All melted away.

He tumbled wildly, unable to make sense of the bright lights flashing past him.

‘Loki?’

The howling had ceased. As someone placed their hands on his shoulder and gently rolled him onto his back, the flashes gave way to a single blinding light suspended high above him. Was this it? Or was this only some temporary reprieve? He didn’t recount falling or landing, yet his back was now pressed against something smooth and solid.

Groaning, Loki pushed himself off the ground and propped himself up on his elbows.

Frigga knelt beside him, sunlight turning her hair golden and catching her eyes just at the right angle to make them shine. What little compose Loki still possessed fled him. He scrambled away from her and backed into the balcony railing.

‘What’s happened?’ Frigga said. ‘Loki?’

Her voice was as soft and kind as he remembered it. Her face, presently dark with worry, was also a perfect reconstruction of his memory. After she had died, he had spent hours upon hours lost in the old memories.

Then Frigga moved a step towards him and Loki realised he wasn’t exactly right. She looked younger than she had been in her last days — his mother didn’t yet possess the lines his madness would etch upon her face.

*Is this a trick? Or did I really come back years too far?*

Loki climbed to his feet and leant against the railing as he palpated his right shoulder. It ached. He must have pulled something when he landed, but it didn’t feel like a serious injury. ‘I’m fine, mother. I was experimenting with a new spell last night and it didn’t go as planned. An unfortunate after-effect, nothing more.’

‘Really? You fainted and slid out of your seat halfway through breakfast. Besides, you were with us at the feast last night.’

Loki glanced to the large oval table that stood in the middle of the balcony. It was laden with food — breads, jams, cold meats, fresh fruit and a variety of cheeses — all barely touched. One of the chairs had been flipped over. It was the one Loki usually occupied when he shared breakfast with his mother out on the balcony of her quarters. Loki turned to look back over the balcony railing and felt a lump solidify in his throat. His mother’s garden was in full bloom.

This was too much. It had been a bitter journey, but in the end he had reconciled with her death and with the knowledge that all vestiges of her life, save Loki himself, had perished either in Ragnarok or by Thanos’ hand.
Yet here she is.

Seeing that no response was forthcoming from Loki, Frigga tried again. ‘You truly do look unwell. Don’t tell me you were awake all night with your books, and before a day like today.’

Of all the things he had missed about Asgard, being chided as if he were a child again had not been one of them. Loki had a number of snide comments at the ready, but as he peered at his mother’s concerned expression, he couldn’t bring himself to utter any of them.

‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘It was ill-advised. I was tired, likely that was why I erred with the spell.’

‘Do you want to go over it together?’ Perhaps tomorrow or the day after.’

Loki smiled. He and his mother had spent so many days in the privy of her personal library, working through arcane texts or experimenting with magic of their own making. Although he usually despised to see his errors exposed, he had never minded sharing his troubles with his mother. Had there actually been a spell that was proving troublesome, he would have told Frigga about it there and then.

‘I think I know where I went wrong,’ he said instead.

‘Still, I would rather you weren’t alone if you attempt the spell again. If these are the side effects, you’re playing with something dangerous.’

If you knew exactly what, mother, you’d be aghast.

‘There was nothing dangerous about it until I skipped two steps in the instructions.’

Frigga shook her head — the familiar gesture that over the years had come to embody Frigga’s repeated admonitions that he needed to be careful when it came to magic.

‘Let us finish breakfast then,’ she said, resting her hand on Loki’s shoulder.

He flinched. She hadn’t touched him since Odin had thrown him in a cell for his attempted invasion of Midgard. That had been the tell-tale sign to her projections. She had always been quick to draw him into her arms, to smooth his hair or to brush away stray speck of dust on his jacket. But not after Loki had disgraced himself.

I can’t. This is too much.

‘I’ve had as much food as I can stomach right now.’ He tried to still the quiver in his voice. ‘Forgive me. I will see you later, mother.’

Not waiting for Frigga’s response, he fled.

Loki all but ran down the short corridor from his mother’s quarters to the wing he shared with Thor. Paying little attention to what was around him, he nearly knocked over a pair of maids. Loki threw out a hurried apology to the two women and flung open the door to his own quarters. Suddenly, the manic energy that had propelled him away from his mother dissipated. He slid the door shut and leant against it.

It was all as he remembered it. The oak wood furnishings, the slightly faded tapestries, the burn mark
in the rug by the door. Even the smell — a peculiar mix of leather from the sparring clothes he always neglected to put away, the herbs kept in his workroom and the scent of jasmine drifting through the open windows — was unmistakably familiar.

Yet Loki crept through his rooms as if he were an interloper. Or rather, he supposed he was. This space belonged to his younger self.

*He doesn’t exist anymore. The spell annihilated his mind and I stole his body.*

Loki had changed little about the rooms in decades so there was nothing that could give him a clue as to the date the spell had brought him to until he entered the bedroom. The servants, knowing that he preferred to dress himself, had set out his clothes for him. The inner garments were carefully laid out on the bed, while the outer layer of armour and the accompanying cape had been placed onto a specially-constructed valet stand in the corner of the room. Even in this disassembled state, he recognised the clothing immediately.

Loki seized the undershirt and studied the cuffs. He had accidentally dripped a corrosive potion across a sleeve the second time he had worn it, burning several small holes through the fabric. But the cuffs on this undershirt carried no damage. Loki strode over to the armour. He searched the surface for scratches and examined the leather straps for any marks of wear. None. This entire outfit was brand new.

Frigga had implied there was something out of the ordinary occurring today. Now he knew — Thor’s coronation.

His suspicions confirmed, Loki swore. He had set out to kill Thanos, but here he was a decade into the past and half a universe away from where he wanted to be. In fact, Loki wasn’t even sure where Thanos had been this early on. What was Loki supposed to do now? Play along like a puppet, re-treading the same old paths until he could get to Thanos? Living through all of that had been bad enough once, he had absolutely no desire to repeat the experience.

Except, he didn’t have to follow along. If he planned to change the future later on and prevent the Snap, why not go back further? Here his mother still lived, so did his father and brother. Asgard too stood in its full summer glory. Why should he stand back when this was the chance to prevent all the death and destruction the next decade would bring?

‘This time everyone gets to live,’ Loki muttered.

A giddiness he hadn’t felt since he was a child overtook him as he imagined a future where Ragnarok was only a bad dream and the works of the Infinity Gauntlet only a figment of a morbid imagination. Magic was a fickle mistress, but sometimes the gifts it offered were unparalleled.

A wide grin on his face, Loki drummed his fingers against his thigh. What now? He had to begin somewhere after all and since the spell had brought him to this particular morning, there had to have been a reason for it.

Loki pursed his lips as realisation struck him — his ploy to disturb Thor’s coronation.
Coronation

The moment Loki took his place on the stairs that led up to the throne, Frigga rested her hand on his forearm and softly said something to him. Loki couldn’t parse out a single word. He supposed she was trying to be discreet, but there was no need for that. The crowd assembled in the hall was restless and all their excited chattering blended together into a discordant din.

Still, her expression told him enough.

He leaned towards her until his lips were half an inch from her ear. ‘I’m fine, truly. Do forgive me for earlier, I was not myself.’

She smiled indulgently and Loki was certain she didn’t believe him. To his relief, however, his mother didn’t press the matter. She adjusted a fold in his cape, then drew back.

Loki heard the roaring long before he saw Thor. Cheering from the tens of thousands assembled in Asgard’s Great Hall sent the walls and pillars vibrating. And Thor wasn’t shy about lingering to entertain the crowd. Several minutes passed until the raucous cheers spread to the front half of the hall and the crowd finally parted, revealing Thor strutting out with his hammer aloft.

As Thor continued his unhurried progress to the dais where the throne of Asgard awaited him, Loki felt like his vision had split in two. He saw Thor decked out in the best armour in the Nine Realms, flipping Mjolnir about as if it were a toy to the delights of the assembled thousands all in their best silks and satins. He saw too a Thor bereft of his hammer, his cloak, his helmet, even his eye. This Thor too moved slowly through the crowd, but it was a wariness, not a desire to show-off that set his pace. And around him, the much smaller crowd, barely a smile to be found between them, stood quietly in what clothes they had left.

We live so long. How can so much change in only a few years?

At last Thor came to the foot of the dais. He sank to one knee and slipped off his helmet. Loki chuckled. His brother’s hair hung at that awkward length about an inch below his ears. What had he been thinking? Of course, the same question could have been asked about the wink he sent their mother and the conspiratorial grin he offered his friends, who stood in a line on the opposite side of the dais to Loki and Frigga. If they seemed amused by Thor’s behaviour, Odin clearly wasn’t.

Nevertheless, he rose from his seat and brought down his spear. The assembled throng fell silent.

‘Thor Odinson,’ he said, ‘my kin, my firstborn son, so long entrusted with the mighty hammer Mjolnir, forged in the heart of a dying star. Its power has no equal as a weapon to destroy or as a tool to build. It is a fitting weapon for a king.’

Loki swallowed the solidifying lump in his throat. This was the moment it had all begun. Certainly, he had discovered a way to pass unseen between Asgard and Jotunheim months before. The agreement with the frost giants to have them come and disrupt the coronation had been in the works for weeks. But this was the moment he had actually opened the portal to let them through.

This time around his task was simple. He needed only to do nothing.

Yet he still found himself tuning out his father’s words and focusing only on Odin’s face, lest it reveal some hint that he detected an intrusion. But there was nothing, not even once Odin finished his preamble and began the ceremonial oaths themselves.
‘Do you swear to guard the Nine Realms?’ he asked.

‘I swear,’ Thor responded without hesitation.

‘Do you swear to preserve the peace?’

‘I swear.’

‘Do you swear to cast aside all selfish ambition and to pledge yourself only to the good of the realm?’

Odin’s voice had risen at this last question and Thor’s reply was similarly emphatic. Grinning, he raised up Mjolnir as if saluting a hard-won victory. Odin, on the other hand, seemed to grow more sombre.

‘Then on this day,’ he said after a deep breath, ‘I, Odin Borson, proclaim you king of Asgard!’

The roar from the crowd was quite unlike anything Loki had heard in his life, but to his disbelief, the sound swelled further when Thor rose to his feet and turned to face the gathered Asgardians. Loki too couldn’t contain a cheer, although his cause for jubilation differed to the rest of the witnesses to the coronation. The first time around Odin hadn’t been able to finish his speech; Thor’s ascension to king today was proof Loki could change history.

After a minute or two, Thor brought Mjolnir down to hang at his side and turned to face his father once more. Odin beckoned him up. And slowly, the silly grin on his face vanishing without a trace, Thor moved up the stairs past all his friends, past Loki, past their mother and to the top of the dais where Odin alone stood.

Lord Agnar, who had once offered Gungnir to Loki, had sunk to his knees as he did so. But not Odin. Once Thor was right before his father, Odin remained upright and merely extended his hands, Gungnir resting in his upturned palms. From where he stood, Loki could see their mouths moving, but they spoke too quietly for their voices to carry. Whatever was said, Thor concluded the conversation with a fervent shake of his head and took Gungnir into his left hand.

This is your doing, don’t pretend otherwise.

And now you have your own part to play in this pageantry.

Loki sucked in a breath. As brother to the new king, it was his duty to acknowledge Thor’s new position. The stairs made positioning rather awkward, but he managed to make his bow look graceful nevertheless. Beside him, his mother sank into a curtsy and there was a deafening rustle of clothing and scraping of boots as the rest of Asgard bowed to their new king.

When Loki straightened back up, the sense that he had abandoned reality only intensified. Thor sat rigid on the throne, his back not quite touching the backrest. Huginn had perched himself on the very top of the throne, while Muninn had taken the right armrest and let out a loud caw. Odin himself took up a place beside the throne; a reflection of his new role as Thor’s guide and chief adviser.

Loki wasn’t sure if Odin had made some cue or if Thor himself decided it was time for him to speak, but he nudged Muninn off the armrest, then turned his attention back to his audience.
‘Father,’ he said, ‘mother, people of Asgard, ambassadors from realms near and far, I thank you for
the warm manner with which I am greeted today. My father has said many wise words already and I
do not hope to match them, so I won’t bore you with my prattle. Rather, let us celebrate and make
sure the efforts of the cooks do not go to waste.’

The feast was glorious. Loki eagerly dug into the dozens of dishes on offer and drank until he felt
himself begin to lose control of his sensibilities. After the Snap, the loss of millions of workers and
the resulting political instability had disrupted most supply chains. Many basic items increased in
price by orders of magnitude or disappeared altogether. Wong and Loki had never gone hungry in
the Sanctum, but after relying on the same few foodstuffs for months, the lack of variety had begun
to grate.

Once Loki couldn’t swallow another mouthful, he ventured out to see the entertainment on offer and
to clear the cotton wool in his head. The previous night, at the feast to mark the eve of Thor’s
coronation, there had been a skilled bard and a troop of lithe dancers from Vanaheim on hand to
entertain the gathered. Today, there were easily a dozen bards and dance groups on show. The
festivities stretched out far beyond the Great Hall, to the courtyards of the palace and down to the
streets of the city itself.

Loki made an unhurried loop of the courtyards, stopping to amuse himself at a lewd puppet show
and to cringe at a duo on harps, who were reciting a mangled tale of Loki and Thor’s early exploits.
At the fifth mention of Loki’s ‘fierce orbs’, his patience reached its limits and he turned to head back
inside the palace.

Before he was halfway there, however, he spotted Thor and his usual quartet of hangers-on at the
edge of a broad square. The palace guard typically used this space for their training sessions; today it
had been re-purposed into an arena for dancing. A group of musicians were playing a lively tune and
there were at least a dozen pairs dancing, yet Thor’s voice boomed over them all.

‘You must dance with me!’ he proclaimed. After a moment, he added. ‘Nonsense, Lady Dagny, I’m
sure you’re as graceful on the dance floor as a swan is in water.’

Loki slipped past the revellers charring idly around the edges of the dance area. Thor’s cheeks were
flushed and his gait was a little unsteady as he took a step towards the mortified-looking Lady
Dagny. He had left his hammer somewhere, but he still held onto their father’s spear and in fact,
seemed to be using it to help him stand without swaying. Loki marvelled, it took many pints to
achieve such results. But then today he’d had time enough to be drunk thrice over. The festivities had
begun early in the afternoon and now the sun was beginning to set.

‘My king,’ Lady Dagny stammered out, ‘please forgive me. As much as it shames me to admit it, I
am a poor dancer.’

‘Nonsense, my lady,’ Thor replied, again too loudly. ‘Lady Sif, will you hold onto Gungnir?’

Both women recognised the futility of resistance. With bewildered eyes, Sif shifted her goblet into
her left hand and accepted the spear from Thor. Dagny, for her part, let Thor whisk her away into the
flurry of dancing couples.

In a way, Loki could see what Thor was trying to do. Lady Dagny was petite and flaxen-haired, just
about the exact type that tended to draw Thor’s eye. She was also painfully shy. As a child, she had
often danced with her older sisters and her natural grace had been obvious even to Loki and Thor, who at the time had been barely more than children themselves. But now that her older sisters were married off and Dagny was at an age where she was expected to dance with men, she tended to hug the edges of the room. She met any proposal for a dance with wide, startled eyes and a shuddered refusal.

Thor was merely attempting to draw her out of her shell. He was just being a boor about it.

_Sweet mercy, I’d near forgot what he could be like._

Frowning, Loki shifted over to Sif. ‘Let me take the spear.’

She was all too eager to be rid of it, but then she cocked her head and offered him a sly half-grin. ‘Why so sour, Loki? Having second thoughts about those horns?’

In fact, Loki’d had second, third and fourth thoughts about the horned helmet currently adorning his head, both in this timeline and the previous. The helmet had been a product of cringe-worthy insecurity. Having decided that his lithe frame would never match Thor’s or Odin’s broad shoulders, Loki had decided to at least make sure he looked as tall as possible. He now paid a steep price for his vanity. Unless the helmet was positioned at the exact right angle, it pinched the top of his ears and the weight of it inevitably led to a headache. And, above all, he looked like a gilded grasshopper.

Not that Loki was about to share his honest thoughts with Sif. Out of Thor’s four closest friends, she had always been the most unpalatable and had caused Loki the most trouble.

He offered Sif the most charming he could summon. ‘I’m not sour, I’m sad. For you that is. You’ve spent half your life pining for him and you still haven’t caught on. He’s not interested in you.’

‘Were you not Thor’s brother,’ she sneered, ‘I would —’

‘The king’s brother,’ Loki retorted and sent a covert spell towards Sif’s goblet.

It was one they were both familiar with; Loki had discovered Sif’s hatred for crickets back when they were still drilling with wooden weapons. He waited for Sif’s indignant shriek, but it didn’t come. Sif snorted and shaking her head, walked away.

Loki tracked her retreat until the crowd swallowed all traces of her. Had she put some protection on the goblet? Surely not, Sif detested magic and thought it the coward’s way out. She wouldn’t resort to it unless her life was at stake. Was it the spell then? But it was an easy one, Loki had mastered it about the same time he learned basic arithmetic. And now that he thought about it, despite the healing spell he had worked hours ago when he had been readying himself for the coronation ceremony, there was still a nagging ache in his shoulder.

If there was something off about his magic, he needed to find out exactly what. Loki pushed through the crowds, muttering half-hearted excuses, until he was back at the entrance hall of the palace. From there he turned in the opposite direction to the clamour and gleam of the Great Hall, then hurried up the side-stairs up to the second floor.

‘Loki?’ Odin called out.

Loki froze in mid-step, suddenly all too aware that he still held Gungnir in his hand. Sheepishly, he trudged over to the second-floor landing where Odin stood, the man’s expression inscrutable.

‘Will you take this?’ Loki thrust out the spear towards his father. ‘Thor wanted to dance; I don’t know what to do with it.’
Odin took Gungnir from him, but his eyes never strayed from Loki. ‘You mother said you have been unwell.’

And right now Loki longed to tell his father that he still felt ill and was about to retire to his quarters. Odin would let him go and Loki would have the evening to investigate what precisely was going on with his magic. But it would only be a matter of time until his mother heard he was ill claiming illness again. She would descend upon him with at least a trio of healers in tow. What if the healers noticed he was not the Loki who had originally occupied this body? No, he couldn’t risk this discovery.

What then to tell his father? Now that they were alone, there was much he wanted to discuss with Odin. He had more or less come to terms with his true parentage after a number of bitter years, but nagging questions remained that Odin had never deigned to answer. As for Hela, Loki had a hundred questions about her. However, he couldn’t just ask outright, not without giving some account of how he had come by such knowledge. Besides, this did not feel like a night for hard questions — it was a celebration after all and truthfully, his father looked weary already.

‘I do feel better now, father.’ Loki replied, uncertain if Odin would find it odd how long it had taken him to come up with an answer. ‘It’s just… I find myself lost in thoughts. Tonight marks a new beginning for Thor; I have to question what this means for me.’

Odin motioned for Loki to follow him, which brought a quiet smile to Loki’s face. Perhaps it was the fact he spent so much of his time seated and nearly motionless upon his throne, but Odin had always preferred to walk as he conversed. Loki fell in step with his father and they walked along the long gallery that overlooked the eastern side of the city.

‘I believe one day Thor will be a great king,’ Odin said. ‘But he is still young and in need of much guidance. While I still live, I will advise him as best I can. Once I am gone, it is my hope that he will be able to rely on your good counsel.’

‘He will,’ Loki replied reflexively, then sucked in a breath as he finally understood something that should have been clear to him long ago.

Had his father never articulated what he was attempting to do with Thor’s coronation? Or had Loki been too bull-headed to listen to what his father was saying? Looking back at it, the first time around, Loki had been so focused on the faults of his brother’s personality, Odin’s decision to give Thor the throne of Asgard had seemed ludicrous.

But Odin had not been looking at the faults of his first-born son, but at his potential and was presently trying to smooth over the transition period. Better to guide his son through the first difficult days of his kingship as his adviser than to cling onto power until death took him and leave a grief-stricken Thor to muddle through on his own.

_And he was right. I saw with my own eyes the king Thor became._

_Certainly, a better king than I 'd been._

That was all well, but Loki couldn’t just let the matter drop as if he were the vision of a dutiful son. His younger self would have pouted and Loki was concerned a sudden personality change in him would raise alarm.

‘You told us, and more than once, that we were both born to be kings,’ Loki said.

Odin glanced back at his youngest. ‘Do you wish to be king in Thor’s place?’
Most definitely not.
As his fingers shed the warm hues of his Asgardian colouring, Loki pressed his lips into a thin line. If the vivid blue that replaced the familiar, comforting tones of pink and yellow wasn’t discomforting enough, Loki could feel the flesh under his skin itch as his fingernails thickened and raised lines emerged over his knuckles. He supposed he ought to have been glad his true form was no longer marred with badly-healed burns, but in truth, even now, every moment Loki spent with his true form exposed left his stomach crawling with unease.

But how much was it costing him to keep his true face hidden day in and day out, year after year, century after century? He had never fretted about it overly much, although for years he had suspected the sustained effort of his concealment narrowed his capabilities. In the past, he had wielded magic enough for his purposes.

The time-travel, however, had left its mark. After hours of trial and error, Loki had confirmed to himself that his magic remained, albeit in a crippled form. The simplest works now required thrice the effort they had taken previously and the more complex spells eluded him entirely. Loki could only hope that this was a temporary problem.

If not, he had to find other sources of strength. His magic, not his tongue or his knives, had kept him alive thus far. Without it, he was dangerously exposed.

Heavy footsteps echoed around the room; he was no longer alone. Loki restored the concealment and mentally chided himself for his stupidity in exposing himself in as public a place as the palace library.

Leaning back into his chair, he called out. ‘Thor, I’m here.’

He probably needn’t have bothered. It was late in the evening and with no one else about, Loki had extinguished most of the lights. The sole remaining ones were over the central passage and over the desk Loki was working at. Only a blind man would have failed to spot him. On the other hand, it made Loki feel less like a recluse to reach out to his brother so.

‘We missed you in the training grounds,’ Thor said. He dragged over a chair from one of the nearby desks and slumped into it. ‘You must be lost in a very fascinating project; no one’s caught more than a brief glance of you in days.’

‘Frustrating, not fascinating,’ Loki replied.

His words were true enough. He had spent the three days since Thor’s coronation buried under piles of books, initially from his own collection, then from the palace library. Yet any answer as to what he could do about his magic eluded Loki. Although this was infuriating, he wasn’t surprised in the slightest. That was the risk with dabbling in unproven, theoretical magic. When things went awry, there were no troubleshooting manuals on hand.

Thor wiped the sweat still beading on his forehead, then pushed his dust-coated hair back behind his ears. ‘What’s this for?’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ Loki said. ‘It was just a stray thought I had and I’m starting to think it’s not actually possible, so it might be best to just drop the matter.’

‘Not possible? That sounds like a challenge.’
Loki chuckled. If he were trying to push Thor towards something, Thor had just given him the perfect opening. Another few words from Loki and Thor could be on his way to slay some mythical beast in the darkest caverns of Muspelheim.

*It’s almost a pity all I want is for him to drop this topic.*

‘Magic’s not your forte, Thor, best you stay out of it.’ Shaking his head, Loki slammed shut the three books he had laid out on the table in front of him. ‘What about you? You’ve been king for three days now, have you insulted any ambassadors yet?’

‘Four years it’s been, Loki. When will you stop bringing it up?’

‘Well, it’s not an easy thing to forget,’ Loki said. ‘Father was already beginning to preparations for your coronation, then you go and, in about a quarter of an hour, make such a mess of things that Alfheim was ready to start a war. Spectacular work there.’

Thor bristled. ‘The light elves are easily offended.’

‘I’ve always found them perfectly personable.’

‘Maybe if you’d made some move to help, instead of smirking and snickering at my misfortune!’

‘Believe me, there are some things even I can’t set right,’ Loki threw back, somewhat startled how easy it had been to stir his brother’s ire.

The Thor of his time hadn’t been nearly so easy to bait. In fact, that Thor would have been able to extricate himself out of that awkward situation with the elves with a modicum of grace, not dig himself in further until he had insulted not only the ambassador’s wife, but the entire nobility of Alfheim.

This, infinitely more than Thor’s hair or his eyes, made obvious the vast chasm between the man Thor had been before his exile to Midgard and the man Thor had become before Thanos took him. But what had been the price that accompanied that personal growth? High, far too high. Yet Loki had to wonder, if he did manage to change things enough – sparing Thor, himself and everyone around them even a fraction of the pain the coming years could bring – what would be the trade-off?

*Stop it. You’ve already knocked out the first variable; second-guessing yourself now is a waste of time.*

Thor rose from his seat and Loki was about to bid him farewell — Thor preferred to fling about furniture not words, so this was about the place Loki expected Thor to cut off their discussion. But Thor didn’t leave. He watched Huginn and Muninn dive down from the library’s vaulted ceiling and circle the room, cawing in tandem.

‘We’re under attack,’ Thor declared.

And he was off before Loki had a chance to give voice to any of the questions on his mind. Recovering from surprise, Loki followed his brother out of the library, through two public halls, along several corridors and then down into the bowels of the palace.

At the entrance to the Weapons Vault, they nearly stumbled over a guard lying motionless on the ground. Crystals of ice covered every inch of his skin and the ground around him.

‘Frost giants,’ Thor muttered.
Is this the Norns cackling at me?

While Thor stepped over the guard and strode towards the open doors to the Weapon’s Vault, Loki’s gaze lingered over the frozen corpse.

‘The guards work in pairs,’ he said. ‘Where’s the other one?’

The only answer he received was a familiar whir, which sent the floor vibrating. Loki ducked down just in time to avoid being struck in the head by Mjolnir, but Thor seemed oblivious to his near fratricide. Mjolnir aloft, he burst into the vault.

By the time Loki caught up to his brother, a frost giant lay dead on the floor. Unfortunately, his two companions seemed in perfect health and they had the second Asgardian guardsman cornered, the man’s back pressed against the pillar that held the Casket of Ancient Winters.

Thor took down both frost giants with a single swing of his hammer, but rather than looking relieved, the guardsman’s face paled.

Loki whipped around. At least half a dozen frost giants now stood at the vault’s entrance.

He drew his knives and charged towards them. From the first moment, he felt he was on the back foot in this fight — they were all taller than him and their ice-forged weapons offered them a longer reach. Loki tried to get in as close as possible, so that their long limbs and swords would become a hindrance, not a help. But the tallest of the frost giants caught his arm and swung him around, sending Loki into an unused niche of the vault.

‘How’d they get in here!’ Thor demanded. He was doing good work with the hammer, although the enclosed space limited the range of his movement. ‘Did Heimdall let them through?’

Loki scrambled to his feet and launched himself at the frost giant closest to him. He found a gap in the giant’s armour, sinking his knife deep into the flesh above the frost giant’s hip. Loki staggered back. An injured opponent wasn’t a dead one.

Besides, Thor was right, they needed to find how the frost giants had gotten into Asgard. Loki’s knife found its target in the neck of another giant as Loki forced his way out the vault. Making sure to keep his knives raised should someone attempt to engage him, Loki skirted around the dead guard and took a more thorough look around.

He swore when he spotted the portal. The pillars along the passageway hid it well, it was no wonder Thor and Loki had missed it on their way in. But this portal was at the exact spot he had intended to open one during Thor’s coronation.

This shouldn’t be happening.

Someone struck him across the middle of his back with enough force to send Loki skittering forward a foot. He swerved around. A frost giant grabbed Loki’s right arm and wrenched it counterclockwise until Loki’s grip slackened. The knife in his hand slid out, clattering along the flagstones.

‘Look,’ the giant sneered, ‘I’ve caught myself a pretty princeling.’

Just as Loki was about to make use of his other knife, a second frost giant caught his left hand. This one, a female, grinned and pressed her fingers tighter around his forearm.

Oh no, no, no. Fuck.
Even through his thick shirt, he could feel tendrils of frost spreading out from the frost giant’s hand out over his own skin. There was no need to look down either. The confused expressions of the frost giants told Loki more than he wanted to know.

Thor leaped out the doors to the vault with a furious roar. Not a second later, the doors were flung off their hinges and torn into pieces in a torrent of ice.

Loki recovered from the shock of seeing the Casket in use faster than the frost giants. He head-butted the female one, breaking her nose. Her grip on Loki loosened, so Loki twisted out of her hold and stabbed the other frost giant in the thigh. This was hardly a fatal stroke, but it allowed Loki to slip away.

Meanwhile Mjolnir whistled through the air, sending chunks of blue and white ice flying in every direction. Loki could barely see the frost giant currently wielding the Casket amid the furore. Nevertheless, he couldn’t stand idly by — this wasn’t a weapon Thor could deal with on his own.

Loki lunged forward. Just as he did so, Thor altered the direction of his swing, throwing off Loki’s calculations. Loki had to awkwardly dive sideways to avoid his brother’s wrath and landed far further from his target than he would have liked.

‘Thanks, Thor,’ Loki muttered as he clambered up.

He struck out at the nearest target available — the giant’s calf.

The frost giant howled with pain and swung the casket down. Throwing his arms over his head, Loki rolled away. Just as he prepared himself for the Casket’s full force to come down on him, the torrent stopped.

Loki lowered his hands just enough to see what’s happening and found Thor standing over him with a satisfied smile on his face.

‘He’s dead,’ Thor said, offering his hand to Loki.

The frost giant was indeed dead; anyone would be after Thor swung Mjolnir into their head. Loki cringed at the bloody sight, but he had to admit this had been the decisive stroke of this encounter. The Casket lay idle beside the frost giant’s body and the three giants who still remained on their feet turned to flee.

Loki brought his hand up to close their portal. But when he completed the incantation, nothing happened.

One of the giants slipped through to the other side.

‘Close the portal!’ Thor hollered.

The second frost giant reached the portal. Loki tried the spell-work again. The result was the same. The remaining frost giant jumped into the portal and disappeared from view. The portal’s glowing edges pulsed, then rolled in until the portal was no more.
Brother

That wasn’t my doing.

Loki pursed his lips, berating himself for playing around with untested spell-work until Thor’s disgruntled muttering startled him out of his thoughts.

‘The second guard didn’t survive the power of the Casket,’ Thor explained when Loki threw him a questioning look.

‘How many would?’ Loki replied and gestured to the body of the frost giant who had wielded the Casket. ‘How did he get to it in the first place?’

‘I brought him down earlier on. He wasn’t as dead as I thought he would be,’ Thor answered curtly as he surveyed the empty space where the portal had been.

‘Mistakes happen. It doesn’t matter now — the frost giant’s dead and the Casket is still in Asgardian hands.’

To be precise, the Casket now lay on its side in the middle of the Weapons Vault’s ante-chamber, amid melting ice and washes of spilt blood. Loki shifted away from it. Thor could pick the Casket up and return it to its designated stand. It was bad enough the frost giants had seen Loki’s true form, he didn’t need to offer Thor that revelation this evening as well.

‘If they can open a portal into the palace, the Casket isn’t safe. Nor anything else in the vault,’ Thor replied. He seemed to give up hope of finding answers in the empty air where the portal had been and turned his attention to the bodies now scattered all around them.

Loki cocked his head. ‘That might well be true. We could move the vault’s contents to the Treasury and order for the guard to be doubled throughout the palace.’

‘That’s not enough.’

‘Father would know what to do,’ Loki said. He didn’t much care for the dark undertone in Thor’s words. ‘Summon him.’

Thor started, then jerked to a stop. He crouched down beside one of the frost giants lying slumped by the door to the vault and flipped him onto his back. ‘This one’s alive.’

The frost giant’s thigh and shoulder bled, but his life didn’t seem to be in immediate danger. Consequences of Thor’s wrath aside, of course.

Thor slid his fingers under the collar of the frost giant’s chest piece and lifted him off the ground. ‘Your name!’

‘Baugi,’ the frost giant muttered.

‘I have questions. It’ll be best for you if you answer them, and answer them well.’ As he spoke, Thor lifted the frost giant higher until Baugi’s body spasmed and he moaned with pain. Baugi’s armour hid the exact nature of his injuries, but Loki suspected Thor’s rough handling had put additional pressure on the shoulder wound. Whether this was his intention or a happy accident, Thor gave no clue. He waited until Baugi stilled, then went on. ‘How did you get into Asgard?’
‘A portal!’ Baugi let out a strangled chuckle. ‘Has all the gold in this thrice-damned palace left you blind?’

‘Who opened the portal? How was this done?’ Loki asked.

‘Not my place to know these things.’

‘So now you claim blindness?’ Loki scoffed. ‘How could you not see who held the portal open for you when you came through?

‘I didn’t stop to look around.’

At that, Thor wrenched up Baugi even further, until Baugi was nearly eye to eye with Thor, but then Thor groaned in frustration and released his grip on the frost giant. Baugi flopped to the floor and screamed as the fall jarred his injuries. Thor wasn’t done, however. With a warm smile, he set Mjolnir atop the giant’s solar plexus.

‘Think quietly for a while, my friend,’ he said. ‘I expect you will find you have more to tell me than you first thought. Call out when you’re ready to talk.’

Loki had to make a concerted effort not to grimace at Baugi’s struggle to take a breath while Mjolnir’s full weight rested on his chest. Even when Mjolnir hadn’t been reserved for Thor’s use, the weapon hadn’t been an easy weight to bear, let alone to shift. Loki remembered that full well.

Thudding on the stairs interrupted Thor’s impromptu interrogation. Both Loki and Thor stiffened, half-anticipating another fight, but it was their father, flanked by Tyr, the captain of the Einherjar, and a dozen of the palace guard. Odin wore little more than leggings and nightshirt, save for the sword at his side.

‘The ravens are slow to forget their old ways,’ Odin said. ‘They spoke of an intrusion, but I see the new king has attended to the matter.’

‘Frost giants, father. They were after the Casket,’ Thor replied.

Odin and Tyr were silent for several seconds, seemingly just taking in the scene before them. It was hardly a glorious battlefield — a dank chamber with bodies scattered all about and everywhere, melting mounds of ice that would soon turn the whole floor into a great, red-tinted puddle. And amid all that, the great treasure of Jotunheim still lay like a discarded trinket.

‘Guards, clear the dead,’ Odin said, then lifted up the Casket and beckoned his sons into the Weapons Vault. ‘You had best explain to Tyr and me what happened here.’

Thor waited until they were out of earshot of the guardsmen before he spoke. Perhaps he was still disappointed to have allowed frost giants to reach the Casket; his account was brief and lacklustre — all of four sentences. Loki then added a few words for the tale, but there was little for him to say unless he wanted the night’s focus to turn to his crippled magic or the true shade of his skin.

‘What will you do now, Thor?’ Odin asked once he set the Casket back to its designated place in the vault.

‘One frost giant still lives,’ Thor replied. ‘I was in the middle of questioning him when you arrived.’

Tyr grinned, revealing the wide gap in the upper row of his teeth where a frost giant polearm once struck him. ‘The one writhing under the hammer, I take it? A good start, my king. I can work with him from here; he will be talking soon enough.’
They gave the guardsmen time to clear the space. The frost giants were carried out quickly, but as per ancient custom, the two dead Asgardians were wrapped in silken sheets and lifted up on ceremonial shields. They had died defending their realm. Fire and Valhalla awaited them.

Once only Baugi remained, Thor called for the guardsmen to leave and lifted Mjolnir off Baugi.

The frost giant gulped mouthfuls of air, his chest nearly spasming. After perhaps a dozen of these panicked breaths, Baugi must have become cognizant of his situation. He clambered backwards, away from the Asgardians peering down on him.

Tyr, although only a few centuries younger than Odin, still retained the full vigour of his youth. He moved swiftly. In one deft motion, he grabbed Baugi and pulled the frost giant up.

‘Stand!’ Tyr demanded. ‘Stand upright, you miserable beast.’

Baugi did seem to try, but his injured leg wouldn’t hold him. Within moments he collapsed to his knees and sank his head down to his chest.

Tyr kicked him. ‘Too pathetic to even stand and face your enemies.’ Tyr grabbed a fistful of Baugi’s hair and pulled back until Baugi finally lifted his head. ‘Pay respects to your betters, beast. Here you are before Thor, the king of Asgard and protector of the Nine Realms. You are here before Odin and before me, Tyr.’

Baugi produced an incomprehensible grunt, which sent Tyr into laughter.

Tyr leaned down and spoke into the frost giant’s ear. ‘I take it these names mean something to you? Yes, what you fear is true. I am the Tyr who took Gjallir and who slaughtered the Roskvar. This is the Odin, who broke the might of Jotunheim and took the Casket of Ancient Winters from your miserable race. Think well before you choose your next words.’

‘What do you want? I already told your king what I know,’ Baugi replied.

While Odin seemed tired more than anything else, Thor wore an expression of stunned fascination. Loki too found himself disarmed by the scene before them. Tyr featured in countless songs and sagas, but Loki and Thor had known him primarily as the dour man whom Sif called father. The man had made a valiant stand against the Dark Elves before he fell, but Loki had been in Svartalfheim by then and heard the tale only later. This was the first time Loki saw firsthand the Tyr the bards had sung about.

*I can’t say I like him any better like this.*

‘Tell us about the portal,’ Loki said, lest Tyr go on any longer.

‘Why? Won’t change the truth, will it?’ Baugi replied. ‘Here you stand amid these great names, yet you don’t even get an introduction. But there’s no point introducing you, is there? I saw you try to close the portal and you couldn’t. What good is a wielder who can’t even do that much?’

Tyr glanced at Loki, then delivered a kick square to the small of Baugi’s back. ‘Tell us about the portal.’

‘I don’t know anything,’ Baugi insisted.
‘Lord Tyr, step back.’ Loki said.

Baugi had to be lashing out at him because he was the only target available, Loki couldn’t see what other motive there could be. Still, there was no reason he couldn’t introduce himself to the frost giant. Neither Thor nor Tyr had produced results so far, perhaps Loki would.

‘I’m Loki Odinson, prince of Asgard,’ he said and conjured a circle of four-foot high flames around Baugi. ‘Well met.’

The frost giant shrunk into himself and tried to lift himself off the floor, but Loki sent the flames higher until they licked at the ceiling. Odin and Tyr threw up their hands to shield their eyes from the fire’s heat. At their feet, the puddle rapidly consuming the floor began to hiss and bubble.

‘It was a witch. One of the women from the Bradi clan!’ Baugi called out over the crackling fire.

Loki snuffed out the flames and inhaled deeply. After a few moments, when his vision stopped swimming and the tremors in his hands calmed, he motioned for Baugi to continue. ‘What else?’

‘My prince commanded us to go with him, so we did.’ Baugi wiped off the rivulets of sweat running down his face. ‘I don’t know anything more.’

‘Your prince?’ Thor asked.

‘Helblindi.’

Odin’s eye narrowed. ‘Laufey’s boy?’

‘Yes.’

Laufey’s son? His brother? Loki had heard of Helblindi before. In the last years before Ragnarok, news seldom had come from Jotunheim. Since the realm remained hostile to Asgard and neither Loki nor anyone else among the Asgardians hungered to interfere in frost giant politics, Loki had never paid much attention, but Helblindi had featured frequently in those snippets of information. He had led a number of influential tribes in the civil war that Laufey’s death had instigated.

Yet Loki never realised they were related. Were the poor sources or his own inattention to blame? Or had Helblindi himself chosen to forswear his father’s name?

_You can never know now, can you?_

‘Did the prince escape?’ Odin asked, inching towards Baugi.

‘No,’ came Baugi’s sullen reply.

Odin’s shoulders sunk and in that moment the long centuries of his life seemed to catch up with him. ‘And now Laufey has cause for fury beyond measure,’ he sighed. ‘Allfathers give us strength.’

‘Or perhaps this is settled. Helblindi made an assault on Asgard and paid for it. Laufey now knows for certain that our strength outmatches his,’ Loki said.

He hoped his words sounded sincere, because they certainly weren’t. This whole affair felt like a beginning of something, not an ending. In the muddled swirl of thoughts in his mind, one drew forth again and again: _This isn’t what fixed looks like._

‘No, the frost giants have violated the peace between our realms,’ Thor said. ‘How can I let that go unpunished? They walked right into the palace; they got to the Casket itself.’
‘Do not allow your anger to forget the profits diplomacy can bring,’ Odin replied.

‘It is too late for diplomacy.’ Tyr half-heartedly kicked Baugi in the side. ‘They have already declared war.’

Odin shook his head. ‘Too ha—’

‘No,’ Thor cut in, ‘the frost giants have no respect for peace treaties; they only came to heel because you and Tyr made them. Now you’re king no longer and they think I’m a weakling. They don’t know me and they don’t respect me, so they try their luck. The only way we can have peace is to show them I’ll not hesitate to strike them down whenever they give me cause to do so.’

Loki bit down on the inside of his cheek; this was all too familiar. Worse yet, this time Tyr beamed an encouraging smile at his young king. Chances were, any arguments Odin could make against war, Tyr would counter. The old war hound itched for another chance at glory.

‘How do you plan to strike them down then?’ Loki asked, then paused. ‘We have what we need from the frost giant, don’t we? Best not have him listening in on this.’

‘Quite right.’ Tyr whistled, then hollered so loudly he likely woke half the palace servants. ‘Guards! Attend to the prisoner and take him down to the cells!’

Four guards rushed in. Two grabbed Baugi’s arms and dragged him out, while the other two trailed behind, their spears pointed at Baugi’s back. They moved quickly, but Loki still caught the fear in their eyes. It had been centuries since frost giants had last been seen in Asgard.

‘Well, Thor, have you a plan?’ Loki pressed. ‘Or do you simply intend to march out to Jotunheim and hammer them into submission?’

Thor jerked his head towards Mjolnir. ‘The Einherjar and my hammer should more than suffice.’

‘I could have a regiment ready by tomorrow,’ Tyr said.

‘Oh, good,’ Loki replied dryly. ‘Thor, declare war if you so wish, you are the king now and we have a duty to obey. However, don’t act like a child and stomp about because someone dared to displease you. Think as a king and as a warrior. Once you do, the matter is quite clear — it is dangerous to leave your rear vulnerable to further attack.’

Odin nodded to his youngest. ‘A witch has opened a portal almost directly into the Weapons Vault, which holds the most valuable collection of relics in this half of the galaxy. Who is to say she cannot open another portal into Asgard, either in the same location or elsewhere. It would be unwise to take the Einherjar into Jotunheim and leave Asgard unprotected.’

‘What was this portal then, Loki? I don’t recount frost giants being able to enter the palace so freely before.’ Thor said.

‘The spell is common enough. The location, as you said, less so.’ Loki paused to weigh up how much he wanted to reveal. ‘It isn’t easy to open a portal between the realms ordinarily. I think, and this is the roughest of theories only, I think this is the first sign of the approaching Convergence. The boundaries between the realms have begun to weaken, making portals easier to create. It may be this area down by the vault is a particularly sensitive fracture point. How many more there are, I have no clue.’

Thor made a mock swing with Mjolnir. ‘Norns be damned. Fine, until we have a solution for these portals, we’ll have a regiment of the Einherjar in the palace to supplement the guard and another
regiment out patrolling the city. A third will come with me to Jotunheim. I want them ready by tomorrow.’

‘I cannot have that many men ready by then,’ Tyr replied, ‘not without stripping the outer villages —’

‘Which we cannot do, because a portal might open up anywhere,’ Thor finished for him.

Tyr sighed. ‘My king, give me four days and you shall have your soldiers.’

‘Fine,’ Thor groaned. ‘Go then and start your work, Tyr.’

‘Excuse me?’ a guard interjected during the brief pause in Loki and Frigga’s discussion.

Once they turned to the guard, however, his courage failed him and Frigga had to prompt the man to continue.

‘I-I just thought the king might be found here, your highness,’ the guard explained. ‘The captain just wanted to report that the vault has been emptied and everything has been relocated to the Treasury.’

The man looked somewhat bewildered, which Loki supposed was justified. It was a rare day when the Council Chamber was filled with sorcerers rather than the king’s councillors. But Thor, Tyr and Odin had left to inspect the first contingent of the Einherjar arriving to protect the palace, leaving the chamber vacant. Loki and Frigga saw no reason not to make use of the space in their absence. They were in need of a map and there were none better than the one in this chamber.

‘Thank you, Aldur,’ Frigga said. ‘I will pass on the message to my son. Was there anything else?’

The guard began to shake his head, then thought better of it. ‘Do you know what is to happen with the bodies?’

‘Prepare them for a warrior’s funeral of course.’

‘The frost giants too?’ The guard’s eyes widened.

‘Ah, that had —’

Loki rested his hand on his mother’s forearm. ‘I’ll look into the matter.’

In the furore of the night, he hadn’t had the chance to spare a thought about the frost giant bodies and apparently, no one else had either. What had his father ordered to be done with the three troublemakers from Thor’s coronation the first time around? Loki couldn’t recount; he had been too focused on Thor at that moment. What then was the appropriate disposal method? He couldn’t well leave it to Thor, not in the mood Thor was in. Nor did Loki want rotting corpses lying about in the palace. On the other hand, Asgardian sensibilities had to be considered.

‘Where were the bodies moved to? I would see them before I make a decision,’ Loki said, hoping that inspiration would strike soon.

The guard looked somewhat put out at the request, but took Loki down to the dungeons where an unused cell had been repurposed as a morgue. The frost giants, nine in all, were laid out in a row atop sheets of undyed canvas.
As Loki moved along the line of the dead, the guard spoke. ‘I’d not trouble yourself overly much about the bodies, your highness. After all, no matter the method we use to be rid of them, it’ll never match what their own families would’ve done.’

‘Pardon?’

‘I think it was Isinger the Blind who spoke of it.’ The man’s cheeks flushed — it wasn’t the place of a guard to school a prince of Asgard on history. ‘But other chronicles too. They feed the dead to their children.’

Loki grimaced. ‘Yes, I rather suspect the palace cooks can furnish the dining table with more palatable meat than Jotunn.’

The guard laughed and Loki threw up his hand to dismiss him. Isinger had indeed written about cannibalism among frost giants, but Isinger had also claimed that the old king Bor had bedded ninety-nine virgins in a single night.

‘Can’t say there’s much meat on any of you anyway,’ Loki muttered under his breath as he inspected the rest of the bodies.

The last frost giant in the line wore different armour to the rest. It hugged its wearer in a way only custom-made armour could and gleamed in the torchlight, elaborate revealing images of strange animals etched into the chest and shoulder pieces. Their leader then.

_Helblindi._

Loki hadn’t noticed it back at the Weapons Vault, but Helblindi was shorter than the others. Was short stature the lot of Laufey’s line or had Helblindi simply not yet grown to his full height? Loki didn’t actually know which of them was older.

Someone had turned Helblindi’s head so that the damage to the back of his head wasn’t so obvious and his passive, stiff face now stared up at Loki. There didn’t seem to be much resemblance between them. Helblindi clearly took after Laufey, while Loki favoured his mother — whoever she had been. If Odin knew her identity, he had never volunteered the information and Loki had never dared to ask. Now he had to wonder, was he a full-blood brother to Helblindi or merely a half-brother?

Either way, the point was moot. The Norns had decreed a battle between Thor and Helblindi. Thor had won. That was the end of it.

Except that wasn’t true. Loki had meddled with history, he had a hand in this.

_I traded one brother for another._

Running his hand through his tangled hair, Loki sighed. He was dwelling too long on a dead Jotunn with whom he had never exchanged so much as a word. There were more important issues to deal with.

By the time he caught up to the guard out in the corridor, Loki had an order ready. ‘Have their bodies cared for as if they were Asgardian and then kept in stasis,’ he said. ‘Chances are the king will make use of the bodies later.’
Jotunheim

It took an hour of trying to make sense of contradictory directions before Loki found the cell where Baugi was being held. Confusion reigned in the palace. The permanent guardsmen and the supplementary Einherjar presently stationed at the palace were squabbling over who had precedence in the chain of command and the exact boundaries of their jurisdictions. Thor, meanwhile, was too busy debating Tyr on the best strategy for an assault on Jotunheim to notice the turmoil.

For his part, Loki was almost glad to find himself in a dusty tunnel that wound around the palace’s foundations. There were fewer people to contend with down here — all of two guards in the middle of a card game.

They snapped to attention upon Loki’s approach and waited for orders, their eyes drifting towards the covered tray in Loki’s hands.

‘Is this where the frost giant is being held?’ Loki asked. He received eager nods from both guards. ‘I wish to speak to him.’

‘Certainly,’ the older of the guards said.

He unlocked the cell to the left of him. The cell was as antiquated as the rest of this wing. No projected barriers, no lamps. Only a coarse, windowless wall and iron beams to make up the other three sides. An unusually low ceiling too; Baugi had to hunch when he stood. Loki suspected this was the sole reason Baugi was being kept in this half-abandoned section of the palace. Tyr, like Sif, delighted in these sorts of petty victories.

‘Were your injuries attended to?’ Loki asked as he set the tray down on the cell’s flimsy table.

Baugi grunted and, limping somewhat, moved a few steps closer to Loki, which Loki was thankful for. The cell lacked light; only the guards’ lamps out in the corridor provided illumination. Now that he was closer, Loki could see edges of bandages peering out from beneath Baugi’s loose shirt.

‘I thought you wouldn’t refuse some extra food.’ Loki lifted the lid off the tray.

Steam rose up, drowning the cell in the sweet aroma of roasted venison and root vegetables cooked with a generous amount of herbs. The meal had been intended for Loki. His mother knew he often skipped meals while he worked, so she ordered food to be brought to him whether he had asked for it or not.

‘Still hot,’ Baugi remarked.

‘A simple heating spell.’

Baugi’s lips twitched with distaste, but he picked up a chunk of venison and bit into it. ‘What do you want?’

‘I suppose “nothing” would sound insincere?’ Loki replied. There was an art to getting information out of a prisoner; Thanos’ acolytes had known it well. Loki, however, had spent the past two days buried in musty books and had nothing to show for it. He lacked the patience to play games. ‘I want you to tell me about the Bradi.’

Baugi sunk into the lone chair in the cell, then picked up the fork and tried the vegetables. ‘No wonder you Asgardians grow fat and spoilt.’ He slid his tongue over his lower lip, then went on.
‘You’re planning to offer me something in exchange, I take it? Sweeter food, a better cell, other such luxuries… The prince of Asgard must be the kindest man in the Nine Realms.’

‘Or I can throw you into a dark pit and order the guards to stop feeding you altogether.’

‘It was a poor move to bring a fork in here,’ Baugi said after a moment’s pause.

Loki shrugged. ‘I didn’t come here unarmed.’

‘I can’t wield in here. You can?’

‘Try me and you’ll find out.’

Baugi’s forehead creased, but rather than lunge at Loki, he speared another piece of venison and shoved the meat into his mouth. That was a relief. All cells in the palace had warding on them, but Loki wasn’t sure what had been used for this lot of cells. Considering the present state of his magic, he could well have walked into a fully warded cell and not noticed the wards bind his powers.

On the other hand, Baugi might be waiting for the right opportunity to strike. The fork had been a bad oversight.

‘Do you have a family?’ Loki asked in an effort to defuse the situation.

‘That’s not your concern, one way or another.’

Loki sighed. The last two days had been an exercise in frustration. He wanted to be out with the other teams of sorcerers working to map out where the boundaries between the Nine Realms grew thin, but his magic was too weak for such intensive work. He wanted to learn more about Jotunn sorcery, but the Asgardian libraries possessed all of three books on the subject. Now Baugi refused to cooperate.

‘I tried to be civil, but I seem to be getting nowhere,’ Loki said. He rested his hands on the edge of the table, making it tilt slightly, and leaned forward so he was within Baugi’s striking distance.

‘Before I send for Tyr and his men to do their work on you, one more chance. You tell me what you know and I’ll arrange for a more comfortable cell for you and if you do have a family, I’ll have a message sent to Jotunheim letting them know you’re alive. Right now, they have no reason not to think you dead, do they?’

‘How generous,’ Baugi said. ‘You must have great need of me.’

‘The Bradi, Baugi. Our scholars say they are a clan gone extinct even before the wars began. So how can one of them be opening a portal for you now?’

The frost giant gritted his teeth for a long moment before he answered. ‘Near extinct. A few remained. Children who couldn’t make the sacrifice.’

‘Keep talking.’

‘You don’t know much at all, do you?’ Baugi grabbed the last of the venison. ‘The Bradi were a strong clan, the best wielders came from them. Their leader was the one who created our Casket. But she alone couldn’t give it the power it needed, so she and all the wielders of the Bradi clan poured themselves into the Casket. Only those too young to wield remained.’

‘And those children would be grown by now, their children too.’
‘Sigran, the one who opened the portal for us, is young, but she’s said to have rediscovered many secrets of her fore-bearers. She’s making a name for herself in Laufey’s Hall.’ Baugi snickered. ‘And some have said Helblindi had his father’s weakness for Bradi women.’

Loki raised his eyebrows. ‘Laufey’s wife is Bradi?’

‘No, both his wives came from warrior clans. His lover was Bradi,’ Baugi replied and flung the fork down back onto the tray. ‘Does that satisfy you? I want to sleep.’

Satisfy? Loki bit back a laugh. Baugi just opened the door for another two dozen questions.

‘How was the Casket made?’

‘If you want to know that, you need to ask the dead.’

Loki found himself in a better mood the next morning. Tyr had finally reined in his squabbling lieutenants, so there was an air of order in the palace again. And while a great deal of work remained in the mapping of areas affected by the Convergence, under Frigga’s direction, the Asgardian sorcerers had at least now hammered out the methodology for the process.

For the first time since Loki had travelled back, he and his parents had an opportunity to eat breakfast together. Thor hadn’t joined them, but then he rarely did. Sometimes he liked to sleep in after a late night. More often, he woke up with the dawn and after snatching a quick breakfast from the kitchens, headed to the training grounds where he could be found until the sun was high in the sky.

Still, even with Thor absent, Loki relished this private family time. While they ate, Frigga fretted over the state of her garden and with an indulging smile, talked about the budding romance between two of her handmaids. Odin, in turn, talked about his desire to enjoy his days now that Thor held Gungnir. He wanted to take Sleipnir out to the mountains and revisit the wild trails he had enjoyed in his youth.

When he asked if Loki would be interested in accompanying him, something snapped within Loki. He supposed there had been moments like these in Frigga and Odin’s last years, but Loki — either lost to the wilds of the universe or locked in Asgard’s dungeons — hadn’t been privy to them.

‘I’d love to,’ he muttered as he threw up his hands to cover his expression. He made a show of rubbing his eyes and faked a yawn. Not his best work, but it would suffice. ‘Pardon, I was up late last night.’

But the Norns had never been kind to Loki and his hour of peace drew to a close when Tyr threw open the balcony door.

‘The king is gone,’ Tyr declared. His beard was untrimmed and cheeks flushed scarlet. He turned for a moment, then pushed out in front of him a mortified looking Einer, one of the younger sorcerers assisting with the portal research. ‘Thor took my daughter, a squadron of my men and those three idiot friends of his into Jotunheim last night.’

Frigga sucked in a breath while Loki swore.

‘What possessed him to do that?’ Loki asked once the curses flying out of his mouth began repeating themselves. ‘I’m guessing by your manner, Lord Tyr, you knew nothing of this. Why is that? You’re
the king’s military adviser.’

Tyr’s brows knotted together. ‘We quarrelled last night. Thor left in a sour mood, but I didn’t anticipate he would do this.’

*I should ’ve.

‘It appears we all underestimated my son’s temper.’ Odin said. He set down his mug and drummed his fingers against the tabletop. ‘What part did the sorcerer play in this?’

Tyr nudged Einer forward.

‘Thor, um,’ Einar shuddered and planted his eyes firmly on his shoes. ‘The king approached me while I was working late in the library last night. He was looking for his brother, but the prince was nowhere to be found. Disappointed, he was about to leave, but then he asked me if I could open a portal for him. I said I could. So he…he ordered me to do it.’

‘The one near the Weapons Vault?’ Odin asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Bloody f…’ Loki cut himself off when Frigga threw him a reproachful look. He took a moment to try to strip away the venom on his tongue before he spoke again. ‘You didn’t think to tell anyone that the king left Asgard?’

‘He forbid me to! He told me they would all return by morning, but then it was morning and I became worried, so I went to find someone who could help, but Lord Tyr already knew.’

Tyr let out a derisive snort. ‘Does he think me incompetent? As if I wouldn’t notice my men missing.’

‘It took you long enough though, didn’t it?’ Loki replied.

‘Where were you last night, your highness? Perhaps your tongue would’ve produced a miracle my counsel wouldn’t. Of course, you only ever —’

‘I had questions for the frost giant.’ Loki said. ‘Question his guards if you will, you will find nothing untoward in my behaviour. On the other hand, you, Lord Tyr, have done nothing other than salivate at the prospect of a new war with the Jotnar.’

‘Enough!’ Odin ordered and everyone in the room froze. ‘Tyr, ready your men. Frigga, have the sorcerers on alert for any intrusions. Loki, come with me. We need to consult with Heimdall.’

‘Are you aware my son went to Jotunheim?’ Odin asked. Without waiting for Heimdall’s answer, he went on. ‘Do you see Thor now?’

Heimdall stared at Loki. The staring in itself wasn’t new. The interactions between Heimdall and Loki had at times been less than amicable. And yet, he had never looked at Loki quite like that. Distaste, repulsion, anger — all that was familiar. Fascination wasn’t.

*Great. One more complication I don ’t need.*
Loki nudged his head towards the opening to the Bifrost. Odin’s mind was on Thor at the present, but unless Heimdall managed to tear his eyes away from Loki, even Odin was bound to notice Heimdall’s behaviour.

Thankfully, Heimdall seemed to remember himself. He turned his back to Asgard’s gleaming towers and peered out into the endless murk of the universe. Silence stretched until Loki could almost hear his own heartbeat.

‘I feel his life force,’ Heimdall said at last. ‘Yet I cannot see him. It is strange. There is a veil on him, where there should be light there is only darkness and what sound seeps through the veil offers me no clues about Thor’s location.’

‘What of his companions? Twenty of the Einherjar went with him, so did the Warriors Three and Lady Sif,’ Odin pressed. His words sounded calm, but Loki stood next to his father and he couldn’t avoid noticing the way Odin’s hands refused to still.

‘I see Lady Sif and the Warriors Three.’ Heimdall turned back around to face Odin and Loki. ‘Four Asgardian soldiers are with them. They are lost amid wood and snow, but fear and grief drive them on.’

‘And Thor isn’t with them?’ Loki asked.

‘I cannot see him, so I cannot say for certain.’

‘Thank you, Heimdall,’ Odin said.

Loki looked to his father in hope of answers. Heimdall could be fooled, Loki knew a couple of ways to hide himself from Heimdall’s eyes, but what the man had described with Thor sounded different. Was Thor injured, fallen prey to some Jotunn weapon? Fear and grief and a mere four soldiers where there should have been twenty suggested something dark had taken place.

‘Too many unknowns here,’ Odin spoke softly. ‘Meanwhile, Tyr still needs more time to ready his men.’

‘Do we need more Einherjar in Jotunheim?’ Loki replied. ‘The numbers Thor took with him is not so far from the strength Helblindi brought into Jotunheim, there is a sense of proportionality. An army sends a different message.’

Odin adjusted the edge of his eye patch. ‘I am glad at least one child of mine is not eager to settle every problem with sword and spear. However, I fear, one way or another, blood will flow today. Heimdall, send a message to Lord Tyr to continue the preparations in our absence. Loki and I will go to Jotunheim; listen for our voices on the winter winds.’

Heimdall jerked his head in agreement and lifted Hofund, the great sword he used to open the Bifrost.

While Heimdall readied the Bifrost mechanism, Loki squared his shoulders and checked the straps on his armour. This wasn’t a surprise. He had tried to be optimistic over the past three days, but ever since he first saw the frost giants in Asgard a trip to Jotunheim had seemed an inevitability sooner or later. Loki was glad that at least his father was with him.

The Bifrost spun open before them, flooding the world with more colours than any eye could ever perceive. Odin remounted Sleipnir and led him onto the bridge. Loki hurried to his own horse, but the chestnut was still young and lacked Sleipnir’s experience. He baulked at the Bifrost’s light and fury. It took several reassuring neighs from Sleipnir and Loki promising a large bag of sugar when
they returned before Iiro finally moved forward.

Heimdall set them down in a narrow clearing surrounded by haggard pines and larches, all heavily laden with fresh snow. A storm must have just passed. Stray snowflakes still danced in the air and dark clouds hung in the distance.

‘Is this place as miserable as you remember it, father?’ Loki asked.

Odin’s mouth twitched and he brushed away the snowflake that had got caught in his eyebrow. ‘Best we move.’

The Bifrost had burned through the foot of snow that carpeted the ground, revealing the dead grasses and ochre mud beneath. Loki and Odin nudged their horses out onto the unmelted snow on the clearing’s edge. Within seconds, Loki was certain the horses would be more a hindrance than a help. The deep powder masked the unevenness of the ground beneath. It was too easy for the horses to stumble over a stray boulder and break a limb.

‘Allfather! Loki!’ a familiar voice disturbed the wood’s frosty silence, then Volstagg emerged from the tree line. ‘Norns be praised. But come, come, we shouldn’t be out in the open.’

Leaning on his axe as he walked and with clumps of snow hanging from his beard like garlands, Volstagg led them to rest of the Asgardians.

Snow coated their clothes and armour. Every inch of exposed flesh was flushed and beginning to blister. Two of the Einherjar walked with their comrade slung between them. The injured soldier barely had their strength to keep his feet moving, let alone to greet the newcomers. Fandral looked little better. The front of his armour was sticky with blood and a large gash ran from his right eyebrow to his chin. Hogun, even more resolute than usual, kept him steady. Sif and the last Einherjar soldier brought up the rear of the party.

‘Where is Thor?’ Loki asked. When Sif and the Warriors Three exchanged uneasy glances but didn’t produce a word, Loki grabbed Volstagg’s beard and pulled the man towards him. ‘Where the hell is my brother?’

Volstagg’s eyes widened and he stammered out his response. ‘Captured.’

‘Explain,’ Odin demanded. ‘Start at the beginning and explain all of this.’

Loki let go of Volstagg’s beard, sending the man stumbling back. He produced an incomprehensible series of stammers until Sif cut him off.

‘Respectfully, your highness,’ she said. ‘We need to keep moving until we can find shelter. From what I remember of my father’s words, there were caves where one could take shelter a few miles to the north-east.’

‘Surely even you can talk while you walk? Out with it,’ Loki replied.

On any other day Sif would have glared at him; today she kept her eyes on the snow at her feet. ‘Thor found us at the training grounds last night. He was incensed about how my father kept wasting his time talking about supply trains and such. Thor said he could achieve just as much without a thousand Einherjari soldiers slowing him down. He wanted the four of us and you, Loki, to go with
him. But you were nowhere to be found and Fandral persuaded him to at least take twenty soldiers with us.’

‘We found a sorcerer who could reopen the portal the frost giants had used to get into Asgard. It led to a cave in the hills above a village,’ Hogun said.

Loki nodded. He remembered that village. Two dozen houses, most with unevenly slanted roofs, and a few farm animals in rotting pens. He had found his co-conspirators there for his plan to disrupt Thor’s coronation. He hadn’t thought much of them at the time, but someone in that village must have had the intelligence to make Helblindi aware of the prize Loki had offered. In hindsight, it would have been smarter to eliminate everyone who had known about the portal when Loki decided not to follow through with the plan.

‘Did you enter the village?’ Odin asked.

‘We did.’ Sif glanced up for a brief moment, then dropped her head again as if she didn’t dare chance meeting Odin’s gaze. ‘That’s where it went wrong. They were waiting for us.’

‘There had to have been at least sixty of them,’ Fandral added.

The injured Einherjar soldier’s foot caught something, nearly sending him and the two men helping him face-first into the snow. Loki dismounted and motioned towards Iiro. The party could only travel at the pace of their slowest member. They might as well put the worst of the injured atop the horse. Loki could walk and make sure Iiro didn’t misstep and injure himself.

‘Sif, get on with your account,’ he said while he helped the soldiers get their injured comrade into the saddle.

She sucked in a breath and went on. ‘At first it was a heavy fight, but not the worst odds we’ve seen. Then, I still don’t quite understand it, but then a young-looking female appeared. She grabbed Thor’s hand and he collapsed like all life had been stripped out of him. A pack of frost giants seized him and bore him away before any of us could get to him. We went after him, but it was no use. They wouldn’t let us anywhere near him. That’s when the Einherjar took the heavy casualties. We had to retreat.’

Odin closed his eyes and drew his head back until he stared up at Jotunheim’s lukewarm sun. ‘Laufey will feast tonight.’

‘Do you…’ Sif seemed to recognise that this wasn’t the time to bother Odin with questions, so she hesitantly reached out to Loki. ‘He is still alive, isn’t he?’

Loki pulled away from Sif’s hand. ‘Heimdall could sense him, but he couldn’t tell us where Thor is.’

‘The Norns bless us, not all is lost,’ Volstagg said.

‘Bless you?’ Loki sneered. ‘The Norns would do well to spit in your eye, Volstagg. In fact, all of you. You follow my brother about like you are moths drawn to his flame, always encouraging the worst in him. One night I’m not around to talk him out of idiocy, one night! And come morning, we have this disaster. Wonderful, fucking wonderful.

‘What was your plan here anyway? Did you bother to ask Thor what his plan was? Because I can’t see what it could’ve been. For one, we still don’t know if Laufey ordered the attack or if Helblindi made the move on his own volition. Even if Laufey is responsible, did you really think he would just let you walk into his house unchallenged? Or did you not think at all? Was it just a vague idea that you would smack about any frost giants who happened to get in your way?’
No one had an answer for him, which only left Loki more incensed.

‘So it was to be random mayhem in that village?’ he snarled. ‘How does that make you different to a marauder?’

‘Loki,’ Odin said quietly. ‘Now is not the time for anger.’

‘When is?’

Glaring, Loki looked up to his father. His breath hitched. All colour had drained from Odin’s face and his mouth hung half-open in dismay. Honestly, Odin had looked healthier while dying.

‘Father, remember Heimdall’s words, Thor’s lives,’ Loki muttered.

A familiar, ugly jealousy stirred in the pit of Loki’s stomach. Odin loved him as his own, Loki knew that, but a small voice still screamed out: would his father look so stricken had Thor and Loki’s places been exchanged? It was a struggle not to indulge that instinct.

Odin attempted a smile, but managed only a cold grimace. ‘Helblindi is dead, by Thor’s hand.’

‘We will find shelter soon,’ Sif said. ‘We’ll rest through the night. In the morning, we will get Thor back.’

Loki clenched Iiro’s rein, but swallowed the biting answers he had for Sif. He had said enough already, anything more would be self-indulgent and unproductive.

What then was the productive move? The Asgardians were in need of a healer or two. They hardly looked ready to take on frost giants once more. On the other hand, Laufey had no reason to treat Thor gently. The longer they waited, the longer Thor had to endure Laufey’s wrath and the harder it would be to track where Thor had been taken. Perhaps this was that time, which came once in a century or so, when Sif was right — they needed to find a safe place and regroup.

An arrow whistled through the air.

Iiro reared up with a wild roar, ripping his reins out of Loki’s hand and sending the injured soldier flying out of the saddle.

Before the Asgardians could even duck down, more arrows came down on them.

So much for shelter and safety.

Loki threw himself onto the ground and threw up a rough shielding spell over the Asgardians. He was too slow to catch all the arrows. Someone screamed. In reply, another volley of arrows whistled towards the Asgardians.

‘Come and fight us face to face, cowards!’ Fandral shouted, drawing his rapier.

Loki drew his own knives and tried to make sense of the situation while his shielding spell gave him the opportunity to do so. Odin had caught Iiro’s reins and was trying to bring the horse under control. The injured soldier was on the ground, but he was moving. The rest of the Einherjar kept close to Odin. Fandral, Hogun and Volstagg were crouched down, eager for a fight. Which left Sif.

Shit.

She was slumped on the ground a mere three feet behind Loki, one arrow shaft protruding from her left arm and another from the base of her neck. Trembling, Sif held her right hand over the neck
wound, but blood ran freely down her fingers. Loki scrambled over to her.

Another volley of arrows descended on his shield. Had the arrows come from a single direction, Loki wouldn’t have been concerned. But the frost giants seemed to have surrounded them and it strained him to keep everyone protected from every angle.

‘Loki, release the shield!’ Volstagg yelled. ‘If they won’t come to us, we shall come to them.’

‘Look at Sif!’

Loki pressed his hands against the wound on her neck. Within moments, his gloves were soaked.

*The blood still flows, which means the heart is still pumping. That’s good.*

‘You’ll be fine, Sif,’ he muttered. ‘We’ve survived worse over the years, haven’t we?’

‘Heimdall!’ Odin’s voice boomed out.

Light and colour descended upon them. Loki released the shielding spell when he felt the Bifrost’s pull and surrendered to it. The Jotnar sent a volley of arrows in farewell; their hiss died just as Loki glimpsed Asgard in the distance and released a breath of relief.

He landed awkwardly, but kept his hands firm around the shaft in Sif’s neck. He was vaguely aware there was commotion in the Bifrost Observatory — men groaned and swore; horses huffed their displeasure. He didn’t care. He focused what magic the time travel spell hadn’t stripped away into slowing Sif’s frantic heartbeat.

‘Heimdall,’ Loki called out. ‘She needs a healer!’

No reply came.

Loki glanced up. Everyone else in the Observatory stood in a tight circle at the bottom of the dais in the observatory’s centre.

‘I need…’

Hogun shifted his weight from one foot to another, opening up a gap between himself and Fandral. Loki could see the edge of a red cloak through that gap. Only one of them had worn anything red today.

Loki swallowed the lump in his throat and gave voice to the question he desperately didn’t want answered. ‘What’s wrong with my father?’
‘This is how my son died,’ Tyr said. In the last few hours, Tyr’s voice had taken on a softness that Loki had never known the man to possess. He used a cool cloth to wipe the sweat on Sif’s face and straightened the blanket Sif’s last seizure had left askew. ‘Not exactly like this, no. His company became cut off and thus unable to take their injured to a field hospital, let alone back to Asgard. The poison took him as he lay in a dark cave, without so much as a fire to give him comfort in his final hours.’

Loki pressed his palms together, uncertain about what response Tyr wanted from him. Ove, Sif’s brother, wasn’t a topic one raised within Tyr’s earshot. As best as Loki understood it from snatches of whispered conversations and from Sif’s few words on the matter, Ove’s early death left Tyr to bury all the ambitions he had held for his house. In the first few centuries, Tyr had hoped for another son, but the Norns saw fit to offer him three daughters in Ove’s stead. After Sif’s birth had nearly robbed him of his wife too, Tyr had to admit defeat.

Tyr’s family had long amused Loki: Sif always striving to become the son she could never be; Tyr’s simmering resentment that she would even attempt such a charade; and Sif’s older sisters perpetually attempting to force a peace between the two.

It wasn’t so amusing now.

‘Well over a millennium has passed and, unlike her brother, Sif is in the care of the best healers in Asgard,’ Loki said.

Tyr threw him a condescending smile. ‘Does she look to be improving?’

She didn’t. The arrow wounds themselves were serious injuries, but the poison on the arrowheads turned out to be the true calamity. The first symptoms had appeared in hours after their return to Asgard, once the poison had a chance to spread throughout Sif’s body. A fever came. Within an hour it was severe enough to spark seizures. Then Sif’s organs began to suffer. The healers propped up her vital functions, but they struggled to bring down the fever and they could do nothing about the grotesque spider-webs of grey spreading over Sif’s skin.

‘How is it that after the long years Asgard and Jotunheim have been at war, we don’t have a cure for this?’ Loki asked. Sighing, he leaned against the windowsill and tried his best to ignore the sun creeping up from behind the mountains.

‘Healers say the poison is never the same,’ Tyr replied as he sunk into the wicker chair by Sif’s bed. ‘And they cannot keep a patient alive long enough to try an antidote.’

‘An intelligent strategy, I’ll give the frost giants that.’

‘A coward’s strategy. An honourable man doesn’t resort to poison.’

Loki bit his lip and swallowed his instinctive reply, then reached for something more conciliatory. ‘I’m not ready to surrender my hope for Sif’s recovery, but whatever may come, I’m sorry this grief has befallen your family. She should’ve had many more years in this world.’

Despite their mutual dislike, Loki didn’t have to spin his words out of nothing. Sif had been more perceptive than the rest of the Asgardians, so fearing that she would expose him, Loki had banished her from the Nine Realms. She hadn’t been there for Ragnarok or for the funeral pyre Thanos made of the Statesman. She could well have survived Thanos’ Snap too.
Helblindi. Sif. Who else will find premature death because of me?

Something of Loki’s thoughts must have crept into his expression, because Tyr cocked his head and said, ‘Do not doubt your father’s strength, Loki. He is not as we are. He will recover.’

‘Thank you, Lord Tyr,’ Loki said, speaking more quickly than he meant to.

Loki had no desire to discuss his father, but now that Tyr had brought up Odin’s condition, Loki couldn’t find a trail of thought that didn’t swiftly circle back to Odin. Tyr, for his part, seemed to have nothing else to say. So they kept vigil until a healer burst into the room and disrupted their uneasy quiet.

Her eyes swept over Tyr, then froze on Loki. ‘I thought you would be with your father, your highness.’

I couldn’t take being in that room any longer.

‘I came to check on Lady Sif and Lord Tyr,’ Loki responded after he dismissed the first three answers that flashed through his head as unnecessarily hostile. ‘I had best return now. Do make sure Lady Sif receives the best of care.’

All of fifty paces separated Sif’s bedside from the room where Odin presently lay, but each step was a struggle. When it came to Sif, there was a fairly long chain of events connecting Loki’s decision to meddle with the past and the arrows that struck her in Jotunheim. When it came to his father, Loki’s culpability was far more direct. He had mistimed the moment to drop his shield. Half a second – just enough time for an arrow to find its mark before the Bifrost delivered them to the safety of Asgard.

To Loki’s surprise, his mother wasn’t at her husband’s side, but stood out in the hallway by the doors to Odin’s room.

‘Why are you out here?’ Loki quickened his pace. ‘Has he —’

‘No, your father sleeps,’ Frigga said. ‘You were gone so long, I worried. How is Sif?’

Loki shook his head. ‘Not well.’

Frigga closed her eyes and muttered something under her breath, then offered Loki a reassuring smile. He struggled to match the gesture in any way. Instead, he took his mother’s arm and led her back to the broad room where Odin slept. As must as he didn’t want to hear the grief in Frigga’s voice or see her knuckles whiten as fear left her clenching Odin’s cold hand, Loki knew she needed him close at this moment.

Frigga nestled herself back on the edge of Odin’s bed and gestured for Loki to take the chair he had occupied through much of the night. Loki sunk into it, then peered up at his mother.

‘We must not lose hope,’ she said, more to herself than to Loki, but he nodded nonetheless.

After a couple of minutes, she rested her back against the headboard and began taking out the long pins that kept her hair up. They were decorated with golden eight-pointed stars, which glimmered as they caught the light flooding into the room through the uncurtained windows.
‘Thor was fascinated with these when we were children,’ Loki said. ‘He would always beg you for a pin until you gave in and handed him one. Of course, he’d lose the pin or break it and come running to me, demanding I fix it.’

‘And you did, didn’t you? Otherwise, there wouldn’t be a pin left,’ Frigga replied. She opened her hand and let the pins rest across her palm. Gathered together like this made obvious the limitations of Loki’s artistry. A few of the pins had odd kinks in them and two stars sat angled incorrectly.

‘I don’t know where to start to fix this,’ Loki sighed.

He longed to start over again and think things through before he made any changes instead of allowing sentimentality to drive him. But considering the damage time travel had inflicted on him already, Loki has certain the spell would kill him should he try it a second time. The time stone meanwhile was still well-protected by Strange’s predecessor. Attempting to get his hands on it would be no less suicidal than the time travel spell.

‘Dawn always follows the night, no matter how deep the dark might seem.’ Frigga replied. ‘Your father will come back to us. Your brother too.’

For the first time since he returned to the room, Loki’s gaze drifted to his father. No seizures, no foul tentacles of poison trailing across his skin. As best as they could tell, he had fallen into an Odinsleep once the arrow struck him.

Loki suspected Odinsleep had been inevitable. His father had put it off for far too long; likely a testament to his private hesitation to leave the Nine Realms in Thor’s hands. And if Loki’s revelation about his true identity could trigger his collapse, news of Thor’s capture by the frost giants certainly could too. However, the arrow complicated matters. Last time Odin had slept for three days, but there was no guessing how long this Odinsleep would last.

Heavy footsteps outside startled Loki out of his anxiety-ridden speculation. He rose to his feet just as the doors swung open and Lord Agnar, the chancellor of Asgard, strode in with Gungnir in his arms. Behind him, at least half a dozen guards positioned themselves along the hallway. Before Loki could say anything, Agnar dropped to his knees and offered Loki the spear.

‘Thor is captured, the line of succession falls to you,’ Frigga declared. ‘Until your brother returns, Asgard is yours.’

Loki let out a mirthless laugh. There was an uncomfortable sense of self-inflicted deja vu about this moment.

‘Do you not believe your br —’

‘No, mother, it’s not that,’ Loki said quickly. ‘Thor lives, I’m sure of it. He is of more use to the frost giants while alive.’

Sighing, Loki took the spear out of Agnar’s hands and muttered a few perfunctory words of gratitude to the man. The spear had been thrust into Loki’s hand once before and he had carried it daily for two years while he impersonated his father, but it still didn’t sit comfortably in his hand. Loki slid his palm down a few inches and clenched Gungnir’s shaft.

‘You are right, mother, you always are,’ Loki said. ‘I have had the night to grieve and now it is morning. There is a great deal of work to be done. Lord Agnar, have you anything to write on?’

When the man shook his head, Loki shrugged and dismissed him, then summoned a few sheets of paper from his father’s study. These were remnants of the king’s stationery – crisp, thick and
Asgard’s city-scape embossed at the bottom of each sheet.

‘Huginn. Muninn,’ Loki muttered while he pulled a chair over to the narrow table between the room’s two windows.

A few moments later, the two ravens dove through the doorway with low, gurgling croaks. Muninn, always the shier of the two, perched on the headboard of Odin’s bed. Huginn, meanwhile, landed in his favourite spot to linger — atop Gungnir.

‘Get down, you menace, as if this thing was not heavy enough without you squatting on it,’ Loki tipped the spear forward until Huginn had no choice but to relocate himself onto Loki’s forearm. ‘No claws either, please. I have a task for you – a message that cannot go astray.’

Both ravens cawed excitedly, but they were soon disappointed. The letter still had to be written. It took four aborted drafts before Loki realised that brevity would best suit his intent and contented himself with a concise, if inelegant missive.

‘Unto Laufey Blainnson, King of Jotunheim.

Your majesty,

It has been reported to me that your people have captured my brother, Thor Odinson, when he and his companions travelled to your realm. I wish to discuss what arrangements can be made between our two realms to secure my brother’s safe return to Asgard.

Please send a reply with the ravens indicating if you would be amenable to such a discussion.

My regards to you and your house,

Loki Odinson, Prince-Regent of Asgard.’
Laufey’s answer came swiftly. His letter was two lines long and missing basic courtesies, but its contents offered Loki a modicum of hope. They would have a meeting — midday of the following day. Loki threw himself into preparations and contingency planning at once.

Twenty-four hours later, however, he felt no more ready than he had been the day before.

Loki pulled closer the papers Lady Eydis had laid out for him and rubbed his eyes. Eydis’ records were full of terse notations and sharp underlines — just what Loki would have expected of Asgard’s treasurer. His father too had been satisfied with Eydis’ work. His notes were few and his elaborate signature featured on the bottom of each page. But no matter the hand that had written them, the numbers and the words no longer made sense to Loki. No matter how hard he tried to concentrate, the pages blurred together.

‘We have compensated everyone for the additional transport needed to bring the Einherjar, their equipment and stocks into the city. As you can see, the cost already incurred is not insubstantial,’ Eydis said.

‘It will be more challenging to bring goods into Jotunheim and therefore more costly,’ Loki replied.

Eydis ran her tongue over her lower lip. ‘The throne of Asgard is yours right now, your highness. Only you can determine which expense is justified and which isn’t.’

Two tolls came from the belfry; it was half past the hour. Only half an hour more until the moment of reckoning.

‘Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown.’ Loki said in a sullen tone.

He began to gather up the treasury records, but Eydis caught his hand and shook her head. ‘I will take care of these. You would be better served heading down and verifying all is in order there.’

‘I suppose so,’ Loki muttered. ‘I doubt more figures will help me at this point.’

He rested his weight on Gungnir and pushed himself to his feet, feeling the weight of every hour he hadn’t slept in the past week. As much as he was reluctant to leave the relative serenity of the Council Chamber, his treasurer had a point — he couldn’t hide in here for the rest of time.

However, he was all of twenty feet from the chamber’s entrance when Tyr descended upon him. The man had taken the time to change into his formal uniform since Loki had seen him last, but he had not paid any attention to his hair or beard, which left him exuding an air of ominous volatility.

‘So it is true then. You are going through with this?’ he hissed as he forced himself into Loki’s path. ‘You are willing to negotiate with them?’

Loki inched back until Tyr was no longer in his personal space. ‘I am.’

‘They are filth. It abases all of Asgard to even contemplate such a thing! You know what they did to you brother and the soldiers who were with him. You saw what they did to your father, to my daughter. It is merely another chapter in millennia of misdeeds. Death is the only thing we ought to
offer them.’

‘They will offer death to many an Asgardian should we pursue war.’

‘Coward,’ Tyr scoffed, moving towards Loki once more. ‘You are soft, all sorcerers are. You are one-tenth a man my daughter was.’

‘It’s curious how you never had one positive comment about her while she was around to hear it,’ Loki retorted.

Tyr’s already agitated expression twisted into a grotesque mask of disdain and his skin flushed an unhealthy crimson. That had been a careless thing to say; Loki realised his mistake at once. Tyr was in a poor state of mind. Loki had been too busy preparing for his meeting with Laufey to enquire about Sif’s condition this morning, but things had looked worse, not better late last night. But what was he to do now? Loki was presently the master of Asgard and Tyr had insulted him to his face. It would hardly be fitting for Loki to be the first one to attempt to make amends.

He waited, hoping that Tyr would offer them both a way out, but Tyr merely glared at Loki with disgust.

‘There is more to life than honour and the glory of battle, Lord Tyr,’ Loki said in the end. ‘It would do you well to remember also that I am prince-regent at the present and I expect to be treated with the same courtesy you would offer my father or my brother.’

That, unfortunately, quickened Tyr once more. ‘Obsequiousness is not my habit. I offer you the courtesy of my honest opinion, your highness, as I would offer it to any ruler of Asgard.’

‘I dare say there is a way to offer your opinion without insulting a person’s manhood.’

‘Do you think Laufey’s words will be mild and sweet?’ Tyr smirked.

*The old man isn’t going to relent on this, is he?*

Loki flexed his shoulders, drew himself to his full height and forced all excess emotion out of his words. ‘As it happens, Tyr, I’m about to find out. Now, if you intend to be present, we had best head down. If not, step out of my way. I will not be late for this meeting.’

To Loki’s relief, Tyr still had the presence of mind to step out of Loki’s way and allow him to pass. The sense of relief proved momentary, however, because Tyr then followed Loki to the Lesser Reception Room, always trailing three steps behind him. He fell back only in the reception room’s ante-chamber when Lord Agnar called him over.

Loki himself hurried into the room proper. Like so many other days, the Great Hall would lie empty today. The purpose of that grand, echoing space was to awe and overwhelm, which often wasn’t the sentiment the king of Asgard wanted to communicate while in a diplomatic wrangle. Hence the royal palace had two reception rooms – the Greater and the Lesser.

It was sometimes misconstrued that a reception held in this smaller room was some half-masked insult from the king of Asgard. This was inaccurate. The moniker ‘Lesser’ referred only to the room’s smaller dimensions. The decision as to which room would be used depended primarily on the size of the visiting party and the retinue the Allfather wished with him on the day. Since Laufey
wouldn’t be present in the flesh and Loki hardly wanted half of Asgard watching the proceedings, the Lesser Reception was the logical choice.

Loki was somewhat surprised to find the room empty. The councillors seemed to be occupied amongst themselves, snippets of their conversation occasionally audible through the open doors leading back to the ante-chamber. Otherwise, all was quiet. The servants had done their work — someone had even had the forethought to swap out the usual tapestries depicting Odin’s triumphant victories for pieces featuring less incendiary subjects — and made themselves scarce.

‘Loki, there you are,’ his mother said as she entered the room and found Loki standing right in the centre, checking that no important detail had been missed. She dismissed her two handmaids and offered Loki the lidded ceramic mug she held in her hands. ‘I thought you wouldn’t refuse this.’

He accepted the mug and removed the lid. He immediately smelled the nutmeg and ginger in the warm, honey-hued liquid, but there was a sharper undercurrent to it too. No amount of spices could mask the magic. Loki took a sip, which confirmed his suspicions.

‘I am aghast, mother,’ he said, shaking his head in mock disapproval. ‘How many times have you warned me about the dangers of such concoctions?’

‘You look to be in need of it,’ his mother replied.

Loki took a large gulp and waited until the tingling sensation in his mouth subsided.

‘I expect I do. I haven’t so much as got a glimpse of my bed for two nights now.’ He took a deep breath. The potion wasn’t as strong as Loki would have mixed it had he prepared it, but it certainly left him feeling more like himself. ‘Thank you, I can already feel it working. How is father today?’

‘The same.’

‘And Sif?’

Frigga’s lips drew together. ‘You haven’t been told? That… I’m sorry, child. She passed away this morning.’

‘Oh,’ Loki muttered. ‘That explains Tyr’s temper earlier. I shall have to give my condolences to Sif’s family once this is over.’

‘No one will think it a slight to not hear from you at once. You have taken on the duties of the king, everyone understands how busy you are right now.’

Loki nodded absently and turned towards the broad golden throne that dominated the back half of the room. There wasn’t much time left. He drank the remainder of the potion and replaced the lid. His heart pulsed, but he couldn’t be sure if it was the potion’s effects or his nerves getting the better of him.

‘I should take my place,’ he said softly.

Just as he shifted away from his mother, she rested her hand on his bicep, then pulled the empty mug out of his grasp. ‘Loki, although you father seems far from us, it is not so. He still sees all and I know he is proud of you today. As am I.’

‘I…’ His lips and tongue couldn’t quite form the words he was looking for, so he simply nodded.

His mother smiled and withdrew to one of the chairs set up either side of the throne.
And all too soon, the bell tolled out the hour – midday. Everyone who was still standing hurried to their seats.

Once everyone was in position, Loki sucked in a breath and focused his attention on the Eye of Angrboda. It wasn’t much to look at. A hollow ring, about two of Loki’s hand-spans in diameter, that rested atop a stout alabaster pillar. He sent a spark of magic into the ring, silently thanking his mother for the potion once more – he hadn’t considered the strain this exercise would put on his magic.

That was if the meeting would be going ahead. The Eye of Angrboda was merely an unattractive piece of palace furnishing until its counterpart, which Loki had sent over to Jotunheim the previous evening, also stirred to life.

Seconds stretched out into minutes. Everyone gathered grew restless, exchanging meaningful glances as if Loki lacked the peripheral vision to notice their behaviour. He was about to summon the ravens and send them off to Utgard, when the Eye spun. It hummed as it whirled around. Its rotation sped up until it looked like a solid sphere, then it snapped open and projected an image across the entire back half of the reception room.

Laufey sat upon his stone throne, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees. He had only one person at his side — a female frost giant about an inch shorter than Loki. No doubt Laufey needed someone to work the Eye of Angrboda for him; Loki had never heard of a Jotnar king skilled in magic.

‘You have begged me for an audience, prince-regent,’ Laufey said. ‘I would have thought you would have something to say, yet here you are looking like a doe who has wandered in the hunter’s path.’

It stung how accurate the assessment was. As haggard and bent as Laufey was, seated amid shadows and unpolished stone, Laufey was nothing less than a master of his kingdom. Loki, on the other hand, squirmed upon a throne intended for a man twice his size. Worse yet, he was surrounded by a gaggle of advisers. The seven of them and his mother were all ready to jump in should anything go amiss.

What was I thinking to have them all here? I work better alone.

‘Greetings, King Laufey,’ Loki said as evenly as he could manage. ‘I thank you for acquiescing to this meeting. Relations between our two realms have taken an unfortunate turn in recent days, I believe it is in our mutual interest if we do not allow the situation to escalate further.’

‘Why are you the regent? Is Odin too decrepit now to be lifted out of bed and sat upon that gilded eyesore?’

‘I believe this is solid gold, not gilded. As to my father, he rests in Odinsleep.’

‘A pity. I would have welcomed his face heavy with knowledge that his son is in my hands to do with as it pleases me.’

Loki wrapped his left hand around the decorative armrest of the throne and reminded himself that Laufey wouldn’t miss any opportunity to bait him. ‘I want proof my brother remains in your custody and that he has not been mistreated.’

‘I have him. Don’t fret, pup.’

Laufey straightened his back and rose, confirming for Loki once and for all that his birth-father was
as tall as the frost giants were reputed to be. He moved slowly, his steps uneven. The projection from
the Eye tracked him, but the effect was somewhat disorientating — it took Loki a moment to realise
that Laufey had merely crossed to the back half of the hall.

And there was no doubt Laufey still had Thor. Two chains, suspended from the ceiling, held Thor’s
arms above his head. Another two snaked across the ice-covered flagstones and met at an unsightly
metal contraption that girt Thor’s torso. The need for the chains was questionable, however, Thor
was slumped down on his knees and his head hung limp. His hair obscured his face so Loki couldn’t
tell if Thor was conscious.

Loki glanced to his mother. Her face was ashen and she had pressed her hands over her mother, but
she had the presence of mind to keep quiet. Agnar and Tyr, on the other hand, were muttering
among themselves. Loki lifted Gungnir an inch into the air and sharply brought it down, startling
them into silence.

‘I cannot tell if he lives. In fact, I cannot be certain this is my brother, not some facsimile. I wish to
speak to Thor before we go on,’ Loki said.

‘No.’ Laufey grabbed a fistful of Thor’s hair and pulled Thor’s hair up until Loki could peer into the
incandescent crimson swirling within his brother’s eyes. ‘He sleeps. I would not want to disturb his
sweet dreams. Of course, if you insist on definitive proof, I would be happy to slide my knife into his
throat and verify that he still bleeds.’

Loki forced a smile. ‘You do that and I’ll be forced to do some very unfortunate things in return.’

‘I wonder if you’d have the stomach.’

*I had stomach enough to murder you once. Right now I wouldn’t be upset to do so a second time.*

‘If we can get to the heart of the matter?’ Loki said. ‘I am willing to make concessions in exchange
for my brother’s safe return to Asgard and to ensure that the past is consigned to history. Tit for tat
attacks will only bring more grief upon our peoples.’

Laufey released his grip on Thor and headed back to the comfort of his throne. ‘Tit for tat? Your
newly-crowned king and two dozen warriors walked into Jotunheim without warning. What
transgression did Jotunheim commit to warrant this?’

‘You have killed or injured nearly all the warriors that accompanied him. Moreover, you have
captured our king. Has Asgard not paid for its folly?’

‘Your brother has. Asgard? Not so much. This was a military incursion into our lands. A violation of
the peace treaty signed between us.’

‘Prince Helblindi brought his warriors into the heart of Asgard first. You violated the treaty, not
Asgard,’ Lord Agnar said.

‘Helblindi violated the peace and he paid for it with his life.’ For the first time in Loki’s memory
Laufey’s words lacked a derisive undertone. ‘I accept the punishment the Norns have apportioned to
the prince for his hubris. I neither knew of his plan nor would have condoned it should he have
shared it with me.’

‘He was your son. How could you be wholly ignorant?’ Loki asked.

‘Does Odin know all that you entangle yourself in?’
Loki had to concede the point. He could imagine Helblindi as a young prince eager to prove his worth to his people and to his father, who would rush into an ill-conceived adventure to reclaim the great prize of Jotunheim. Thor wouldn’t have hesitated if such an opportunity presented to him. At the same time, Laufey could well have lied. It afforded him no advantage to admit he had a hand in his son’s gamble and Helblindi wasn’t around to tell anyone otherwise.

Whatever the truth, Loki saw no victory in calling Laufey out on this.

‘It seems both parties have cause to be aggrieved,’ he said instead. ‘But there is no sense in counting punches placed and blows received for the rest of our lives. As long as I have your word we can put this behind us, I will be content. I will authorise to return to Jotunheim the bodies of the slain and Baugi, the frost giant captured after Prince Helblindi’s incursion into Asgard. I am also willing to offer substantial economic —’

‘I cannot return the Asgardian dead, we burned them. Only ashes and armour remain, you are welcome to that. Your brother too, as long as you return the Casket of Ancient Winters.’

*Here it is. He is as predictable as the tides.*

‘That —’ Loki waited until his advisers finished their incredulous mumbling, then went on. ‘That is out of the question.’

‘The Casket rightfully belongs to Jotunheim.’

‘If you possess the Casket, what is to stop you from invading Midgard or another planet? No, you cannot be trusted with it.’

Laufey leaned back and furrowed his brows as if to feign confusion. ‘Yet you want me to release your brother on your word, and your word alone, that the conflict between us has ended. He is the king of Asgard. Once he returns, he will sit upon the throne, not you. What is to stop him from ignoring all you have promised and launching an attack on my people once more?’

‘If that is what he chooses to do, I will personally beat him until he comes to his senses,’ Loki replied. ‘But the point is moot. The Casket is not yours any longer. It was taken as wergild for the Asgardian and Midgardian lives the Jotnar took in the last war. I will pay for my brother’s release in gold, in silver, in Asgardian goods, in favourable trade deals and in master craftsmen to work on projects in Jotunheim. I will not hand over the Casket to you.’

Around him, his advisers sat up straighter. This was their moment. Loki didn’t possess the in-depth knowledge of Asgardian resources and economic situation that his father commanded after centuries on the throne; he needed to rely on expert knowledge if he were to negotiate a fair deal for both Asgard and Jotunheim.

Laufey’s lips curled with distaste. ‘I have no need to wrap myself in gold or dress myself in silks, nor do my people. I do not care about trade deals and I do not want any of your craftsmen. We have skilled labourers enough; we are not the primitive savages you claim us to be. I will have the Casket.’

Loki sighed. Anyone would have anticipated the frost giants’ would demand the Casket in exchange for Thor’s return. But only a fool would believe that Asgard would ever hand the Casket back into Laufey’s hands and Loki had never noted any signs that Laufey was a fool. He would demand and try to cow Loki into submission. At the end of the day, Laufey would accept that Thor’s ransom would be paid with lesser treasures and trinkets.

‘How can I make this clearer for you? The Casket will not be a part of these negotiations,’ Loki said.
‘Patience is the quickest path to victory here.’

‘If that is so, I do at least appreciate the symmetry to this affair. Odin took my son, I now took his son in return.’

‘You said yourself, Helblindi’s end was the result of his own actions.’

‘I do not speak of Helblindi.’ Taking advantage of Loki’s confusion, Laufey pressed on, his words becoming progressively more animated. ‘There was a child born at the close of the war. Well-loved and regrettfully, left unattended. The Allfather stumbled upon it. I wonder if he took the time to search for the child’s parents before he claimed it for Asgard. You remember, Lord Tyr. You remember, don’t you? A blue-skinned infant wrapped in a blood-red cloak.’

Loki clenched the Gungnir, his knuckles turning white. He glanced to Tyr, but he couldn’t make out the man’s thoughts from Tyr’s expression. Loki didn’t dare to look to his mother. One glance in her direction would betray far too much.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ Loki shook his head, trying his best not to keep his panic out of his voice. ‘Do you want —’

‘Or maybe the skin wasn’t blue by then; magic can do wondrous things. Still, it cannot strip away all. Blood remains true. After all, someone had to show Helblindi the path into Asgard.’

‘What?’ Have you any proof of this?’

Loki didn’t even care that his words were drowned amid the uproar from the rest of the people in the reception room. His insides were twisting onto themselves and he was sure there wasn’t a drop of blood left in his face.

‘You have many councillors, prince-regent, why don’t you send them to find what the truth is?’
Laufey grinned. ‘It seems we are at an impasse here and I am done talking. If Asgardians want their king back, they need only to come to Jotunheim and lay the Casket at my feet.’

The projection blinked out. For all the noise in the room only seconds before, silence now reigned.

This is fucking perfect.

Loki rubbed his face. ‘Nothing but lies and mockery. This is what you get for trying to reason with a frost giant. Fine!’ He let out an irritated snarl. ‘Fine, so be it. We march on Jotunheim.’

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long gap since the last update, guys. I took some time off this project because I needed to focus on a different work I was trying to finish and then I got sick. Ugh, I am so ready for winter to be over.
Regent

Loki pulled off his jacket and let the heavy garment sink to the floor. His leather vest soon also lay crumpled on the ground, leaving him in a silk shirt. The thin material rippled over his skin as a gust of cool air swept through the room. Loki reached for the window; there was an unpleasant chill to the wind this evening.

The lanterns down on the foreshore gave him pause. He hadn’t expected anyone would still be out there.

He had come down for the funeral ceremony of course. The ruler of Asgard could hardly forgo attendance and Loki thought that Thor would appreciate him being present since Thor himself could not be there. But, for all the effort Sif’s older sisters had expended in organising it, there had been an odd atmosphere to the event. Tyr barely met anyone’s eye, the rest of the Einherjar’s leadership surreptitiously attempted to coordinate troop movements throughout the ceremony, and half the gathered crowd seemed more interested in gawking at Loki than in paying respects to the dead. He had fled back to the palace minutes after Sif’s funeral boat passed out of sight.

Someone knocked on the door.

Loki shut the window and called out, ‘Come in!’

An aide-de-camp from Tyr’s staff stepped into the room. With his hair slicked back and each tassel of his uniform in its proper place, he looked like the Einherjar was due out on parade tonight. His bow matched the immaculate state of his dress. His face, however, betrayed the depth of the man’s nervousness.

‘Something on your mind, captain?’ Loki asked.

‘Only the challenge that faces us tomorrow, your highness,’ the man responded and made an effort to steel his expression. He thrust out a letter towards Loki. ‘I have an update on the progress of the advance parties for you.’

‘Thank you.’

The man’s hand snapped back as Loki took the letter from him and he hurried out. Loki watched the door slowly swing shut behind him, wondering if he ought to have ordered Sif’s funeral to be delayed. It was Asgardian custom to farewell the dead at the first sunset after their passing, but Sif’s funeral boat aflame would have done nothing for the soldiers’ morale. However much her personality had grated on Loki, she had been respected as a warrior. Her father too. And she had died by the hand of the very enemy the soldiers would be fighting come the morning.

Loki had thought Tyr would use his eulogy to rouse the Einherjar. For once his bluster and antipathy towards the frost giants would have been of some benefit. As it turned out, Tyr had been in the wrong frame of mind. His speech had been apologetic in tone, full of stumbles and at times impossible to follow.

Loki himself wasn’t helping matters, he understood that. He lacked both Odin’s experience and Thor’s natural bravado. Worse yet, it was public knowledge he had been against the war with Jotunheim until the very last moment. Hardly an inspiring leader to rally around. He could only hope his council followed his orders and kept quiet about what had been said during the meeting with Laufey. There were rumours he couldn’t afford to have flying about the palace right now.
‘I’ll have to find some words to say tomorrow,’ he muttered under his breath. ‘Something that’ll get the drums of war going, otherwise Thor’ll be Laufey’s guest for a long time.’

Sighing, Loki broke the seal on the letter and trudged to his bedroom. He took off the two scabbards that held his knives, setting them on the bedside table, then collapsed onto the bed. When he unfolded the stiff paper, he found an equally stiff report inside describing the evening’s efforts with the portals.

Asgardian sorcerers had spent days tracking down the narrowing gaps between the worlds and identifying where Asgard’s vulnerabilities lay. But these portals functioned in both directions. By the time the main Asgardian force entered Jotunheim tomorrow, there would be dozens of advance parties already creeping towards Laufey’s capital.

After a few lines riddled with Einherjari jargon and short-hand that Loki had to strain to decipher, he pulled a pillow under his head and closed his eyes. His mother’s potion had worn off hours ago; he needed a few minutes to himself right now. After, he would get back to the report and parse out the rest of its contents.

Something pressed against his Adam’s apple. Loki groaned and reached to pull the offending object away. A hand clamped around his wrist. Loki’s eyes snapped open. There were several people in his bedroom — that was all he managed to register before he was pulled out of bed and dumped onto the floor.

Disorientated, he was still clambering up to his knees as hands slid under his armpits and pulled him to his feet.

‘What is the meaning of this?’ he demanded. Once he blinked away the bleariness out of his eyes, the world around him found focus. There were six people in the room, apart from himself. Agnar, Tyr and four high-ranking Einherjari soldiers. Loki snuck a glance to the bedside table; his knives weren’t where he had left them. ‘Lord Chancellor, care to explain?’

Agnar’s reply was a bewildered stare; his mouth dangled as low as his overly-ornate collar would allow.

Tyr nudged the chancellor. ‘You believe me now?’

‘By all that you hold dear,’ Loki said, ‘you had best have a very good reason —’

‘Lord Agnar wanted proof.’

‘Proof of what?’ Loki turned to face Tyr and felt something rigid against his throat once more.

He reached for it, then froze. The back of his hand was blue.

_Fucking hell._

‘What have you done to me!’ Loki tried to restore the concealment, but his magic had been stripped. He grabbed the object wrapped around his neck — a wide collar, metal and etched with some kind of inscriptions. Despite his best efforts, he couldn’t rip it off.

_Right. Ok. You’d better give the performance of your life here._
‘What is this collar? Get it off me!’ Loki said in a shaky voice. He pulled up the sleeve of his shirt and upon finding only more blue skin, palpated his face. ‘What have you done to me? Why?’

Agnar shifted from one foot to the other. ‘The collar is dwarven work, your highness, one of several items in the vault that can be used to bind a person’s magic. We needed to see if there were any concealments on you. It seems there were, and not minor ones.’

‘And my, what a tragedy to have you hidden all these years.’ Tyr chuckled. ‘Your eyes are striking. Nifmar, there’s bound to be a mirror somewhere in here. Fetch it for our resident frost giant, will you?’

‘Frost giant?’

Tyr moved aside as Nifmar dragged over the full-length mirror from Loki’s bathroom. He angled it so Loki could peer right into his reflection. Blue skin, clan markings, red eyes. Loki didn’t have to force the shiver that rattled through his body.

‘This isn’t real!’ He clawed at the collar and tried to figure out the lock mechanism keeping it in place until two of the soldiers moved in to restrain him.

Tyr shook his head. ‘Enough with the melodrama. Let’s not pretend you thought Laufey was talking about anyone other than yourself. How many frost giants are there in Asgard?’

‘Laufey was angry; he was making things up.’ Loki sucked in a breath and furrowed his brows. ‘He was, wasn’t he?’

‘I think the answer is self-evident,’ Tyr replied. ‘Take the prince down to the Great Hall. We will continue the conversation there.’

The Einherjar prodded him forward. As they moved through the half-lit and near-empty hallways, Loki considered calling out to the palace guards, but he suspected in his present form he would have problems proving he was who he claimed to be. Tyr, on the other hand, was their commander. They would do whatever Tyr ordered.

Loki’s thoughts turned to Agnar. The chancellor was the king’s second-in-command and wielded more authority than the captain of the Einherjar — Asgard wasn’t a military dictatorship after all. Apart from the man’s initial incredulity, Loki wasn’t sure what Angar’s thoughts were about the present situation. Perhaps if he were to make the man remember that he was more than a frost giant, Loki could yet make an ally of him.

‘So Laufey was telling the truth, I was taken after the war?’ Loki said softly. ‘Why would my father do that? Why not tell me the truth at least? Lord Tyr, Lord Agnar, please explain how this is possible.’

‘War does strange things to men.’ Tyr threw open the side doors to the Great Hall. ‘I told Odin back then that you were not worth the cloak he wrapped you in, but he refused to listen.’

The bulk of the lamps in the Great Hall were extinguished. It was hard to even make out the walls, leaving Loki with a sense he was in some cavernous pit. The sole island of light was the dais. The throne was unoccupied, but the rest of the king’s council stood on the steps below it. As Loki’s small party approached the dais, more Einherjari soldiers emerged from the darkness. There were dozens in all. Far more than necessary if they were worried about Loki. His magic was bound and he had no idea where his knives had ended up.

*Something tells me the collar won’t be coming off just yet.*
Loki made a show of attempting a smile. ‘Was there a party invitation I missed?’

For all the outward differences, Loki still sounded the same. A palace guard was unlikely to be familiar enough with Loki’s voice to recognise it when it emanated from a frost giant’s mouth. The king’s advisers were a different matter. They had all been at Odin’s side for centuries, if not millennia. They had practically watched Loki grow up. And they all looked distinctly uncomfortable once they heard him speak.

Agnar, perhaps because he’d had some minutes already to accustom himself to Loki’s true features, recovered first. He grimaced and slowly climbed the steps up, then turned to face the dark vastness of the hall.

‘I thank you all for coming despite the peculiar hour. It is a matter that cannot wait the light of day. Lord Tyr has made an accusation of treason against the prince-regent. We must determine whether there is merit in the commander’s claims and whether the prince should remain regent.’

Loki ran his hand through his hair, grimacing at the way the ridges on his knuckles caught the strands.

‘It seems the former king and queen kept certain basic facts from me,’ he said, making sure his voice trembled a little as he spoke. ‘But it is not treason to be born a frost giant, surely? What am I being accused of?’

‘I believe the prince-regent has been conspiring with the frost giants to weaken Asgard and to secure the throne for himself,’ Tyr replied.

Loki spun around to face Tyr. ‘What?’

‘Why is it that when the King of Jotunheim asserts there is treason among us, Asgardians, the prince-regent all but laughs off the words?’ Tyr said. He hadn’t joined the rest of the councillors up on the dais and now made a slow circuit along the broad semi-circle his Einherjar had formed across the floor of the Great Hall. ‘It’s because he already knows the traitor’s identity. Unprecedented events have befallen Asgard recently. Who was involved in them all? Who benefited from them? Prince Loki.

‘It seemed strange to me that for all his skill in the magic arts, he was unable to close a portal in time to prevent the frost giants escaping after their assault on the Vault. Stranger yet that he would mistime dropping his protective shield in Jotunheim when Odin’s life was at stake. But it’s not so strange when you realise this was the intent. I suspect the plan was for Odin to die in Jotunheim, but the Odinsleep saved him.’

‘Do not attribute to malice what can be explained by incompetence,’ Loki responded. ‘Spellwork is finicky, all the more when time is not on the sorcerer’s side. I daresay you too have made mistakes in the chaos of battle.’

‘I’ve never made a mistake that directly led me to be proclaimed ruler of Asgard.’

Loki glanced up to the vacant throne. ‘I have no desire to rule Asgard. What have I gained from my mistakes, Lord Tyr? My father is gravely ill, my brother is captured and Asgard is at war.’

‘Odin is not your father and Thor is not your brother. And I doubt you care about Asgard at all.’

‘Then why have I spent so much energy trying to keep the realm out of this war!’

‘Who knows, maybe Laufey needed time to gather his forces.’
‘Unsupported assumptions have no place in this conversation,’ Eydis said.

Loki pursed his lips. She might be presenting herself as a moderating voice now, but she had to have known of Agnar and Tyr’s plans. Everything in the Weapons Vault had been transferred into the Treasury. They would have needed her authorisation to enter the Treasury vaults and take the collar currently rubbing a blister into Loki’s neck. He wondered if any of them had entertained a thought that they could ask Loki to voluntarily put on the collar before they decided on the clandestine ambush in his bedroom. It seemed unlikely, and that unnerved Loki all the more.

‘The point doesn’t change,’ Tyr responded. ‘The entire time he has been the most pro-Jotnar voice in the palace. We have always thrown the dead giants into pits and buried them, but he would have them accorded the same honours as Asgardian fallen. It verges on blasphemy.

‘He demanded also the frost giant his br— King Thor captured should be given unprecedented comforts. In fact, on the very night the king sought the prince, intent on having him accompany the king’s party to Jotunheim, the prince was nowhere to be found. Convenient if one wanted to avoid the ambush that met the king in Jotunheim. And where was the prince that night? Busy being bosom buddies with the frost giant in our dungeons.

‘And is it not curious how quick the prince was to explain how the portal was made? It’s quite clear now. He knew how the portal was made because he led the frost giants to it.’

Loki tried to keep his face neutral. Out of all the stupidity Tyr had just rattled off, the portal was Loki’s sole true transgression. He was fairly sure, however, Tyr had no way of proving this. The frost giants involved with Loki’s original plans were either dead or in Jotunheim. Baugi clearly didn’t know of Loki’s involvement or he would have said something long before now.

‘You are repeating the words of the king of Jotunheim, who is our enemy,’ Loki said. ‘It is in his interest to sow discord among us when we are on the eve of war with Jotunheim. Now it seems he had hit upon a certain truth, but it does not make the rest of his words true. It is a common liar’s trick. Mix in a bit of truth into your lie and it’ll sound more convincing. Still, at the end of the day, a lie remains a lie. My loyalty is with Asgard and will be always.’

Tyr began to respond, but Eydis spoke over him. ‘How did Laufey know Loki was one of his? Or has he always known? Why then not claim the child earlier?’

‘Because until now he had no reason to,’ Tyr replied. ‘Laufey does not move a finger unless it benefits him in some way. No, that’s not it. He was waiting until the child grew up and he could make use of him. The plan worked out, has it not? Look at the state of Asgard right now.’

Loki dropped his head, but found the collar cut into the edge of his jawline. He nudged his chin up. ‘I think I might know what happened,’ he said. It seemed a good idea to volunteer information where he could; appearing cooperative could only help him. ‘During the fight down in the Vault, one of the frost giants grabbed my arm. She did something and my limb went cold, then the skin turned blue. It looked like my hands do now. I thought it was some obscure Jotunn magic and with everything else going on, I didn’t dwell on it. Thinking about it now though, the frost giant looked more startled by the result than I was. She must have realised she pushed through the concealment magic. I’ve seen the dead and she wasn’t among them, so she could’ve told Laufey about me. From there, he would have extrapolated the truth. There could only be so many children unaccounted for that match my description.’

‘A plausible theory,’ Agnar said. ‘On the other hand, it relies on your word and yours alone. You did not share this story with anyone else until now, I take it?’
'No, but I’m not obligated to share with the council every detail of my life.’

‘Watch your tone, boy,’ one of the other councillors muttered.

Agnar waved his hand dismissively. ‘For the sake of brevity. Your highness, is there any truth to the accusation that you were involved in bringing the frost giants into Asgard?’

‘No,’ Loki replied flatly.

‘How did you know that the portal was tied to the Convergence?’

Loki’s shoulders sunk. They wouldn’t believe him if he claimed it was a fortunate guess.

‘I have been experimenting with portals myself,’ he said. ‘I thought it was likely that if I noticed the effect the Convergence was having on the boundaries between the realms, others could have too.’

‘Did you make any trips to Jotunheim during these experiments?’

‘No.’

Agnar clasped his hands together. ‘Where to then?’

‘Svartalfheim and Vanaheim. Before you ask, that is where the portals I found led to. I never thought to look for possible portals in the ante-chamber to the Weapons Vault,’ Loki answered.

‘And what if we are to say that we found your magical signature on the other side of the portal that the frost giants came through?’ Tyr asked.

‘I’d say? I’d say, so what? People and goods travel through portals, so does magic. I did a spell to close it, I was around for the initial exploration of the portal. How many times has that portal been meddled with since then? I would’ve been very surprised if you didn’t find traces of my magic on both ends of the portal by now.’

Thank the Norns you cannot date a magical signature or this ’ll be the end of me.

Loki’s words stirred some uncertainty among the councillors. Agnar turned to the Minister for Public Works, who stood to his left and hissed something in his ear. Others soon butted in on the conversation. Usually, Loki and Frigga were the designated consultants on all matters magical. Of course on this occasion Loki was no help to them and Frigga too was unlikely to aid them. The Minister for Public Works had a familiarity with magic, but judging from his body language, properties of magic flows through portals were beyond his limited expertise.

Loki cleared his throat. ‘Are there any other accusations being thrown at me, councillors?’

‘Other accusations?’ Tyr retorted. ‘You have not disproved anything presented so far.’

‘Nor have you provided any definitive proof on any statement you made, Lord Tyr. I have the outermost respect for you and I have given you the time to make your voice heard, but all of this is just conjecture and fantasy. I’m not a traitor and I’ve no desire to usurp Thor’s place. I have made errors, yes, and my mistakes have proven to be costly. I would now like to focus on setting them right, not on this theatre.’

‘There is one more thing I wish to address,’ Agnar said. ‘The king of Jotunheim stated there was a traitor in Asgard; you ignored him and told us not to speak of it. Why?’

‘Because he had no reason to tell the truth and every reason to lie.’
‘Was the possibility not worth investigating?’

Loki shook his head in feigned disbelief. ‘Perhaps, yes. I’ve already said that I’m not infallible, perhaps this was one more error on my part. But, Lord Agnar, you are my adviser right now. If you believed I was acting imprudently, why didn’t you do your job and advise me to take a better course of action?’

‘I tried, your highness. You were not listening to me.’

Thinking back to the minutes after Laufey ended the negotiations, Loki found he couldn’t be sure of Agnar’s words one way or the other. He remembered a flurry of overlapping conversation. He remembered too trying to ignore them all as he attempted to swallow his worry over Thor’s safety and his panic about the accusations Laufey had thrown at him.

‘A competent adviser knows how to pick the appropriate moment to approach his sovereign with suggestions,’ Loki said. ‘You picked the wrong one.’

Agnar offered him a mirthless smile. ‘Noted, your highness.’

‘Well, are you all satisfied?’ Loki asked.

‘Councillors?’ While Agnar seemed to make a survey of his peers, Tyr finally climbed up the steps and took up his position to the left of the chancellor. Agnar squared his shoulders. ‘When it comes to claims of treason, I believe definitive evidence is scant, but there is still the matter of the regency. King Thor did not leave detailed guidance on who should take up Gungnir in his absence. With the former king also indisposed, this council voted to give the regency to Prince Loki. However, the council retained the right to strip the prince of his regency should there be need. I believe the time has come for a vote. Does –’

‘You have no evidence of any wrongdoing on my part.’ Loki took a step back, so he could see the whole council at once. ‘All you have are rambling accusations from Lord Tyr and the words of Asgard’s enemy. I explain to you already why Laufey cannot be trusted. And, respectfully, what is Lord Tyr’s state of mind right now? He buried his daughter today. He is grieving and angry and looking for someone to blame.’

‘You’ve said enough, Loki,’ Agnar replied. ‘Councillors, your votes.’

Tyr’s words rang out first of course. They were quickly followed by four more. All called for Loki’s removal. Loki grit his teeth as the rest of the council gave their votes. By the time all the councillors had spoken, only two votes had gone in Loki’s favour and they were useless to him. The vote didn’t have to be unanimous, a simple majority would suffice.

 Damn you all.

Agnar clasped his hands together. ‘Then it is done. Prince Loki, you are stripped of the regency.’

‘How the hell are you planning to explain this to the rest of Asgard?’ Loki laughed bitterly. ‘What am I guilty of? Being a frost giant?’

‘We cannot prove treason at this time, but overall your conduct has been questionable and with Asgard’s delicate present political situation, you are not the appropriate person to occupy the throne of Asgard.’

Loki drew in a long breath and pressed his teeth together. He wasn’t surprised at this outcome, not really. This night hadn’t been heading anywhere good from the moment Tyr’s men had pulled him
out of bed. Still, that didn’t mean he wasn’t furious.

‘It may be soon or it may be centuries, but don’t be mistaken about this. A day will come when each one of you will regret your choices today,’ he said.

Tyr scoffed, then whispered into Agnar’s ear. Once he received a nod from the chancellor, Tyr gestured towards his soldiers. ‘There is no reason for him to be present any longer. Einherjar, take the frost giant to his quarters.’

Two men grabbed Loki from behind and eight more formed a tight perimeter around him. They manhandled him out of the Great Hall and out in the shadowed corridors of the palace. Loki preoccupied himself with making their task as difficult as possible; it took him far longer than it should have to notice that the soldiers were not leading him back up to his rooms.

‘Where are we going?’ Loki asked. When he received no answer, he pressed the matter. ‘Where are we headed? Answer me!’

The soldier leading Loki’s makeshift guard chuckled. ‘Your new quarters, your highness. Somewhere a frost giant would feel more at home.’
Loki scraped his thumbnail across the brow of a soldier attempting to hold onto him and pressed his thumb into the man’s eyeball. Einherjari armour was well-designed, there were few vulnerabilities for Loki to exploit. And Loki was half-dressed and unarmed as the six of them man-handled him. He had no qualms about exploiting every dirty move in his repertoire.

To Loki’s glee, the soldier howled with pain. Loki hooked his foot around the back of the man’s knees, but before Loki could flip him onto the ground, the two soldiers from the back of Loki’s guard grabbed onto him. One of them aimed a solid punch into Loki’s back. Loki responded by dislocating the man’s forefinger.

For all his efforts, he couldn’t avoid his fate. The party moved, slowly and inexorably, towards its final destination — the old, half-abandoned corridor at the base of the palace.

More soldiers were stationed there, shifting impatiently from foot to foot before an unlocked cell door.

‘What are you waiting for!’ shouted the soldier who commanded Loki’s guard.

They flung open the cell door and scurried to the side. A moment later Loki himself was flung through the opening and into the cell. By the time Loki jumped back onto his feet, however, the lock was firmly on the door.

‘Enjoy the rest of your night, your highness.’ The commander grinned and motioned for his men to leave.

Loki straightened himself as much as he could, tucking in his shirt and smoothing his hair. There was no point in throwing himself at the cell’s thick metal bars as if he were a rabid beast. No amount of effort would shift them. Besides, three Einherjari soldiers remained behind and were presently staring at him. The first step to a successful escape was to wait until your guards were occupied elsewhere before you attempted it.

‘Who might you be?’ Baugi asked.

Loki turned and laughed. Of course Tyr had put him in the cell right next to Baugi’s.

The frost giant came up to the bars that separated their cells and rested his head against one of the bars.

‘You know me, Baugi,’ Loki replied in a dry tone.

‘Your voice is familiar.’ Baugi frowned and it was a long moment until he spoke again. ‘You sound like the prince of Asgard.’

‘I do, don’t I?’ Loki had the beginnings of half a dozen self-deprecating jokes at the tip of his tongue, but he wasn’t in the mood for any of them, so he simply shrugged.

While Baugi threw one questions at him after another, Loki wiped away the blood pooling on his lip, palpated his aching ribs and glanced at what he had to work with. His cell was better furnished than Baugi’s. The dining table, the leather chairs, the wide daybed looked no different to the pieces you could find in the guest quarters for visiting dignitaries. Prisoners of noble birth were allotted some comforts in their captivity.
Loki sunk onto the bed and rested his feet on the armrest. He supposed he ought to have been grateful for this concession, he had been held in more dismal prisons and remembered those miserable days clearly, but the set up here reminded him too starkly of the cell his father had thrown him into after his attempted conquest of Midgard.

Eventually, Baugi realised he would get no answers and left Loki alone to his thoughts. He tried to focus on solutions or at least on listening in on his guards in hope of gleaning any shred of additional information. But the soldiers outside had little to say to each other and instead of searching for a way forward, his mind turned constantly to past. Again and again, he mulled over everything he could have and should have said before the council.

Minutes stretched to hours and Loki was on the verge of drifting off when commotion out in the corridor jerked him back to full alert.

When he propped himself up on his elbows, he found his mother staring at him. Her eyes wide, she started to say something, then shook her head. Loki bit into the inside of his cheek and waited for Frigga to take in the sum of his true features. As far as he knew, she wouldn’t have seen him like this since he was little more than a newborn. It took some adjusting to.

After a long, awkward moment, he sat himself up fully and broke the silence. ‘You should’ve told me.’

Einherjari soldiers lingered behind Frigga; Loki expected they were to report everything they heard. It would be foolish to stray from the story he had committed to earlier.

‘I’m sorry, Loki,’ Frigga said. ‘Your father thought it better you didn’t know.’

‘But you disagreed, yes? You should have taken matters into your own hands. You are his wife, not his thrall.’

Frigga turned to the soldiers. ‘Unlock the cell for me and retreat to the end of the hall. I wish to speak to my son alone.’

‘Our orders—’

‘Let me into the cell, good man. I absolve you of any responsibility should something befall me in there.’

Whatever the political situation in Asgard, Frigga still carried enough authority to send even the Einherjar into a flurry. The sergeant quickly produced the keys and opened the cell door for her.

‘Lock it.’ She pointed to the lock once she was inside the cell. ‘I’ll call out when I need you.’

She waited until the soldiers had fallen back and out of sight before she all but ran over to Loki. ‘You are right, I should’ve stood up to your father,’ she said. Her hand trembled slightly as she reached out and lifted up his chin. ‘What have they done to you? Your lip is bleeding.’

Loki slid his hand across his lips. ‘It’s only a split lip, it must have just reopened.’

‘You can speak freely,’ Frigga said. ‘I left a light ward in the hallway, even if they hear us conversing, they won’t be able to make out the words unless we shout at the top of our lungs.’
'I'm fine. I gave as good as I got.'

'Loki —'

'Leave it, mother, please,' he cut in. 'And let's discuss how I came to be your son later too, hopefully when I am not in a cell. What's happening out there? I take it they weren't daft enough to appoint you regent.'

'With all the misfortune that has recently befallen my family, they say they did me a kindness in not heaping the stress of governing upon me as well.' Frigga scoffed, then ducked her head so Loki couldn't see her face, but when she spoke again, her simmering fury was obvious. 'There will be no regent. The council has decided to vote on all decisions among themselves. Loki, had I known —'

'They decided to stage their coup in the middle of the night precisely so you wouldn't know until it was too late. Don't blame yourself on that account. But now that we are where we are, it's hard to argue against the council's decision. They governed often enough when father fell into Odinsleep before and Thor left no instructions to the contrary.'

'Agnar and Tyr will dominate the council.'

'I know,' Loki replied. 'Are there any signs of father waking?'

'No.'

Loki glanced to Baugi's unmoving form in the other cell. Frigga's warding probably didn't extend to him and there was no telling if the frost giant slept or only pretended to. Still, Loki had to ask. 'And Jotunheim?'

'Too early to say I think, but there are rumours of heavy casualties.'

Loki pondered if Tyr and Asgar would consider it treason if they were to find out that at this moment Loki wished the complete failure of the Asgardian campaign in Jotunheim. As unkingly as it was, the resulting loss of Asgardian lives had become a tertiary consideration. The simple fact was that as long as Laufey believed Thor could be the key to negotiating an agreement between Asgard and Jotunheim, he had an interest in keeping Thor alive. But if the battle-plans worked out in Asgard's favour and Laufey faced an Einherjari army ransacking his capital, he might well kill Thor out of spite.

Still, it could be worse. Half the universe could be dead.

'Loki,' Frigga said, her voice barely above a whisper, 'would you be honest with me? Is there any truth at all to what Tyr has said?'

All the grand gambles of war and politics fell away and the spans of centuries withered into nothing at that question. Loki was a child again, peering at his mother's soft eyes. She had always had the power to coax the truth out of him when no one else could. And frankly, sometimes Loki too tired of the lies he cloaked himself in.

'I showed the frost giants how to enter Asgard,' he replied.

He would have been content to finish the confession there, but Frigga remained silent, waiting for him to go on until the full truth was exposed. Another familiar trick.

Loki sighed. 'I was certain Thor wasn't ready to be king so I planned to let in a few frost giants into the palace and disrupt the coronation. At the last moment, I changed my mind and decided I should
trust father’s judgement on this. I thought all was well, but once the frost giants knew where the portal was, they only had to find another sorcerer to open it for them.’

He clasped his hand together and pressed his fingers down until his knuckles ached. His mother was usually quick to reward his candour with a hug or some similar sign of affection even as she metered out his punishment. Yet she now sat unmoved, her lips drawn into a thin line.

‘Is that all?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t think so. You haven’t been yourself, even before the frost giant attack.’

Loki raised an eyebrow and stifled a wince as pain throbbed through the right side of his face. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I have been trying to put my finger on it for days,’ Frigga replied. ‘You are quieter for one. I had expected to find you in a furore, but… Loki, I don’t know, there were times when you gave us all such weary, melancholic looks I wondered if you had done something terrible.’

Of course she noticed. I could never keep up a lie around her for long.

‘Such as treason?’ he asked with a grimace.

‘No. Not that.’

Loki hoped she would elaborate, but his mother instead cocked her head, clearly anticipating his reply.

‘Do you remember how I had a bad reaction to a spell on the morning of Thor’s coronation?’ he said. When Frigga nodded, he pulled himself upright and paced the width of the cell. ‘My magic wasn’t right after that spell, it was only starting to recover in the last couple of days. It’s not a pleasant thing for a sorcerer to endure. Thor’s coronation weighed on me too and then the frost giants… well, I’m not surprised I’ve come across oddly.’

‘What spell was it? You never did explain.’

Loki froze mid-step and turned to face his mother. The temptation to confess was overwhelming. He held his breath, the first words of the truth on the tip of his tongue, but his chest ached with anxiety.

True, back the first time around, she had never turned away from him, even after Midgard. But she had died not knowing half the things he had done. He had never admitted before today his part in the frost giant incursion during Thor’s coronation. Worse yet, were the things he had done after her death. If he were to tell her the truth, he would have to explain how he had faked his death, subdued his father and impersonated him for two years. He would also have to explain his part in Thanos’ madness.

Even a mother’s love had limits, surely? Besides, this was a different time-line – a time-line Loki had already muddled. It was possible that everything that had happened since he had played with the past had changed Frigga’s attitude to the world, including to Loki himself.

No, he didn’t dare to take the risk.

Loki let out a strangled chuckle. ‘There are some spells a man doesn’t feel comfortable discussing with his mother.’
‘Is that so?’ Frigga’s incredulity was palpable.

‘Don’t, just don’t,’ he responded. He had to wonder if frost giants were capable of blushing, because his cheeks burned. On the other hand, he supposed his discomfort at this awkward lie worked in his favour, his mother would take it as proof of his embarrassment about dabbling in these sorts of questionable spell-work. ‘It was a foolish whim and I won’t be trying it again.’

Loud rapping against the cell bars startled both Frigga and Loki. The sergeant had tired of waiting for Frigga. Her ward on the hallway worked in both directions, they couldn’t make out his words, but his demeanour and tone conveyed enough.

‘I can break you out of here,’ Frigga muttered.

‘What then?’ Loki asked as he pulled his mother into an embrace. ‘The palace is filled with armed men, I won’t get far like this. Can you get me out of this collar?’

She ran her hand along the metal band and sighed. ‘This needs a key.’

‘Then leave me here until you’ve found it. Please take care though, don’t give Tyr a reason to turn against you too.’

Frigga wrapped her arms tighter around Loki.
‘Another?’ Geir asked as he gathered up the cards on the table. ‘I guess if we keep playing, there’s a chance you’ll get better at this game. How many is it in a row now?’

Ranveig huffed. ‘There’s only so much I can do with the shite cards you deal me.’

‘You deal then.’

Curled up in bed, Loki gritted his teeth at the inane chatter drifting into his cell.

Four days had passed since Agnar and Tyr had staged their coup. He had received no further visits from his mother nor any messages from her. The cell itself wasn’t a hardship in the grand scale of things. He was given food whenever he requested it and some of his personal belongings had been brought down. He was well-fed, clothed and moderately entertained, but as much as it heartened him that Asgardians still remembered that he was the king’s brother, his anxiety over the lack of news from the outside gnawed at him.

The only thing to change in the past days were the uniforms of the men stationed outside his cell. As Loki understood it, more Einherjari troops had been called to the front, which left the palace guard to manage more of the emergency tasks inside the palace.

Ranveig and Geir weren’t half as attentive to their duties as their Einherjari counterparts had been. They had set up a table in the middle of the corridor and occupied themselves with lewd jokes, complaints about their superiors, and card games. Loki had initially thought their relaxed attitude would be a boon, but now that it was two in the morning and their conversation continued to keep him awake, he wasn’t so sure.

As Ranveig finished shuffling the cards, however, Geir dropped the volume of his voice a notch. ‘Have you heard from your brother-in-law?’ he asked. ‘There’s not much news coming from the fighting.’

‘Not since his company went in. Not that he expected anything good. Last time he was at my house, he spent half the night ranting about how they prepped for the last war against Jotunheim, not today’s.’

‘Should he be talking like that about what happens in the planning room?’

‘Drink loosens his tongue,’ Ranveig replied. ‘I’ve told him often enough he needs to contain himself, but he doesn’t give a fig about what I’ve got to say. Whatever’s happening out there, I hope the old king wakens soon and sets things aright. Clearly, the queen can’t do much.’

_I wish father would wake too. If only to shut up the two of you._

Moving slowly so he wouldn’t draw the guards’ attention, Loki pulled his blanket down and turned so he could see them seated at the table.

‘I thought she was really something,’ Ranveig added, dealing out the cards for the next round. ‘No joking, I did. Except, what’s she doing now? Hiding out in her room, weeping. She’s the queen! We all have family problems and we still come in to do our work.’

‘I’m a card short.’
'Oh, sorry.’ Ranveig slapped one more card onto the table. ‘I suppose I hardly know what the queen does. Maybe she’s just supposed to sit by her husband and look pretty.’

Geir took a glance at his cards and shook his head. ‘Use your brain, Veig. The queen’s quarters are as well-guarded right now as the Treasury vaults. Sure, she’s confined in there by her own choosing.’

Loki sighed. Now he had his explanation and it was exactly what he had feared.

‘What are you saying?’ Ranveig asked.

‘Well, don’t go repeating this, yeah? But it seems to me everything worked out neatly in Lord Agnar’s favour. Everyone can see he’s getting on in age and rumours were, the new king disliked him, so it was only a matter of time until he was thrown out of the king’s council. Now he rules Asgard. If he manages to get rid of the king’s family properly and keeps Tyr occupied with the frost giants, he could probably proclaim himself king by the end of the year and no one will do anything about it.’

Ranveig clearly wasn’t the type who spent his time thinking about the intricacies of palace politics. He furrowed his brows and through the next several turns of their game, seemed to be mulling over his friend’s words instead of focusing on his cards.

‘Agnar’s a good man,’ he said finally. ‘We had a traitor on the throne and he found a way to be rid of him.’

Geir leant back, sending his chair creaking. ‘I’m sure he thought only of Asgard when he had the prince thrown down here.’

‘You aren’t one of those who think he’s innocent, are you?’

‘Of course not. Only an idiot would trust a frost giant.’

‘True, but… I don’t know, he never seemed so bad to me, even with his magic and his petty tricks. It must be shite growing up the little brother to the future king. You know, they say he was as shocked as anyone else when they revealed what he was.’

‘He’s always been a good liar.’ Geir’s face twisted into a grimace. ‘Besides, he hardly need to have known he’s not Asgardian to betray us. Sometimes blood will just win out.’

Loki clung onto the edge of his blanket and forced himself to take slow, even breaths. In his younger days, he would have leapt out of bed already and would be at the bars at this very moment, making sure Geir knew what Loki thought of him. The urge was certainly there even now — Geir’s words stung as much as a physical strike would have. He had a lot of things to say to the man in return, but if he revealed he had listened in on their conversation now, Loki would forgo the chance of scraping information from their future conversations. There were times where you have to swallow pride in order to secure future advantages.

‘It’s your turn.’ Ranveig gestured towards the sprawl of cards at the centre of the table.

‘No. Bor’s wrinkled ball-sack, is it so hard to pay attention? I just put down my card.’

‘Right, sorry.’

Geir snorted when Ranveig set down his card. ‘You can’t blame your shoddy playing on my shuffling this time.’
‘Shut it,’ Ranveig replied. He froze for a moment, as if listening out for something in the distance before he went on. ‘You know, I don’t think it’s as simple as what people are saying. The old king brought the prince to Asgard for a reason.’

‘Kings make stupid decisions too. The fact he’s half-dead from an arrow wound and his son’s been captured by frost giant just proves that that’s so.’

A thunderous bang swallowed Geir’s reply.

By the time the two guards were on their feet, the hallway had begun to fill with viscous smoke. Loki ignored their panicked exchanges. He pulled his blanket over the lower half of his face and scrambled out of bed. He hadn’t been permitted any weapons inside the cell, of course, so he grabbed the best available alternate — his table lamp.

‘I can’t…’ someone muttered.

The smoke had become so thick, only vague outlines of people remained distinguishable. Loki thought the speaker might have been Geir. Whether through panic or due to the smoke, his voice had climbed an octave.

Moments later, when both silhouettes swayed and slumped to the ground, taking a chair down with them, Loki decided the smoke had been the culprit. He pressed the blanket tighter around his nose and mouth. His eyes had begun to sting too, but he didn’t dare deprive himself of his vision when he understood so little of what was happening around him.

Metal clinked further up the hallway. Hurried footsteps.

A new silhouette emerged from the cloud smoke. As it drew closer, it took a more solid shape, but it was the swagger in Fandral’s walk that Loki recognised first.

‘The sergeant had the keys,’ Loki called out. The blanket garbled his words, but Fandral seemed to understand the gist of it.

‘I’m glad you’re conscious, I didn’t relish the thought of having to drag you out of here,’ he responded, his words similarly muffled by the scarf drawn over the lower half of his face. He flung a ball of wet fabric through the cell bars and turned his attention to Geir and Ranveig.

Loki pulled the ball apart and found it was a thin scarf. Tossing the blanket aside, he secured it over his face. The scarf had been soaked in a potion that reeked of yerba and spearmint. Loki grinned. This was his mother’s work.

After a bit of rough handling, Fandral extracted a set of old-fashioned keys from Geir’s pocket.

‘No reason to dawdle, is there?’ he said as he quickly worked to get the cell door open. Typical of Fandral, he appeared nonchalant about the clandestine activities he was carrying out this night. Or at least he hadn’t been until Loki slipped out of his cell and stood close enough for Fandral to see him clearly. His jaw slacked and he produced a strangled half-wince, before he recovered the use of his speech. ‘Pardon me. I’d heard, but it’s different to actually see you.’

‘Yes, Fandral,’ Loki replied. ‘I can tell by how your face has turned the same shade as the smoke. Hearten yourself, just think of how many pranks there could have been had I known about this.’

Fandral cleared his throat. ‘I, for one, always thought Kronans were much scarier than frost giants.’

Loki shrugged and let this trail of conversation peter out. There was no sense stirring up trouble with
a man who had just stuck out his neck for you. Instead, he grabbed Geir’s legs and dragged him inside the cell. Fandral was quick to shift Renveig into the cell also. The smoke’s effects were unlikely to linger; it would be foolish to leave guards free to raise alarm about Loki’s escape.

‘Let’s go,’ Fandral said, already heading towards the stairs at the end of the corridor. ‘Your mother will be waiting for us by now.’

Loki started after them, but a stray thought stopped him in his tracks.

‘Baugi?’ he called out. ‘Are you there?’

The frost giant’s cell wasn’t lit half as well as Loki’s had been. Loki only spotted Baugi when he turned onto his back and sat up in his rickety bed. He had pulled up his shirt to help him breathe, which suggested he was cognizant of what had just transpired, although Loki doubted that Baugi had cause to be worried that the potion would overcome him. He was larger than an Asgardian and further away from the source of the smoke.

‘Stopped by to say farewell?’ Baugi asked sourly.

Loki slid his hand along the cell bars. ‘A trade. I get you out of here, you help me in return.’

‘Help you?’

‘This is a deal you want to take, Baugi. When they find out I’ve escaped, they will be angry and they will take it out on you.’ Before Baugi had a chance to reply, Loki called out to Fandral. ‘Hold on! Get this cell open first.’

Fandral retraced his steps and came to stand beside Loki. His brows knitted together as he understood what Loki was asking.

‘Why would this be a good —’

Loki pulled Fandral closer and hissed into his ear. ‘For your sake, if nothing else. He’ll be questioned when my escape is discovered. Even if he didn’t see you clearly, he heard you.’

Fandral nodded, but even with half his face covered, Loki could tell he pouted like a spoiled child as he unlocked Baugi’s cell.

Loki grabbed Baugi’s arm. ‘Time to get out of here.’

By the pace Fandral set, one would have thought he was the prisoner who was fleeing his captors. He led Loki and Baugi up the steep stairs and through several palace tunnels, glancing back only to prod Loki to keep up the pace. They passed through three more sets of guards, all incapacitated, before Fandral took a sharp left and flung open the door to one of the unused servant dormitories.

Frigga waited inside. Loki didn’t even have the chance to greet her before she wrapped her arms around him in a suffocating embrace.

‘Mother?’ he struggled out.

Frigga smiled sheepishly as she drew back enough to allow Loki to refill his lungs. ‘My room was guarded, that’s why this took so long. And the materials I had to work with were… Never mind all
that, it’s done now. Let me get that collar off you.’

‘Thank you.’

Loki couldn’t see much of what his mother did, but after a few moments, the collar clicked and split into two parts. He ripped it off, then palpated the base of his neck. The collar had chafed and there were now several weeping sores around his throat. He left them as they were. Should any Asgardians see him, he wanted them to know what had been done to their prince and from a more practical standpoint, he planned to expend his magical reserves on more important things.

‘We’d best not frighten the children any longer,’ he muttered and with an exhale, warmth flooded his skin.

Thank the Norns.

Frigga’s lips tightened. ‘You don’t have to do that.’

‘It’ll be easier to make our way around Asgard if I don’t look like the enemy,’ Loki said. ‘Fandral, do you have a weapon to spare?’

While Baugi had chosen to skulk around the edge of the room, Fandral had positioned himself before the half-open door so they could have warning should they have company. At Loki’s words, he finally pushed down the scarf covering his face and offered Loki a small dagger.

‘You won’t need a weapon,’ Frigga said.

Baugi snorted. ‘It is an insult to call that a weapon.’

As Loki turned the dagger in his hands, he found himself agreeing with the frost giant.

‘I’ve arranged for a place on Alfheim where you’ll be safe,’ his mother explained. ‘You can open a portal to Alfheim from this room and I’ll send a message to you when it’s safe for you to return to Asgard.’ Loki’s expression must have told her what he thought of that plan, because she went on. ‘Or if Alfheim is not where you wish to be, go to Midgard.’

‘I’m not running off into exile. Not while Thor is being held captive.’

Why do you think Baugi is here?

‘No, Loki —’

He slipped the dagger into his pocket, then set his hands down on Frigga’s shoulders and pressed his forehead against hers. ‘He’s my brother. Send me to Alfheim or Midgard or the farthest corner of the universe, I will crawl my way back to Jotunheim and find a way to set Thor free.’

‘And if you get in trouble yourself?’

‘You know me,’ he responded. ‘I find trouble all the time and, sooner or later, I find a way out of it.’

Frigga shook her head in exasperation. ‘You’ll be careful at least?’

‘Of course, I will,’ he replied. ‘Let me think for a moment.’

He tapped his fingers against his thigh. The Bifrost was closed to him; the Einherjar would have commandeered the bridge for their purposes. It was the portal then. That too would be guarded, but perhaps not as heavily. From there, it was a long and unpleasant, but manageable hike to Laufey’s
house. And once he was there, things would only become more complicated. Thor wouldn’t be kept unguarded.

‘Do any of you have paper?’ he asked.

With a sigh, Frigga conjured a short scroll, ink and a dip pen for him. Loki unrolled the scroll. Even if he couldn’t use the Bifrost to enter Jotunheim, changes were the portal would be out of reach for his return journey. He would need Heimdall’s help. Loki scribbled down his few rough ideas for his plan in Jotunheim, then, unsatisfied with himself, stared at the scroll. He needed Heimdall’s trust, otherwise, the man would betray him to Tyr at once.

Loki bit his lip. Heimdall had already looked askance at him when Loki had travelled to Jotunheim with his father.

‘I beg your help, Heimdall,’ Loki added to the end of his message. ‘Asgard is in greater danger than anyone in the Nine Realms knows. Tyr and Laufey play children’s games, unaware of the tides shifting in the wider universe. My brother has a part to play in the war that is to come. I will explain when we return.’

He rolled to up the scroll tightly and added a spell to ensure its contents would be legible only to its intended recipient.

‘Watch me being careful, mother,’ he muttered, then spoke more loudly. ‘Fandral, you have already done me a great service tonight, but would you do one more? Would you take this message to Heimdall?’

Fandral swivelled to look directly at Loki. ‘I’d rather be by your side in Jotunheim.’

‘Please. This is important.’

‘Fine,’ Fandral replied. ‘But take my rapier with you. The frost giant is right, I mostly use that dagger to peel apples.’

Loki took the sword from Fandral and tested its balance. It had been decades since he had last had cause to hold this weapon. He had no affection for rapiers — the blade was too long for his taste, but the grip of Fandral’s weapon at least sat comfortably in Loki’s hand. Loki tried a mock attack, then drew back into a low-line parry.

‘It’s not terrible,’ he conceded.

Gripping Loki’s message tightly, Fandral offered Frigga an ornate bow and nodded to Loki, then slipped out the door.

Loki motioned for Baugi and Frigga to move also. The Weapons Vault was in a different section of the palace to the one they were presently in and the passage between them was circuitous. Before they had made it two hundred feet, however, an alarm sounded.

‘Did the blond one get caught already?’ Baugi asked.

Frigga muttered something under her breath, then sad, ‘It seems unlikely. But my escape could have been noticed. Volstagg and Hogun helped me cover it up as best we could before we broke into the vaults, but —’

‘Or the guards were left behind were discovered. The how doesn’t really matter,’ Loki replied as he quickened his pace.
His heart already pulsed. He would have broken into a full sprint if not for the fear that he would run straight into a squadron of palace guards. Or, considering his luck of late, Tyr himself.

But despite the continuing thump of the palace alert system, they found the passageways and the stairways on their path empty. Loki had to wonder just how many men had been called to Jotunheim in recent days.

‘Halt!’ a woman shouted from behind them.

When he spun around, Loki realised the woman half-dressed in the formal Einherjar officer’s uniform was one of Tyr’s favourite underlings. He couldn’t quite remember her name. Her face and her scowl, however, were familiar – she had been there in the Great Hall that night, relishing in Loki’s downfall. Her scowl turned into a smirk as she drew her sword.

Loki flung Fandral’s dagger. She hadn’t taken the time to fasten her collar; the dagger slid smoothly into her bare throat.

‘Decent throw,’ Baugi said as the woman fell forward, struggling through the last minutes of her life.

Frigga grabbed Loki’s sleeve and pulled him after her. ‘Hurry. Who knows who heard her.’

There were no half-measures any longer. Frigga, Baugi and Loki raced down to the Weapons Vault.

Loki’s lungs burned by the time they reached the top of the stairs to it and saw the wall of men standing there, all itching for a fight. Had Frigga and Loki come alone, perhaps they could have leveraged the oaths of loyalty that had bound the citizens of Asgard and their royal family for generations, but Baugi’s presence extinguished that possibility. Once they saw him, the guards closed in around the top of the stairwell and dropped their spear tips down to form a formidable shield wall.

With one sweep of her hands, Frigga lifted a good half of the guards off their feet and deposited them in a crumpled heap. Baugi and Loki leaped atop of them. Baugi swiftly commandeered a spear, while Loki found that Fandral’s rapier slipped into the gaps of the guards’ armour just as well as his own knives.

‘Loki! Go!’ Frigga shouted.

She was right, of course. Their aim was escape, there was no need to exacerbate the political turmoil in Asgard by shedding unnecessary blood. Moreover, the longer they spent here, the higher the chance of reinforcements arriving. Loki shouted for Baugi to follow him and set off down the stairs to the Weapons Vault ante-chamber.

Once they were there, Loki skidded to a stop.

_Don’t fuck up this time._

Loki sucked in a breath and started on the incantation, working at a slightly slower pace than his habit. Portals were tricky magic and the consequences of errors very painful. Two of the guards had pursued them, but Baugi kept them at bay. As Loki worked, the chamber resounded with men’s grunts and clangs of weaponry.

With one final flick of Loki’s fingers, a ball of light pulsed into being and unfurled into a portal.

‘Baugi,’ Loki called out. ‘Follow me.’
Hello everyone! I'm switching back to end of work week updates. Trying to write over the weekend and updating on Monday just hasn't been working for me (as you may have noticed).

Loki’s foot slipped sideways. He crumpled onto the water-soaked dirt, rolling twice before the momentum from his leap through the portal was exhausted.

‘Close the portal,’ Baugi hissed into Loki’s ear as he pulled Loki to his feet.

Yes, obviously.

Loki flung out his hands. Tossing aside the care he had taken in creating the portal, he worked through the spell as quickly as he physically could and then pooled the sum of his magic at the pulsing opening between the realms. To his satisfaction, the portal blinked shut.

Less satisfactory, his knees shook and acid rushed into his mouth — an ominous warning about the consequences of over-exertion.

‘Baugi, I need a minute.’

The frost giant grabbed Loki’s shoulder, his grip sure to leave finger-shaped bruises across Loki’s skin. ‘Keep your sword at the ready.’

Loki followed the line of Baugi’s gaze and groaned. The easiest way to manage a hostile intrusion was to prevent it happening and Tyr wasn’t a total dullard. He had left a formidable group of Einherjar guarding the portal from this side. A trio of low-ranked soldiers, probably watch-keepers, were already advancing towards Loki and Baugi, and more men were emerging from the Asgardian camp sprawled across the field to the east.

‘Good morning,’ Loki said in the most cordial tone he could manage.

‘Identify yourself! What’s your business here?’ one of the watch-keepers shot back. ‘What’s the frost gi —’

‘It’s the traitor!’ the man next to him shouted.

Baugi broke into a sprint, half-dragging Loki after him and fled south into the thick forest. The snow was melting, water dripped from the branches above and the ground underfoot was a foul, brown muck. With every step, Loki’s feet seemed to sink deeper. This trek would have been hard work even if he hadn’t been exhausted already.

‘Keep up!’ Baugi barked out. ‘Can’t you hear them?’

Loki didn’t have a breath to spare for a reply, but he certainly heard the Einherjari soldiers and the arrows they sent after them. The situation seemed unwinnable. Even if Baugi and Loki were to move swiftly enough for the Asguardians to lose sight of them, the soldiers would follow their tracks. With
the mud on the ground, each step was so clear, a blind man would find them with ease.

*Perhaps it’d be better to get caught, recuperate and escape later?*

*No, the first thing they’ll do is take us back to Asgard.*

Baugi grabbed Loki’s shirt front. ‘Move your bloody feet!’

‘Trying!’ Loki spat back. ‘You realise I’m shor —’

Baugi leaped forward, pulling Loki after him. For a long moment there was no ground beneath them, then they landed into an ice-cold creek. Loki gulped for air. The creek-bed was rocky and the water temperature stole what little there had been left in his lungs. Baugi, however, wasn’t about to indulge Loki. Once more, he dragged him to his feet.

They followed the creek down the deep ravine that years of snow-melt and landslides had gouged into the hill. Men shouted to each other above and behind them. Baugi’s strategy didn’t seem particularly intelligent. The Einherjar could follow them along the edge ravine and pick them off with their bows.

‘Here.’ Baugi slammed Loki into the side of the ravine.

Holding Loki in place with one hand, he scouted the cliff face with the other, then pressed into it. Loki slid backwards as a door swung open behind him. He managed to catch himself this time.

‘We’ll be safe in here,’ Baugi muttered as he slid the door shut and left them in utter darkness.

Loki didn’t care. He felt around for a solid wall to lean against and rested there until he caught his breath.

Baugi meanwhile rummaged about. After several barely comprehensible swear-words, Baugi fell silent and light burst out of his hand. Loki squinted. It was some sort of crystal lamp. The light had a cold, green tinge to it, but it illuminated the space around them well enough.

‘Where are we?’ Loki asked.

‘Let’s move away from the entrance,’ Baugi said. ‘In case they hear us from the other side.’

Loki nodded and followed Baugi down the tunnel. The ceiling was high enough for Baugi to stand upright and the walls wide enough apart for two people to walk abreast. For all the mud and water outside, in here the air was dry and the mud their passage left behind was the only sign of contamination from the outside world.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ Baugi asked.

Loki shrugged. ‘Your legs are longer than mine.’

‘There’s that, yes. Except, you didn’t look right before we had to run either.’

‘I threw far more than I needed to into the spell to close the portal. If you remember, I screwed up that spell the last time I attempted it, I wanted to make sure I got it right this time. Well, it worked, I guess.’

‘Do you —’

‘I’ll be fine in a few minutes,’ Loki said. ‘What is this tunnel?’
Baugi scrunched up his nose. ‘This is part of a network of tunnels that run under Jotunheim. I expect this is why Asgardian soldiers have been having such a hard time here. It’s not easy to fight an enemy who can sneak up behind your back.’

‘Will this tunnel take us to Utgard?’

‘One of the tunnels will.’

‘Then lead on.’

‘First, turn back,’ Baugi replied. ‘You do us no favours in this form.’

Loki had to concede the point to Baugi. The Einherjar thought Loki a traitor and seeing him on Jotunheim in the company of a frost giant would have only reinforced that belief. And should the frost giants catch him, they would probably kill him before he had a chance to explain himself. They were at war with Asgard after all.

And it will take some of the strain off.

Loki let the concealment over his skin drop, but abused what reserves remained within him to cloak himself in a replica of the armour worn by the frost giants Helblindi had led into Asgard.

‘Passable?’ Loki glanced up at Baugi.

‘You look ridiculous. No Bradi would wear a warrior’s armour.’

‘My father’s from a warrior clan, is he not?’

Baugi scoffed. ‘Yes, but you take after your mother.’

The condescension in his tone was so palpable, he might as well have patted Loki over the head like he was an errant child. Loki swept his hand up and his clothes reverted to the casual tunic and trousers he had worn back in the cell. Without the filth he had picked up in the brief period of time he had spent in Jotunheim, of course. He kept the warrior’s fur-lined boots too. This was Jotunheim, it was only a matter of time until they had to trudge through a muddy field or a half-frozen swamp.

‘Let’s keep moving,’ Loki said.

They walked for a long while, barely exchanging a word. Loki eventually felt better, but he struggled to tell how much time had passed, how far they had travelled or how deep underground they were. Their path seemed to slope up for several hundred metres, then would start to slope down. The walls were bare, save for the symbols painted beside each path whenever there was a fork. There was some code to them, but Loki couldn’t make sense of it and Baugi refused to explain.

At a four-way fork, Baugi jerked to a stop.

‘Are we lost?’ Loki asked.

‘No.’ Baugi motioned for Loki to stay put and ducked into the leftmost passage. Just as Loki became concerned the frost giant had abandoned him in this underground maze, Baugi reappeared with a small, wooden chest in his hands. ‘Care for some food?’

‘I won’t say no.’

Baugi flipped open the lid and pulled out two small packs wrapped in thin cloth. He threw one to Loki and kept the other for himself, then re-stowed the chest in whichever crevice he had found it.
Once Loki unwrapped the cloth, he found a few pieces of half-frozen jerky and two biscuits so hard Loki suspected only Mjolnir would be able to break them.

As they resumed their trudge, Loki picked out about a third of the jerky and tried to heat it up. The end result was tolerable, but the jerky acquired a sour aftertaste — an inevitable result of contaminating good food with magic.

Baugi seemed to be attempting to soften his biscuit by sucking on it, but with little success. He pulled the biscuit away from his mouth and glared at it. ‘They used to have better food stored in these boxes, but the rangers kept stealing it for themselves.’

‘It must be a dull job to keep these tunnels resupplied,’ Loki replied.

‘Better than actually digging out these tunnels.’ With a crack that made Loki’s teeth hurt, Baugi bit through the biscuit and chewed it. ‘What will happen to the woman who helped us back in your palace?’

‘That was Frigga, the Queen of Asgard. She’ll probably be confined to her quarters again and placed under heavier guard than before. It’s her co-conspirators I would worry about more; they don’t have the security her rank offers her.’

‘She was the woman who raised you?’

‘She’s my mother, yes.’

‘Your real mother was a creature of magic, so too is this Frigga. The Norns play strange games sometimes,’ Baugi said.

Loki frowned. ‘Did you know my birth mother?’

‘Never met her.’

‘How do you even know who she was? You seem very certain about my parentage.’

Baugi turned to look directly at Loki. ‘You are a strange one. Although I said you take after your mother, that’s not wholly true. Your stature and your magic certainly point towards the Bradi, but your clan markings are almost replicate Laufey’s. It’s rare to see a child’s markings to so heavily favour one parent.’

‘And from that we can extrapolate the truth easily enough.’

‘Everyone here knows the story of Laufey’s lost bastard child.’ Baugi chuckled, startling Loki a little. ‘You lied back on Asgard. The reveal of your heritage wasn’t news to you. When you came to question me, you trailed off on what I thought was an odd tangent, asking about Laufey’s old lover. But the tangent is only natural if you already knew about your father and were seeking your mother.’

‘I wasn’t seeking anyone. My questions were pertinent to my concerns about the security of Asgard and its people.’

‘Every abandoned child seeks his mother.’

Loki glared at him. ‘Yes, just like everyone enjoys being patronised.’

Baugi snickered. ‘You and Byleistr would get along.’ A moment later, he added, ‘Byleistr’s your older half-brother, from Laufey’s first wife. Your half-sisters would eat you alive though.’
Loki knotted his brows. ‘I’d heard of Byleistr, but I didn’t know I had half-sisters.’

*Not on the Jotunn side of the family anyway.*

‘Perhaps you’ll meet them before the day’s end.’

‘I would like that, I think.’ Loki replied. ‘What about Helblindi? Do you think we would’ve enjoyed each other’s company?’

Baugi kicked a stray rock on the ground, sending it skittering further down the tunnel. ‘I doubt it. Laufey remarried out of political necessity, his affections were and, I suspect, remain with your mother. He never had much patience for Helblindi’s mother nor for Helblindi. It wasn’t the boy’s fault either, it was you Laufey wanted, not him.’

‘Fathers can be cruel,’ Loki said quietly.

Baugi, it turned out, knew a lot about the many cruelties a father could inflict on his children and had no reservations about sharing his knowledge with Loki. After a few of Baugi’s tales, he found himself feeling both profoundly sorry for his little half-brother and certain that had the Norns ever thrown them together, they would have quickly learned to understand each other.

Probably realising how dark his tales were, Baugi began to pluck happier times from his memories. First, he spoke only of Laufey’s family and life in the Great Hall of Utgard, but eventually, he turned to reminisce about his young daughter, Barra. She had been the younger of the twins Baugi’s wife had borne four winters back and the only one to survive. Few twins born on Jotunheim lived to see their first birthday.

He fell silent only when the tunnel began to climb sharply.

‘Where are we now?’ Loki asked.

‘We approach Utgard,’ Baugi responded. ‘So, what’s the plan to free your brother?’

Loki bit his lip, then smiled mirthlessly. ‘Ah, Thor. Nearly forgot about him.’

‘And what part am I to play? That is the favour you would ask of me, isn’t it?’

‘No. You saved my skin from the Einherjar, you’ve fed me, you’ve led me through these tunnels. Once we reach my father’s house, I will consider your debt to me more than paid in full. I’ll muddle through from there on my own.’

‘I doubt you’ll get far,’ Baugi replied. ‘But I do appreciate the chance to see my daughter again.’

‘I’m sure she’s missed you.’

Baugi’s lip pressed into a thin line, however, no response came. At the next fork, he gestured toward the second passage from the right, then moved in to walk a few paces ahead of Loki. They were at their journey’s end now. The air here was less stale and the tunnel had been carved with greater care. Every once in a while Loki even spotted faint remnants of old carvings.

‘Who approaches?’ a raspy baritone called out far ahead of them.

‘Baugi Gillingson! I was one of Prince Helblindi’s men.’

Pieces of plate armour groaned as they slid against each other, then an aged frost giant emerged from some side passage ahead of them, carrying a light identical to the one in Baugi’s hand.
He peered at Baugi with narrowed eyes. ‘Aren’t you supposed to be dead, like your prince?’

‘I was captured and held prisoner on Asgard. This one helped me escape,’ Baugi replied, motioning back over his shoulder to Loki.

‘And what’s his name?’

Before Baugi could respond on his behalf, Loki nudged him aside and stepped forward.

_Time to shine._

‘I’m Loki Laufeyson,’ he said. ‘I wish to speak to my father.’

The guard’s face twisted with incomprehension and his eyes flicked back to Baugi. ‘Is he a tad… er, not quite all there?’

‘Not as far as I can tell. Will you look at the boy properly? He’s Laufey’s all right.’

‘Right… I never had patience for family dramatics. I’ll send out a message to the Great Hall, they’ll sort all this out over there,’ the guard replied. ‘Follow me. You’ll wait at my station in the meantime.’

Once they were in the passageway the guard had emerged from, the tunnel turned into a long staircase. The steps had been carved to suit someone of Baugi’s size, not Loki’s, which made his climb awkward. He was glad when they reached the guard station. The narrow room had been carved into a cliff and the grey stone walls left unpolished, but its occupants had done their best to make the rough space comfortable. Fire simmered in the small fireplace and dice lay in neat rows in the centre of the table.

‘Stay here,’ the guard said, then threw open the front door. He descended a few steps, called out to someone, then shut the door behind him.

Loki leaned to look through the arrowslit that served as the station’s window. The guard was conversing with two other frost giants dressed in the same style of armour, but bearing different insignia on their upper arms. Behind them stood a rabble of old buildings and further back, smoke drifted high into the cloudless sky.

‘Laufeyson?’ Baugi said.

‘It has a better ring to it than Odinson. You’ve got to appreciate the alliteration.’

‘And your adoptive mother? Your brother? You seemed quite fond of them when we were back on Asgard.’

Loki whipped around to face him. ‘I don’t have the words to describe the affection I have for her, but she’s the sole person I can rely on back there. You saw what Asgardians did to me on mere suspicion. And as for Thor… I didn’t dare to say anything against him for fear of the consequences of such candour, but in truth, Thor is a thoughtless brat who should’ve never been proclaimed king. No doubt had he been there when my true heritage was revealed, he too would’ve ordered me thrown in a cell.’

‘You’ll find Laufey is seldom kind or affectionate, even to his own kin.’

‘So I gather from your tales.’ Loki replied as he pulled out a chair and took a seat at the table. He picked up one of the dice and examined the stylised animal carved into each side. ‘What do you propose I should do?’
Baugi let out a derisive snort. ‘If you wanted to get away from your adoptive family, you should have done as your mother suggested and gone to Midgard.’

‘There’s nothing for me on Midgard.’ Loki flicked the die in his hand across the table and sent the rest of the set skittering in all directions.

The front door burst open. The conversation with his peers had left the station guard flustered. His hands twitched slightly as he beckoned Baugi and Loki.

‘No messages for you,’ he said. ‘They will take you directly to the Great Hall.’ He coughed to clear his throat, then added. ‘Welcome to Utgard, Prince Loki.’
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Utgard, the capital of Jotunheim, couldn’t have been more different to Asgard. Nestled in the mountains, with narrow, easily-guarded passes to the north and the south-east the only overland routes in, those few who did find the way into the city, were bound to be disappointed by the few crude structures they would see sitting precariously atop the steep mountainsides. When Loki had gone to Laufey to discuss Odin’s assassination, he had certainly found nothing to be impressed by. Utgard had looked like a half-abandoned village, not the capital of an entire civilisation.

On this occasion, however, Loki quickly discovered that the inhabitants of Utgard spent little time in the open air and all the artificial structures on the surface were merely approaches to frost giant dwellings inside and beneath the mountains. It was easier to hide in the caverns, both from the weather and the enemy. But the fact that he had been permitted to know this nagged at his thoughts as the guards led him through the main avenues of Utgard. Was this a peace offering from his birth father? Or was Laufey leading him straight to his death? Or was the old front giant merely reluctant to leave his house in wartime?

No answer was immediately forthcoming. At the end of the busy thoroughfare, the crowd, who hadn’t been shy in their curiosity about Loki, dissipated. The guards halted before a pair of obsidian doors that were easily four times their height. Despite their size, the doors swung open without sound, revealing a vast, shadowed place beyond.

‘Go on,’ one of the guards said to Loki.

The Great Hall of Utgard – Loki guessed when he crossed the threshold. A few more steps forward, he recognised it. This was the place Laufey had been in when they had spoken through the Eye of Angerboda. Now that Loki stood there in person, the hall seemed even larger and colder. He couldn’t see how this place could ever be used for grand events and celebrations as Asgard’s Great Hall often was. It seemed like there weren’t enough lights in Jotunheim to melt away the murk.

‘Thor Odinson is not here,’ Laufey spoke from the other side of the vast room. He hadn’t spoken loudly, but his words echoed down the hall.

Loki nodded. The only sign Thor had ever been in this place were the heavy rings embedded into the walls, which had held Thor’s chains. Loki made a concerted effort to keep his disappointment from showing as he crossed the length of the hall and offered Laufey a shallow bow.

When he straightened up he found himself staring right into Laufey’s eyes. He inched away from the intensity of that gaze.

‘No,’ Laufey said. ‘Come closer. I want to see you.’

Loki took two steps forward. That wasn’t enough for the King of Jotunheim. Laufey rose from his seat and moved towards Loki. He circled Loki, then leaned in, his nose almost brushing against Loki’s ear and sniffed him. With a huff, Laufey hooked his finger around the collar of Loki’s shirt and pulled the material back, fully exposing the remnants of the sores on Loki’s neck and throat.

‘What happened here?’ he asked.

‘A dwarven collar to bind my magic. I haven’t gotten around to healing it just yet.’
Laufey took a step back, his lips curled. ‘A collar? Why not kill you?’

‘I expect they feared Odin’s wrath should he ever wake again,’ Loki replied.

‘He does have a vile temper,’ Laufey replied. He laboriously retraced the steps back to his throne and peered down at Loki. ‘Have you the Casket?’

‘No.’

‘Then why are you here? Did I not say —’

‘You said,’ Loki cut in, ‘Asgard is to lay the Casket at your feet if Asgard is to get its king back. I don’t give a damn about Thor. In the years I called him brother, he has been nothing but a source of embarrassment and frustration. He is not a man fit to be king. Even Odin saw that. Had he had a viable alternative, he wouldn’t have passed the kingship to Thor.’

‘That must have caused you a great deal of heartache. I ask again, why are you here? Why do you introduce yourself as Laufeyson?’

Loki smiled self-consciously, uncertain who was playing whom here and who was being played. It was one thing to profess his enmity towards his adoptive family to Baugi, it was another to come to Laufey with the same story.

‘That is my name, is it not?’ Loki said.

‘I won’t deny the resemblance.’

‘That is most gracious of you… father.’ Loki shook his head; obsequiousness wasn’t the path to Laufey’s heart. Actually, he wasn’t certain Laufey possessed a heart, but assuming he did, Loki thought there were some emotions his birth father would relate to easier than others. ‘In truth, I don’t quite know why I’m here. I couldn’t stay on Asgard after you exposed me. Thor’s councillors turned on me, stripped me of my regency without a single solid scrap of evidence and threw me in the dungeons. Once I found a way out of my cell, Jotunheim seemed the only path forward.’

‘You’re after revenge for what the Asgardians did to you.’

Loki paused for a long moment before he nodded. ‘I suppose so. My entire life I felt the odd one out among them and they preyed upon it. And at the first opportunity, they acted.’

‘That opportunity arose by my hand. Are you not aggrieved by that?’ Laufey clasped his hands together and rested his chin on top. ‘Come now, be honest. You were trying hard to strike a bargain and I ruined it all for you.’

‘I don’t know. You tell me, should I be? You are my father and I your son. You chose to say what you did, surely aware of the danger you could place me in by your actions. So why did you do it? In fact, explain how it all happened in the first place! You called me well-beloved and from what I have heard, you held great affection for my mother, yet the Asgardians believed I had been abandoned when they found me.’

Loki had hoped to elicit at least a spark of an emotional response, but Laufey’s face remained as hard and cold as the stone around them.

‘You were abandoned, that’s correct,’ he said.

‘Why? What fault did you find with me?’
'None,’ Laufey replied sharply. ‘You were perfect and that made the decision all the harder. Early in the pregnancy, the war was going well, but then we suffered several routs and before we knew it, we were on the brink of disaster. Jotunheim needed your mother’s skills. A child would have drawn too much of her energy and time, so a sacrifice had to be made.’

Loki lowered his gaze and let his birth father’s words wash over him. He had suspected something of this sort had happened, but it was difficult nonetheless to have confirmation that he had been discarded because he had become an inconvenience to his parents.

‘Loki.’ Laufey’s words took on an odd undertone as he spoke. ‘I am a king, it is the king’s duty to put his people before himself. Even when it concerns his own kin.’

*This is as close to an apology as I’ll ever get.*

‘Did the sacrifice pay off?’ Loki said tersely.

‘No. Jotunheim was defeated, your mother killed in the last of the fighting and you went missing. We searched; there weren’t many children born that year so you would have been hard to hide, but I never thought to look among the Asgardians. I presumed you were dead until Helblindi’s men returned from Asgard with a strange tale.’

Loki chuckled. ‘Yet upon realising that I still lived, the first thing you decided to do was to turn the Asgardians against me.’

‘Whatever my personal feelings might be, my duty is to protect my people. I judged political infighting in Asgard would be in Jotunheim’s favour. Your adoptive father would have done the same.’

‘That’s probably true,’ Loki replied.

Laufey leaned back until his spine was flat against his high-backed chair and his expression turned thoughtful. ‘I will concede, I pondered those words for some hours before I made my decision. There was undeniable political expediency in it, but in part, I also hoped to show you that your place is not on Asgard. Be mindful, I didn’t prepare a coup against you, I merely said a few words and the Asgardians made their own choices from there.’

‘But you expected there would be consequences for me after you said your piece.’

‘Asgardians despise the Jotnar no less than we despise them. There was never a chance you would be live in peace among them once the truth about you became known. Even Odin understood that.’

*Manipulative swine.*

After he had killed Laufey, Loki had at times indulged himself in imagining how his life would have turned out had Laufey realised that the Asgardian prince with whom he plotted Odin’s assassination was his own son. Now he was glad Laufey had exited his life quickly the first time around. Loki could see what Laufey was trying to do. A young man who believed everyone from his previous life had turned on him and that you were the sole reasonable, if somewhat harsh, benefactor could be made into a potent weapon. Were he still feeling as angry and betrayed as he had been when he first discovered he was not Odin’s son by blood, he might well have found himself genuinely drawn to Laufey.

*Thor had better thank me for this later.*

Loki rubbed at his face with the back of his hand, then sighed. ‘I don’t think I can go back to
Asgard.’

‘Stay here then,’ Laufey said. ‘Your half-brother is leading the warrior clans, but his wife and his children remain in Utgard. They will look after you.’

‘Uncle Loki!’

A child giggled. A small hand closed around his bicep and attempted to shake him awake. Loki groaned. This was it, there would be no more sleep this morning. He had never spent much time in the company of children, but the past week had been educational.

He opened his eyes to Hyndla’s wide grin. She was the elder of Byleistr’s two children and had quickly accepted Loki as her uncle. Loki had surmised that his integration into the family was no great upheaval for her. She had grown up surrounded by aunts and uncles from both her mother’s and her father’s side of the family. Loki, personally, still found it peculiar to be referred to as an uncle. To his knowledge, neither Thor nor Hela had ever produced an offspring.

‘Hello, Hyndla,’ Loki said. ‘What can I do for you this fine morning?’

‘Mother said I need to stop being a nuisance to her and that I need to tell you to keep us entertained until the afternoon,’ the girl replied in a somewhat flat tone.

‘I bet she used those exact same words too.’

Hyndla nodded, looking pleased with herself. Loki, on the other hand, remained unnerved by this habit of repeating what she had heard word for word. He suspected either her father or her grandfather had taught her to do this, which suggested that they used her to gather information. From what Hyndla and her younger brother had told him over the past days, neither Laufey nor Byleistr had much time for them, which the children lamented. There was an opportunity in that. Young informants craving positive attention from their elders could bring great gifts and asked very little in return.

‘What’s that?’ Hyndla picked up Fandral’s rapier. Loki had sharpened the previous night and had left it out atop the wooden chest that stood at the foot of his bed.

‘It’s a sword.’ Loki carefully pried the weapon out of the girl’s hands. ‘Haven’t you ever seen one before?’

‘Can’t you make a weapon out of ice?’

He frowned for a moment. ‘I don’t know, never tried. Where is your brother?’

‘He’s playing,’ Hyndla replied, her eyes still on the rapier. ‘I don’t see why you couldn’t do it, everyone can.’

‘Is he playing with the model? I don’t like how quiet he is.’

Loki nudged the girl out, hid the rapier, then pulled his blanket over his shoulders and wrapped it tight around him as if it were a cloak. Remaining in his Jotunn form kept him from feeling the worst of the cold, but the mornings were still too chilly for his liking. He yawned as he strode out to his sitting room. Or rather, Helblindi’s sitting room. Practicality reigned in an era of wartime restraint and
Loki had been handed the quarters previously occupied by his younger half-brother.

The rooms remained largely as Helblindi had left them, which Thrym, Byleistr’s younger child, had taken advantage of. Helblindi had been fond of his niece and nephew, so he had fixed up some of his own old toys for them. There were well-armed soldiers, howling hounds and ferocious beasts to choose from, but the light of Thrym’s life (and Loki suspected Helblindi’s once upon a time) was a large model of Utgard carved out of oak and dressed with a thin coat of paint.

The model had been a boon to Loki. He had peppered the children with questions until he got a good sense of the city’s layout. He had hoped also the model would help him narrow down where Thor was being kept, but there he had only found disappointment. At first, he had danced around the topic, then asked the question outright. Neither Thrym nor Hyndla had an answer for him. Either the children genuinely didn’t know or had been coached not to tell him.

‘What are you up to today, Thrym?’ Loki asked.

The boy set down the warrior figurine in his hand. ‘Helping protect Jotunheim from the enemy.’

Loki didn’t have to ask who the enemy was. Thrym had lined up a dozen figurines painted to resemble the Einherjar against his frost giant army.

‘You play the same thing every day,’ Hyndla said. She pulled a chair over to the table that held the model and climbed into the chair. ‘Uncle Helblindi wanted to steal back the Casket of Ancient Winters. We should do that. Wouldn’t that be more fun? Now that Uncle Loki’s here, I’m sure we can do it.’

‘Have you ever seen the Casket?’ Thrym asked.

Loki raised an eyebrow. ‘I have.’

‘What does it look like?’ Thrym’s eyes widened with excitement. ‘Is it really big and shiny? Will you help us get it back?’

_Sweet lord, child. I thought I’d be having this conversation with your grandfather, not with you._

‘I don’t know,’ Loki replied. ‘It’s a dangerous quest, I’d wager more dangerous than anything you’d find here on Jotunheim. Are you up for that kind of danger?’

He had only meant to tease the boy a little, but Thrym struck out his lower lip and looked back at Loki with a confused expression.

Hyndla rolled her eyes, then whacked her younger brother’s arm. ‘Don’t be a baby. We are up for it, aren’t we?’

‘And what will you do with the Casket when you get it back?’ Loki asked. ‘Invade Midgard?’

‘Not Midgard.’ Hyndla looked at Loki as if he had just sprouted a horn between his brows. ‘If we’re going to invade something, we’d invade Asgard. They deserve it. But first I’d fix Jotunheim. So yes, Jotunheim, then Asgard, then maybe Midgard. Midgard is much larger than Asgard.’

‘Yeah, we’ll kill all the soldiers on Asgard,’ Thrym reached for the figurines representing the Einherjar and nudged a few over. ‘Then we’ll take their stuff.’

On first thought, the scene had sparked nostalgia in Loki. He and Thor had spent many days in their youth planning and acting out campaigns against the frost giants. But the war currently raging
between the two realms coloured these children’s fancies with a crimson tone. The game now seemed grotesque. One day Hyndla or Thrym would be ruling Jotunheim and would have the power to send their armies into whichever realm they pleased.

He tried to shake off those dark images and asked, ‘What do you mean, fix Jotunheim?’

‘That’s what the Casket is for,’ Thrym responded.

‘Yeah, everyone…’ Hyndla cocked her head. ‘Or maybe you don’t know. The Casket was made to fix the weather fluctuations across Jotunheim. It’s hard to grow anything when one year the summer is three months long and the next year it’s about nine. Winters too are like that often enough. In those years the animals have nothing to eat and we’ve nothing to hunt.’

Loki got down on his knees beside the girl and rested his elbow on the table before them. ‘I thought Jotunheim was always cold.’

‘Of course it’s not.’

‘I suppose the snow was melting when I came through from Asgard, perhaps spring is on the way already. How are the seasons so uneven in the first place?’

‘It wasn’t always like that, but it’s got something to do with how the planet spins and other things around it. Father tried to explain to me; I didn’t really understand,’ Hyndla admitted.

‘It sounds like you’re talking about an unstable planetary tilt.’

With this nugget of knowledge, many things fell into place for Loki. The frost giants likely originated in a period when Jotunheim was more stable; now they struggled. Loki needed only to look around. Laufey’s household was no more luxurious than the house of any well-to-do merchant in Asgard. The Bradi clan thought they had found a solution and sacrificed themselves to create the Casket. Perhaps it had been a viable answer, but then Laufey’s father had an even more ambitious idea — conquest and relocation to a more hospitable planet. If not for Asgard, they would have succeeded.

On Asgard, Jotnar demands for the Casket’s return had always been seen as a question of stubborn pride. It wasn’t. It was about survival.

What then was the proper recourse? Asgard couldn’t hand the Casket back. Not while Laufey lived.

Except Laufey wasn’t the problem. The problem was that once a seed of an idea was out there, it could bear fruit just about anywhere. Thrym and Hyndla’s fantasies about what they would do with the Casket attested to that too clearly. Jotunheim couldn’t be trusted, so for the sake of other realms, the Casket had to be kept away from the frost giants.

They struggle, yet they do manage to survive on this planet. That will have to do.

Not quite satisfied with the conclusion he had drawn, Loki picked up one of the figurines and tried to shift the conversation in a different direction. ‘Did your mother happen to say how I am to entertain you today?’

Hyndla shook her head. ‘We can go down to the pools?’

Loki chuckled. Were it up to Hyndla, she would spend her whole days swimming in the thermal pools in the lowest levels of the city. Thrym, however, looked aghast.

‘Aren’t we going to play here?’ he asked.
Loki sensed a tirade about his sister’s obsession with the pools was about to follow, so he threw up his hand to get the boy’s attention. ‘After we recapture the Casket of Ancient Winters, we’ll celebrate with a short dip in the pools. Set up, Thrym. I’m just going to change into proper clothes, I can hardly run from the Einherjar while wearing a blanket.’

‘Maybe it can be a disguise,’ Hyndla said.

‘Maybe, but I think not today.’ Loki climbed to his feet. ‘I haven’t eaten this morning yet. Hyndla, could you find something?’

‘I will.’

The girl slipped out of the room a second later. Loki watched Thrym for a moment, uncertain whether to trust the boy not to cause havoc. The last time he had left him on his own, Thrym had tried to scale a bookshelf. Presently the boy seemed to be occupied with the figurines. Loki let him be and retreated to the bedroom.

He had inherited Helblindi’s wardrobe together with his quarters, a fact Loki wasn’t particularly pleased about. The fit never seemed right. Truthfully, he wasn’t sure how the fit was supposed to be and there were few men about whom Loki could imitate. He did his best and tried to ignore the amount of skin Jotunn garments left exposed. So far, neither his sister-in-law nor her children had laughed at him to his face so he could only assume he made a passable job of it.

He was fastening the last buckle when he heard voices out in the sitting room.

‘Will this be enough?’ a woman asked.

‘I think so,’ Hyndla replied. ‘He doesn’t eat much and Thrym and I already ate earlier. What’s all this food for?’

‘For the guardsmen.’

‘Is that an ointment too?’ Hyndla riffled through something. ‘Is one of them injured?’

Loki slipped the leather strap into place and moved closer to the door, careful to make as little sound as he could.

‘Must be, they asked for it and they’re not going to waste it on the Asgardian,’ the woman answered. There was a pause, then she went on. ‘If you say this is enough for you three, I’d best go. It’s a long climb to Reaper’s Peak.’

‘I could go for you.’

‘I don’t think so. Your grandfather will have my hide if I let you get anywhere near that beast. I’ll see you later. Keep yourself and your brother out of trouble for a change.’

Loki crouched down and tried to get a look at the woman through the keyhole, but the angle was wrong. He saw only Thrym examining the figurines one by one with the measured eye of an expert. Loki bit down on his lip to stifle the curses on the tip of his tongue.

Had the Norns smiled on him for once in his life? Loki had found no clues about Thor’s whereabouts for a week, now the information he needed had simply been handed to him. He even knew where Reaper’s Peak was; Thrym had pointed it out on the model the other day.

Or was this a setup to test his loyalty? Laufey was the type to make his own enquiries about a
person’s loyalty. And were the children in on this ploy too? Loki’s constant anxiety about how he ought to interpret everything that happened and everything he would soon leave him with an ulcer. Yet, for the life of him, Loki couldn’t work out if Laufey believed his tale or merely waited for Loki to show his true colours.

In Loki’s experience, sentimentality was the easiest thing to exploit and with Laufey the potential was there. Baugi and other adults Loki had spoken with over the past week all talked about Laufey’s genuine sorrow at Loki’s disappearance at the close of the last war. Perhaps Loki’s tale had tugged at the right heartstrings. Laufey wasn’t one for hugs or tears of happiness, but he had permitted Loki to live as a member of his family.

On the other hand, a man as sly by nature as Laufey, seldom took what they were told at face value.

‘Uncle Loki?’ Thrym called out. ‘It’s ready.’

_Feather crawling around Utgard in secret would’ve been easier after all._

Loki groomed his expression into a steady smile and opened the door. ‘Is it? Good. Let’s steal back what’s rightfully ours.’

Chapter End Notes

*Quick note - it'll be about a fortnight before the next chapter is up. Sorry guys!*
In the afternoons Loki’s sister-in-law either had the children study or tasked them with helping her. She oversaw the running of the hospitals, so Thrym and Hyndla ran messages for her, rolled freshly washed bandages and mixed ointments. There was plenty of work to be done in Jotunheim these days. Even Baugi had enjoyed all of one day with his daughter before he was handed a second-hand uniform and sent off into the fighting.

Only Loki remained idle. Laufey had decreed he wanted Loki to first acquaint himself with life among the Jotnar, but that decision seemed wasteful when you looked around and saw the strain Utgard was under. Loki had some thoughts about Laufey’s real reasons, however, he couldn’t confirm his suspicions without speaking to his birth father and that wasn’t a social call Loki was eager to make. So, when he wasn’t playing nanny to his niece and nephew, he played tourist instead.

Today, his routine worked in his favour. Loki made a conscious effort to move at the same casual pace he had adopted the previous days and having seen him strolling about aimlessly before, no one now spared a second-glance for him.

Loki kept to the script nevertheless. He climbed up the stairs to the top of the broad rock-shelf that overlooked the city’s main thoroughfare and paused there as if to enjoy the view of the market far below him. There wasn’t much trading going on today and Loki wondered if Asgard’s markets looked similar. Commerce was the surest path to prosperity, but commerce needed peace to flourish. Loot was the only wealth to be found in wartime.

I wish I’d seen Utgard on a better day.

His hand shifted to the pommel of Fandral’s rapier and he made a mental check on Hilblindi’s old skinning knife hidden in his sleeve, then moved on. He followed the length of the rock-shelf, then passed through a narrow archway. From there, as Thrym had promised him, Loki found a steep and poorly lit stairwell. The stairs spiralled up for hundreds of metres. Doorways occasionally led off them, but Loki had to follow the stairs to the very top.

He heard the howling wind long before he saw the last few dozen steps. He sprinted up them, then jerked to a stop. Guards stood before a rattling door. They had to be the biggest frost giants Loki had ever encountered.

‘How do you do?’ Loki greeted them with a smile.

They didn’t return it.

The stockier one of the two moved towards Loki. ‘Who are you? What do you want?’

‘I wish to see the prisoner. I’m on the king’s business here, I’m not at liberty to discuss it.’

‘Have you proof?’

‘Proof? Yes, of course. Let me…’ Loki took a couple of steps more towards the guard and palpated his clothes. ‘Just hold on a second. Wait… Ah, here.’

Loki pulled the knife out of his sleeve and sank it into the guard’s thigh. The frost giant screamed as he collapsed to his knees. Loki wrenched out the knife; the heavy blood-flow confirmed he had struck the artery. Not willing to waste a moment, Loki went for a kill shot.
He was flung back down the stairs instead.

He leaped up and drew out the rapier even as he realised that Fandral’s weapon stood little chance against the second guard, who was presently advancing towards him.

Loki released a wave of raw magic. Over the past week there had been little reason for him to rely on his magic so pure energy now poured out of him without the strain he had come to fear of late. The guard flew back. His heavy body knocked over his injured partner, then tore through the wooden door they had been protecting.

“That’ll do.”

He climbed up to the top of the stairs once more and paused by the guard he had injured. The visor of his helmet had fallen back. For all his size, the features of his face, now twisted with pain and panic, were youthful. Seeing Loki approach, he tried to clamber up and conjure a weapon.

Loki was quicker. He swivelled around the guard and sank the rapier deep into the back of his neck.

‘Nothing personal,’ Loki muttered as the frost giant’s body went slack.

He shook the rapier until most of the dark blood had dripped off the blade, then pushed past what remained of the door.

Reaper’s Peak was one of the highest points in Utgard. Hyndla had informed Loki that it was the site of a key guard station as the mountain summit offered an excellent vantage of the northern approach into the city. She had understated the view. The door Loki came through emerged in the middle of a wide, stone platform from which you could see for miles in every direction. Or, at least, for the moment you could. The wind roared and whipped about the first snowflakes of an approaching storm. Winter wasn’t yet ready to relinquish its grip on Jotunheim.

Loki brushed off a snowflake that had landed on the bridge of his nose.

A deep inhale to his left.

Loki repelled the guard’s attack with his magic. This time there were no doors to crash through. The force Loki had put up against the frost giant sent him flying straight over the side of the crenelated walls. His dying screams echoed for a good minute.

‘So much for not drawing attention to myself,’ Loki said under his breath, although with the wind, he doubted anyone besides him would have heard his words anyway. He moved to the southern side of the broad platform, which had been half-hidden by the top of the stairwell shaft, and grinned. ‘Thor!’

He was frozen in a similar pose to one he had been in when Laufey had showed him off to Loki, except his head was now straight up. He was positioned to peer out to the mountains. Loki stepped over the heavy chains holding Thor in place and moved around to face his brother. He winced. Thor was at the mercy of the elements out here. Wind had knotted his hair and torn off his cloak. Frost had tarnished the plates of his armour. His face, however, had taken the brunt of the damage. Skin had cracked all around his lips; crusting sores spread across his cheeks and forehead.

‘Thor?’ Loki went down on his knees beside his brother. ‘Are you still in there?’

He sheaved the rapier and rested his hand on the top of Thor’s clenched fist. He searched for the spells keeping Thor in this catatonic state. Pale runes spun about in his mind’s eye, some familiar and some not. None offered him the opening he sought.
‘Give it up,’ a woman said. ‘This is Jotunn magic, you know nothing about this.’

Loki tore his hand away from Thor and opened his eyes. At first he found nothing save his brother’s disintegrating face, then the snow whipped up by the last wind gust settled somewhat. Two frost giants stood behind Thor — Laufey and the short Bradi woman he had kept near him when they had spoken via the Eye of Angrboda.

Laufey must have caught Loki’s lingering glance, because he chuckled a little, then said, ‘Family introductions are in order, yes? Loki, this is your second cousin Sigran.’

‘Well met,’ she said without bothering to mask her insincerity.

Loki climbed to his feet, a tad disappointed with both himself and with his birth father. If Laufey had followed him up here so quickly, it could only mean that his trepidations had been correct — Laufey had been waiting for him.

‘Why keep Thor up here?’ Loki asked. This encounter had a great number of possible endings, few of them good, but there was no reason to rush to any of them. ‘If the Einherjar are to mount a rescue mission, this place would be easier to reach than somewhere inside Utgard.’

‘I thought he would enjoy exploring the pleasures of the local weather,’ Laufey replied.

‘I suppose I am glad he’s treated with the hospitality he deserves.’

Laufey pursed his lips. ‘You killed two of my men and broke my door. Would you like to explain yourself before I throttle you?’

‘They became aggressive,’ Loki answered cautiously. ‘I had to defend myself.’

‘You had to defend yourself because you have no business being here.’

‘I… needed to see him. I tried to put the past behind me and embrace life here in Utgard, but memories linger. I thought maybe seeing him would help.’

‘You could have asked me.’

Loki raised an eyebrow. For all the hours he had spent thinking about how he could extricate himself and Thor out of the mess they found themselves in, this was one possibility he hadn’t considered. He probably wouldn’t have taken it even if he had, but it was an intriguing notion nevertheless.

‘Would you have allowed me this?’ he asked. ‘In that case, I beg your pardon, I am still learning —’

‘For a change, would you keep your mouth shut? If you want retribution, kill him and be done with it,’ Laufey replied.

So this is his test. No pulled punches here.

Loki sucked in a breath. ‘Don’t you need him? You’ve kept him alive until now.’

‘I thought I might have need of him. I do not. Asgard is on the verge of losing this war. When they run back home to lick their wounds, the humiliation will be all the greater if their king is slain like a defenceless babe.’

‘Valhalla won’t open its doors for him,’ Loki said. He glanced down to his brother’s blank eyes and then back to Laufey. ‘And his mother will weep all the more when she finds out whose hand ended her precious son’s life. You are right, this is a fitting end to this tale.’
Loki had one more trick to play. Possibly. Maybe. He had no idea why the alarm had sounded in the palace during their escape and had no way of knowing if Fandral had managed to deliver the message Loki had tasked him with. Even if he had, Loki couldn’t be certain what Heimdall had made of the letter. He could have easily handed it straight to Tyr and Agnar.

*This whole enterprise was ill-conceived. It’s impossible to make plans when there are so many uncertainties at play.*

Loki drew out his knife.

Sigran let out a bitter laugh as she gestured to the weapon. ‘That was Helblindi’s knife! I remember it. The Norns ensure justice is done today.’

‘I never had the chance to know Helblindi,’ Loki replied. He knew nothing of the relationship between Sigran and Helblindi save for Baugi’s single reference to it, but Sigran’s expression spoke of fierce grief. Loki nodded to her. ‘I hope I wield the knife as firmly as he would have.’

He pulled Thor’s filthy, tangled hair out of the way and raised the knife. At the last moment, he turned his hand, sending the knife flying towards his father.

Laufey threw himself to the side. The knife missed him by two inches and ended up skittering across the platform’s stone floor.

‘So this is your choice!’ Laufey sneered when he straightened up. ‘So be it.’

He leached moisture out of the air around them. His hand crusted with ice, which then poured out into a long, serrated sword.

Loki drew Fandral’s rapier, but it was Sigran who acted first. With a flick of her hand, Helblindi’s knife tore through the air once more, this time in Loki’s direction. He parried it with the rapier and sent it flying off somewhere over his shoulder. Unimpressed by this, Laufey advanced towards him.

Loki scrambled back, away from Laufey and away from the chains that surrounded Thor’s unmoving form. He didn’t dare to flee all the way back to the edge. One wrong move and he might end up falling hundreds of metres down the steep mountainside.

Sigran sent a shower of icicles at him. There was no parrying them; he flattened himself on the ground. Once the danger seemed past, he rolled onto his back. Laufey’s sword swung down towards him. Loki rolled out of the way and jumped to his feet.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sigran’s panicked expression. She stood still, not daring to make another attack on Loki while he was so close to her king.

Loki thrust out the rapier, hoping for Laufey’s arm, but found only air.

Laufey launched his own attack. Loki brought up the rapier to block and the swords met with a resounding groan. The rapier snapped. Loki didn’t even see where the top half of the blade flew off to, he was cognisant only of the rapier stump that remained in his hand.

Laufey advanced towards him. ‘What now?’

The same question rang through Loki’s mind.

‘HEIMDALL!’ he yelled. ‘Now!’
For a moment that stretched halfway to eternity, no one moved. Laufey loomed over Loki with an amused expression, untroubled by the force of the snowstorm now bearing down on them.

A thunderclap parted the dark clouds. Laufey jerked back, but the light of the Bifrost didn’t descend upon Loki or Thor. Heimdall guided it to a narrow valley just past the edge of Utgard.

Laufey snorted. ‘Your man lacks aim.’

‘No,’ Loki grinned like a madman. ‘He’s done precisely as I told him. And now he will hold the Bifrost open. Do you know what happens when you do that?’

It was a small thing, but Loki saw Laufey’s twitch nevertheless. He knew very well.

‘You’ll die here, together with the rest of us. Your brother too,’ Laufey said.

‘It’ll be worth it.’

Laufey raised his sword once more. His attack came with a feverish fury Loki’s couldn’t hope to match. He twisted out of the way of the first strike, but Laufey kept coming. He brought up what remained of the rapier to parry. Laufey’s ice sword sliced through the steel stump like it was paper and kept going. Only Loki’s age and his quicker feet kept him breathing.

And yet, he couldn’t keep going like this. Sooner or later Loki would make a mistake, likely a fatal one. Loki concentrated his magic in his hand. He felt the bitter cold envelop his skin, but there was something he was missing.

‘That’s Jotunn magic,’ Laufey smirked. ‘You don’t know how to work it.’

‘Whose fault is that?’

The ground beneath them began to shake. With every passing second, Heimdall shifted the full force of the Bifrost closer to the city. Already, clouds of frothing dirt had swallowed the snowflakes and the wind now carried dark dust. Loki gulped down a breath. There was no sense in keeping anything in reserve anymore.

At Laufey’s next attempted strike, he split his form into two. He sent off his replica scampering to the left and to the door back down to the caverns of Utgard. For himself, he kept out of Laufey’s range of vision and tried his hand again. The cold he summoned only made his bones ache.

I’m missing something.

He threw his mind back in desperate search for an answer.

Water.

He coaxed the water particles in the air into a clump around his hand. And at last, ice sprung into being.

Loki leaped on Laufey’s back, sending him toppling on the ground and his ice sword shattering. Loki’s replica blinked out of existence. Loki didn’t care; its purpose had been accomplished. He kept his bodyweight over his birth father’s back and slid his newly created weapon under Laufey’s chin.

It was only the length of a hunting dagger, but it would be enough for Loki to do what he had to.

‘You’ll find I’m a quick study,’ Loki said. ‘Now let’s end this fruitless war. Release my brother. We will call back the Einherjar and head back to Asgard. Deal?’
‘Cousin!’ Sigran called out. ‘Let the king go or I’ll break your brother’s neck.’

Loki had to awkwardly shift his weight in order to both keep control of Laufey and to see Sigran. His heart skipped a beat. While he had been focused on Laufey, she had come around to Thor and now held his head in her hands, her nails digging deep into his weather-worn skin.

‘You’re an idiot,’ Loki replied when he managed to swallow his panic. ‘Kill him if you like. I’ll then kill your king and the Bifrost will remain open until ash is all that’s left of Jotunheim.’

Sigran shook her head. ‘If you do that, you’ll die same as us.’

‘Yes, I know. I’ll die and Thor’ll die and so will everyone on this god-forsaken planet. That’s fine with me. The universe will be better off for it.’

‘You are Jotunn too!’

‘The Jotnar are the people that left me to die,’ Loki spat back. ‘I’m returning the favour.’

Sigran’s eyes fell to Laufey, who struggled futilely under Loki’s grasp. Finding no help from her king, she finally understood the full gravity of her situation.

‘Give me one minute,’ she muttered. ‘Just one minute.’

She worked quickly. No doubt her heart beat at the same manic pace Loki’s did. One by one, the shackles keeping Thor in place snapped open and toppled to the ground. Sigran sniffled, then placed her hand on Thor’s head and chanted.

A shiver coursed through Thor’s body. Sigran staggered back, but Thor had already turned to face her. Even amid the roar of the Bifrost’s ever-growing destruction, the familiar rumble of Mjolnir flying through the air was as clear as a whistle.

‘Farewell, father.’ Loki thrust his makeshift weapon into Laufey’s neck. When he pulled it out, dark blood frothed out, sending a tendril of steam off Loki’s ice dagger. Loki rolled off to the side. ‘Thor, let’s go home!’

Thor spun Mjolnir in his hand, advancing one step for every step Sigran took back from him.

‘Thor!’ Loki grabbed Thor’s wrist, then lifted his head to the churning skies above. ‘Heimdall, enough! Take us back to Asgard!’

‘Heimdall! Reopen the Bifrost,’ Thor shouted. ‘I will have my vengeance.’

‘Hold here, Thor.’ Loki threw himself into Thor’s path. He lacked the strength to physically stop his brother, but he hoped at least to slow him down. ‘Take a look around you, will you?’

The anxiousness in Loki’s words must have stirred some common sense in Thor. He jerked to a stop and took stock of the cracked walls and half-obliterated ceiling in Heimdall’s Observatory.

‘Sweet mercy,’ Thor muttered.

Loki took a step towards his brother, forcing Thor to back away from the opening to the Bifrost. ‘This is what Asgard looks like, the destruction in Jotunheim is a hundred times greater. They have
paid dearly for the insult they have inflicted upon Asgardians and Laufey, who has stirred up trouble between the two realms, is dead. Please, brother, let your hammer rest for now.’

‘The sorceress still lives.’

‘I know.’ Loki sighed. ‘In time we will find a way to back her back for what she did to you, but today isn’t the day for that. Asgard is in disarray and you are the king. You have responsibilities here.’

Thor snarled in frustration, but he lowered his hand and let Mjolnir rest idly by his thigh. Behind him, Heimdall let out a noise which was a close to a relieved sigh as Loki had ever heard from the man. Loki mouthed a quick thank you to him, then called over the bewildered-looking Einherjari soldiers that were positioned by the entrance to the Observatory.

‘Take a message to Lords Agnar and Tyr,’ Loki said. ‘King Thor has returned.’

None of the Einherjari soldiers were eager to be caught in whatever tumult would follow Thor’s return. All four of them immediately saddled their horses and galloped down the length of the bridge. Thor’s gaze followed their passage.

Loki carefully rested his hand on Thor’s arm. ‘Are you well?’

‘I… don’t feel quite myself. While she held me, my body didn’t belong to me. I’m sure this will pass soon enough.’ Thor forced a smile. ‘That’s a very good disguise, Loki. I almost didn’t recognise you.’

Loki swore under his breath. After a week surrounded by frost giants, the hue of his own skin had faded into the back of his mind. Thor, on the other hand, had never seen him like this previously. Nor did he know anything about the sorry tale of Loki’s adoption.

That realisation chilled Loki to his core. The last time he hadn’t been around when Thor had first learned Loki wasn’t his brother by blood. True, he did offer Loki his acceptance when they encountered each other again, but Loki didn’t know what his initial reaction had been. And, this time, Thor had been a prisoner of the frost giants for weeks. Loki could only guess at what torment they could have inflicted upon Thor.

‘You must have spun a good story. The sorceress claimed you her cousin,’ Thor added, oblivious to his brother’s distress.

Loki cocked his head. ‘You heard that?’

‘I heard everything, from the moment they took me to the moment she released me.’

‘I see. Well, to be clear, it was never my intent to kill you.’

Thor attempted to separate the worst of the tangles in his hair. ‘I gathered as much.’

‘Good.’

There was so much Loki needed to explain to his brother. Asgard lay just on the other side of the bridge; Thor needed to know the political situation in his realm before he returned to the palace. He also needed to know about Loki. And Loki didn’t know where to start. He still felt the warmth of Laufey’s blood on his skin and felt the rumble of mountains quaking under the Bifrost’s incessant pulse. Were Hyndla and Thrym safe? What of Baugi and his family? Baugi probably was. He was supposed to be somewhere further out, on the front lines. And that was another issue in need of
resolution — the Einherjar remain on Jotunheim.

Loki closed his eyes. There was one thing he could do. It was vain, but it would put him at ease.

A small flick of his hand.

His skin was pale and smooth once more, his clothes the familiar green leathers.

‘Thor.’ he said, as he forced himself to ignore the signs he was reaching the end of his reserves once more. ‘We’d best talk while we walk.’

‘If matters are truly urgent, I can use Mjolnir —’

‘No. First, I must explain what’s happened.’ Thor shrugged and gestured for Loki to start talking, but Loki still hesitated. ‘All be damned, I don’t even know where to begin.’

‘The beginning is usually a good place to start.’

Loki made a face. ‘The beginning? Sure, let’s get that out of the way then. I planned to sabotage your coronation.’

After that proclamation, Loki couldn’t well stop talking until he explained himself fully. Worse yet, Thor set a good pace across the bridge. Loki’s words spilled out in an uneven, agitated cadence. He explained about his aborted pact with the frost giants and their father’s injury in Jotunheim; about his regency and his downfall; about his imprisonment and his escape; and finally, about his last days among the frost giants of Utgard.

By the time he fell silent, they were past the city gates and Thor’s face was twisted in concentration. Loki found consolation in the fact Thor hadn’t yet swung Mjolnir in his direction.

‘So the knife you would’ve slain me with was your half-brother’s?’ Thor said after a lengthy silence. ‘The one I killed.’

‘Out of everything I just told you, you’re concerned about him?’

Thor’s forehead furrowed. ‘I never thought… I mean to say, I am sorry, Loki, I didn’t understand what I did.’

Loki nodded. Apologies didn’t come easily to either of them, so although Loki sensed that Thor’s words encompassed more than comment on the loss of a half-brother Loki had never properly met, he didn’t press further.

This afternoon on Asgard was scarcely less glum than on Jotunheim, the sky was overcast and a thin, cold rain fell. Those few who were out on the streets were occupied with their own affairs, likely eager to be done and be inside, so Loki and Thor received less attention than Loki had anticipated. Thor seemed glad for it. He avoided the gaze of the few that did realise that the dishevelled passer-by was their king.

‘I didn’t know who he was back then either,’ Loki said. He hesitated for a moment, then decided he needed to be clear on where they stood now that Thor knew the truth. ‘In any case, who am I to condemn you for anything? I killed my birth father today. Possibly many others.’

‘For my sake, you say.’

‘It had to be done.’
Thor looked sharply in Loki’s direction. ‘By your estimation, my life is worth a great many of your kin.’

_How many would you ’ve slain when you charged into Jotunheim with your hammer aloft?_

Loki bit back the instinctive sarcastic retort and instead said, ‘You are my brother. And my king.’

Thor left Loki’s words hang between them without any sort of answer as they followed the gentle slope of the streets back home. The closer they got to the palace, the more guards they saw, but all of them had the wits to allow them through without challenge. And still, Thor had nothing to say.

Dread knotted Loki’s innards. He hated himself for his neediness, but he couldn’t help himself.

‘We are still brothers, aren’t we?’ he asked and winced at the way his voice shook as he spoke.

Thor leaned towards Loki. He wrapped his arm around the back of Loki’s shoulders and pulled him into a tight side-hug. ‘You are the smartest person I know, so I don’t have a clue how you can ask so stupid a question.’

‘Thank you,’ Loki said softly.

He wasn’t sure Thor heard him. They had turned a corner and the palace itself now lay right before them, as grand and proud as ever. It bore no sign of the intrigues and turmoil that had taken place within over the recent weeks. Loki inched forward, but Thor’s heavy arm kept him rooted in place.

‘Thor?’

Thor peered up at the palace’s golden towers with a thoughtful expression etched into his face. ‘I’m not sure I am ready to return to being King Thor quite so soon.’

‘None of us chooses what tapestry the Norns stitch for us, but you —’

The great gilded doors were thrown open; someone in the palace had noticed their approach. Thor sighed and slipped his hand off Loki’s shoulders. They didn’t make it far past the doors before a flock of guardsmen, servants and petty officials descended upon them. Their clamour was near deafening. Loki made sure to remain close to Thor. After all, among the Asgardians he remained a proclaimed traitor and an escaped prisoner.

Thor cleared his throat several times until he finally had everyone’s attention and the noise dissipated. He pointed to one of the officials dressed in a scribe’s robes. ‘Find Lord Tyr, tell him I wish all forces withdrawn from Jotunheim. The frost giants have paid heavily enough for their intrusion into this palace.’

‘Certainly, your majesty.’ The woman bowed and scurried off.

‘I wish also to see Lord Agnar,’ Thor went on, pointing to another official from the gathered crowd. ‘I will receive him in the Great Hall.’ He frowned, then turned to look at Loki. ‘Brother, would you take a handful of guards and find our mother? I’m certain she would want to know both her sons have returned home safe.’

I can ’t think of anything I’d like to do more.
Leavetaking

Thor was already there when Loki entered their father’s bedchamber. He had set Gungnir on the bed beside Odin. As for himself, Thor was the image of a penitent son. He was on his knees on the ground, his head bent low as he spoke to his father. Loki shut the door with more force than was necessary to make sure Thor was aware of his presence, then slowly approached the ornate bed.

Thor lifted his head and tracked Loki’s steps. ‘He grows thin. The muscle’s wasting away beneath his skin.’

‘I think that’s common in comatose patients,’ Loki replied. ‘He will recover his strength when he wakes.’

His brother nodded, although Loki’s answer plainly left him unsatisfied. He peered at their father’s unmoving face for a long moment, then rose to his feet.

‘Were you looking for mother?’ he asked.

‘No, I wanted to see father one more time. I hoped that after seeing him, I’d find some clarity and I’d know what to say when I came to see you.’

Thor frowned. ‘What don’t I know?’

‘I’m leaving Asgard,’ Loki said.

‘If this is because of Agnar and Tyr, don’t. That’s all in the past, I assure you. They’ll rot in their cells until the end of their days. Everyone else involved will be demoted or punished according to their crimes. It might take time, but the king’s justice will be done. You —’

Loki threw up his hand to silence his brother. ‘I appreciate that and you have my full confidence in you on this, but it’s not because of them. This is a trip I need to make for my own sake. For both our sakes, in the long term.’

‘For both our sakes?’ Thor reached for Gungnir and scooped the spear up. ‘What are you talking about? I need you here, by my side.’

Loki bit back a wince as his mind cast back to their father’s vision for him. Odin’s fears for Thor’s rule had become reality. With Odin lost to his sleep and the majority of the council in cells awaiting the king’s judgement, Thor was desperately short of good counsel. Odin had been right then and Thor was right now — Loki’s place was by his brother.

And he longed to stay and help Thor. And to gloat to Tyr and Agnar’s faces. But the universe demanded a higher loyalty. Now that he had triaged the situation on Asgard, it was time to go.

‘I’ve made up my mind,’ Loki said. ‘Mother will help you and father will awaken.’

I can only hope the previous weeks taught you something, brother.

Thor took a step back, a strange expression on his face. ‘How can we be certain of that?’

It wasn’t a matter of certainty; there hadn’t been any frost giant arrow in the first timeline. More chilling – the last time Odin died, Asgard had all but perished with him. Loki didn’t dare contemplate that, not when so much else had gone awry.
He sighed and slipped his hands around his father’s cold palm. ‘He’s the Allfather. It’ll take more than one poisoned arrow tip to kill him.’

‘I pray you’re right.’

‘You’ll see.’ Loki offered his brother a smile and pressed his hands over Odin’s, hoping to share some of his warmth with his father. ‘So, I’ll leave tonight, once I’ve bad mother farewell. You’ll pass a message through Heimdall once you have good news about father, won’t you?’

‘No. You can’t leave.’ Thor pushed himself up to his feet. ‘I need you here and so does mother.’

‘I can’t leave?’

Thor realised they had ventured into territory he hadn’t intended for them to go, but was reluctant to find a way to retreat. ‘I suppose,’ he said in a hesitant tone, ‘I have the power to make you stay.’

‘And so I shall be a prisoner again? You’re most kind, your majesty.’

‘That’s not how I meant it!’

‘I know what you meant.’

Thor scowled. Loki sensed danger in that expression; furniture usually ended up broken not long after. He swallowed the juvenile comments that came readily to his mind. He could lower himself to match Thor’s temper or he could try to force Thor to rise to the occasion.

‘You are being selfish,’ Loki said.

‘No, I’m being realistic, more than I’d rather be. It pains me to admit it, but I can’t rule without help.’

‘What about my pain right now?’ Loki responded. ‘My parents are not my parents, my brother is not my brother. I’m not even Asgardian and my birth-father is a man we’ve been taught to despise all our lives. The people I grew up among turned on me the moment they found out, making all sorts of baseless accusations. My life has been a lie. How can I just go on like nothing has happened?’

‘Is punishment for their actions not enough?’

Loki drew his hands back and shrugged. ‘I… I don’t know, Thor. My mind is in chaos right now, I’m angry and I’m not. I desperately want to speak to our father and at the same time, I never want to see him again. I doubt I am even in the right state of mind to be offering counsel to anyone, let alone a king.’

‘I can understand that,’ Thor said. He skirted around the bed until he was at Loki’s side, but seemed unwilling to physically reach out to his brother. ‘Mother did tell me that she suspected you were more upset than you’d let on. I just thought that after how things ended on Jotunheim, you would prefer to remain on Asgard after all.’

‘Let’s not discuss that mess right now.’

‘If you are leaving, I think we must. The frost giants are your blood and I realise, it’s natural that you’d want to explore that heritage, but I doubt they’ll welcome you back.’

Loki burst into laughter. ‘That’s bloody obvious, Thor. I’ve not the slightest desire to go back to that frozen hellhole. Ever.’

‘Oh,’ Thor awkwardly chuckled along, as if forcing himself to enjoy a joke he didn’t understand.
'Then where are you planning to go?'

'My plan is a wild, drunken ramble through the wide universe beyond the Nine Realms.'

'If only I could join you,' Thor replied. His relief was palpable.

'Maybe one day you will.' Loki patted his brother on the shoulder. 'We still have many centuries ahead of us.'

_This is a waste of time._

Loki flipped back the blanket over him and propped himself up on his elbows.

He didn’t end up leaving in the evening as he had planned. The conversation with his mother proved more difficult and lengthy than the one with Thor. By the end, his mind was wrung out at the effort of dredging up old hurts for the sake of his current cover story. Nor, in truth, was he in a hurry to leave.

He let his mother talk him into staying for dinner, just the three of them — Loki, Thor and Frigga. Odin’s absence and Loki’s impending departure imparted a melancholy mood over the occasion, but it was still orders of magnitude better than a re-hydrated meal from some rotting tavern Loki had anticipated having that evening. The three of them made a concerted effort to avoid talking about the future and instead, reminisced about the past. They lingered at the table, laughing and drinking until even Frigga’s cheeks grew flush from the wine in her goblet.

It had been well into the night when they finally dispersed to their own rooms. And it was nearly dawn now and Loki was yet to find an hour of solid sleep. He seemed to drift in and out of wakefulness every quarter of an hour, his thoughts flitting between wonder at the oddness of his dreams and concerns about his journey ahead.

There was no sense in trying to find rest any longer. Loki grabbed the robe he had discarded by the bed and switched on the lamps. Squinting until his eyes adjusted to the sudden influx of light, Loki went through the motions of his morning routine.

Once he looked presentable, he made a survey of his quarters. He needed to pack. He had known this would come from the moment he decided to leave, but the reality of it left him rather puzzled. Spontaneous travel was how it usually worked out for him. He had to think hard until he remembered his last planned journey. It had been a tour of the outlying villages while he had been impersonating his father. His servants had packed everything for him back then.

‘Well, it can’t be that hard,’ Loki muttered. ‘People do it every day.’

He found an old bag once used for hunting trips on the bottom of his closet and threw in an extra set of clothing there. The few imperative items from his bathroom followed, then his knives, his set of healing supplies, a spare notebook and a few knickknacks that Loki thought might come in handy. Loki stared at the bag for a few moments, then added two spell-books from his collection.

‘Ah, the most important thing,’ Loki said with a groan.

His rooms held a couple of gold trinkets, which could fetch a good price. Gold, however, wasn’t an especially valuable commodity in the wider universe. Loki threw his bag on his shoulder and set off
towards the Treasury Vaults.

He found a small satisfaction in the nervous looks of the guards at the entrance to the vaults.

‘I am here on the king’s business,’ he said. ‘Would you be kind enough to shuffle of my way? Thank you.’

As he gathered up some of the less dangerous, but flashy artefacts and a few handfuls of most valuable coins, Loki tried to guess how furious Thor would be when he heard about Loki’s pilfering of the Asgardian treasury. Probably, no more than he would be about Loki sneaking away without a final goodbye, he decided, which didn’t bother Loki much. Thor would forgive these slights by the time he returned.

Once he concluded his business at the vaults, Loki strode quickly through the silent palace and the empty streets of the city below. The sky grew lighter, but the sun was yet to show its face, so the multi-coloured gleam of the Bifrost was the only source of light.

‘Good morning, your highness,’ Heimdall said when he saw Loki approach. ‘Come to fulfil your part of our bargain?’

‘Hello, Heimdall,’ Loki replied. ‘No. I’m leaving.’

‘Does the king know?’

‘He does.’

Heimdall’s lips twitched. ‘And does he know what you promised me in exchange for aiding you in Jotunheim?’

‘That he does not.’

Silence fell.

Loki shook his head. The missive he had sent to Heimdall had been born out of desperation. He hadn’t taken the time to contemplate the practicalities of sharing with Heimdall the information he had promised and now that he had, Loki was reluctant to do so. Unfortunately, Heimdall’s stubbornness outmatched Loki’s. He would stand there, still as a marble statue, until Loki lost his temper.

And what then? He couldn’t attack Heimdall. Robbing the treasury was unsavoury enough; robbing the treasury and then attacking the Guardian of the Bifrost started to look downright sketchy. Loki supposed he could summon Thor to demand Heimdall to move on Loki’s behalf, but then Heimdall was bound to mention Loki’s letter to Thor and Thor too would have questions for Loki.

Shit.

This one is purely my own doing too.

‘What do you know already?’ Loki asked.

‘Time and space are mangled around you. I cannot say what you have done, but it carries heavier consequences than your usual tricks have accustomed you to.’

‘No need for the reproachful tone; this wasn’t done lightly,’ Loki replied. ‘I can’t tell you much. Tangled timelines get messy. Here’s the crux of it —there is someone out there seeking the Infinity
Stones.’

Heimdall’s eyes narrowed. ‘Which ones?’

‘All of them.’

‘That is —’

‘I believe the seeker has the capacity to wield them successfully. I’ve told my family I’m leaving Asgard in an effort to come to terms with myself as a frost giant, but it is him I am pursuing. I may need your help again.’

‘You can rely on my discretion. Unless I believe your actions threaten Asgard,’ Helmdall said flatly. Heimdall’s expression had often been a puzzle for Loki and, to Loki’s discomfort, right now was no different.

_I suppose I can content myself with the thought that Heimdall is not one to lie._

‘I would expect no less of you,’ Loki replied. He glanced back to the city at the other end of the bridge. Its towers now glistened in the rose-tinted washes of the rising sun, inviting Loki to return and enjoy the comfort of his home just a little longer. ‘It’s time for me to go.’

‘You didn’t say where you were headed.’

Loki cringed. ‘Sakaar.’
(Part II) Sakaar

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part II

This place is the worst.

Loki leaped to the left to avoid the great hunk of metal plummeting from the wormhole above. This was a hazard the locals knew to always be aware of, but he was still readjusting to life in the middle of the universe’s trash pit. Still, he was getting there. Like any other inhabitant of Sakaar, he examined the universe’s new offering on the off-chance it had value. It didn’t. The twisted shape seemed to be a canard off a fighter ship; Loki wasn’t so desperate as to become a metal scrapper.

He climbed further up the mound until he reached its summit and could look down at the cluster of buildings huddled in the mound’s shadow. Frankly, to call them buildings was generous. These were just ships parts and bits of Xandarian plaster clobbered together without proper tools. The end product was a hideous and chaotic mishmash, much like the people in and around this quasi-legal camp.

The Grandmaster liked to claim that no one left his haven for lost and broken things. This couldn’t have been further from the truth. A scrap heap that was allowed to build up exponentially was dangerous; it was only a matter of time until it collapsed on itself. Ships bearing the more valuable items — semi-functional bits of technology, expensive construction materials and breathing things — left Sakaar every day. It wasn’t legal by the Grandmaster’s laws, but as long as the activities took place outside the bounds of his city and he skimmed off the profits, he was happy to allow the smugglers to operate unconstrained.

Loki watched the miserable wretches the smugglers readied for their next transport and cringed. He hadn’t dared to go straight to the Sanctuary. One cannot claim to search for someone and then go exactly where they were. Nor did Loki want to draw Thanos’ attention to Asgard. The decision to go to Sakaar had been sensible, but it left him with a problem. He was Systems away from where he needed to be.

The smugglers were the obvious solution. No one had ever bothered to ask him how he had first encountered Thanos. Well, in truth, it hadn’t been his choice. Loki had let go, he had fallen and he had landed among the endless junk piles of Sakaar. He had managed to survive for three months on this planet before he made a bet with the wrong person and ended up in the hands of smugglers gathering a ship for the Sanctuary. Thanos’ crusade had always been short on manpower.

I doubt he ever appreciated the irony in that.

‘So that’s the easiest way,’ Loki muttered under his breath. ‘Retreat the path – the smugglers, the ship, the slave-pits of the Sanctuary. I strayed from the script once on Asgard and everything unravelled. This is the safest path.’

Yet, after days of trying to persuade himself that this was the way forward, the thought continued to repulse him. Those had been some of the most painful and miserable days of his life. Masochism didn’t appeal. Besides, he wanted to change the future, not to relive it a second time. He would have to stray from the familiar path eventually. So why not now?
The answer was clear there. The more he changed earlier on, the less he could rely on his memories of the future.

And yet.

Screams tore through the air. A smuggler emerged from one of the buildings, holding a whip in one hand and in the other, dragging a small figure by the hair. A child, Loki realised when the people milling around backed away. He shuffled back. He still possessed a sense of self-preservation; he wasn’t going anywhere near the smugglers.

He moved quickly and to his relief, the screams were soon beyond his earshot. Careful to avoid falling debris and places where the junk had accumulated enough to cause landslides, he made his way back to the city. Thus far he had avoided the glitz and glamour of the Grandmaster’s citadel, staying instead in the crowded lower sectors of the city. People caught between the lawless junkyards and the Grandmaster’s whims tried to make the best of their lives here. Once Loki armed himself with a blaster as long as his arm and accumulated a bit of dust on his shoes, he blended in well enough.

Of course, he couldn’t settle down and open up his own junk shop down here, he still needed to get to Thanos. There was only one person on this dump of a planet he trusted to help him out.

It took him two days, a black eye and a fair amount of hard cash, but he found Scrapper 142 in a half-empty tavern on the city’s outskirts. As Loki had anticipated, there was a near empty bottle next to her while she sat at a table, tinkering with some gadget. Loki swept past her and approached the bar. An alcoholic wants little to do with a person who doesn’t drink.

‘What’ve you got that’s good?’ Loki asked the barman.

All three of the barman’s heads glared at him, then motioned towards the beer taps and the stock of liquors on the cabinet behind him. Sighing, Loki pointed to the beer that had the brightest logo. Everything in here looked like it was local brew. No matter what he chose, it was bound to be vile.

Once he held the slightly chipped ceramic mug in his hand, Loki approached Brunnhilde. ‘May I?’

She glanced to the empty tables on either side of them. ‘No. Fuck off.’

‘I’m not here to hit on you,’ Loki replied. He pulled over a chair from one of the other tables and set down opposite Brunnhilde. ‘You have a solid reputation on Sakaar. I want to hire you.’

‘You must be the weirdo who’s been asking after me. I appreciate the enthusiasm, but I’m not interested. Now fuck off.’

Loki bit down a laugh. This was going exactly as well as he thought it would go.

‘Look, Scrapper 142 or whatever your actual name is, I see you are committed to your alcoholism and I respect that. What I’m proposing is a few weeks of light work that will set you up for a year-long full-time alcohol binge. You can even stock up on supplies on the way back.’

Brunnhilde took a swig from her bottle. ‘Where do you want to go?’

‘Sanctuary. It’s an asteroid belt in the Chitauri system.’

‘You’re a lunatic.’

‘No, just bored and curious.’ Loki sipped at his beer and regretted that decision immediately. Beer
shouldn’t taste like it had powdered charcoal stirred through it. ‘I came to Sakaar because I was bored and curious. This planet is supposed to be something special. Well, I’ve seen the Contest of Champions, I’ve been to the parties and the markets. Yeah, I’m not… I mean, you can drink and party and engage in viciousness in many places in the universe. But have you heard the stories about the Sanctuary?’

Brunnhilde leaned in. ‘I have. It’s the home of the Mad Titan. He draws fanatics from every direction and everywhere he goes, devastation follows. Why would you want to go there?’

‘It sounds like a bit of fun for me. And there is a promise of good compensation for you.’

‘You got here somehow, right? You look like the tourist type. Use whichever ship you came here in.’

‘Not possible, unfortunately. My ship is rather worse for wear after a misunderstanding with a Kronan.’

‘Get another one then.’

Loki scraped at the scuff mark on his mug. ‘I am. Your ship just happens to be the one I want.’

‘That’s too bad. I happen to have other plans for it.’

‘Doesn’t the slave trade get boring?’ Loki winced sympathetically. ‘I’m sorry, I believe it’s impolitic to call it that around here. Doesn’t gathering up suitable fighters for the arena become dull? Or maybe sometimes, when you find yourself on the edge of sobriety, your conscience has something to say about your chosen profession?’

Brunnhilde grabbed Loki’s collar and pulled him toward her, sending his beer flying off the table. ‘Get the fuck out of here. Or you’ll spend the rest of the night picking out glass out of what’ll remain of your smug face.’ She pushed Loki back into his seat. ‘You’re an idiot if you are thinking of joining the Mad Titan is —’

‘No one said anything about joining him,’ Loki cut in, ‘but fine, if you’re not even interested in discussing price, I’ll find someone else.’

‘Good,’ Brunnhilde shrugged.

‘Happy drinking,’ Loki replied as he rose from his seat.

*That’s a pity. Time for Plan C.*

Twelve hours later, Loki was piloting Brunnhilde’s ship through a wormhole and feeling pleased with himself. Things had worked out as he had planned them to for a change. Humming out one of the old Midgardian songs Wong had liked to play back at the Sanctum, he adjusted the thrusters and took a swig of the whisky he had pilfered from the Valkyrie’s supplies.

Leather creaked.

*Speaking of.*

He locked the ship controls and turned his chair around just as Brunnhilde climbed to her feet. Still
somewhat unsteady, she reached for the ship’s wall. Loki grinned as reality caught up to her. First, her eyes narrowed and she glared at Loki. Then she caught sight of the rushing nothing out the ship’s windows. Brunnhilde straightened up.

‘What the fuck is wrong with you?’ she asked.

Loki offered her his most charming smile in reply. ‘I wanted you to come with me. You didn’t want to. So I snuck into your apartment, waited until you passed out drunk, gave you a little something to make sure you stayed asleep and shot us off on your ship. I figure since it’s your thing to take people against their will, you won’t mind.’

She reached behind her shoulder, only to realise her sword wasn’t in the scabbard on her back. Nor did she have on her any other weapon she habitually carried. Loki had been thorough.

‘To be serious for a moment.’ Loki held up his hands in an effort to prevent the Valkyrie from launching on top of him, armed or not. ‘I lied to you back on Sakaar. You drink in some unsavoury places, I couldn’t trust the company around us.’

‘You’d better have the best story ever told or —’

‘Some terrible and profoundly humiliating violence is sure to befall me in short order. Got it.’

Making sure to always have a wall or a control panel within her arm’s reach, Brunnhilde moved towards Loki. ‘What’s your story then?’

‘Odin of Asgard is concerned about the Mad Titan’s plans. He sent me to find out what I can.’

‘So you’re here on the king’s business. Aha,’ Brunnhilde replied. ‘Props to you. I still don’t see why I should care or why you need my ship.’

‘You know, if you want your identity to remain hidden, you should make more effort to hide your very distinct tattoos. I would’ve expected better from a Valkyrie.’

Brunnhilde had the self-control not to flinch or look down to the tattoo on her arm. ‘I’m not at Odin’s beck and call any longer, haven’t been for a very long time. So long, I’m surprised he hasn’t karked it yet.’

‘Father is getting on in years, I admit. He’s had quite the ride though. You might remember he had a mid-life crisis a while back, gave up on the conquering and so on. He’s remarried since, had a son with the new wife and adopted a frost giant baby.’

‘Which one are you?’

‘The blue one.’ Loki shrugged. ‘Magic conceals all manner of sins.’

‘Yeah, I didn’t think he’d send one of his own blood to do this kind of shit job.’

‘Things are complicated between Odin and me, it was never any different. Nor does it alter the facts — the Titan is a vicious megalomaniac, who has already destroyed entire civilisations. Now there are rumours he may be something more dangerous.’

‘I’m sure you’ll make your good old dad proud soon enough. Now, don’t make me wrestle for the controls. Stop off on the next planet we pass.’

Loki made a quick check of the performance indicators on the ship’s control panels, then threw
Brunnhilde the bottle he’d been drinking out of earlier. ‘Here, it’ll take the edge off that headache.’

She fumbled her catch, but didn’t waste any time in pulling off the cap and taking a swig. Loki leapt out of the pilot’s chair. He pushed her against the cabin’s back wall, pressing a knife against the Valkyrie’s throat.

As he had expected, her first move was to swing the bottle towards his head. Loki caught her arm and kneed her in the stomach. The next moment he was on the floor, the Valkyrie’s fist flying towards his face.

He blocked her and flipped them both over.

‘How long can you go on right now?’ he said in a pleasant tone. ‘I’m more sober than you are and you’re still being affected by the tranquilliser I gave you earlier.’

‘What the fuck do you want with me?’ Brunnhilde pushed Loki off her.

‘A back-up. Only an imbecile walks into an enemy nest alone. I wager a former Valkyrie has the right calibre of skill.’

Brunnhilde pulled herself back to her feet and nudged the shards from the now smashed whisky bottle over to the side. ‘Find someone else. I’m not interested.’

Loki forced herself between Brunnhilde and the pilot’s chair.

‘I know my father was an arse,’ he said, ‘he still is sometimes. I know drinking is better than reliving the past, but every once in a while you need to consider the future too. Don’t tell me you haven’t heard what the Titan has been up to so far. Now consider what his next steps may be. We all have only the one universe to share.’

‘I don’t care about the universe. It’s been here long before me and it’ll be here way after I’m gone.’

Loki had to make a concerted effort to remain calm. ‘I think if you venture outside the boundaries of your self-imposed exile, you might be surprised. But, meanwhile, how about this proposal? You work for me five weeks, after that we will return to Sakaar and I’ll hand you one million credits to spend as you like.’

‘Two million,’ Brunnhilde replied.

‘One and a half.’

She threw her head back and chuckled. ‘Damn. That’s a lot of money.’

Chapter End Notes

I want to focus on finishing up the next chapter tomorrow night, so I am putting up this one a bit early. I realise this story has shifted focus the past two chapters, how are you all finding it so far?

Regarding Loki’s previous time on Sakaar and connection to Thanos. I can’t find the post anymore, but I came across a comment on Reddit a few months back noting that the Devil’s Anus in Ragnarok came out under Asgard. The poster speculated that Loki
ended up falling through that wormhole at the end of Thor 1. It seemed like a workable idea for this story.
The wormhole did speed up matters, but it hardly deposited Loki and Brunnhilde in the middle of Chitauri territory. It took fifteen dull, yet frustrating days of travel before they reached their destination. Brunnhilde wasn’t timid about critiquing Loki’s choice of supplies for their journey or his steering technique whenever he took the pilot’s chair. Loki, for his part, knew only so many ways of telling someone to shut up.

Yet, as Brunnhilde banked hard and the hundreds of asteroids that made up this section of the belt came into view, Loki was tempted to tell her to turn the ship around and head for some civilised part of the universe.

‘Where are we supposed to be landing?’ Brunnhilde asked sourly. ‘If you knew what you were doing, Odinson, you’d have procured at least a basic map for us.’

Loki ran his tongue over his lower lip. ‘From whom exactly? The smugglers? Their word isn’t worth the dirt on my boots. That big one there seven points to the right of us is the one to steer towards. If you are going to live in an asteroid belt, you’d at least pick the biggest hunk of stone you can possibly cling to.’

‘Or you are worried about being found and are intelligent enough to hide among the smaller asteroids.’

Brunnhilde wasn’t wrong. The bulk of Thanos’ followers, both willing and unwilling, were spread across four main asteroids, the largest of which rivalled Asgard in size. However, Thanos and his inner circle often retreated to the seclusion of the smaller asteroids. Loki wasn’t about to explain this to Brunnhilde, of course. This was the sort of information he was supposed to be gathering during this trip.

‘If someone wants to hide, they are unlikely to welcome the unannounced arrival of a pair of strangers. Take the ship where I told you to,’ Loki said.

Brunnhilde rolled her eyes as she turned the ship towards the asteroid Loki had pointed out. They had already slowed significantly since their reached the edge of the asteroid belt, now they had to slow to a crawl. Hundreds of asteroids little bigger than their ship speckled the space around them and there was local ship traffic as well. Loki gestured to Brunnhilde to follow the trail of a decrepit troop carrier. Over the years, Thanos’ men had learned to navigate this maze; Loki and Brunnhilde were safe from collision as long as they could leverage off local expertise.

‘This is a decent location for a base,’ Brunnhilde remarked. ‘Out of the way, true. But it’ll be a bitch for your enemy to bring their army in.’

‘Not just an army.’

They were now close enough to Theta-Three, as the inhabitants of the Sanctuary referred to it, to have a perfect view of the vast open mines that dominated this sector of the asteroid. Thanos’ forces procured rare metals and sophisticated technology from Sakaarian smugglers and at times even through legitimate trade. However, the sheer bulk of raw materials needed to equip the military was staggering and the costs no less so. As Brunnhilde had already noted, it was near impossible to pilot any sizable vessel through the belt, so Thanos had turned to a native solution. Even at this stage in the game, his men had already hollowed out several asteroids.
Their ship glided above the broad crest that ran like an ill-healed scar across the asteroid’s length and they were suddenly above the outer reaches of Sanctuary City. Loki remembered this view well — lines of quickly thrown-up barrack buildings, rising smoke from the smelters and messy outlines of half-completed warships.

*Less a city than a military encampment.*

Beside him, Brunnhilde mumbled something under her breath, but it was too soft for him to hear. He gestured towards the horizon where there was some glimmer of grace to be found in the well-built administrative centre of Thanos’ madness.

Loki realised he was holding his breath as Brunnhilde guided her ship to a docking bay in the city’s main port. He forced a sharp exhale. ‘Obviously don’t tell anyone why I’m here. If someone asks you who I am, tell them you know nothing about me apart from my first name and you don’t care enough about the job to learn more.’

‘What’s your cover story? You had to have told me something to get me out here,’ Brunnhilde replied.

‘It’s what you first heard in the bar — a man whose years of idleness have left him jaded about the world and who now seeks something he can’t put into words. Rumours of Thanos sparked his curiosity. He is just sensible enough to hire a bodyguard, but lacks the forethought to check her credentials or to keep her around when it would be most prudent.’

One by one Brunnhilde flicked down the thruster switches. ‘He sounds less of an arse than you are. So I’m not to be around? Good. I got tired of your face two weeks ago.’

‘You are my scout. I want to know the layout of the place, who goes and who comes, what the local politics are and so on. There won’t be time for either of us to be lounging about.’

‘Joy of joys.’

Brunnhilde made the last few expert flicks of the switches and the ship shuddered through its transition from flight mode to standby. With a soft click, her seat belt snapped open. She swivelled the pilot’s chair, ramming the armrest into Loki’s side.

With a wince, he grabbed her arm. ‘Hold on.’

‘What are you doing?’

‘I’m covering your tattoo. Hold still, please.’

She didn’t listen to him. The more she tried to pull away, the firmer he held on. No spell was made easier when it had to be performed on a moving target. By the time he was satisfied no trace of the tattoo remained visible, he had left crescent-shaped indentations in Brunnhilde’s arm.

‘Find something physical to cover it as well, in case the magic fails,’ Loki said.

‘Fine.’

He sighed. ‘Now, for me.’

He released the concealment over him.

Brunnhilde cocked her head, evaluating him anew. ‘You’re way short for a Jotunn.’
‘You absolutely right. I try not to think about it, but late at night I lie awake and the truth taunts me. Odin must’ve lied. My real mother was actually an Alfheim pixie,’ Loki said dryly.

‘Gross,’ Brunnhilde replied. ‘Do you know how they reproduce?’

‘I heard it gets loud.’ Loki shrugged. ‘Get used to this charming look. The fewer links there are between me and Asgard, the better. Now, come on, let’s explore.’

Brunnhilde raised an eyebrow. ‘So that’s him?’

Loki followed the line of her gaze to the garish mural above the triple doors to the city’s main Mess Hall. Thanos stood in the middle of a host of his followers, his arms stretching out wide and smiling rapidly. Such an expression had never crossed his face, Loki was certain of that.

‘Must be,’ he replied. It was a trial to keep his voice light. ‘You know, I’m not hungry. I’m going to continue looking around. You go on though. Once you’re done, ask around about decent accommodation. If I keep sleeping on that bed back on the ship much longer, the kink in my neck is going to become permanent.’

‘I should stay by —’

‘It looks perfectly safe. I’ll see you back on the ship in say, four hours?’ Brunnhilde shrugged. ‘Whatever you say.’

Loki permitted himself a shudder as he turned away and headed back down the street. He had anticipated this homecoming (for lack of a better term) to Theta-Three would be difficult, but even if one knew something was coming, it wasn’t necessarily possible to avert it. So, after the first few hours in Sanctuary City fear at the thought of being discovered still caught his breath and the guilt he had carried with him from the future twisted his stomach anew. Worst of all, however, was the way this place made his skin crawl.

Slaves toiled in the mines just over the mountain range that dominated the horizon, slaves suffocated in the factories on the city’s edge and closer yet, slaves were tormented into submission in the vast complexes mere blocks away from where Loki now stood. Yet the streets in the city’s centre were paved, clean and lined with flowerbeds. Children played in designated playgrounds and street musicians had to have their licences on display while they performed.

This wasn’t Thanos’ doing — he had no patience for these sorts of minute details, but this had a definite stench of his philosophy. Just as Thanos cloaked the waves of violence he unleashed in proclamations of coming peace and prosperity, someone tried to cloak the brutality of life in the Sanctuary with this veneer of civil order.

Despite the time Loki had spent in the asteroid belt previously, he wasn’t particularly familiar with the streets of this sector. There had been few opportunities for excursions among the public back then. He ended up taking a meandering route to the compound he was after.

The building was inconspicuous, almost a twin to the one next to it, but Loki had been inside before. Coming to the Sanctuary was risky enough, entering this place was nothing less than walking out in the middle of a battlefield and taunting the enemy into attacking you.
On the other hand, Loki had more or less done precisely that during his last encounter with Thanos. He survived. Not many others had. Loki sucked in a breath; his mind was all too quick to make a count of that debacle — the roaring fire drowning out the screams of the doomed and the stench of his own blackening flesh.

_You’ve come this far. Can’t back out now._

He pulled open the door and strode inside.

Corridors spun off the central, hexagonal atrium. About a dozen people, none of them belonging to species Loki could name, stood at the mouth of one corridor, diligently listening to the barking orders of their commander. Loki ventured in the opposite direction, to the corridors that overlooked the fizzing swimming pools and past the low gravity chambers. He didn’t need to look at the signage helpfully placed throughout the complex. Once upon a time, after Thanos had decreed Loki had worth, he had spent weeks here, trying to coax his body back to health.

Loki moved slowly in an effort to understand as best he could who was using the facility today. The common soldier — a Chitauri wired into the hive mind or a half-rabid Outrider — wasn’t worth the expense of treatment and rehabilitation, but their commanding officers were a more precious commodity. Loki needed to befriend someone from this class of Thanos’ followers if he were to find a path to Thanos himself.

The pickings were slim, however. Most of the pools and the training rooms stood empty. Disappointed, he was about to turn back toward the atrium, when he came to a little-used side corridor. The edge of Loki’s lip curled up. There were all of two rooms down the short passageway — a changing room and a training hall. Neither of them had been occupied when Loki had first found them nor had he been interrupted in the weeks he had holed himself up in there.

But the training hall was occupied today. The whirring of machinery was audible out in the corridor. He cautiously pulled the door open and slipped inside. The person who sequestered themselves in there probably didn’t want company. Loki certainly hadn’t.

_Nebula?_

The young woman pitted against the practise dummy in the centre of the room did have the right physique. However, Loki had never actually met her and knew her only from the few photographs taken during her brief stay on Midgard. He hadn’t spent a great deal of time studying these either. And what details he remembered, he struggled to match to the woman before him now — she moved too quickly for him to catch a good look of her face.

A knife spun from her hand and whistled past Loki’s ear. The weapon found its mark in the padded door behind Loki.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said. ‘I didn’t mean to intrude.’

The woman took steps back from the practise dummy. ‘But you did.’

She turned to face him as she spoke and Loki’s heart skipped a beat. It was Nebula. He had to bite the inside of his lip to stop himself from grinning. Finally, the Norns had smiled at him. Everything he tried to achieve of late was like trying to chip granite with bare fingers. This was a welcome break.

‘Is there something you want from me?’ Nebula asked.

‘Ah, no, not as such.’ Loki allowed some of his fluster about meeting her to come through in his
words. ‘I’ve heard this was a good place to sharpen one’s skills. I’m a bit rusty, so I didn’t want to embarrass myself in front of a crowd, so I was looking for somewhere quieter. And then I lost track of where the entrance to the complex actually was.’

Nebula clicked her fingers and the dummy fell silent. ‘It’s quite an achievement to get lost with the signs all around the place.’

‘I suppose my father was right to say that being lost is my natural state of being.’

‘Your father must be a wise man.’

‘I’d hardly know.’ Loki pulled Nebula’s knife out of the door and walked down to the matted area where she stood. He flipped the weapon so the handle faced Nebula, then offered it back to her. ‘He never had much time for me.’

Nebula snatched the knife back from Loki and brought the blade up to examine the tip. The kink in it was unmissable.

‘Must have struck the metal frame within the door,’ Loki said. ‘What’s the knife made out of? It’s not very durable by the looks of it; you can get better quality.’

‘It’s a practice weapon, it doesn’t have to keep its edge,’ Nebula replied.

Loki nodded. ‘Fair enough then.’ He glanced to the practise dummy. ‘You looked like you know what you are doing and knives are my favourite weapons. How about we go through a few rounds together? A dummy can only do so much.’

Nebula frowned, her mouth hanging slightly open. With a steady influx of new faces in the Sanctuary’s training halls, a culture had evolved of welcoming the newcomers, no matter their background or skill level. It had been one of the few things Loki had appreciated about the place. On Asgard, he had been made unwelcome on the training grounds far too often. Clearly, Nebula didn’t want a training partner, otherwise, she would have chosen one of the bigger, more popular halls, but she had grown up in Thanos’ realm and had been well-indoctrinated in its customs. She didn’t want to refuse him either.

‘There’s a particular thing I am working on,’ Nebula said finally. ‘An enduring inadequacy after an injury.’

‘Then let’s start with that.’ Loki smiled, drawing his knives.

Nebula forced a smile. ‘Ok. I guess.’

They pushed the practise dummy off to the side and positioned themselves in the centre of the matted area, knives at the ready.
That chance meeting became their routine. Every morning, Loki had breakfast with Brunnhilde, then wondered four blocks down from their hostel to the rehabilitation complex. Nebula was always there before him, working through her warm-up exercises in the centre of the training hall. The practise dummy, on the other hand, stood in the corner, unused.

This morning too, Loki was the last to arrive. He hung back, watching Nebula’s meticulous movements. They were as precise as on any other day, but they lacked the free-flowing grace Loki had observed previously. The line of Nebula’s shoulders was stiffer than it should have been. Loki considered simply asking what was bothering her, but Nebula disliked interruptions in the middle of an exercise and she was so flighty about personal matters, he feared an overly forward question would undermine their fragile friendship.

Loki, instead, slipped off his outer layers of garments and put on a thin shirt he didn’t mind staining with his sweat. As he folded his street clothes in a neat pile, he realised the rhythmic shuffle of Nebula’s feet shifting over the matted area had seized. He glanced around to find Nebula staring at him.

She averted her gaze. ‘Good morning. I was wondering if I could ask you for a favour.’

‘Depends on the favour,’ Loki replied. He had three double entendres ready to go, but kept them to himself. Nebula hadn’t responded well the last time he had tried one on her.

‘How good are you with a sword? Would you mind if we train with swords today? My sister is due to return shortly and I need to be ready for her.’

‘Planning an assassination?’ Loki asked.

Nebula frowned for a moment, then rolled her eyes. ‘We always spar and she favours the sword. So, Baugi, you don’t mind?’

‘Hardly. I could use some practice with a sword myself.’

‘Ok, good. I picked up a few that looked about the right size,’ Nebula said, pointing towards the large duffel bag she had left by the door to the hall.

Inside were half a dozen different swords of various lengths and blade widths. All had blunt edges, but anyone on a receiving end of a strike from these would earn a sizable welt nevertheless. Loki examined the swords one by one, checking the centre of balance and how the grip sat in his hand. None of them were perfect. He settled for one that distinctly reminded him of Fandral’s rapier. It had a nice grip — not so new that the leather was slippery and not old enough for the leather to have started to break down.

‘Are you going to warm up?’ Nebula asked as Loki took position opposite her. She had asked him the same question practically every morning so far.

Loki flashed a smile. ‘You just want to watch me sweat.’

‘You aren’t as handsome or charming as you think you are.’
'But you do think I am just a little bit handsome? And charming?'

Nebula shook her head, not meeting his eyes. ‘Stop fishing for compliments and hit me already.’

Loki let out a mock scoff, then sank onto the intimately familiar warrior’s stance and brought up his sword. Their first drill was nothing more than what a child in their first year of training would do. They took turns making the different common cuts and thrusts until they were satisfied with each one. Nebula had no tolerance for imperfection.

They then both moved a step back, changing the distance between them and went through their repertoire of swings and cuts. Then they altered their starting position again. It was a painfully repetitive exercise, but it reinforced the fundamentals of good technique. Thor had also claimed on more than one occasion that these sorts of exercises relaxed him. Loki settled for acclimatising to the unfamiliar weapon in his hand.

A quarter of an hour later, once they had worked through the basics, the drills became more engaging. Loki and Nebula tried out different blocks and feints. Sweat beaded on Loki’s forehead and their thrusts were now accompanied by stoic grunts.

Ignoring the burning muscle in his left shoulder, Loki made a low-line attack. Nebula blocked him, but Loki could feel the give in the contact between their blades. He pushed forward until his sword tapped against Nebula’s hip bone.

Loki pulled his sword back and straightened up. ‘Your block here comes down at the wrong angle.’

‘Yeah, I picked up on that,’ Nebula said. ‘I don’t need commentary from you.’

And so it begins.

‘Let’s try again then.’ Loki sighed.

They went through the same exchange four more times and Loki was the victor after each one. Nebula did adjust the position of her sword with each attempt, but she clearly didn’t understand what part of her movement her mistake lay in and groped about blindly for a solution. This was her answer to every weak-point in her technique.

‘Nebula,’ Loki tried again, ‘let me show you.’

‘As I said before, I don’t need your commentary.’

‘Really? Are you enjoying the bruises you’re accumulating?’

‘Let’s just go again,’ Nebula snarled.

‘Look, I’m not your sister,’ Loki said. He tried to keep his frustration from seeping into his words, but failed. He had been bottling up his frustration for days already. ‘Whatever there is between the two of you, I don’t particularly care. I’m here because I thought we might help each other in training together, but if you’re not interested in what I have to say, you might as well go train with the dummy.’

Nebula drew back. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you, I’m frustrated with myself, that’s all.’

‘How about a water break?’ Loki said through gritted teeth.

Nebula nodded and strode off towards the door, where she slid to the floor beside her duffel bag.
Loki gulped down half the water he had brought with him, then after a hesitation, sat down on the floor next to Nebula.

‘Your training partner is not your enemy,’ he said. ‘My old sword-master used to say that sort of thing a lot. He believed training isn’t about beating your partner to a pulp; it’s about finding the weaknesses and working together to turn them into strengths.

‘Unfortunately, it took me way too long to understand what he meant. I was always competitive, desperate to win every single sparring bout and every single drill. My partners existed to be beaten, until no one wanted to train with me anymore. So I came to class determined to be the best and soon enough, I was the worst in our training group.’

‘You don’t seem so bad to me. Your cohort must’ve been something to behold,’ Nebula replied.

Loki flipped his half-empty water bottle, letting it spin twice in the air before he caught it. ‘My brother possesses so much natural talent, it’s maddening. The others, not so much. The difference was — my brother is a more generous person than I am and he wanted his friends to get better too, so he was free with his help. The others followed suit. Their training looked little different to children at play. They’d laugh, they’d try out all sorts of ridiculous moves and they’d throw out ideas on how to do something. Yet in what looked like nonsense, they learned what worked and what didn’t. And they also learned how to trust each other. Now that they are adults, they make a formidable team on the battlefield.’

‘But not you.’ Nebula rested her head against the wall and palpated the edge of a cybernetic implant in the side of her knee. ‘Can’t have been a pleasant experience to struggle with through those lessons and to be left out of their happy group.’

It discomforted Loki how much Nebula had guessed from the few scraps of detail Loki had shared from his childhood. But perhaps perceptiveness was a talent common in lonely children — those who watched from the sidelines saw more than those caught up in the furore of the action.

‘I made their life as miserable as my own,’ Loki said. ‘I had a foul temper when I lost and I learned other ways to victory. At least, with some maturity and perseverance, I did figure out some things on my own about how to win a fight.’

Nebula offered him a knowing smile, then sighed. ‘When it came to our lessons, it was never friendly between my sister and me. I can’t even think of a time when such a thing was suggested to us. Our trainers, our father always pitted us against each other.’

‘Well, I don’t see your sister here. Or your father. Or your trainers. So forget about them.’ Loki climbed to his feet and extended his hand out to Nebula. ‘Come on, we have work to do. That block won’t fix itself.’

A hand rested on Loki’s shoulder.

‘How do you fare, good man?’ Ebony Maw asked. His silky voice sent shivers up Loki’s spine. ‘So many new faces since I last walked along the tables of this hall. The Great Titan will be pleased how many pilgrims answer his call.’

Loki turned to face the Maw and peered up at the man’s cold eyes. ‘My companion and I are grateful for the Titan’s generosity in providing meals for visitors to his domain.’
‘The Great Titan is always generous.’ Ebony Maw’s nose flared slightly as if it offended him to even contemplate any alternative. ‘I will be at the Gathering tonight. Your companion and you will attend, won’t you?’

‘I wouldn’t dream of missing it.’

Ebony Maw smiled and withdrew his hand. He moved further down the long table, stopping to converse with anyone that caught his eye, but even once he had made all the way to the other end of the hall, Loki still felt the pressure of the Maw’s fingers on the skin of his shoulder. He had been ravenous when he walked into the mess hall, now the sight of his food sent his stomach protesting.

‘Who is he?’ Brunnhilde asked between bites of her own dinner. Although she continued eating, she kept one hand close to the knife strapped to her thigh. ‘He seems friendly.’

‘That’s Ebony Maw. He is the Titan’s first lieutenant,’ replied the woman sitting opposite Loki and Brunnhilde.

Brunnhilde nodded. ‘I’ve heard much about him. He’s not quite what I imagined.’

‘He’s supposed to spend most of his time by his master’s side,’ Loki said, doing his best to keep his tone casual. The woman opposite them was an Other — a rare specimen of her species. Only one out of every fifty-thousand Chitauri wasn’t wired into the Chitauri hive mind. Loki didn’t relish talking to one of her kind any more than he would have relished the company of Thanos himself. ‘If Ebony Maw is here, does that mean Thanos too is on Theta-Three?’

‘I’m not one to know such things,’ the Other answered.

Loki sighed and forced himself to return to his meal. He wasn’t hungry now, but he might well be by the time the evening was over. Ebony Maw’s love for the sound of his voice was second only to his love for Thanos himself. And distribution of food was tightly controlled in the Sanctuary. Loki and Brunnhilde had made numerous enquires — the Titan’s mess halls were the only sure way the common populace could acquire food.

By the time he finished his oily noodles and the unidentifiable protein supplement on his plate, the tables of the mess hall had emptied. The vast majority of those who had been in uniforms had left — this wasn’t their time. The Gatherings, as Thanos’ loyalists called them, catered specifically to the newcomers.

They took place daily. Loki had managed to skip a few, feigning ill-health or exhaustion, but he didn’t dare make it a habit. Informers and opportunists abounded in the Sanctuary. Someone was bound to take issue if he seemingly idled about, not participating in the usual rites of the pilgrims. And now that Ebony Maw had singled him out — there was absolutely no question of not attending. The Maw would notice his absence.

At some sign known only to him, Ebony Maw strode up to the raised stage at the far end of the hall and clapped his hands three times. ‘My friends, let us gather!’

He lifted the long tables and shifted them to the edges of the hall, leaving a large open space before the stage. The newcomers, nearly three dozen of them in all, gathered in a semi-circle before him. It was a motley crew. Some young and wrapped in rags, some carrying the scars of long experience and the wealth of more fortunate times in the lives. Loki found himself a place off to the side and in the second row. Brunnhilde remained by his right shoulder.

‘I rejoice,’ Ebony Maw said. Although he didn’t raise his voice, his words commanded the room.
'There are so many new faces before me today. So many have already heard the Great Titan’s call and with each new day, more answer.'

He clasped his hands together and walked down the steps in front of the stage. He seemed to make a survey of those gathered before him, before settling his gaze on one particularly ragged creature.

‘Agullo, are you not? You have travelled far to reach us. What drew you here?’

The Agullo, a foot shorter than Ebony Maw, took half a step back. ‘I-I disgraced my family and myself, only death might atone my sins. But it is said that those who are loyal to the Titan’s cause might yet find salvation.’

‘What you heard is true.’

‘How do I… I mean, I have nothing to offer other than myself,’ the Agullo said. Loki shifted an inch to the left so he could get a better look. He didn’t know much about Agullo physiology, but to Loki he looked very young. ‘I can work. I’ll work very hard…’

Ebony Maw cupped the Agullo’s cheek, then drew his hand up to the top of the Agullo’s head. ‘Do not fret. Here we are all Children of Thanos and with every step we make, the universe tips closer to balance. Your days of darkness and indignity lie behind you. Salvation will be yours.’

Beside Loki, Brunnhilde pursed her lips. Loki wondered if she too felt the crawl of Ebony Maw’s power through the room. It was subtle magic that whispered of hope, safety and comfort. Loki’s own magic, recognising an old foe, recoiled within him and energy pulsed through his body. Loki grit his teeth and forced his defences to quieten. He was too slow.

Ebony Maw’s eyes locked on Loki and he cocked his head as he spoke, ‘Some of you will have trepidations. It is only natural. I encourage you to surrender them and embrace the destiny that awaits you.’

Conscious that any reaction was likely to betray him, Loki forced himself to remain impassive, but his heart thumped. He could spin the finest lies in the entire history of the universe and it would change nothing. The contents of his mind could condemn them all.

I have to … I don’t even know what. There’s got to be some solution here.

After Ebony Maw had finished his preaching and dismissed his audience, neither Brunnhilde nor Loki were in the mood for conversation. They walked back to their hostel, then climbed the steep stairs up to the second floor in silence.

Brunnhilde threw open the door, revealing the disarray of their living area. Loki didn’t want to be known for having money to throw about, so he had chosen this small and rather dingy suite with a single bedroom. Brunnhilde slept on a mattress that folded down from the wall in the living area. As his bodyguard, she was his first line of defence against anything that might burst through the door.

She didn’t think it necessary to maintain her part of the suite to a presentable standard. Loki had initially made comment about it, but had surrendered on the issue in the past week. It wasn’t worth the argument and a small a part of him that had been steeped in courtly manners, did find their sleeping arrangements unpalatable. Charade or no, Thor would no doubt have surrendered the bedroom to the Valkyrie.
Loki’s sense of chivalry, on the other hand, didn’t extend past taking the cap off a bottle before he passed it to Brunnhilde.

She accepted it, but then simply held it in her hands and sighed. ‘This place is messed up.’

‘This is worse than my father suspected,’ Loki said. He stacked up Brunnhilde’s cast-off clothing until there was enough space on the lounge for him to sit. Still unnerved by Ebony Maw’s magicry, he searched for something more palatable to focus on. ‘Did you learn anything useful today?’

‘While I learned a great deal about the factories, I’m not sure how useful that knowledge is. There is a great deal being constructed — ships, artillery, armour, weapons, but nothing points to a particular strategy or target.’

The question of what Thanos’ next target of attack would be had consumed Brunnhilde’s thoughts in recent days. The preparations were impossible to miss, but no one seemed to know their purpose. For Loki, that question was unimportant — as long as Thanos lived, all inhabited planets were under threat, but he let Brunnhilde burrow further into this tangent in hope that she would strike upon something useful to Loki as well.

‘This mission might take longer than five weeks,’ Loki said.

‘So I surmised.’

‘I’ll compensate you fairly once we are done here and return to Sakaar.’

Brunnhilde nodded, seemingly hardly registering his words, then asked, ‘How goes your training?’

_I haven’t had so many bruises on me since that green beast on Midgard._

‘Tiring,’ Loki answered. ‘I haven’t trained so many hours a day or for so many days in a row in a very long time.’

‘And the princess?’

Loki rolled his shoulders, trying to loosen the muscles. ‘She’s no princess.’

‘As good as.’ Brunnhilde took a swig from the bottle. ‘Have you slept with her yet?’

A sexual relationship with Nebula had been his first thought. That was far from his preferred strategy to obtain what he wanted, but there were times when such measures were necessary. Nebula wasn’t one of these, however. The longer he spent around her, the clearer it became.

‘She needs a friend, more than anything else,’ Loki replied. ‘I can be that friend.’

Brunnhilde cast him an incredulous look.

**Chapter End Notes**

The training scene ended up being the most autobiographical piece of fanfiction I’ve ever written. My bad if it comes across as self-indulgent
‘Have you ever had a Luthomoi critter?’ Nebula asked, tapping her thumbs against the labelless box in her lap.

‘Can’t say I have,’ Loki replied. His eyebrows drew up as Nebula peeled off the lid and revealed about half a dozen crimson coloured critters floating in brine. Despite their spectacular colour, Loki found it hard to embrace Nebula’s excitement. Food shouldn’t have both coarse hair and so many legs. ‘They aren’t sentient, are they?’

‘Who do you take me for?’ Nebular replied. ‘Here, watch me.’

She grabbed one of the critters and deftly pulled off the tail, then peeled off the shell, taking the critter’s legs and hair with it. She purred the leftover fleshy bits into her mouth and bit off about a quarter. A child-like smile spread over her face and she motioned for Loki to try a critter himself. His work wasn’t half as speedy or neat, but he did manage to extract the fleshy insides. When he tasted it, however, he nearly spat it back out from sheer surprise. He had anticipated something akin to a crawfish or a prawn. This thing was as sweet as honey.

‘It’s very… edible,’ he muttered and worked his way through the rest of the critter. Nebula had brought up the idea of having their midday meal together up on the rooftop of the rehab complex. More humbling yet, she had shared a delicacy from her home-world with him. He didn’t want to appear ungrateful.

Nebula scoffed down her second critter with relish and peering up at the violet sky dotted with asteroids, she said, ‘I wish I remembered the proper name for them. The traders call them Luthomoi critters. That’s definitely not the term my mother used.’

‘Have you ever been back there?’ Loki asked.

‘No.’

‘Probably the smart choice. It’s best to look forward, not back.’

Nebula considered his words for a moment before she spoke. ‘Sometimes it’s not a matter of choice.’ She hesitated, then when on. ‘What about you? Are you following your own advice?’

‘In regards to?’

‘Have you thought of what you want to do here long-term? I can speak to my father on your behalf. He is always in need of intelligent men to take command. Or you can become a combat instructor. You’d be good at it.’

Loki reached for his water bottle; the sickening sweetness of the critter lingered in his mouth. ‘You think so?’

‘You’ve taught me a few things, between the snarky remarks.’

‘The snarky remarks are why you like having me around,’ he replied.

Loki’s heartbeat quickened as he considered the offer. He had sought Nebula out in order to get to Thanos. Now that the opening he had sought lay open before him, he longed to flee back to Asgard and bury himself in the minutia of royal governance. And, perhaps, it would be too suspicious to
jump on Nebula’s offer. Or he was being a fool. He pretended to be a lost man searching for a purpose in life — Nebula’s offer was a chance of a lifetime for a person like that.

He hedged his bets.

‘I’ve been here for three weeks now,’ he said. ‘Still, I don’t think I understand your father is trying to do.’

‘It’s not that complicated. He wants peace in the universe.’

Loki sighed. ‘So I heard. That’s what drew me out here. Except nothing here looks like peace. You, your sister, everyone practises their combat skills endlessly. In the outer areas, they seem to be producing armour, artillery and transport ships. This is not peace. These are preparations for a military campaign.’

‘Sometimes, to assure peace you need to prepare for war.’ Nebula pulled another critter out of the brine and peeled it. ‘Titan, my father’s home planet, is a wreck. He warned the leaders of his people of approaching disaster, but they refused to listen. They exiled him, fought a civil war between themselves and in the end, destroyed everything. He doesn’t want the same fate to befall other worlds.’

‘So he conquered your planet and your sister’s and however many others. And how many yet remain? The universe is too large a place for any one man to conquer.’

‘If we take enough planets, the rest will see it is better to accept to the inevitable and surrender to my father’s will.’

‘That’ll still take a lifetime, many lifetimes,’ Loki said. He reached to take another critter, but then thought better of it. He ran his fingers over the tribal markings on his forehead. ‘I came here in hope of escaping war. I was born in the middle of a war and was left to die when my parents thought victory was more important than their child. The enemy found me, took me and brought me up hating my birth kin. Once my true identity was discovered, the people I grew up among turned on me. And the fighting continues, despite the centuries that have passed since the wars began, and I’m stranded right in the middle of it.’

Nebula was silent for a long moment, before she said, ‘Why did your family take you in if they dislike your kind?’

‘Why did Thanos take you?’ Loki replied. ‘Both your father and mine believe they live to do great and just deeds. Perhaps once in a while, when they stand knee-deep in enemy blood, that conviction wavers and they have to convince themselves they are not monsters.’

‘My father is not a monster,’ Nebula said so sharply Loki nearly winced.

He had been too provocative there. He knew Nebula had turned on her father eventually, but in all the time they had spent together over the past weeks, he had caught no evidence she doubted her father’s cause at this point in the timeline.

‘It’s only a thought. What am I to know? I’ve never met your father,’ he back-peddled.

‘That’s right. My father orders people to be killed only when he must and unlike some, he doesn’t relish it. And he’s seeking a way to avoid further conflict.’

‘How would he do that?’
‘I don’t know the details,’ Nebula quickly replied. Too quickly. Loki had picked up the obvious after two days of knowing her — Nebula was a poor liar.

Would it be too suspicious to press the question?

Probably.

‘Whatever it is,’ Loki said. ‘I hope your father finds it. This universe is overrun with war and death.’

A shadow fell over them. When Loki looked around, he realised that one of the larger asteroids had drifted overhead, obscuring the edge of the dwarf star that gave tepid light to the Chitauri System. Soon it would obscure the star altogether, plunging Theta-Three into a brief darkness.

‘I can’t quite get used to the days here,’ he said. ‘Sunset three times a day and a sunrise twice a night. Never mind the eclipses.’

‘The sky here has its own beauty. So many pinks and violets.’

‘Sure, though I think I like blue better.’

Nebula chuckled, but her good mood seemed to sour a moment later. ‘I ought to warn you. I may not be around to train with you tomorrow. My sister is due to return tonight. Father will probably want us to spend time together and I seldom come out well after such days.’

These news actually suited Loki just fine. Brunnhilde wanted his help on a scouting mission she had planned for the evening and he had a feeling it would turn into a whole night affair. Chances were, he wouldn’t be at his best come morning.

He nodded, but his curiosity got the better of him. After a momentary pause, he shifted his body so that he faced Nebula. ‘When you say you don’t come out well, what does that mean? Is your father —’

‘My father? No. My sister and I spar. Sometimes upgrades have to be made.’

‘Upgrades?’

Nebula gestured vaguely over her body and Loki found himself grimacing. When one looked, it wasn’t obvious where Nebula’s real skin ended and the synthetics began. But Loki had felt the difference when they grappled and worked on hand-to-hand combat. He would have been surprised if more than a quarter of her body remained organic.

‘I’d assumed you were in some horrid accident and this was a life-saving measure,’ he said.

‘No. Only proof of my natural inadequacy.’

Your father is an abomination.

‘You’ll show your family what you’re worth,’ Loki replied. ‘Perhaps sooner than you think.’

‘Are you a prophet now, Baugi?’ Nebula scoffed.

‘No. I’ve just seen you fight.’

Nebula muttered something under her breath, then fished another critter out of the brine. Loki reached for one himself. Thanos had done a thorough job on Luthom; they might as well relish what little remained.
'Are you sure you need me for this?' Loki said once he heard out Brunnhilde’s plan for their night in full. ‘This sounds like a one-person job.’

‘It’s doable without help, but I’d rather have someone watch my back,’ she answered.

As they walked down the street, Brunnhilde’s gaze never settled on a spot. The Chitauri marching by, the open doorways, the water trickling into the drain — she took in as quickly as Loki did. *Never be complacent enough to believe the enemy doesn’t know you’re coming.* It struck Loki that although he had been raised and educated in a different millennium to Brunnhilde, many of their lessons had to have been the same.

And now that he has questioned the plan, he waited for the predictable Asgardian response: a line questioning his courage and a quip about his lack of manliness. Even Sif — no, Sif more often than anyone else — has revelled in those moments.

‘You’re paying for me to be here,’ Brunnhilde said. ‘I presume you don’t want me to become a person of interest to Thanos’ men.’

Swallowing his surprise, Loki chuckled. ‘It would be an irritating complication to my day.’

‘I’m glad we are clear on the bounds of our relationship.’

A couple of blocks down, Brunnhilde pointed to an alleyway to their right. Reeking of rotting vegetables and potted with disintegrating pavement, the narrow space was a rare departure from the orderly conditions of the heart of Sanctuary City. It was also a shortcut to the back wall of the Palisade — the sprawling complex where Thanos’ centre of operations resided.

The alleyway ended on a desolate patch of land, bounded by the twelve-foot-high wall on one side and a clump of derelict buildings on the other. A fire had swept through the area some months ago, but the reconstruction works hadn’t yet begun. As a result, there were few people about and the Thanos’ men paid little attention to the area. Brunnhilde believed this was their best entryway to Thanos’ inner lair.

‘Shit,’ Brunnhilde muttered. ‘Bad timing.’

The guards patrolling the perimeter weren’t quite here, but they were on their way. Their heavy uniforms didn’t permit them the luxury of quiet movement, so their approach was no surprise. Loki started to retreat to the safety of the alleyway. Brunnhilde pulled him towards her and pressed her mouth over his.

Her lips were chapped and her grip on him not at all gentle. In another moment — when the stench from the alleyway didn’t threaten to overwhelm his senses and there weren’t four of Thanos’ soldiers heading in their directions — he might have been eager to respond. But not like this. Nothing about this was romantic or a turn on.

Loki met Brunnhilde’s tongue with his own, then wrapped his hands around her and pulled her with him, positioning her so her back was flat against the derelict building. Brunnhilde pressed still closer to him. Her hand trailed down along his hip, then ventured further down. Loki’s breath caught as her thumb slid between his legs.

He pulled his head back as much as he could. ‘Didn’t think you were—’
'I can be versatile,' Brunnhilde whispered into his ear and before he knew it, her tongue traced the line of his jaw.

He shuddered.

Loki nudged her chin back up and drew her into a kiss. A real kiss this time, not the half-hearted one Brunnhilde had endured from him earlier. All too quickly, however, she drew back and rested her head on his shoulder.

‘They’re gone.’

‘That was rather more than necessary,’ Loki replied.

‘It had to look real. I didn’t offend your princely sensibilities, did I?’ Brunnhilde pulled his hand away from her buttocks, which was somewhat of a surprise for Loki. He hadn’t made any conscious decisions about the placement of his limbs. ‘Let’s go.’

Loki cleared his throat as he followed Brunnhilde to the base of the wall. The neighbouring houses stood too far away to jump across nor were there any trees in the vicinity they could climb, so Brunnhilde had made sure to bring a rope. She had done this type of thing before — the hook on the end found its target on first attempt.

‘Go first,’ Loki said. ‘I’m just here to watch your back, right?’

Brunnhilde didn’t contradict him. And he was glad that by the time she reached the top and climbed over to the other side the discomforting tenderness in his nether regions had receded. He climbed up, then jumped off, taking the rope with him.

He found himself in a sad imitation of a garden. An asteroid belt was a poor place for vegetation. What yet lived, were mostly twisted branches and spikes. Brunnhilde had made a prior excursion here so she confidently led him to the top of a segregated pavilion. From there, if one craned one’s neck, one could see the guards stationed by the back of the Palisade’s main building.

Loki made himself as comfortable as possible on the little exterior platform they were to occupy while they waited. Brunnhilde took up a spot opposite him.

‘To be clear — what happened, it’s not an invitation,’ she said.

‘Understood.’

‘I hope your princess isn’t expecting you too early tomorrow. We’ll be here a while yet.’

‘In fact, we are in luck.’ Loki cocked his head until he could see the guards; they didn’t look like they would be going anywhere any time soon. ‘She told me not to expect her. Nebula’s delightful family is likely to keep her occupied tonight and it’ll probably not end well.’

‘Poor girl.’

‘Yes. She doesn’t deserve to be her father’s daughter.’

Brunnhilde choked down a laugh. ‘Careful there. I’ve heard the bards tell this tale before. The young hero enters the enemy keep on a secret quest to kill the evil king, but soon enough he and the king’s innocent daughter are smitten with each other. It always ends in tears. Sooner or later, she must choose between her father and the young hero.’
‘I’m not a hero and she’s not a princess and this is not the lurid fantasy of a dim-witted bard. Besides, what do you care about what happens to her?’

‘I don’t,’ Brunnhilde replied, ‘but I think you are starting to.’

Loki offered her a non-committal grunt in reply. Brunnhilde had never so much as caught a glimpse of Nebula, let alone conversed with her. Everything she had to say on the subject of Nebula was derived from fantasy.

Minutes bled one into another. Someone shouted intermittently in the distance and asteroids flashed by above them. Loki pondered his memories, picking out which were safe to give up and which had to stay privy only to him at all costs. Soon the purple hues of the day’s last sunset faded, sinking Theta-Three fully into darkness.

‘Tell me about Asgard,’ Brunnhilde said. Her voice was a notch above a whisper, but after the long quiet, it seemed far too loud.

‘What do you want to know?’ Loki replied, abandoning the previous trail of his thoughts.

‘What happened to Hela?’

_Oh Norns. Is Thanos not enough to deal with?_

Loki made the effort to keep his voice light. ‘Who?’

‘Your older half-sister.’

‘Ah, her.’ Loki was glad for their dim surroundings as he searched for a reply. His expression was sure to give away more than he would have wanted to. ‘I don’t know. Father isn’t fond of discussing her. Wait, was Hela the reason you left?’

‘It’s generous for you to say I “left”. For all you know, I could be a heinous criminal banished from Asgard for the rest of my life.’

Loki paved his way through life with lies and deflections. He had no trouble recognising one when he heard it. He could sympathise too. From what little he had seen in Brunnhilde’s mind when he had made use of the skills he had learned in Thanos’ service and awakened the memories Brunnhilde had been determined to bury, the instinct to flinch away from the past was understandable. But Loki’s sense of empathy didn’t run deep as deep as his itch to satisfy his curiosity. The memory he had dredged up back then had been only a fragment of the story.

What was your crime then?’ he asked, none too gently. ‘Did you kill my half-sister?’

‘If only I had.’

‘Really? You sure? You know, there was a story I read once. A princess and her loyal guard fall in love. They go through all sorts of trials and tribulations, but they remain strong together. Then, one fateful day, treachery befalls the princess and she loses her mind. In her last moments of clarity, however, she begs the guard to kill her rather than let her live like this. The guard fulfils her love’s last wish, but —’

‘Just shut up for a change, Odinson,’ Brunnhilde hissed.

‘No romance involved then?’
Brunnhilde scoffed, but Loki let the silence linger between them. That was an easy way of getting information out of a person — the longer silence reigned, the stronger the compulsion to fill the empty air between them. Brunnhilde didn’t disappoint. After about a minute, she sighed.

‘When your father sent us after Hela,’ she said, ‘she cut us down like we were children with wooden swords. I survived only because one of my fellow Valkyries protected me. At the cost of her own life, as it turned out.’

Loki sucked on the edge of his lip. ‘So that’s how it happened. The Valkyries featured in many stories my brother and I heard when were little. You were the personification of Asgardian virtues. I think my brother wanted to be a Valkyrie when he grew up, at least, until he realised all of you’d been women.

‘I did find it odd that there were no more Valkyries around, but when I questioned it, I was told that Asgard no longer needed the Valkyries. That they were allowed to disband and live out the rest of their lives in peace. Not all heroic tales end at the doors to Valhalla — that’s the way it was put to me.’

Brunnhilde muttered something, then spoke more clearly, ‘We were always prepared for death, just not like that. There’s no honour in a civil war.’

‘It may be the frost giant in me talking, but I’d take my life over my honour any day.’ Loki snuck another look at the guards by the main building and beckoned Brunnhilde over. ‘Why are there more of them down there now?’

‘That’s not right,’ she said as she checked the time. ‘It’s not a shift change; it’s too early for that. Looks like they’ve doubled the guard. Do you think they know we —’

‘If they did, they’d be actively searching the grounds for us.’

‘They are on alert about something. I’ve been watching their movements long enough to know their standard procedures.’

Loki shook his head. ‘Something’s happened down there. We need to get out of here.’

‘Come on,’ Brunnhilde replied, ‘we can take them down. In fact, I can take them on by myself.’

Beams of light ran through the garden and over the top of the main building. When Loki glanced up, his eyes watered at the intensity of the light emanating from the approaching ship. It was easily the largest ship Loki had seen since he had left Sakaar, but it moved quickly, the pilot confident in his skills. As it drew closer, Loki understood why. The ship was a refurbished Halla-class frigate and equipped with shields capable of shattering any asteroid or ship that drifted into its path.

Loki swallowed the bile in his throat. ‘Thanos is here.’
Loki of Jotunheim

It was a near thing, but Loki and Brunnhilde did manage to backtrack out of the Palisade without being caught. The next day, as Nebula had predicted, she wasn’t in the training hall when Loki arrived. He worked on his own, using the opportunity to add magic into the mix as he did so. This morning too, Nebula failed to show up. In an effort to turn his mind away from his worry, Loki ventured out to the more popular halls in the rehabilitation complex. He found plenty of sparring partners, but no one well-enough connected to be worth cultivating a deeper relationship with.

When he returned to the hostel, sweaty, sore and eager for conversation that didn’t focus on the three most efficient ways to kill a Plodex, he was once again disappointed. Two empty bottles stood on the table, another lay on the floor by the lounge. Clothes seemed to be placed strategically to cover as much surface area as possible. Brunnhilde was nowhere to be seen.

Loki moved deeper into the suite. She had spent the night on a new attempt to get into the Palisade and break into the Sanctuary’s computer systems. This attempt hadn’t been any more successful than their first; the increased security was problematic. It was a time-consuming and tiring activity nevertheless. He hadn’t expected Brunnhilde would be in the mood to do much work today. Sure enough, he found her sprawled across his bed.

Rolling his eyes, Loki threw his blanket over her and retreated to the lounge room. He cleared up the worst of the mess, then took out the notes Brunnhilde had pulled together over the past weeks. There was so much detail Loki was sure something significant could be extrapolated from the sheer mass of data. They could use the information. Thanos, Ebony Maw and Loki had spent long days planning the invasion of Midgard, but Thanos hadn’t discussed his broader strategic approach in those meetings. Loki knew little more than Brunnhilde did.

‘It might be I’ll have to sit through those meetings again,’ Loki muttered. ‘What joy.’

Thinking back to those long days, he remembered the errors as much as the exhaustion. They had approached Midgard like it was a clump of dirt barely worth an invasion. At the time Thanos had been unaware of the time stone’s location, Midgard didn’t have any resources of interest and Midgard’s technological capabilities were in their nascent stages. If Odin hadn’t hidden the Tesseract there, Thanos wouldn’t have had any cause back then to turn his eye towards Midgard at all. As it was, Thanos had been reluctant to commit his more formidable units to the endeavour.

Would that day have ended differently if I’d had more competent ground troops?

If the matter had been less serious, Loki would have laughed at his youthful folly. He had sold every piece of knowledge his mind held in exchange for the promise he would be king of the Nine Realms when all was done. But Loki had ruled these same realms and without Thanos’ help to secure the throne. He had ruled when the realms were still full of vitality, not the withered husks that remained in Thanos’ wake. And, well, the sum of those years solidified the thought he had always carried in the back of his mind, but had been too immature to articulate adequately — he didn’t want to be king. He sought something less tangible than a throne.

Loki flipped through what had initially been his notebook and had now become Brunnhilde’s. Neat diagrams and meticulous notes in an Asgardian code as old as Odin himself filled the pages. He slammed the book shut, suddenly tired of obsessing about the past and fretting about the future.

What Thanos knew of Midgard, he learned from me. It’s my fault I underestimated the defence Midgardians would put up.
There was a knock on the door.

Loki slipped the notebook into a pile of Brunnhilde’s belongings and cautiously moved towards the door. There were no translucent panels or a peephole, nor was the hostel expensive enough to have any kind of intercom system. This hadn’t bothered Loki back when he’d chosen their accommodation; he had assumed that any adversary would show themselves in. It bothered him now. A lot.

He nudged the button; the door slid open two inches.

_Gamora._

Save for the not quite scabbed-over cut over her left eyebrow, she looked exactly as Loki remembered her. Superficially, at least. He had never seen her face twisted in such an expression of distaste. And she wasn’t usually flanked by two eight-foot-tall thugs.

‘Good afternoon,’ Loki said as he opened the door fully. ‘If you’re looking for old man Jucko’s birthday party, that’s a floor up.’

‘Baugi, is it?’ Gamora replied.

‘And you are?’

She smiled, revealing a chipped tooth. ‘Gamora. Thanos wished to speak to you.’

‘Ah. You’d best come in, I think. Pardon the disorder.’

Loki turned away and drew back into the suite, not giving Gamora the opportunity to disagree. She ordered the two thugs to wait outside, for which Loki was grateful. He couldn’t pinpoint their exact species, but they looked similar to Outriders, so were likely a cousin species. Neither the Chitauri nor the Outriders were known for their manners; Loki doubted these two would prove better.

‘You have my gratitude for delivering these news personally,’ Loki said once Gamora made her survey of the lounge room and clearly found him wanting. ‘When does he wish to have this audience? Is there an etiquette when it comes to dress? There are so many species here, I never quite know what’s appropriate.’

‘Now is when he wants to see you. An hour ago would’ve been better, but now will have to do. Your dress is irrelevant.’

That didn’t surprise Loki, but he thought this titbit of information would provoke a reaction in the persona he had adopted around Nebula over the past weeks. He raised his eyebrows. ‘Why the urgency?’

‘My sister, Nebula… You’ve met her, right? She has more than enough to say about you. Our father’s curious to see if reality will match her tales.’

The broken tooth, the cut on the eyebrow, the sour mood. Loki smiled. Nebula must have prevailed for a change.

‘You don’t seem much impressed by what you’ve found here,’ he said. Before Gamora could respond, he went on, ‘Please allow a minute for my guard to get ready. Guard!’ He waited several seconds, but there were no signs of life from his bedroom. ‘For pity’s sake… Brunnhilde!’

Gamora crossed her arms. ‘Why would a man like you —’
'Loki, why the hell did you wake me up?' Brunnhilde called out, then half-staggered out of his bedroom. At the sight of Gamora, she straightened up ‘What’s going on?’

_Effort of the century, Valkyrie. Give up the game thirty seconds in, why don’t you?_

‘Hurry up and make yourself ready. The Great Titan wishes a word with me.’

‘Let’s save your… bodyguard the trouble,’ Gamora offered Brunnhilde a condescending look. ‘My father is a generous host. He won’t tolerate his guests being mistreated. You can be certain, my two companions and I can assure your safety.’

Loki bit into his lip. It wasn’t that he believed Brunnhilde would be able to help him in any way. If anything she would be a handicap to have around for this meeting. But the idea of being in Thanos’ presence once more sent cold shivers up his back and he struggled to keep his thoughts straight.

‘Your father’s generosity is unparalleled, Gamora,’ he replied after a long pause. ‘We shouldn’t keep him waiting.’

At the entrance to the Palisade, Gamora turned to Loki. ‘Is it just Baugi or do you have other names you go by? I can’t say I’m familiar with the customs of your home planet.’

‘There are other names, but none I care to be known by,’ Loki replied.

Whether the question was part of an administrative procedure required upon entry to the Palisade or Gamora merely fished for information, he couldn’t care less. The outer wall of the complex stood behind them and the heavy main gate groaned shut; it took every ounce of self-control he possessed to keep his discomfort from becoming evident. The anticipation and the dark, insuppressible flights of his imagination that tied his innards into knots.

‘If you pardon my curiosity, what happened to you? I can’t help noticing the cut above the eyebrow,’ he said in a half-hearted effort to turn his mind to a less agitating topic.

‘A lucky strike,’ she replied. ‘Nothing more.’

At the sight of Gamora, the Palisade security personnel waved them through. Loki glanced every which way as they moved through the ground floor, taking stock of their path, the rooms they passed and the side-corridors branching out deeper into the complex. The overall architecture was familiar — the dull grey wall-panels, the whir of the climate control system, the rubbery floor. Loki had walked through these areas before, but they hadn’t left a lasting impression on his memory. When he thought back to the entrance to the Palisade, the sole vivid memory was his unceremonious initial arrival through one of the service entrances — prisoners didn’t merit anything more.

*It had to have been someone’s job to clean up the dribbles of blood my passage had left behind.*

They took a lift up to the third floor, which caught Loki by surprise. There were large spaces on the first floor that were especially constructed to convey the full might of Thanos’ power. The third floor was predominantly dominated by private quarters. To Loki’s mild relief, Gamora didn’t take him straight to her father’s personal chambers, but out to the wide balcony that offered excellent views of the asteroid’s many sunrises.

‘Father,’ Gamora called, ‘I fetched him for you.’
There were half a dozen people out on the balcony. Loki recognised Ebony Maw and Proxima Midnight, but the rest were unknown. Judging by their clothing and the datapads in their hands, they were likely Ebony Maw’s flunkies. Loki wasn’t an idiot enough to dismiss their importance entirely, but there were more critical things presently. Namely, the massive chair suspended half a foot off the floor. Its occupant slowly turned towards Loki and Gamora.

‘Welcome to the Palisade, Baugi,’ Thanos said.

His voice tore all heat from Loki’s body. The familiarity of this moment — the gleam of Thanos’ golden armour as it caught the light, the hiss of thrusters in the base of the chair, Ebony Maw’s lopsided smile. Loki’s throat had gone dry. He could only stare.

Thanos slid his chair a few feet forward. ‘Is your species incapable of speech?’

Loki cleared his throat, which didn’t alleviate the painful dryness, but it offered him one more moment to prepare himself. He smiled self-consciously. ‘I beg your pardon. Your reputation is formidable, I was… rather at a loss for words for a moment. If I might add, I am honoured by your interest in me, although I am not quite clear on the reason.’

‘I wanted to meet you.’ Thanos’ gaze trailed past Loki. ‘Gamora, now that you’ve returned, go and get yourself cleaned up. Proxima, we will discuss the remaining details later when Corvus can add his thoughts. The rest of you have no business being here either. Out.’

If Gamora and Proxima felt themselves chastised by their master’s diktats, neither showed it as they withdrew. The others, however, scattered like ants under the shadow of a boot. Only Ebony Maw remained, rooted to the spot where he stood. Loki understood the unspoken message Thanos wanted to convey — nothing Loki could do would be a threat to Thanos.

‘Is there something you wanted with me, my lord?’ Loki asked.

‘You’re rather impatient. Do you have somewhere to be?’ At the shake of Loki’s head, Thanos slid his fingers along the armrest of his chair. ‘Tell me about yourself. What paths led you to become my guest? I admit, I can’t quite pinpoint your planet of origin.’

‘I’m a Jotunn. As a species, we are called the Jotnar and Jotunheim is our home planet. There’s no reason for you to have heard of it. It’s a miserable place populated by a species struggling to survive when the climate of their home-world would drive them to extinction.’

Loki paused there to gauge Thanos’ response. He had anticipated this question would be asked. Both on Sakaar and in the Sanctuary his obscure origins inspired curiosity. While among the learned, Odin’s name did resonate, the realms he had subjugated were little more than footnotes in the histories of the universe.

‘There’s no world out there that doesn’t have something of merit,’ Thanos said, then motioned to the sprawl of Sanctuary City over the balcony banister. ‘You see what can be done with as an unpromising a base as an asteroid field.’

Loki ignored the opening for flattery and said, ‘Perhaps once, but the golden ages of Jotunheim ended thousands of years ago. I don’t believe they can be restored. In part, that’s why I left — there seemed to be more promise out in the stars than in the caves where my kin are forced to reside.’

‘The hopeful dreams of youth. They afflict us all at one time or another,’ Ebony Maw replied, drawing a chuckle from Thanos.

Loki threw up the protections around his mind lest Ebony Maw attempt his magic on him, but felt no
sign of intrusion. Careful to remain aware of the Maw’s actions, Loki went on. ‘Perhaps then you’ll also be familiar with the disappointment that follows. The universe is a place for liars, maniacs and murderers. A shank to the back is how most would solve their problems. At least, that was the conclusion I came to before I heard tales about the Great Titan and what he sought to achieve. I, like so many others, came in hope that these tales are true.’

‘What am I seeking to achieve exactly?’

‘Peace, isn’t it?’ Loki frowned and sank his gaze to the ground at his feet. ‘An end to the wars and the deprivations. I’ve seen my kin suffering. The solutions they’d take only do more harm. How many worlds are there like that? If there’s a way to end it all, I… I think it’s the only thing worth dying for.’

One corner of Thanos’ lip crept up. ‘You are young. I can see why Nebula has developed a fondness for you.’

‘If my answers are not to your satisfaction, I beg your pardon.’

‘Stop apologising. An apology is nothing more than an attempt to justify your failures. As long as you do as you are tasked to do and get results, there’s no reason to ever utter one.’

Loki flinched. He started, but then caught himself before he could mutter another apology.

‘I’ll keep your sage words in mind, my lord,’ he said.

‘Be sure that you do,’ Thanos replied. He brought his hands together and cracked his knuckles, which brought to Loki’s mind the terrified face of an Einherjari soldier whose spine Thanos had snapped with his bare hands. ‘I have a squad of men in dire need of quality instruction. You have three months to make something of them. You’ll be given private quarters in the inner sector and a stipend for any outstanding material needs. How does that prospect sound?’

‘I didn’t realise this was a job interview.’

‘Did you think this was a social call?’

Loki raised an eyebrow. ‘I expected I would have to demonstrate my skills first.’

‘You come with glowing recommendations from a source I trust.’

There was nothing light-hearted about that last remark. Most would’ve missed it, but Loki was familiar enough with Thanos’ thinking to recognise the threat. He accepted in good faith that Loki had the skills to carry out the task he had been chosen for. If this proved not to be the case, painful punishment awaited not only him, but Nebula as well.

‘I won’t disappoint you,’ Loki replied.

He could only hope neither Thanos nor Ebony Maw noticed his forced smile. He had wanted an opening into Thanos’ inner circle and now he had found the path in, but this felt like an act of self-flagellation than the road to victory.

Thanos nodded as if the answer Loki had given him was the only possible response, and perhaps in his mind it was, then rose from his chair. Loki fought the instinct to scramble back. Worse yet, Thanos beckoned him over.

‘Ebony, would you make the arrangements?’ he said. ‘Come, Baugi, no need to look so
apprehensive. This is a new leaf in the story of your life, you ought to embrace it.’

Loki listened to Ebony Maw’s footsteps as the man hurried inside. Even the Great Titan’s favourites didn’t dally when given an order.

‘Is Nebula well?’ Loki asked. Thanos had retreated to the balcony parapet and Loki reluctantly moved to stand beside him. ‘I haven’t seen her in two days.’

‘She’s well indeed,’ came the reply, carrying more fondness than Loki had ever heard from Thanos when Nebula’s name crept up in a conversation.

Before either of them could say anything more, Ebony Maw strode back out to the balcony, this time with a massive sceptre in his hands. The Maw was no small man, but it was ludicrously long in his hands. It had been even more unwieldy for Loki, which had led to the decision to create a more fitting design for him.

Loki had spent many hours contemplating how this moment would eventuate and he had expected to be terrified, but now he found only resignation. Thanos possessed the sceptre, Thanos had no cause not to use it. There was no fleeing from inevitability.

‘What is this?’ he asked as Thanos took the sceptre from Ebony Maw. In his hands, its length and girth seemed perfectly appropriate. ‘Is this a test?’

‘You could call it that,’ Thanos responded. He tilted his head to the side and there was something apologetic in his expression. Nevertheless, he cupped Loki’s chin, then pressed his thumb into Loki’s temple. ‘This won’t be comfortable for you.’

Waters roil far beneath the rainbow bridge. Two ravens let the winds carry them up high, then swoop down, croaking to one other. In the distance, Asgard stands silent. Her towers glisten in the rose-tinted washes of the rising sun, inviting Loki to return and enjoy the comfort of home a little longer.

‘A wise king never seeks out war, but he must always be ready for it.’

Thor and Loki walk beside their father, excited to have the rare chance to enjoy their father’s undivided attention. They pass one treasure after another: a flame that does not extinguish, a hammer no common man can lift, a gauntlet that seems too large even for Loki’s father to wear, a casket bursting with cold light.

‘Only one of you can ascend to the throne,’ Odin proclaims, ‘but both of you were born to be kings.’

‘Jotunheim needed your mother’s skills. A child would have drawn too much of her energy and time, so a sacrifice had to be made. Loki.’ Laufey’s words take on an odd undertone. ‘I am a king, it is the king’s duty to put his people before himself.’

A thunderclap parts the dark clouds. Laufey jerks back, but the light of the Bifrost doesn’t descend upon Loki or Thor. Heimdall guides it to a narrow valley just past the edge of Utgard.

The ground beneath them begins to shake. With every passing second, the full force of the Bifrost
shifts closer to the city. Already, clouds of frothing dirt have swallowed the snowflakes and the wind now carries dark dust. Loki gulps down a breath.

‘I’d not trouble yourself overly much about the bodies, your highness. After all, no matter the method we use to be rid of them, it’ll never match what their own families would’ve done.’

‘Pardon?’

‘I think it was Isinger the Blind who spoke of it.’ The guard’s cheeks flush. ‘But other chronicles too. They feed the dead to their children.’

‘Can’t say there’s much meat on any of you anyway,’ Loki mutters under his breath as he inspects the bodies.

‘All this because Loki desires a throne.’

Chains clang. Manacles wear down the skin on Loki’s wrists. ‘It was my birthright.’

‘Your birthright was to die!’ Odin leans forward, but he keeps his temper in check, which feels like a slight in itself. ‘As a child, cast out onto a frozen rock. If I had not taken you in, you would not be here now to hate me.’
Loki of Asgard

‘What are you his nurse now?’

‘One more word and I’ll knock out what’s left of your front teeth,’ came the reply.

A laugh.

‘It’s cute, really,’ the first speaker said in a condescending tone.

A rhythmic clang of metal. The hiss of a door sliding aside. Fading footsteps. One set of footsteps only.

Cognisant that there had been two people in the vicinity, Loki was careful to avoid moving. Whoever had remained behind didn’t need to know he was awake just yet. Covertly, he tried to make sense of the situation. He lay on a stiff mattress, his heels resting on the edge. Thick fabric was draped over him. He longed to pull it off. It was as if he was bathed in heat and wherever the material touched his exposed skin, it left him itching. Coupled with the disinfectant-permeated air, he surmised he was in a medical facility.

As to the reason he was here, the clues were less than satisfactory. His head was a well of misery, everything inside his skull seemed inflamed and throbbing. The rest of his body ached in a more sedate manner. But these pains were the outcomes of whatever had transpired, not the causes.

Loki made a count of his limbs. Four. No obvious traumatic injuries either.

Not liking where this was going, Loki reached for his magic. A hundred needles bore into his skin. He gasped and jerked away to the comfort of the material world.

‘Loki?’ Nebula asked. ‘Can you hear me?’

He sucked in a breath and with a groan, opened his eyes. He didn’t see her in the initial blur, but once his eyes stopped watering and the floaters in the field of his vision lost their over-whelming gleam, he found her leaning against a wide set of cabinets at the back of the room.

Loki pulled the stifling blankets off him and paused. That single gesture alone seemed to cost him the bulk of the energy he possessed. ‘Nebula, could you fill me in on what’s happened for me to end up here?’

She cocked her head, then straightened up and moved a few feet closer until she was by his bed, but not so close as to suggest any sort of intimacy between them.

‘Do you remember meeting my father?’ she said. At Loki’s nod, she went on, ‘He wanted to verify your story. Do you remember that? Well, you reacted badly to the method he used. You collapsed a minute after. It’s been about ten hours since.’

Loki suppressed the urge to dig through the memories of the previous day and check Nebula’s story. Likely, any attempt to do so would only intensify the pain. Nor could he see why Nebula would tell him falsehoods about this.

He slid his hand over the side of the mattress and hunted for the control panel to the bed-frame. He doubted he had the strength to prop himself up for long, but he had enough grasp of his sensibilities to detest the indignity of attempting to converse while lying flat on his back. Nebula caught his hand
and guided him to the right set of buttons.

‘Thank you,’ he said as he nudged the bed frame to lift him up into a seated position. ‘So, now that your father pilfered through the contents of my head, do I still have a job?’

Nebula took a moment to form a reply. ‘He hasn’t said anything about that to me.’

He got the sense she was about to say something more, but Loki lacked the energy to think about Thanos and everything that entailed. He fiddled with the hem of the blanket. ‘Doesn’t matter. I expect I’ll know one way or the other soon enough. Could you call over a medic? My head is throbbing so badly, I can’t follow the trail of my own thoughts.’

Whatever the medics gave him did little to improve Loki’s headache, but it did leave him so drowsy he had to abandon all attempts to string words into a coherent sentence. Nebula let him be and he found a modicum of relief in dreamless sleep minutes later. When he woke up again, only the cold, off-white furniture kept watch over him.

Loki tilted up the top half of his bed. There were no windows in the room or so much as a clock, so there was no telling how long he had been asleep. He sensed it was a while. His limbs now felt like they had a spark of life in them once more and his skin bore imprints of the creases in his bed sheets.

In one corner of the room was a semi-opaque door that Loki guessed led to the washroom. It was all of four feet to that door. Loki needed to relieve himself and some water to wash the clammy sweat lingering on his skin would do him a great deal of good. Laboriously, he lifted off the blankets and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

**At least I still possess four limbs after this encounter with him.**

He sighed, then pushed himself off the bed, but didn’t let go entirely lest his legs betray him. His vision spun. For several moments he stood frozen, waiting for his body to acclimatise itself to being upright again, then slowly he took his first, stumbling steps.

The main door hissed. Loki spun around to look at who had entered, but lost his balance halfway through. His feet tangled under him. Before he knew it, he was on the floor.

‘You really don’t look well,’ Thanos said as he locked the door behind him. The ceiling in the room certainly wasn’t low, but Thanos’ head seemed to nearly scrape against it. Looking up at him from the ignominy of the floor, Thanos seemed no smaller than a mountain and not one Loki could ever hope to surmount.

Loki gulped down a breath and clambered back to his bed. ‘What did you do to me?’

‘I wanted to know more about you. It’s curious. No one before has come out of the exercise looking half as wretched as you now do.’

Thanos still held the sceptre in his hand. No doubt, no matter Loki’s physical or mental state, he was ready to use it again if he deemed it a necessity. Whatever Loki had to do, he had to avoid this. His collapse was his own work as much as that of the stone set within the sceptre. He had wielded the mind stone and he knew something of how it worked, so he had attempted to protect his memories from it. His magic had borne the brunt of that battle and when it succumbed, his physical body fell victim to the resulting whiplash. He didn’t have the reserves to meet another intrusion into his mind.
Did that ploy even work in the first place?

He flopped back onto the mattress. There was no sense in wasting what little energy he could summon on something as perfunctory as standing when he was conversing with a madman nearly twice his height. ‘Would you do me the courtesy of explaining what this sceptre is? I’m very keen not to go near such a thing ever again.’

‘You’ve lost some of your courtesies since yesterday,’ Thanos said pleasantly.

‘I’m in too much pain for empty pleases and thank yous.’

Thanos glanced to the stone at the top of the sceptre. ‘You ought to reconsider that. You were not quite honest when we last spoke. Or with my daughter. Isn’t that right, Loki?’

‘That’s the name I answered to in my youth, yes. I chose another since. Surely I’m not the first person you’ve encountered who has chosen to break with the past and elected a new name for themselves? As to the rest of it, I don’t enjoy dwelling on the past and you didn’t press for details.’

‘And if I press for them now?’

‘I suppose,’ Loki replied as he ran his hand through his sweat-coated hair, ‘you have a right to know the tale if I’m to find employment within your ranks.’

‘Then talk.’

If only it were so simple. More of the trial had come back to Loki since he had first regained consciousness, but he still retained only flashes of the memories Thanos had torn out of his head and nothing at all of the moment he had collapsed. How many memories that Thanos seen? What happened after he had collapsed? This type of interrogation typically required the subject to be conscious, but if anything could defy conventional laws, it was an infinity stone. The curated wall of memories he had built up might have collapsed after he lost consciousness and left the entire course of the future for Thanos to peruse.

It might well be that Thanos already knew everything and played a game here. He enjoyed games. Particularly when it came to catching people at the lowest and coaxing advantage out of their bared weaknesses.

Loki ran his thumb along the side of his leg. ‘Surely you’ve seen everything in my mind already.’

‘I’ve seen some of it, Loki, son of King Laufey of the Jotnar,’ Thanos said with a slight chuckle. ‘Discarded as a babe and offered a second chance by King Odin, the great enemy of your race. Yet life among the shining might of Asgard wasn’t always so sweet.’

‘In hindsight, it was a better life than one I would’ve had among my blood kin.’

‘That must be a deep-seated conviction. You were ready to destroy Jotunheim for your brother.’

‘A mistake,’ Loki shot back. ‘Saving my brother that is, not destroying Jotunheim. The Jotnar are vicious warmongers, who defile their dead and dispose of inconvenient children. They allowed my birth-father to lead them. My actions were nothing less than they deserved. As to my brother, he is an oaf and he’ll always be an oaf. No better than the rest of the Asgardians, really. He seemed chastised after his imprisonment by the frost giants, but I could already see his old self re-emerging. A man cannot make as thorough a change as he is in need of.’

‘And King Odin?’
‘I-I hardly know where to begin with him. He’s the reason I got to live, but then he just –’

Loki bit into the inside of his cheek. He could only hope that the mess of words he had blurted out didn’t directly contradict some memory Thanos had witnessed. Unfortunately, Thanos’ expression provided him with no clues.

‘Do all of these histrionics actually interest you?’ Loki said. ‘The Nine Realms seem so grand a place when you live there, but when you see the true scale of the universe, you get quite a different view.’

‘You no longer wish to seize your birthright then?’

‘I think soon enough my birthright will be nothing more than cosmic dust.’ For the first time in a long time, Loki got the sense he surprised the Titan. He didn’t savour the victory, however, and went on, ‘It’s a dark prediction, I know, but I genuinely think little good lies ahead. Something is wrong with Jotunheim as a planet; it’s increasingly hostile to life.

‘And the Asgardians? They are arrogant and complacent. Odin was an ambitious man in his younger days. He conquered planets, people say he once even sought the infinity stones. He gave up all that, happy to lounge around in his throne and listen the bards recount his ancient victories a thousand times over. My brother too would rest all on those laurels. Asgardian pride will lead them to ruin and there’s nothing I can do about it. So be it then. I won’t fight for a lost cause.’

‘Is that so?’ Smiling wryly, Thanos reached down and cupped Loki’s chin. There was no controlling the impulse to pull away — only yesterday that same gesture had preceded his interrogation with the mind stone. But there was no escaping either. Thanos caught Loki’s shoulder not a moment later. ‘I hope you will find my fight is not a lost cause.’

‘I-I believe it.’

‘I know something of worlds that are determined to destroy themselves. My home-world is lost, but it may be that you and I will yet find a way to save yours, whether it be Jotunheim or Asgard,’ Thanos said softly. From anyone else, those words might have sounded comforting.

Had he done it? It seemed so. Loki had caught that minute widening of Thanos’ eyes at the mention of the infinity stones. Yet there was something more here. Thanos’ demeanour had changed when he realised Loki had knowledge of the infinity stones the first time around too, but not quite like this. Loki supposed he might have sparked a sense of kinship with his sorry tale. He had heard rumours that the Mad Titan did possess an emotional range. Or this might be an attempt to bind Loki’s loyalty to him.

*It doesn’t matter why. As long as I can persuade him to keep my head attached to the rest of me, I can work on making sure he ends up dead.*

‘Have you nothing to say, Loki?’ Thanos asked.

‘I’m not sure I have the words to convey my thoughts right now, my lord. If what you say is at all possible, then I’ll do anything that you ask of me.’ Loki let out a shuddering breath. ‘I’ve heard it said that hope is the most valuable commodity in the universe. Right now, I really do believe that’s true.’

Thanos smiled. It was an expression strangely reminiscent of that kitsch mural above the entrance to the Mess Hall. ‘And I believe we understand each other better now,’ he said as he released his grip on Loki’s shoulder. ‘Let’s talk more soon. As it is, Nebula will berate me for over-taxing you when you are still recovering.’
‘Thank you, my lord. I appreciate your concern, and Nebula’s.’

When the door slid shut behind Thanos. Loki pulled the blanket around his shoulders and drew his knees up to his chest. He didn’t know when it had started, but his whole body was shaking.
Loki prodded. While his body and mind recovered, the injury to his magic lingered. Every time he reached for it, his sole permanent companion, it was as if he poked at a mangled limb and every touch threatened to reopen the countless lacerations. It might have been more prudent to wait until later in his recovery, but he needed to be sure exactly what Thanos had seen before the uncertainty drove him mad. Besides, prudence had never been Loki’s strength.

He lost track of time, aware only that his eyes had begun to water from the pain, but in the end he found the fortified bunker he had constructed around his more sensitive memories. Loki followed the line of the outer wall all along the perimeter. Unbreached. No evidence of damage either. If Thanos had noticed its existence, he must have assumed it was a natural construct of Loki’s mind.

Grinning with relief, Loki opened his eyes and uncrossed his legs. Lies within lies. Believing he had uncovered Loki’s falsehoods, Thanos shouldn’t have reason to dig deeper. After all, how many people came to him with more than one cover story? Loki slid back until he was flat on his bed once more and despite the lingering pain, savoured the moment. It had been a long time since he had cause to be so pleased with himself.

He didn’t have a chance to enjoy the moment for long, however. There was a knock, then the door slid open. Nebula leaned against the door-frame.

‘You’re in a good mood,’ she said as Loki sat back up.

‘I feel better,’ he replied. ‘And I’m glad you are here. I wasn’t really up to thinking much last time you came to see me. You’d like some explanation from me, right? You’ve been more honest with me than I with you.’

Nebula froze for a moment, then shut the door to the room and walked over to the end of Loki’s bed. ‘Yes, rather so. Here I was thinking you were fleeing some petty tribal violence among your species, but it’s all much grander. You didn’t even grow up on Jotunheim. Didn’t you —’

‘It’s not you, Nebula.’ Loki cut in. He threw up his hand in an effort to get a few more words in. ‘Please don’t think this was a personal slight. It’s just not a story I like to share. How many people would respond positively when I tell them I tried to destroy my home planet?’

‘What about Baugi? I hear that’s not your name either.’

Loki sighed, his good cheer utterly deflated. ‘I borrowed the name from a friend. Well, we didn’t know each other particularly well, so maybe “friend” is an over-statement. I help him once and he helped me out of a tight spot in return. You can keep calling me Baugi if you like.’

‘I don’t think so. Loki suits you better — more appropriately slippery somehow,’ Nebula replied. ‘I don’t think so. Loki suits you better — more appropriately slippery somehow.’ Nebula replied. Loki wasn’t sure if it was meant to be a jibe at him or not, but Nebula made it sound like one. However, she then seemed to collect herself and went on in a milder tone. ‘Now isn’t the time for a long conversation about this. I came because my father wanted you to join us for the midday meal if you were feeling up to it. Will you?’

Were Thanos or any of his other children present, Loki would have gushed about the honour to receive such an invitation. With Nebula, he didn’t trouble himself.
‘It’s not the kind of invitation you refuse, is it?’ Loki climbed out of bed and reached for his shoes. ‘Not unless you are nine-tenths of the way to dead already.’

After two days, he no longer needed to hold onto a wall to feel secure, so they moved at a steady pace through the corridors of the Palisade. There was little said. Nebula had reverted to the reserved woman Loki had encountered during their first few days of training together.

‘How angry are you with me?’ Loki said. Sometimes you just had to force the issue and get the aftermath dealt with.

Nebula motioned for him to take a left turn, then shrugged. ‘I’m not really. You’re right, your story isn’t the sort of thing you blurt out to a stranger. It’s just I told you how I ended up here and you… Look, I don’t know, maybe I am somewhat angry. Would you’ve told me the full story eventually?’

‘I nearly told you up on the roof,’ Loki lied.

Loki remembered the dining room — the broad table carved out of obsidian in the centre and the stiff, high-backed chairs lined up on either side. The table was too wide for the space and there were no windows, so in an attempt to make the room feel less cramped, vistas of vast, distant nebulae and galaxies were projected onto the walls. The effort was of limited success. For a change, Loki didn’t need Thanos’ presence to feel dwarfed by the forces around him.

But Thanos was present — seated at the head of the table, flanked at both sides by his Children and the senior member of his administrative staff. Loki was glad he and Nebula seemed to have arrived late. The remaining seats were on the opposite end of the table to the Titan.

‘I am pleased to see you up and about, Loki,’ Thanos said as Nebula and Loki slipped into adjoining vacant seats. ‘We have much to discuss, don’t we?’

Loki forced a smile. ‘If that is so, I am at your disposal.’

‘See that you are,’ came the reply.

Beyond that, Thanos had little interest in Loki at that moment. He turned to Proxima Midnight, who had managed to nab the chair immediately to Thanos’ right, and queried the readiness of the thirty-sixth artillery unit. Proxima’s answer sparked a rapid-fire discussion that drew in half a dozen people around the table. Lacking context and hearing only snatches of the dialogue from his distant seat, Loki couldn’t follow the trail of the conversation.

He worked instead on clearing his plate. Thanos and Loki’s appetite didn’t really go hand in hand.

‘We should get back into the training hall tomorrow,’ Nebula said between eager mouthfuls of her soup. ‘We’ll take it slowly. Better that than linger idly too long and become soft.’

Loki nodded. ‘Quite right. Though I doubt you’ll go all that easy on me.’

Nebula smirked.

Whatever else one could say about the ethics of those who facilitated Thanos’ mad crusade, they worked hard. No one lingered at the table once they were done. Since Nebula and Loki had been the last to arrive, they were soon the only people, save Thanos himself, who remained in the room.
Nebula too didn’t sit about staring at her empty dessert bowl. She glanced to her father, then pushed her chair back.

‘I have some errands to run,’ she said. ‘Do you remember how to get back to the medbay?’

‘I will have him well looked-after if he doesn’t,’ Thanos answered in Loki’s stead. ‘Come up here and sit by me, Loki. Have you finished with your meal? If not, bring it with you. We’ll talk while you eat.’

Nebula rested her hand on the back of Loki’s chair, the tips of her fingers brushing along Loki’s shoulders. ‘I’ll leave you two to it then.’

Loki wistfully followed her departure out of the corner of his eye while for his part, he rose from his chair and moved to sit by Thanos’ side. He brought his plate with him. A polite man didn’t talk while he chewed, thus chewing afforded you time to consider your words.

‘When we last spoke, you made a certain statement,’ Thanos said. What minute jovial undertone there had been to his words earlier was gone. ‘You claimed your father once sought the infinity stones. I would like you to elaborate on that.’

Frowning, Loki set down his fork. ‘Nebula hinted that you were searching for an alternative way to carry out your plans. Is this it? The infinity stones?’ He chuckled. ‘That’s an ingenious idea.’

‘What do you know of them?’

‘They are the six elemental crystals born in the genesis of the universe. Each controls an essential aspect of existence — reality, space, mind, power, time and soul. Their potential has few rivals, but the stones are as dangerous to their wielder as they are to those the stones are wielded against. If you are not powerful enough to wield a stone, you won’t survive.’

Loki could see Thanos’ patience strain while he recalled what his history tutor had drilled into his head in the first years of his studies. Anyone with a thorough knowledge of the history of the universe would have been able to blurt out the same explanation, so it was not a word more than Thanos already knew. But Loki found himself reluctant to say anything more. He had set out to leave Asgard out of the game, yet had given up Asgard with his opening gambit. Now he had to give up the infinity stones too.

*To make a mistake once is unfortunate. To do so twice is blatant stupidity.*

*And yet.*

*Means and Ends, Loki. Ends and means.*

‘In truth,’ Loki went on, ‘I know little of my father’s quest for the stones. He wishes to be known as a peacemaker and dislikes speaking of his more… bloodthirsty years. To my knowledge, he only possessed one. It was the space stone, I believe.’

‘Possessed? Thanos’ eyes narrowed. He leaned forward, his elbows sliding across the polished tabletop. ‘Are you certain? What’s happened to the stone since? Did someone take it from your father?’

‘He hid it. On Midgard. It’s one of the planets that make up the Nine Realms, but I cannot really tell you anything more precise than that about its location.’

‘Oh, my friend, you’ve told me plenty already,’ Thanos replied.
They weren’t friends, but Loki did agree with the rest of Thanos’ sentiment. He wasn’t getting anything more out of Loki when it came to the infinity stones. Not the history of the Tesseract since Odin had brought it to Midgard; not where King Bor had buried the reality stone; not the location of the time stone; and certainly not how the dwarves of Nidavellir had once forged a gauntlet that would contain the power of all six stones.

‘I’m glad I could be of service to you, my lord,’ Loki said. He picked up his fork and sank his face towards his plate lest his expression betray him.

‘Midgard,’ Thanos said under his breath, then more audibly. ‘Another planet I am unfamiliar with.’

Loki swallowed a piece of root vegetable he couldn’t quite put a name to, then responded. ‘Midgard is its name among the Asgardians; the local inhabitants call it Earth. There isn’t much to say in favour of the native population. Their greatest achievements are the endless methods they devise to murder one other. They’ve made a few brief visits to their moon and sent some unmanned ships out to explore other planets in their home system, nothing more. If your navigational charts have the planet labelled, it’ll be in the Virgo Supercluster.’

‘That supercluster is thirty-three megaparsecs in diameter and contains a good hundred galaxy groups,’ Gamora said as she strode into the room. ‘Can’t you do better than that?’

Loki waited a beat in the hope that Thanos would order Gamora out of the room, but he seemed unbothered by Gamora taking a seat opposite Loki. When a servant brought out a bowl of soup for Gamora, Loki surmised he would have to accept her intrusion.

‘Certainly,’ he said. ‘It’s in the Orion-Cygnus arm of the Via Lactea galaxy. Your navigational charts are most likely to list it under the designator “Sol 3”. Is that detailed enough or shall I map out the flight path for you as well?’

Thanos’ chuckle cut off Gamora’s reply before she could get past the first syllable.

‘Fate plays strange games. Titan is located in the Perseus arm, right next to the Orion-Cygnus arm,’ he said. Still smiling, his gaze lingered on his daughter. ‘Gamora, are you trying to avoid somebody or have you suddenly developed a taste for tepid food?’

‘The latter, father. Definitely, the latter.’

Thanos’ smile faltered. ‘Careful. Don’t disappoint me more than you already have.’

Although the words hadn’t been directed at him, Loki drew back as far as the stiff chair would let him. Was this still about the fight between Gamora and Nebula? Or was this something else? He didn’t particularly want to become entangled so deeply in Thanos’ family matters, so he was relieved Gamora recognised the danger in her father’s tone and made a show of contrition.

‘I trust you don’t want to disappoint me either, Loki,’ Thanos said. ‘I want you to give me a written account of everything you remember about this planet and about the infinity stones. Don’t spare a single detail.’

Shivers trailed down Loki’s back as he nodded. He had made a conscious decision to take a different path to Thanos, yet he was so close now to reprising his original role. A demand for information was how it had started last time too. Even the phrasing to Thanos’ words was nearly identical. The Titan had offered Loki the chance to lead the invasion force not four weeks later. What if some events were beyond his power to his change? For all the muck between Asgard and Jotunheim, Loki had still killed his birth father and had still unleashed the Bifrost upon the frost giants.
He took a breath. ‘How long do I have to make my report?’

‘I would advise you to…’

The medic lost his train of thought at the hiss of the door to Loki’s room. For a moment, Loki was glad to have the reprieve. The medic and his assistant had been poking and prodding at him for some minutes now. He was less glad, however, when he saw the source of the interruption.

‘Is Nebula not with you?’ Gamora asked as she strolled into the room.

Loki grabbed his shirt and pulled it back on. ‘Why would she be?’

‘Why shouldn’t she?’ Gamora replied, then cocked her head in an eerie imitation of her adoptive father.

Nebula had in fact spent the best part of an hour here and had left only when the medic had demanded custody of Loki one last time, but Loki wasn’t about to share that titbit with Gamora. Instead, he turned to the medic. ‘Is there anything else?’

‘No, I believe I’m satisfied with your condition,’ the man replied. He gestured for his assistant to start moving out of the room, then in a half-hearted tone, went on. ‘It would, of course, be wise to be respectful of your body in the coming weeks.’

‘I’ll do my best.’

‘Are these two going to finally release you from their care?’ Gamora said once the medic and his assistant left Loki to endure Gamora’s company on his own. ‘How nice. Your body-guard must have missed you while you were stuck here with only the lonely Nebula to hold vigil over you.’

‘Why should she feel lonely when she has a sister as wonderful as you?’

Where he had half-expected a backhanded slap — Gamora could be liberal with such when provoked, came only a derisive chuckle. ‘Nebula thinks you two are good friends. But it strikes me as odd that your body-guard knew your real name, while you didn’t deign to inform Nebula of the truth. Guess she wasn’t special enough in your estimation.’

Loki surmised Gamora was still bitter about her recent defeat; those who were unaccustomed to losing seldom made for gracious losers. If she hadn’t already, she would probably try to rub this fictive relationship between Brunnhilde and him into Nebula’s face. It was an attempt to drive a wedge between himself and Nebula. He could appreciate the sentiment and the pettiness of it, but the method was so crude it was nigh embarrassing.

She really is unused to losing.

‘The guard knew my true name because she entered my employ before I thought to adopt another name,’ Loki said, tugging at the collar of his shirt. The garment had been sewn for a species with a different anatomy to his own and didn’t sit right on his shoulders no matter what he tried. ‘I’m afraid you’ve misinterpreted the relationship between us. I pay her to watch my back, not to warm my bed or whatever other nonsense you’ve dreamt up.’

Gamora raised an eyebrow. ‘Why does a combat master feel he needs someone to watch his back?’
‘I knew very little about the Sanctuary before I arrived here. It’s only sensible to have a back-up when you are entering unfamiliar territory. Surely your father taught you that much?’

That left Gamora silent long enough for Loki to reach for his coat.

‘Your concern for the quality of acquaintances your sister makes does you credence,’ Loki said in a tone so polite it could only infuriate, ‘but I’m afraid, I don’t have the time right now to answer a host of questions. Your father expects a great deal from me.’

‘I’ll expect we’ll have a chance to speak again soon enough,’ Gamora replied.

Loki smiled and offered her a shallow bow as he hurried out of the room. He was keen to be gone before Gamora spotted his rising anxiety. Petty grounds or not, she had it in for him. Now that Brunnhilde had sparked her interest, she was unlikely to forget about the Valkyrie’s existence and move on.

Trouble was, Brunnhilde was a vulnerability. He had fed her that story about spying on his father’s behalf — a story that directly contradicted the tale he had spun for Thanos. And Brunnhilde’s mind had no protections against the mind stone; Thanos needed only to look.

‘There has to be a way to smooth this over,’ Loki told himself.

Yes, it’s true, my father initially sent me on a covert mission to investigate your crusade, but when I got here, I came to agree with your philosophy. Why didn’t I tell you earlier? I wasn’t sure you would believe my change of heart. Why continue to keep the Valkyrie around? I’m pretty sure she reports back to my father, I didn’t want to take the risk of him realising I’d switched sides.

That was weak. A dim-witted child would be incredulous was suck a load of codswallop. Loki swore. When you had a story, you need to trim all the loose ends, when was he going to learn this lesson?

I was desperate to leave, but the only way my father would let me go was if I did this mission for him. He told me to find the Valkyrie. She’s a fugitive, having betrayed her oaths. I think my father has been using her as an informant — she passes on news from outside the Nine Realms. If she is his agent, I am sure she’s reporting on me as well. I couldn’t let him find out that I’d legitimately changed sides.

Why didn’t I tell you? I… don’t know.

Perhaps he could just go up to Thanos and sell out Brunnhilde now under the pretence of full-disclosure? After a momentary consideration, Loki dismissed the idea. Thanos would be enraged. Loki himself wouldn’t come out unscathed, but Brunnhilde would bear the brunt of it. Of course, once Thanos tore out the contents of her mind, he wouldn’t find the memories to support Loki’s claim that she was Odin’s informant. At that point, the rage would turn back to Loki.

Besides, the suggestion that Odin might be interested in Thanos’ work would implant a dangerous suspicion in the Titan’s mind. Once he considered Asgard a potential threat, the realm wouldn’t be safe.

This was all working out too bloody smoothly.

‘Well,’ Loki muttered under his breath. ‘You need to trim the loose threads. She’s got to go.’
The first step to fixing up a horrendous fuck-up in your plans was to look like you didn’t realise you had made a mistake. Thus, Loki took the medic’s advice and made no effort to push his body. He strolled the streets, pausing to listen to the buskers and lingering at a stall that stocked knick-knacks the Sanctuary’s inhabitants could entertain themselves with during their sparse leisure time. He picked out a Kree puzzle box that he then fiddled with the rest of the way to the hostel.

When he entered the suite, Brunnhilde was upon him in half a second. She pushed him against the plaster wall and aimed the tip of her knife at his throat. Before Loki could respond, however, she seemed to realise who she was manhandling and lowered the knife.

‘Where the hell have you been?’ she demanded.

‘Making new friends,’ Loki replied, gently pushing Brunnhilde away from him. ‘It rather took a lot out of me, I was in the Palisade’s medical wing. Can we move this to the suite proper? You and I need to talk.’

Brunnhilde’s lips curled as they moved into the lounge area. He wasn’t sure if she doubted his explanation for his two-day absence or if she was irritated he had not sent a message to her informing her of his situation. In hindsight, he ought to have arranged for a messenger. But in either case, it wasn’t going to change what he needed to tell her.

‘We sure are overdue for a conversation,’ Brunnhilde said. ‘Someone was in here yesterday while I was at dinner. They searched the rooms. They were good, but they missed a few details when they were putting things back into place.’

‘Is anything gone?’

‘No.’

‘Are you certain there was someone in here then? I move your stuff around all the time and you’ve never suggested someone had been through the suite until now.’

Brunnhilde glared at him. ‘When you move something, you move it, not shift it over by half an inch. Do you think I’m so incompetent that I can’t tell the difference? Besides, you haven’t been here, have you?’

Loki swore. If the chaotic mess Brunnhilde left behind was a strategic decision on her part, so be it. But just because Brunnhilde didn’t notice something was missing, didn’t mean there wasn’t something she had overlooked. Moreover, a smart spy could have made copies before returning the originals to their place. He shook his head, then sighed. This development only confirmed his instincts.

‘Change of plans,’ Loki declared. ‘Take half of the remaining money — I trust you know where it is — and get yourself onto a ship getting out of here. When you get back to Sakaar, go to Nahera’s in the M’or precinct. I made arrangements with him for a secure locker, so he’ll be expecting you. There will be 1.7 million in there. Fair compensation for your work here.’

‘Are you sure about this? That’s rather sudden. I can still be useful to have around here,’ Brunnhilde responded after a momentary pause.

‘I’ve made up my mind. If you can’t find a smugglers’ ship heading in the right direction, just take yours. I’ll find my own means to get out of here.’
‘Ah… sure you will.’

‘Gamora saw you coming out of my bedroom and overheard you referring to me by my real name!’ Loki replied with more venom than he’d intended.

‘How the fuck was I supposed to know —’

‘I called out for a “guard”, didn’t I?’ he shot back. ‘She saw you and thinks there is something between us. And she has it in for me. It only follows that she’ll try to use you to get to me. By the sound of it, she’s already trying with this intruder.’

‘How is it that she has it in for you after you spent two days in the med bay? What did you do to piss her off?’

Loki was about to explain about his intercession into the life-long rivalry between Gamora and Nebula, but decided against it. That was mere distraction now. He gestured in Brunnhilde’s direction. ‘This isn’t about Gamora, it’s about her father. The contents of your memories can condemn us both and Thanos has the means to extricate them in about two seconds.’

‘If my mind’s not safe, neither is yours.’

‘I’ve already survived the trial, Brunnhilde. I’ve given Thanos enough to make him believe I can become an instrument to fulfilling his ends. Back on the ship I explained to you how I came to be out here. Should Thanos extract that memory from your head, I’d be hard-pressed to reconcile that with the story I told him. A few extraneous details I can explain away, but there are limits to my talents.’

Brunnhilde turned the knife in her hands. ‘All these undercover theatrics. Have you considered that you are making this overly complicated? We know now he’s up to no good. Just shank the bastard.’

Loki burst out laughing. When he brought himself under control Brunnhilde was staring at him as if he were utterly devoid of common sense.

‘A Valkyrie through and through, even after all these years,’ he said, offering her a condescending smile. ‘Just charge out with your weapons drawn. How well did that work out for all of you against Hela?’

‘Fine, Odinson. Do as you fucking like.’ Brunnhilde replied. She slipped her knife back into its holster and began gathering up the articles of her clothing scattered all around the suite.

Chapter End Notes

Just a bit of a warning. I am participating in NaNoWriMo this year. The plan is to keep the current schedule going, but there is a possibility I'll hit a snag somewhere during November.
Lonely Paths

Chapter Notes

Look at this fancy pants posting ahead of schedule :)

I have time to upload tonight and no guarantee of the opportunity repeating tomorrow, so it might as well be tonight. I hope you guys enjoy it, but let me know if it drags.

Between the clanging blades, the shouting and the thunder of the soldiers’ feet, the ambient noise in the training hall verged on deafening. There wasn’t much to be done about the clanging — this was the point of their endeavours here. The exclamations of victory, grunts of exertion and raucous war cries also bothered Loki little. The stomping, on the other hand, bothered him a great deal.

The Exians as a species were naturally heavy on their feet and not renowned for their martial skills, a testament to the scraps Thanos accepted into his fold. Loki had gone through dozens of footwork drills over the past fortnight in an effort to do something about this obvious handicap. The Exians were starting to change direction quicker, but so far, the noise hadn’t improved in the slightest.

There won’t be many covert missions for this lot.

Loki paused to watch one of the many mock fights going on in the hall. The two fighters had training gear on, which was laden with sensors that identified where they had been struck, as well as the velocity and the angle of the hit. It was enough information to identify not only who had won the exchange, but to also calculate the likelihood of death from every strike given and received.

Watching the two men sparring were three of their comrades, whose task was to do what the sensors couldn’t — identify why certain moves were successful and others failed.

Ince roared in frustration as the sensors on his chest and left arm lit up, then flashed the pattern that indicated he had received a fatal blow. Whipping off his mask, the Exian turned to Loki. ‘He keeps hitting into my attack. These three can’t tell me what I’m mucking up here.’

The three observers to this sparring pair started to respond, but Loki motioned for them to quieten down. This was a flaw in this system of peer-review, but while he would have liked to watch and coach every pair, there was only one of him for the dozens of Exians in his charge. He beckoned over Ince’s opponent.

‘Would you like to share how you are getting these hits on Ince?’ Loki asked. He recognised the man’s face, he was one of the youngest in the company and rather smaller than the others, but his name escaped Loki.

Ince’s ears drew up. ‘I can’t quite explain it, sir. I see him moving towards me and I just know that if I go for it, I’ll get him before he can get me.’

This one’s worth watching.

‘It’s all right,’ Loki replied. ‘There are many things we see without realising that we are seeing them. Ince, he’s not counter-attacking into your attack. He’s attacking into your preparation. Your first step is very large and slow. Once you notice it, it’s like a warning beacon for what you’re about to do.’
‘It’s always about the footwork with you, captain.’ Ince said. He let out a guttural roar, which Loki had come to understand passed for a chuckle among the Exians.

Loki smiled. ‘I think you’re catching on, Ince. We’ll work on this tomorrow. Is it time for you to rotate partners?’

‘One more hit.’

‘Make it count then.’

A warm hand slid over Loki’s shoulder and trailed up to the top of his head. Words — unintelligible, but soothing — crooned into his ear. Loki slammed the boundaries of his mind shut and his vision exploded in white pain.

‘Sir?’ Ince called out, grabbing Loki’s arm.

It took a few seconds for Loki’s vision to clear. He now stood about a foot back from where he had been, with Ince’s long fingers wrapped around his forearm. Loki extracted himself from Ince’s grasp and glanced around. Only a couple of the other Exians had noticed that something had just made their instructor stagger back like he’d been struck with a lightning bolt.

‘Captain?’ Ince tried again.

‘Everything is fine,’ Loki said. ‘Thank you for your concern. Please return to your training.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Loki made another, more careful, sweep of the hall. Sure enough, Ebony Maw stood up on the narrow balcony that overlooked the training area. Loki climbed up the stairs and walked over to the Maw.

‘You don’t have to linger up here,’ Loki said. ‘It’s so far up you can’t see anything useful. Besides, the soldiers would be honoured to meet you.’

‘I have already seen what I sought to see,’ Ebony Maw replied with a self-satisfied smirk.

‘What just happened to me. Was that you?’

‘That night we first met at the evening meal in the Mess, I suspected you sensed and repulsed me. I was right.’

‘So that’s what it was. Have to say, that’s more than a tad creepy.’

He had second thoughts about those words the moment they came out of his mouth. There was nothing intelligent about antagonising Ebony Maw. But he had been concerned with not voicing his initial thought: that fucking hurt. The Maw had probably surmised as much, but it would have been idiotic for Loki to confirm his weakness. Although, to be fair, Loki had partially inflicted the pain on himself. While Loki had mostly recovered from his trial by mind stone, his magic remained tender (for the lack of a better word). He had overreacted and slammed his mind shut with far more force than necessary.

Loki drummed his fingers along the balcony railing. ‘Was there something you wanted to extract from my mind? I thought my answers satisfied Lord Thanos. Or is this a personal enquiry?’

‘If you can repel me, you must know something of mind manipulation,’ Ebony Maw replied as he
drew his hands together in front of his chest.

At those words, Loki understood the direction Ebony Mow was steering the conversation towards, which was a relief. Loki knew a shortcut. ‘Magic, yes. I know quite a bit about it. But I won’t be much use to you as a sorcerer. I’ve been told, I was born with a great capacity for magic, but as I grew up, the sum of what I could produce amounted to little more than purple sparkles. I studied for years, reading every book I could get my hands on, with no success. There’s something broken in me.’

‘Hmm. A traumatic event can precipitate such a thing, especially in a child.’

*Ripping apart space and time so violently your younger self is obliterated counts too I guess.*

Loki remained silent for a moment, feigning contemplation, before he responded. ‘The Jotnar say my mother was a sorceress. While I have no proof, my suspicion is that she drained me of everything she considered valuable before they left me out to die. Why waste the potential power boost when you are in the middle of a war? The mind has forgotten that betrayal, but the magic remembers the violence of that act. It recoils when it comes in contact with another’s magic; I can barely control it. You saw this twice now.’

‘Three. Perhaps.’ Ebony Maw lifted his hands up until the tips of his bony fingers rested against his chin. ‘Every mind suffers under the sceptre, but it was different with you.’

A trio of war cries cut through the general din in the hall, reminding Loki that he and Ebony Maw were not the only people in the vicinity. Loki’s persona had to incorporate multiple dimensions today.

‘I’ll have to defer to your superior experience with that sceptre,’ he said. ‘I beg your pardon, Ebony Maw. While I appreciate your visit, I need to return to my students.’

The Maw nodded. ‘It is my error. I was under impression the training session would be finished.’

‘They need the extra hour.’

‘General Glaive would approve of your efforts.’ Loki muttered out a thank you and was about to turn away, when Ebony Maw furrowed his nose and went on, ‘Would you consider assisting me on a project? The Great Titan and I might benefit from an additional perspective.’

‘What sort of project?’ Loki asked. It took all of his self-possession to keep his tone from betraying the weight the question carried in his mind.

‘It concerns the infinity stones.’

Loki bit his lip to mask his grimace. ‘You ought to have led with that. I already promised our lord all the assistance I can offer on the subject of the stones.’

Nebula swung out her left leg and jumped. She caught the barely visible crack in the stone with her right hand, then pulled herself up until she found a bit of rock that would hold her feet. Loki meanwhile tried to memorise her movements from a good three metres further down the cliff-face. He still wasn’t sure why he was hanging off the side of a mountain largely by the strength of the two limbs he had found holds for. He would have never allowed Thor to talk him into spending his well-
deserved free afternoon on this.

‘Ebony Maw would’ve just glided up to the summit,’ Loki muttered under his breath. ‘Proclaiming
the glory of Thanos the entire way up too.’

He had never quite mastered the trick Ebony Maw used to move himself around without the aid of
his feet, but an intelligent sorcerer could solve the problem in any number of alternate ways. Namely,
conjuring a ladder up top. Of course, that wasn’t a viable solution in this instance as Loki was trying
to downplay his magical ability as much as possible, but they didn’t even need magic. They had left
a perfectly fine ship sitting idle at the bottom of the cliff.

Loki glanced down. From two hundred metres up, the ship looked like little more than a speck of
silver in a landscape of brown dirt and reddish, iron-rich hunks of stone. At least rappelling down
would be much quicker than climbing up.

He sighed and resumed following the trail of Nebula’s ascent. She had been up this mountainside
many times before, so she moved without fear of making a mistake, stopping only so Loki wouldn’t
be left too far behind. The last seventy or so metres up to the summit proved the most difficult, with
the available handholds shallow and too far apart. Loki focused solely on remaining clung to the side
off the cliff. With every move up, the fall back down became longer. He had survived numerous bad
falls over the years, but those experiences had never been pleasant, so he was keen to avoid another
one.

Above him, Nebula reached the lip of the cliff and crawled over the edge, first her torso, then her
legs disappearing from view.

‘Come on, Loki, we’re here!’ she called out. A couple of seconds later Nebula’s upper body came
into view and she extended her hand out to Loki.

He wasn’t anywhere near in position to reach her, so he hurriedly climbed the remaining few metres.
When he was close enough, he grasped Nebula’s hand and she helped him climb over the cliff’s
edge.

‘Thank the Norns, that’s done,’ Loki said. He pulled off his small backpack and attempted to brush
off the dust that had accumulated on his hands during the climb. ‘As far as cross-training goes, this
isn’t my first choice.’

Nebula laughed. She had already pulled out a flask from her bag and sat down on the bare ground,
dangling her feet back over the lip of the cliff. Loki took the spot to her left and accepted the flask
when she passed it to him. The water inside was flavoured with some kind of citrus, which left the
water somewhat sour, but it was refreshing nevertheless.

‘Don’t you like the view, Loki?’ Nebula asked.

From their vantage point they overlooked Sanctuary City, which was now bathed in the angled,
crimson and mauve lights of another sunset that camouflaged the detail of the sordid activities going
on in the city.

‘Best view I’ve seen since my ship first landed on Theta-Three,’ Loki conceded.

She accepted the flask when Loki offered it back to her, but said nothing more for a long while,
seemingly content to enjoy the opportunity to escape the city. Loki was mostly just glad that the
awkwardness between them after the ‘revelations’ in the wake of his interrogation by the sceptre
were behind them now and Nebula felt comfortable enough to relax herself around her once more.
‘One day we’ll probably have to leave this place,’ Loki said.

‘I suppose.’ Nebula shrugged. ‘I suppose one day you’ll want to return to your home too.’

‘When we are victorious, yes. And you’ll go back to Luthom?’

Nebula turned the flask in her hands. ‘For a short time maybe. I think my father will always have some task for me, however big or small. I wish one day I could see your home-world. Well, home-worlds. And to meet your adoptive mother. She… sounds nice.’

When Thanos had arrived on Luthom, Nebula’s own mother had been in the unfortunate half of the population who had been chosen to become the Children of Thanos through immediate execution. Loki certainly wasn’t opposed to sharing Frigga with her and suspected Frigga would warm up to Nebula within moments of meeting her.

‘You are welcome to visit and to stay as long as you like,’ Loki said.

You are also welcome to run away with me right this minute.

A little over two weeks ago he had lied to her in claiming he had been tempted to tell her the truth. The problem was, since Nebula had brought up the idea, Loki couldn’t shake the possibility of revealing the truth to her. She had turned on Thanos only a few years later and it was clear in so many of the conversations between them since they met that she had grievances about the lifestyle Thanos had chosen for her.

At the same time, she had betrayed to Thanos that Gamora had discovered the location of the soul stone. After the near disaster with Brunnhilde, Loki couldn’t risk any more loose ends. As long as Thanos possessed the mind stone, no one was safe. Even Heimdall had been a mistake. No matter how well-meaning a person was or how much Loki trusted them, Loki could never share the truth with them on the off-chance they ever crossed paths with the Titan.

Loki had never cared for confidants and whispered secrets in the dark, but choosing not to share a secret differed greatly from the knowledge that his mind held truths he couldn’t reveal to a single person in the entirety of the universe. His path was his to walk and his alone. His burdens were never to be shared. How long could he go on until the lies couldn’t smooth over his behaviour? People didn’t like to be lied to; they would demand explanation and they would withdraw from him if his answers didn’t satisfy.

Loki’s face must have betrayed something, because Nebula frowned and said, ‘You all right? You don’t look right.’

‘A touch of light-headiness,’ he replied quickly. ‘It’ll pass in a second.’

Loki let the doorway swing behind him. It slammed back into place with a thud loud enough to shake the walls, making the silence it left in its wake all the heavier for the contrast it conjured.

He sighed. It wasn’t that he despised his new accommodation. This was far better than the cells of the Sanctuary or the cell Loki had enjoyed back on Asgard when his father had sentenced him to a lifetime of imprisonment.

It was the silence of this windowless cube, punctuated by the creak of the mattress when he sat down
on the bed, that left him itching to put a hole through the walls. Spending time with Nebula, knowing that he had to keep up the pretence at all times, only made the itch worse. At least before he had Brunnhilde to share the madness with — someone to trade jokes with and to acknowledge the insanity of the world around them. Now only echoes of his internal thoughts remained. Never quite silent, always on edge. And every day he crept closer towards re-treading his original path and the reason he had come to the Sanctuary seemed further out of his grasp.

What if I go through with it? If I can wield the mind stone and the soul stone, while Thanos has none, surely that’s a fight Thanos cannot win?

Loki gulped down a breath in an effort to quell his rebellious stomach. He was afraid, plain and simple. The thought of pitting himself openly against Thanos left him nauseous. But even if he ignored the bile building in the back of his mouth, it wasn’t easy to come up with a scenario where he could challenge Thanos successfully. A spear to the throat? A spear afforded Loki longer reach than a knife, but Thor had practically cleaved Thanos’ chest in two back in Wakanda and Thanos just about laughed in his face. A pitched force with the full might of the Einherjar at his back? Loki snorted. The Einherjar had fared so well against the Dark Elves and Hela. Meanwhile, Thanos had obliterated the famed Corps of the Nova Empire to the man.

‘Cut his throat when he’s least expecting it,’ Loki muttered under his breath. ‘I’ve always done my best work from the shadows. There’s no reason not to work on my strengths when it comes to this.’

So, full steam ahead with the current plan and look out for the opportune moment, all else be damned.

Yet the conclusion did nothing to settle Loki’s unease. He pulled off the rough cord holding his hair in place and walked over to the washbasin in the corner of the room. These quarters had communal bathrooms and showers, so the sink and the mirror above it were the sole instruments of personal hygiene to be found in the room. Loki washed the days’ grime off his face and stared at himself in the mirror. The blue skin, the red eyes, the markings identifying him as the son of a father who had deemed him unworthy of living. The father Loki had killed twice.

‘Heimdall,’ Loki said before he could give himself a chance to think better of what he was doing. Movement behind him. Loki swivelled around to meet Heimdall’s eyes. It was only a projection, but Loki breathed easier nevertheless. He supposed it said something about the state of his mind that he was glad to see Heimdall. ‘That was quick. Watching me, were you?’

‘Your family worry about you.’ The corner of Heimdall’s lip twitched. ‘And, you have taken a peculiar path; I am curious where it will lead.’

‘Home, I hope.’

‘Your mother and brother hold the same hope.’
Loki raised an eyebrow. ‘But not my father?’

‘I cannot know the mind of an unconscious man. He has yet to wake,’ Heimdall said, his words slipping out quicker than was typical for him.

‘He’s still in Odinsleep?’ Loki said and immediately felt ridiculous for having uttered the question. Heimdall had just told him as much. He slid his tongue over the back of his teeth a few times, then shook his head. This wasn’t what he had anticipated hearing from Heimdall. ‘What are the healers saying? This is miles out of the bounds of the ordinary by now. Is there anything being done?’

‘A remedy is being sought. The king has even reached out to one of your half-sister’s, the new ruler of Jotunheim, asking if the Jotnar would negotiate for the information of the poison the arrow was coated with. No reply came from Jotunheim.’

‘Who’s surprised about that. Well, I’d make a suggestion of my own, but honestly, I have nothing to suggest that mother wouldn’t have thought of already. Let me know if his condition changes, whether in one direction or the other. Please?’

‘Of course.’

Loki expected his mother would demand he return to Asgard should Odin take a turn for the worse, but it calmed him to have Heimdall’s reassurance that he would be kept in the loop. ‘So my brother continues to rule without our father’s aid. How goes that?’

‘He has selected replacements for the vacant positions on the council. Outside the council and the ranks of the Einherjar, there is little change to be noticed. When the king’s thoughts are not on you or on your father, they are focused on the trials underway for the participants in the coup d’etat against your regency.’

You and your. Loki caught what Heimdall was attempting to achieve in his quiet way. He was uncertain whether Heimdall acted of his own accord or if responding to request from Loki’s family, but it didn’t matter. Loki couldn’t give them what they wanted.

He forced a smile. ‘Will you tell mother and Thor that I miss them. I miss them terribly, but I’m not ready to return. Not yet.’

‘I will, your highness,’ Heimdall replied.

A moment later his projection had dissolved and Loki was left staring at empty space. He sighed. He should have known better. Whether in this timeline or the previous, Loki had never had a conversation with Heimdall that resulted in an improvement to Loki’s mood.

Ebony Maw met Loki at the entrance to the Palisade and was uncharacteristically quiet as he took Loki down to the research laboratories, breaking his silence only once they reached the lift.

‘I trust you understand the value of circumspection on this matter,’ he said as he input the security code and scanned in his fingerprints. ‘It is an honour to be entrusted with this knowledge.’

Loki nodded solemnly. ‘I think I would be no less disappointed than the Great Titan would be if he finds my conduct wanting.’
The Maw’s smile at that response wasn’t dissimilar to that of a teacher who had finally received a palatable answer from a habitually mischievous child. The lift had reached its destination, which allowed Loki to ignore the Maw’s condescension and make a show of surveying the research facility.

The laboratory was a wide pentagonal room illuminated with harsh off-white lights and so crowded with equipment that Loki could barely make out where the back wall was. Machines beeped rhythmically and the fans in the circulation system hissed as they whipped around. Despite the fans, it was impossible to miss the fact they were deep underground. The air here had an earthy, slightly wet under-taste to it. Although the path here began in the Palisade, the laboratories weren’t situated within the complex, but were connected via a series of tunnels. Should something go wrong with an experiment, you didn’t want it to take out half of your headquarters at the same time.

‘Here.’ Ebony Maw crept toward a great steel rig set up away from the host of computers on one end of the room. There was another security pad on the rig — this one too needed fingerprints as well as a code. Once the Maw provided both, however, the lid of the rig split into two pieces and slid aside, revealing the sceptre.

Loki leaned forward to get a better vantage angle and feigned confusion. ‘The sceptre holds one of the infinity stones. Do I have this right?’

‘Yes.’

Ebony Maw seemed about to begin pontificating but the rumble of the lift interrupted him. By the time the lift doors opened, he had sunk into a deep bow, which Loki hurried to imitate.

‘Have you begun already?’ Thanos said, striding into the laboratory. ‘Go on then.’

‘We haven’t gotten far, my lord. Not beyond the revelation that you already possess an infinity stone.’ Loki’s gaze lingered on the mind stone. He had wielded it, he had endured it being wielded against him — he couldn’t dismiss it as another trinket in a universe full of powerful artefacts. ‘What is your next move then? Do you…’

Thanos’ eyebrows drew together. ‘If you worry I intend to use the stone against you once more, that fear is unfounded.’

‘Thank you, my lord. Knowing now that it was an infinity stone that was used, I am just glad I survived the trial.’ He took a step back from the rig and glanced up at Thanos. ‘If not that. How can I be of assistance?’

‘This stone emits a strong energy signature. We have made the assumption that the other stones will have signatures of their own and thus can be tracked. We just haven’t been able to move much past the hypothesis. You are a fresh set of eyes, perhaps you can offer some new ideas.’

A flick of Ebony Maw’s hand woke the computer screens from slumber. Soon every screen in the room was alight with metrics of the stone’s pulsation patterns and ambient aura. Loki moved between the various datasets, trying to make sense of what Thanos and Ebony Maw were attempting to capture in each one. His memory was no help here. Back then, he hadn’t received an invitation into the laboratory until a good four months further down in the timeline and by the looks of it, Thanos and Ebony Maw had either made a breakthrough in those months or had rearranged the monitoring equipment set up.

‘I’m afraid I am struggling to grasp what half of these are supposed to be measuring,’ Loki conceded. ‘Can you start at the beginning?’
And so they did. The more they spoke, the more Loki found himself relieved. It was a rare object indeed that didn’t have an energy signature of some kind, but the mind stone emitted energy in just about every measurable frequency. The trouble was, most of these were perfectly common frequencies, making it difficult to isolate from the mundane objects that surrounded it. Thanos and Ebony Maw had yet to isolate the mind stone’s unique energy signature. As each variable and each frequency had to be considered in isolation, doing this was tedious, time-consuming work.

‘There is no guarantee the other stones will have the same energy profile,’ Loki said. In fact, the space stone had a wildly different, and somewhat simpler, energy signature to the mind stone. The reality stone was different again. When he had reached out to it back on Svartalfheim, he found almost no similarities to the space and the mind stones. He had wondered then if being rooted in the body of Thor’s idiotic girlfriend had warped the signature, but he had never had an opportunity to pursue that train of thought further.

Thanos hooked his finger over the lip of one of the screens and tilted the screen up. ‘There are bound to be similarities.’

‘Echoes of the tribulations that brought the stones into existence,’ Loki replied.

He failed to add that those same tribulations that forged the stones into six concentrated ingots had also brought the universe in existence. Even the primitive Midgardian technology could pick up those echoes. Instead, he picked a random frequency and made a show of trying to work out how to isolate it. The line he had to stay on was as fine as a tightrope. He could give them the answers they sought in a matter of minutes — the information was burned into his mind, yet he had to keep Thanos and Ebony Maw from figuring out the answer. At the same time, Loki couldn’t appear useless or sabotaging the work, otherwise, Thanos would remove him from the laboratory (or worse). He had to make it look like they were making progress, while steering them down the wrong path.

For a long while, Thanos, Ebony Maw and Loki focused on the work, only exchanging clipped observations about their findings or lack thereof. But once Loki set up one of the computers to run a complex set of diagnostics, he had nothing to do until the computer finished its calculations. He leaned on the edge of the rig that held the sceptre and slid his thumb over the newly thickened callouses all across the fingers and the palm of his right hand.

‘Is something the matter?’ Thanos asked.

Loki shrugged. ‘I’m waiting for the computer to finish its work. I got rather lost in the contemplation about what the mind stone might mean for Asgard and Jotunheim.’

‘Great change awaits us all,’ Ebony Maw said without looking up from his work.

‘Just as long as it doesn’t come too late.’ Loki slid his hand along the rig’s smooth surface. ‘I shouldn’t be so morbid. It’s just, you have told me before, Lord Thanos, that your home-world is past saving. It is possible our victory will come too late for other worlds too.’

Thanos seemed to have difficulty finding a response to Loki’s words, so Loki seized the opportunity.

‘What did happen to your home-planet? If you don’t mind me asking, my lord,’ he said.

‘No, I don’t mind the question.’ Thanos tilted his head a little. ‘It was a typical tale at the beginning: over-population, a shortage of resources, civil war. Then one faction decided to implement a new tactic — a viral disease designed to cripple enemy soldiers. Trouble was, within the year, the virus had mutated. It now spread more easily and became deadlier. Containment efforts kept failing, so
they tried to bomb the contaminated regions out of existence. That failed too. They kept bombing and kept getting sick until one day there was no one to send out the bombs anymore.’

‘I am sorry,’ Loki said. ‘I know you’re not fond of that word, but I hope in this case you will accept it and the sentiments behind it. No one deserves such a calamity.’

_Well, you do, but not the rest of Titan._

Thanos nodded, then drew back to the computers. ‘Dwelling on the past is wasteful when we have so much to do in the present.’

Loki took note of the quiet chastisement and also slunk back to the computer he had set himself at. The diagnostics were nearly done anyway. He stared at the screen, waiting for the ping that indicated completion, but his mind was no longer on the infinity stones. He speculated instead on the probability that Thanos would be immune to the virus that brought down the rest of the Titans.

_It could be worth a try. Definitely better than just trying to stab him again._
Hello everyone! You might have noticed, there has been major rebranding since last week - a new summary, a new title and the FFN crosspost for a new cover image.

Time to be honest, I kind of always hated the old title. It was supposed to be a reference to Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, which I thought was quite fitting, but the title itself didn't sound right. I just couldn’t think of anything better when I started posting the fic. I'm not too enamoured with the new title either (titles are always a struggle for me), but I think it's better. Major brownie points to anyone who figures out what 'above all shadows' references.

‘One.’ Loki tapped the butt of a re-purposed broomstick against the floor with just enough force for the thud to be audible to everyone in the room.

The lines of Exian soldiers moved a step forward.

‘Two,’ Loki called out and brought down the butt of the broomstick handle once more. The Exians moved another step forward. One more tap. ‘Three!’

The Exians exploded into an attack, striking down their imaginary opponents. Loki waited a moment, giving his pupils the opportunity to assess positioning of the various parts of their body and to make adjustments accordingly, then tapped again. The Exians returned to their starting position.

‘One,’ Loki called out, starting the footwork drill from the beginning again. The Exians hadn’t yet earned their break.

The double doors behind Loki were flung open, cutting him off just as he was about to bring the broomstick handle down for the second count in the exercise. He turned on his heel. A trio of Chitauri had positioned themselves to completely block the doorway.

‘Something I can do for you, gentlemen?’ Loki asked.

‘Are you Captain Loki Odinson?’ the tallest of the Chitauri responded. The insignia on his uniform marked him out as an equivalent to a sergeant, but his tone offered no deference to Loki despite his superior rank.

‘I am.’

‘Then you are to come with us, sir.’

‘By whose orders am I to do so?’ Loki said as he lowered the broom-handle. He had ripped the actual broom part off, so at a pinch, what remained could serve as a staff. The Chitauri weren’t the brightest when they weren’t under the direct control of their hive mind, which seemed to be the case right now. It was best not to provide opportunities for them to misinterpret the situation.

The Chitauri sergeant wrinkled his nose, then squared his shoulders. ‘General Glaive’s.’
That didn’t clarify matters for Loki. He hadn’t even been formally introduced to Corvus Glaive, who seemed to be wholly focused on preparing for some campaign. And the previous time around, he had exchanged all of twenty words with him.

Loki forced a smile. ‘I cannot refuse the general’s orders.’ He turned back to the Exians. ‘In my absence, move onto sparring practice. Evaluate each other.’

He tossed the broom-handle into the corner of the room on his way out. The untreated wood wouldn’t last long in a fight against proper weapons, if he had to resort to physical confrontation, he preferred to have his hands available to make use of other implements of defence. Behind him, the noise coming from the Exians rapidly rose in volume — they weren’t the best at organising themselves without the detailed orders of a superior officer. It was another weakness Loki had to drill out of them.

Loki bit his lip in an effort to stop himself chuckling at his preoccupation with the performance of the company assigned to him. The Exians didn’t matter, yet here he was spending hour after hour making them better soldiers.

‘Hurry on,’ the sergeant muttered. He gestured for the two soldiers accompanying him to fall back behind Loki and make sure he wasn’t dawdling.

It wasn’t a long walk. What really distinguished Sanctuary City from the typical urban settlement in the universe was the inhabitants’ constant proximity to an interrogation room or a prison cell. Loki soon found himself in a poorly-lit, grey cube furnished only with a table and three chairs. Two were vacant. Brunnhilde occupied the third.

Are you fucking kidding me?

‘You look well-rested,’ Loki said while he took stock of the bruises on Brunnhilde’s skin and the dried bloodstains on her clothing. The garments themselves looked to be in a far worse state than it had been the last time he had seen Brunnhilde wear it. Behind him, he heard the Chitauri withdraw and someone else entered the interrogation room. ‘What’s going on here?’

‘What do you think is going on?’ Gamora said.

She had the smug look of a person who had already done the calculations and had concluded that she was assured of victory. Nebula had also slunk into the room, just behind her sister, but she wore a decidedly different expression. All in all, Loki liked this set up less with every passing second.

‘I can’t quite say,’ Loki replied. ‘A surly gaggle of Chitauri interrupted my work and informed Corvus Glaive wanted me. Yet I don’t see the good general here, only my former employee, who should’ve been far away from the Sanctuary by now.’

‘Glaive is delayed.’

Loki leaned in to examine the Valkyrie’s blood-shot left eye and to get a better look at the bindings around her wrists. ‘Ah. Well, he’s a busy man. So am I. Brunnhilde would you care to explain how you ended up here, so I can figure out why I’m here?’

Brunnhilde’s lips parted, but before she could produce a sound, Gamora cut in. ‘There was an intrusion into the Palisade last week; an investigation was initiated. Your… former employee was apprehended as part of this investigation. She had a host of data originating from the Palisade’s systems on her person.’

‘Great mercy. I had no idea she was capable of such a thing.’
‘So you didn’t know about this?’ Nebula asked.

Loki vehemently shook his head, saving the curse words for his inner thoughts. ‘I dismissed her when I was released from the Palisade medbay. Your father promised me accommodation and I thought with me living and working in the military compound, it made no sense to keep a guard around. I’d had no need for her beforehand as it was. I told her to find her way back to her home-planet. As far as I knew, she’d left. I hadn’t even heard about this break-in until now.’

‘It was kept quiet. Reputation’s important,’ Gamora said. ‘The break-in is not actually why we are here, but rather information revealed upon more thorough investigation. She has made allegations about you and your motives. She claims you hired her to assist you while you spied on activities in the Sanctuary. You were allegedly ordered to do so by your adoptive father and will report back to him on what you have found here.’

Although his heart thumped, Loki forced his voice to remain level. ‘How did you get this information?’

‘It’s got to be beatings and threats. Got to be. If it was the mind stone, I’d be cowering before Thanos’ feet right now.’

Gamora shrugged. ‘The usual way.’

‘I’m sorry, Loki,’ Brunnhilde muttered.

‘You’re sorry?’ Loki snapped. ‘You’re sorry? You’re just drunken, back-alley scum, who —’

‘Is it true?’ Gamora demanded, raising her voice to drown out the diatribe he had been building up to.

Loki glanced to Nebula, who still stood a step behind her sister and peered at him with widened eyes. He took a breath and made a show of trying to bring himself under control. ‘Of course it’s not true. Look, Gamora, you were right, I did sleep with her while she was employed as my guard. Once. Only once. I drank too much one evening and that was that, except then she started to expect things and make demands. She spat in my face when I told her to go. Surely you know how reliable confessions obtained under torture actually are. She’s pissed at me for rejecting her, why wouldn’t she make up all sorts of tall tales about me?’

‘She stole from the Great Titan, she’s marked for death already. The condemned have no reason to hold back the truth any longer.’

‘That doesn’t mean she doesn’t have reason to lie though,’ Nebula said. ‘If you’re going to die, you might as well get revenge on everyone you have grievances with.’

Brunnhilde let her head drop forward until her forehead hovered all of two inches above the table top. Gamora grabbed a fistful of Brunnhilde’s hair and wrenched her head up. ‘Have you considered, sister, that you might be biased on this matter?’

‘Although you might think otherwise, sister, I do possess a modicum more intelligence than an Outrider,’ Nebula replied. She made a circle around Brunnhilde, peering down at the Valkyrie as if she were laboratory specimen. ‘She’s awfully quiet now, isn’t she? Anyway, where are you taking this? You don’t have the authority to question Loki.’

‘So that’ll be why you want Corvus Glaive here,’ Loki said with a huff.

He was no longer a random wretch pulled out from the slave pits or an unknown pilgrim coming
from whom knew where; he was officially in Thanos’ employ. More specifically, he had a position and a rank in the Titan’s armies, which placed him under the command of Thanos’ chief general, Corvus Glaive. Gamora couldn’t just apprehend a person from the army corps and interrogate them without Glaive’s expression concession.

‘He’ll be here soon enough,’ Gamora said, ‘and I’ve briefed him on this already.’

Loki sighed. ‘What reason would he have to deny what you ask from him?’ His voice grew strained. ‘I realise, in hindsight, I may have been overly harsh in what I said, Brunnhilde, but this is a low move. Well, not much I can do now. You might as well start your questions, Gamora. The anticipation won’t improve what’s about to come.’

‘It will for me,’ Gamora replied. ‘Why don’t you take a seat, Loki? Nebula, get her out of here and put her in the black cells. I got everything I need out of her already.’

Nebula’s eyes lingered on Loki as she grabbed Brunnhilde by the shoulders and pulled the Valkyrie out of the chair. There was no trace of compassion in the way she handled Brunnhilde, yet she looked aghast. Afraid for what was about to happen to him, Loki realised. They were all Children of Thanos here. He knew what awaited him in Gamora’s hands. So did Nebula.

‘Take her chair, Loki’ Gamora said, pointing to the chair Nebula had just forced Brunnhilde to vacate.

‘Certainly.’

He rested his hand on the chair’s back. It was made of a steel alloy of some kind, the whole chair all one piece — probably made from a mould in a factory right here in Sanctuary City. As far as interrogation room furniture went, it was a good chair.

And, as it happened, surprisingly aerodynamic.

The chair struck Gamora right in the face. The force of the hit wasn’t even close to knocking her out, but it did disorient Gamora long enough for Loki to flip the table in her direction as well. He rushed over to Nebula and Brunnhilde. Getting out of this room wasn’t going to be easy — in attacking Gamora, Loki had betrayed himself to Nebula and Brunnhilde’s hands were bound.

Thankfully, Brunnhilde still had her wits about her. She kicked out, making Nebula groan in pain. Loki leaped onto Nebula’s back and wrapped his hands around her neck. However far each modification of her body pushed her towards relinquishing the body she had been born with, Nebula still needed to breathe. She let go on Brunnhilde and clawed at Loki’s hands. He held on, feeling the protest of both the natural tendons and the robotic additions against his fingers.

‘That was the stupidest thing you’ve ever done,’ Gamora sneered as she wrenched Loki off her sister. ‘You’ll realise that very soon.’

Loki slumped to the floor and by the time he was back on his feet, Gamora had her sword drawn. He met her first strike with his own pair of knives. For all his training since arriving at the Sanctuary, Loki’s heart drummed. He pushed Gamora’s sword off to the side, then moved in. His knives had a shorter reach than Gamora’s blade, so getting close was vital.

‘Loki!’ Brunnhilde yelled.

Nebula rammed into him, using her body mass to push him away from Gamora. He lost his footing and one knife. The resulting heap was a mess of limbs, not helped by Brunnhilde leaping into the confusion. Fists, feet, foreheads. Kicks, swings, jabs. Loki didn’t bother keeping track of where the
attacks came from, focusing only on warding them off. Nebula, it seemed, was determined to beat him to a pulp.

He managed, eventually, to push her off and to reclaim the knife he had dropped. There was another flash of silver in the periphery of his vision, but he ignored it. Gamora had positioned herself in front of the door — the door that was the sole exit out of the room.

‘Your father is a monster,’ Loki said as he moved towards her. ‘It’s hard to admit to it, but you know this is true.’

Her reply was an enraged holler. Loki sidestepped her attack and raised his hand to aim a blow into Gamora’s back. Brunnhilde got there first. She sank a sword deep into Gamora’s abdomen and turned her wrist, making the sword scrape through Gamora’s intestines. What followed wasn’t a scream. All Gamora managed was a tortured whimper.

‘Come on!’ Loki shouted. He flung open the door and pulled Brunnhilde out of the room.

No one waited around outside. Gamora had either not expected Loki to cause trouble or had assumed that between her and Nebula they could come out victorious should they encounter resistance. Immeasurably relieved, Loki muttered a thanks to the Norns for Gamora’s over-confidence. He was sure Nebula would stay behind until her sister could get medical attention; they had a few minutes before the pursuit began.

He held Brunnhilde by the upper arm as they hurried down the corridor. ‘Drop that sword. That’s one of Nebula’s, isn’t it? Too distinctive.’

‘Pity,’ she mumbled and let the sword fall out of her hands. ‘It was a good scoop to get it. She was so busy trying to turn that handsome face of yours into mush.’

‘Do as I tell you and be quiet.’

Brunnhilde smiled weakly, then added, ‘The handcuffs are kind of distinctive too, don’t you think?’

She did have a point there. Loki stopped in mid-step and spun her around, then peered down at the handcuffs again. They were robust and positioned closely around Brunnhilde’s wrists, so there was no smashing them off or trying to slip them off Brunnhilde. But the lock mechanism itself was unlikely to be complicated or warded. Loki pressed his hands against the handcuffs and tried an unlocking spell. The lock clicked open.

‘I’m still good for something.’ He slid the handcuffs into his pocket and glanced around. Still no one in the vicinity. ‘After this, you’re really going to have to stay quiet.’

He let his magic burst out, spreading first over himself, then over Brunnhilde. When it settled, he had to suppress a laugh. Brunnhilde incredulous expression didn’t at all belong on the face of a Chitauri.
They didn’t run — running would have only attracted attention, but they moved quickly, leaving one city block after another behind them. After about half an hour they had reached the outer ring of Sanctuary City where warehouses and workshops proliferated. Some buildings clearly saw more use than others and some were, in fact, being pulled apart to be used for building material in new construction. Loki nudged Brunnhilde towards one of these.

Their entrance was a foot-wide gap between two pieces of wall panelling. To Loki’s relief, once they squeezed through, they found they had the building to themselves. All the furnishings had been stripped long ago and only a fine yellow powder remained caked over the floor. Not knowing what the powder was, Loki steered Brunnhilde to a few square metres of floor by the back wall where the powder layer was the thinnest.

‘We can take a rest here for a while,’ he said.

Brunnhilde nodded, then propped herself against the back wall and slid down to the floor. As she buried her head in her hands, Loki dropped the concealment spells over them both, but he didn’t like what he saw even before he exposed the damage Brunnhilde had accrued in Thanos’ custody. She sat now with her legs sprawled out awkwardly and at the same time, seemed to be trying to hide her face from the world. What bluster she had summoned back in the interrogation room had utterly dissipated.

She reminded Loki of a wounded wildcat, who would claw and hiss with such vehemence that you would scarcely believe the animal was injured at all. Yet moments after the cat believed danger had passed, it would shrink into itself, wholly exhausted. Loki had seen this type of response many times before and had done much the same thing himself too. He supposed it was a manifestation of a primordial survival instinct many of the universe’s sentient species had inherited from their less sophisticated forefathers.

Swallowing all the candid words that simmered in the back of his mind, Loki crouched down beside the Valkyrie. ‘Will you let me have a look at you?’ he said softly. ‘Please? I need to know how badly off you are right now.’

Brunnhilde peeled her hands away and brought up her head. The lighting wasn’t ideal, but what penetrated the dusty windows above them was enough to see the bruising across Brunnhilde’s nose. Loki carefully felt the area around her blood-shot eye.

‘Leave it,’ she said. ‘The socket was fractured; it’s half-way through healing now. The nose too, I think.’

‘What about beyond your face?’

‘It’ll be fine. Just need to rest for a bit. I just need to…’

‘Have a drink?’

‘Or twelve.’

Loki wasn’t sure whether alcohol was supposed to be a psychological comfort or if Brunnhilde physically needed it. Asgardians were heavy drinkers; it was part of their culture, but he had come across other species for whom over-consumption often led to dependency. If any Asgardian had crossed the threshold from liberal drinking to addiction, it had to be Brunnhilde. She had drunk less
in their last few weeks together, but a half-empty bottle of whatever alcoholic substance she could get her hands on remained her faithful companion.

In any case, Loki wasn’t about to go hunting for alcohol while a fugitive in Sanctuary City. Officially, alcoholic beverages weren’t permitted on Theta-Three, but there was such a rambunctious black market for the stuff, he was sure it was secretly supported by elements within the governing clique. This meant that the vendors likely maintained regular contact with the Palisade insiders and with the right amount on offer, could be persuaded to be on the lookout for Brunnhilde and Loki.

He tried to take stock of Brunnhilde’s condition once more. The damage on her face was healing — Asgardians were a hardy lot. The angle of her left forearm looked off, probably a broken bone that had knotted back incorrectly, but he would have to re-break it and reset it if he was to fix it, which he didn’t want to do right now. Better a crooked arm than a newly broken one. A part of him wanted to ask what had been done to her. Judging by her state, it wasn’t all crude beatings. He had a wealth of experience with mistreatment in the hands of Thanos’ followers; a small, morbid part of him longed to compare notes.

*Back when you were first free of them, did you want to speak to anyone about that? Ever?*

Grimacing, Loki chose another chain of questioning. It was bound to be only marginally less upsetting to Brunnhilde, but one he suspected he might actually receive comprehensive answers to.

‘Why didn’t you find a ship back to Sakaar as I told you to?’ he asked.

‘Because you’re an idiot.’

Loki’s lips quirked up; maybe the bluster wasn’t wholly spent in her just yet. ‘I’m not the one who blew my cover.’

‘Yeah, I know, my bad,’ Brunnhilde replied. She drew her legs up and tried to scrape blots of dried blood off her clothes. ‘I just wanted to finish what I’d started before I left, as a back-up in case your plans didn’t work out. So I broke into the Palisade, stole a bunch of data from their systems and was backing right out of there when I caught some guards. I thought I’d killed them. Turned out not quite. He was able to give a description of me and that’s how they tracked me down.’

‘It’s always the loose ends that get you.’

‘Can’t argue with you there.’

‘How long ago did they take you in?’

‘About ten days I think,’ she said, then quickly added, ‘Loki, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to tell them about you.’

*Stop apologising. An apology is nothing more than an attempt to justify your failures.* Perhaps there were still ideologies Loki shared with Thanos. Whether she had intended to do it or not, Brunnhilde had destroyed everything Loki had painstakingly set up during his time in the Sanctuary. Nor did she have any idea just how much effort Loki had expended here when all the while his instincts told him to flee as far away from Theta-Three as materially possible. ‘I’m sorry’ wasn’t going to cut it.

Perhaps sensing that Loki wasn’t about to reply with anything conciliatory, Brunnhilde changed tack. ‘We need to figure out how to deal with this situation.’

‘If you have any ideas, fire away,’ Loki responded, not bothering to curtail the sarcasm in his tone. ‘Getting off this asteroid is going to be decidedly difficult. The first thing Gamora would’ve done is
to impound your ship. Then any trading vessel heading out will have been warned to be on the look-
out for us and it'll be the same with the smugglers. They’d be happy to collect a reward for handing
us over and I don’t have anything to make a counter-offer with. Perhaps, we might have a better
chance if we separate. They’d be looking for two people, not one.’

‘Trying to get off Theta-Three right away is a bad idea. That’d be what they’d expect us to do.’

Loki scoffed. ‘Staying here is no better. Not in the city with every patrol looking for us. What then?
Do you want to head out into the wilderness? I’ve heard of escapees from the mines who tried that.
It’s an unpleasant death. Besides, getting out of the Sanctuary actually suits me. I have a lead to
follow, I might as well take it.’

‘What’s your lead?’ Brunnhilde narrowed his eyes and winced. She swore under her breath as she
prodded around her injured eye. ‘Reinforcements would be good.’

‘It may be a way to kill Thanos.’

‘Yeah?’ She nodded along to Loki’s summation of what Thanos had explained to him about the fate
of Titan, but when he finished and fell silent, she pursed her lips. ‘So, what, you want to head out to
his home-world, which is like eight months travel from here, in search of a virus? The virus might
well have died out itself once it ran out of viable hosts to infect. Or it might be dangerous to us too.
Who’s to say the Titans are the only species susceptible to it.’

‘It’s not the most robust of plans, I concede, but this is the one sure thing that will kill a Titan.’

‘I don’t know why you think he’s so invulnerable. Sure, he’s big and he’s surrounded by supporters,
so I agree that an outright assassination attempt in the middle of the Palisade isn’t the best idea. But
he’s hardly immortal. Just in the story Thanos told you, he talked of not one, but two things that
could kill someone of his species.’

Loki peered blankly at Brunnhilde for a long moment until he worked through the meaning of her
words. ‘Explosives.’

‘Explosives indeed.’ Brunnhilde smiled.

Revenge was never sweeter than when carried out with a poetic flair. After claiming the Tesseract,
Thanos had the Statesman set on fire. That fire had taken Loki’s foot and twisted his skin in endless
scars. It served the Mad Titan right if Loki sent him out in flames. Loki could imagine so easily
mountains of flame consuming the entirety of Theta-Three. Of course, it wouldn’t be half as dramatic
as that — Sultur wasn’t around to offer his services, but there should be enough explosive material
on the asteroid to satisfy Loki’s needs.

‘It’s not a matter of explosives alone,’ Loki said aloud, although the words had been intended
primarily for himself. ‘We’d have to set up explosives without being detected. Set them off at the
right moment too. It has to work perfectly. We can’t risk failing or his fury will pursue us to the very
ends of the universe.’

‘The guy sleeps, right?’

‘I think so?’

Brunnhilde reached for the wall and started climbing to her feet. ‘Then we rig up his bedroom. I
would prefer a mass murderer to be awake at the moment of his death, but for the sake of
expediency, we can just blow him up while he’s sleeping.’
‘All right, assuming that —’

‘Assuming that we get the layout of Thanos’ personal areas inside the Palisade? And assuming we can get our hands on the explosives we need?’ Brunnhilde cut in. ‘I spent weeks crawling around this asteroid, I know where the explosives factories are and where the storage bunkers are. And I’m not stupid enough to walk around with the only copy of the data I stole from the Palisade in my pocket; I made a back-up.’

‘You would’ve been smarter yet not to have that data on you at all.’

Brunnhilde winced. ‘You really know how to rub it in, don’t you? I would’ve been gone by now, but it turns out it’s not easy to get your ship approved for lift-off around here. While I was sorting that, I was looking to stash that second copy somewhere safe. That’s when they took me in. Bad timing’s a bitch,’ she sighed. ‘So, what’s it going to be? Are you in the mood to make some fireworks?’

‘Raging wildfire is more the image I had in mind,’ Loki replied. He shrugged. ‘Might as well, I suppose. I’ve survived more reckless plans.’
At least the first step in their assassination plan went off without a hitch. Or, if there had been hitches, Brunnhilde didn’t consider it necessary to inform Loki of these. But now that he had the datapad with the back-up of the files Brunnhilde had stolen from the Sanctuary, with every minute that passed, Loki was increasingly certain that the datapad retrieval had been by far the easiest part of this affair.

‘Besides all of the above, Valkyrie, your ship was impounded. As if they’d miss something that obvious,’ he said as he none-too-gently massaged his temple.

Gamora had no reason to ask about Loki’s shape-shifting abilities and thus Brunnhilde hadn’t shared any information about Loki’s pseudo-Asgardian form with the Children of Thanos. While Brunnhilde had retrieved her datapad, he had dropped the Chitauri form and reverted to the face he had grown up with. It was as much a deception as the Chitauri disguise he had adopted earlier, but this magic was intimately familiar to Loki and asked a lot less of him than any other glamour he could adopt. Once he had stripped off the jacket, which bore the insignia of Thanos’ military forces across the shoulders, he was left with a plain, grey shirt. He rubbed some dirt into it and added a few extra scuff-marks to his boots until he thought he no longer stood out from the thousands of labourers at work in Sanctuary City on any normal day.

He had taken the risk and ventured out to the port — no plan was complete without an exit strategy. What he found, however, hadn’t left him enthused about their chances.

Brunnhilde tapped her fingers against her thigh, the beat a match to the thumping of the machinery on the factory floor below them. ‘Security’s tight, I take it.’

‘Very. Maybe it’ll be all chaos once the Palisade is compromised, but even so, we won’t have a pick of ships to choose from. The fuel can’t be procured locally so there’s always a shortage. They don’t refuel right until the ship is about to go and they don’t put in a drop more than is necessary.’

‘Then it’ll be a fight all the way out and we’ll just take the best of what we can get,’ Brunnhilde replied.

Loki nodded, although this conclusion left him deeply unsatisfied. On the other hand, their departure was the last step in this operation and he had plenty of doubts outstanding about what would precede it. He slid his thumb over the datapad screen in order to zoom in on the Palisade schematics.

‘It doesn’t have to be his bedroom,’ he said. ‘While he’s on Theta-Three, he scarcely leaves the Palisade, there are other areas of the complex where he regularly spends his time.’

Brunnhilde crossed her arms. ‘Such as?’

The ideal scenario was the laboratory. If he and Brunnhilde stacked the enclosed space with enough explosives, they could potentially incinerate not only Thanos, but Ebony Maw and the mind stone too. The problem was, the schematics they had in front of them didn’t contain any trace of the said laboratory. Loki supposed he could trace the path there by relying on his memory, but once they got to the lift, Loki didn’t have the entry code. Ebony Maw had never permitted Loki to be in the laboratory on his own. The first time around, he had tried to puzzle out the code from watching the
Maw’s movements but had gotten nowhere. Nor did he have a way to fake the Maw’s fingerprints for the scanner.

Where then if not the laboratory or the bedroom? The throne room tempted, mostly because it satisfied Loki’s sense of dramatic irony to imagine Thanos’ throne blowing up under him. However, the room was used on an ad hoc basis. There was no predicting who might walk in or when.

‘He has an office,’ Brunnhilde said, motioning towards the datapad screen.

Loki zoomed out a tad; he didn’t recount ever hearing about any office. ‘This is just a room in his suite. I don’t know how often he uses it and if we get that far, we might as well walk a further twenty metres to the bedroom.’ He zoomed out and flicked to a file that detailed a different level of the complex. ‘Maybe the dining room? No, there are people coming and going all day, plus the staff cleaning up in between. No chance we’ll manage to get in, set up and get out without being spotted.’

‘The bedroom it is then. So what are the walls and the floor like? And the furniture?’

‘Why would I know that?’

Brunnhilde swore under her breath, then went on at a louder pitch. ‘For a person who was supposedly set on killing the madman, you’ve been rather too pre-occupied training his troops and cosying up to his daughter. I don’t suppose you have any idea of his daily habits either? It would be helpful to know when he goes to bed and when he gets up.’

‘I’m not the one who got caught,’ Loki replied. ‘If not for your idi…’

Brunnhilde brought her finger up to her lips. A moment later Loki heard it too — the machinery that had been rumbling in the factory floor below them had ground to a halt. Loki shut off the datapad in case the illuminated screen caught the attention of a wandering eye, then prostrated himself on the rough concrete. He was closer to the balcony railing and thus potentially more visible, but Brunnhilde didn’t take chances, ducking down to lie beside him. They waited. There seemed to be more movement from the workers now, but Loki supposed the machinery might have just drowned out some of that noise either.

‘Clean up your area!’ someone hollered. ‘Did you hear me back there? I’ve had enough of the third shifters complaining about you lazy-ass fucking wankers and the mess you leave!’

‘It’s just the shift change,’ Brunnhilde muttered, rolling to her side.

Loki grabbed her before she could clamber up and forced her to stay put. They had relocated here on the assumption that a busy factory was less likely to be searched than an empty warehouse. But Thanos’ thugs weren’t the only threat in this city. While they worked, the factory labourers focused on their tasks. They had high quotas to fulfil, so there was no opportunity for malingering. Now that they had been dismissed, however, they were more likely to glance up and with the machinery quiet, any noise Loki and Brunnhilde made was more likely to be heard. Loki made sure he and Brunnhilde stayed still until the next shift had come in and started up the production lines again.

‘He does sleep in his own bedroom, doesn’t he?’ Brunnhilde hissed when Loki finally let go of her.

‘If he’s not sleeping, he’d be working. This man has dedicated his life to his crusade for the universe; he’s not going to waste time at a brothel or anything of that kind.’

‘You’re probably right there.’

Loki snickered. ‘So there is something I can get right.’
'The ideal thing would be to pack the explosives on the underside of the bed frame,' Brunnhilde went on seemingly without having heard Loki’s words, ‘but that’s assuming he sleeps on a bed. It’d really bloody help if we knew more about the Titans as a species too. But working with what we have to go on, we just hope there is some space to put the explosives that won’t be immediately obvious. I can just set up a detonator to go when it senses motion.'

‘What if Thanos isn’t the first person to enter the room? It could be one of the house staff or just one of the robotic floor cleaners they have all over the place in the Palisade.’

‘Have you considered inciting a rebellion among your Exian soldiers and getting them to take down Thanos? Might be safer than us sticking out our necks like this.’

‘I assure you, Ebony Maw has done thorough work on those boys,’ Loki replied. It saddened him to admit as much, in part because the Exians were now dedicating their lives to a vile cause and in part because he had thoroughly enjoyed leading the rebellion against the Grandmaster. ‘We can do a remote detonation. Just set up a small camera in the corner of the room and when we see him walk in, you do your thing.’

‘The Palisade has a host of shields set up around its perimeter that’d intercept unauthorised signals from the outside. We’d have to still be inside the complex to start the detonation and the signal won’t go far, so we’d have to be close. It won’t be a set up the trap and stroll away kind of deal.’

Loki sighed. ‘I never thought it would be.’

Somehow these were the words that illuminated to Loki the reality of what they were planning. Unwilling to accept the possibility of failure, they would be getting their hands on the most potent explosive material to be found on Theta-Three. If they didn’t blow themselves up prematurely or get caught on the way in, there would be nothing solid left of the Titan’s body. But as much as it was retribution for the fate Thanos had decreed to the Statesman, it was also a near-certain death sentence for many who worked and resided in the Palisade — once the explosives went off, the fire wouldn’t be contained to the bedroom for long.

‘So it’ll be as many packs of ASV-591 as we can carry without looking obvious, a remote detonation mechanism, a camera,’ he said. ‘And add a pair of small blasters to the list of things we need. A knife’s good for many things, but when there’s fire all around you, a blaster is the quicker way out.’

Brunnhilde smiled wryly. ‘This is the kind of shopping list I like.’

A day later, Brunnhilde and Loki were a lot filthier and a great deal hungrier, but they had made good use of the Mad Titan’s warehouse and storerooms. Every item on their ‘shopping list’ had crossed off. The first stage in turning their plan into reality, however, wasn’t happening as quickly as they had hoped it would.

While Loki stood with his arms crossed and hummed out an old song, Brunnhilde craned her neck to get a better look.

‘These two,’ she said pointing to her chosen victims.

‘Too low ranking,’ Loki replied. In truth, he was more preoccupied with Brunnhilde than with the two Titan’s loyalists that the Valkyrie had picked out from the crowd spilling out of the Palisade. There was a distinct undercurrent of excitement to her words now. Loki had to swallow a laugh;
Asgardians were all so alike.

‘We’ve been waiting for the best part of an hour here already and this is the best we’ve spotted. If we hang around much longer, someone is bound to take an interest in our business. Or I’m going to die of starvation.’

*I suppose we only have to get inside. Those two would have access to the lower levels.*

‘Fine,’ Loki said. ‘I’m sick of wasting time out here too. Let’s go.’

He let Brunnhilde go ahead. Despite the effort it took on his part, he kept Brunnhilde concealed under the glamour of a Chitauri — posters had begun to pop up bearing images and descriptions of the two fugitives Thanos desperately sought, with a promise of a generous reward added in bolded text at the bottom. It was simply not feasible for Brunnhilde to be out on the streets wearing her own face. As a Chitauri, however, she blended in perfectly well. There were hundreds of Chitauri about in the streets of Sanctuary City, especially now that there was an open manhunt going on.

For his part, Loki had to adopt a new disguise for this scheme. He closed his eyes and coaxed his magic until he felt his bones twist and his muscles thin. It was far from a pleasant experience, which was why a wise sorcerer avoided shape-shifting that necessitated large changes to one’s physical size. Unfortunately, the messengers that run between the various compounds in the city all through the day tended to be nimble youths who were still a little young to do a full day’s physical labour.

Loki gulped down a lungful of air and broke into a sprint. In imitation of the dozens of messenger runners he had seen out on the streets, he weaved through the crowd, always apologising, but never slowing his pace. He passed Brunnhilde soon enough, but he pressed out without acknowledging her.

‘Sir! Ma’am!’ he called out, trying to sound like his voice hadn’t quite broken yet. ‘Sir! Ma’am! Hold on, please!’

The two Palisade clerks turned in unison and looked expectantly at Loki when they spotted him. He came to a sharp stop just before them, then sucked in more air to suggest he was far more winded than he was.

‘Well, what is it, boy?’ the elder of the clerks demanded.

Loki’s widened his eyes. ‘Crimson code! You are requested at the treasury.’

‘In that case, you’d best lower your voice,’ the clerk replied. ‘Why in thrice-blessed Teerha would we be needed in the treasury? Who is the message from?’

‘Ebony Maw.’ In Loki’s opinion, this was the riskiest part of this conversation. These two seemed like fairly low ranking staff, they might well believe it to be out of the realms of possibility to receive orders directly from the Maw. If only Loki knew who their supervisors were. The best he could make out from the insignia on their jacket lapels was that they belonged to the financial team. So lest the two clerks had time to ponder the peculiarity of this message, Loki quickly went on. ‘I don’t know what’s happened, but it’s gotta be big. I’ve been sent out to gather everyone I can spot and send them off to the treasury.’

‘Do you think it’s related to that break-in into the Palisade the other week?’ the younger, female clerk suggested.

The older clerk pursed his lips. ‘Maybe. I don’t like the sound of this much, but we’d best get on with it then, Jalmar. Go on, boy, it seems we all still have plenty of work to do tonight.’
‘Bye!’ Loki replied, already turning on his heel.

He spotted Brunnhilde in the crowd about five metres back. She carried their supplies for the night’s operation in a bag slung off her shoulder, which was a handy way to distinguish her from the actual Chitauri. He winked to her as he sprinted back past her. Once he reached an intersection, Loki took the smaller alleyway that spun off to the right. If the two clerks had a decent brain between them, they would know that if Ebony Maw had declared code crimson, the second highest alert level for Palisade staff, he expected everyone to hurry directly to their work. The clerks should be taking every short-cut available.

And, as it happened, there were some narrow, little-used streets between this quarter and the treasury. Loki kept up the frenetic pace as he took a parallel street, then did his best to get ahead of the two clerks. He stopped at the mouth of the alleyway he and Brunnhilde had picked as the most suitable for their purposes and his best to block the entrance with his slim body.

‘Hey, get out of the way, will ya?’ said a wrinkled Kree, who was dressed in the usual get-up of the Mess hall staff.

Loki’s heart thumped. ‘Best take a different street. They… Someone found a decapitated head down there, the city militia told me to keep people away while they do their investigation.’

The Kree’s expression twisted into a grimace. He stared at Loki for a long moment, before seemingly deciding that a story that outlandish wasn’t worth questioning and turning away. Loki grinned as he watched the Kree’s retreat.

A scream.

Loki whipped around and headed down the narrow alley. He found the source of the disturbance at the second twist in the passage. Brunnhilde had already slipped a line of steel wire around the neck of the older clerk and was pulling it tighter with every passing second. Jarmal, the female clerk, meanwhile had lost the lottery on her fight or flight response. She stood frozen three feet away, staring blankly at Brunnhilde’s masterwork.

Loki slipped out a knife and sank it into the back of Jarmal’s neck. It wasn’t the kindest of deaths, but she did stop breathing before her companion had, which was as much mercy as Loki could offer her. Loose ends back on Jotunheim and then here in the Sanctuary had proven disastrous, he couldn’t allow himself to make the same mistake for the third time.

‘I thought we agreed on a no blood policy?’ Brunnhilde said as she released the wire around the clerk’s neck and let his body slide to the ground. ‘You said yourself bloody clothes —’

‘There was a shortage of bludgeoning tools.’

‘At least you didn’t leave any stab marks on her clothes.’ Brunnhilde glanced up at the towering buildings either side of the alley. What few windows there were had been fitted with frosted glass, which offered light, but no view of the street. Satisfied that they didn’t have witnesses, she rolled the dead clerk over to his back and pilfered through his pockets until she found his identity card. She tossed it to Loki. ‘You look more his built. Do you have hers?’

That took a bit of digging; Jarmal’s clothing contained about a dozen pockets. By the time Loki pulled out the identity card, he was thoroughly sick of fiddly zippers and tiny, slippery buttons.

‘We need to keep moving,’ Brunnhilde said.

‘Yeah, I know,’ Loki muttered in reply. He didn’t like standing over two corpses in the middle of an
otherwise deserted street any more than Brunnhilde did. ‘Here, take her id card. Take her clothes too, it’s one less thing for me to worry about.’

He checked both sides of the alleyway and the windows above them. Still clear. Loki morphed the glamour on Brunnhilde until she resembled the dead clerk, then motioned towards the corpse. He had been forced to call on his magic for the past two days and he felt the first signs of strain, which worried him — he anticipated he would need to rely on it again for what was to come. Should the glamour fail, the clothes at least were a back-up. Brunnhilde and Jalmar were of a similar enough build that Brunnhilde wouldn’t betray herself at once.

‘There’s blood all over her,’ Brunnhilde tutted, peeling Jalmar’s cloak off her swiftly cooling body.

Loki flicked his fingers. A cleaning spell wasn’t yet beyond him.

‘Thanks.’

He nodded and busied himself with taking on the persona of the other clerk. Lysande, according to his work identification card. Knowing his name left a bit of distaste in Loki’s mouth about borrowing the dead man’s face and wearing his clothes. Lysande seemed to have been having a perfectly normal day until Loki and Brunnhilde decided to end his life.

Fastening the clasp of Lysande’s cloak, Loki said, ‘The bodies.’

They had already stripped Lysande and Jalmar of their identification documents and of the most recognisable pieces of their garments, but Loki wasn’t willing to take chances. Their cover would be blown if it was discovered that the people they were impersonating were already dead.

‘Sure thing, Odinson.’ Brunnhilde extracted a small flask out of the side pocket of her bag and poured its contents over the bodies. ‘Stand back.’

Loki took three steps back, but it wasn’t far enough for Brunnhilde. She thrust out her arm and pulled him along as she herself backed away. Once they were a good ten feet away, she took out her small blaster and fired in the direction of the two corpses.

The blaster produced a momentary, blue-coloured flash, but it was enough to ignite the accelerant. Flames easily as tall as Loki himself shot up from Lysande and Jalmar’s bodies.

‘Not bad, eh?’ Brunnhilde remarked. ‘Someone on this miserable asteroid knows how to make fireworks.’

Loki gave her a sidelong glance. ‘Let’s get out of here. We still have a lot to do tonight.’

Chapter End Notes

A quick question - would anyone be interested in reading deleted scenes if I were to post them up? There are a couple for this story and there’ll probably be more by the time I’m done.
The Palisade

The number of security guards at the entrance to the Palisade had been doubled when Thanos had returned to Theta-Three. Now the numbers had been doubled again. The result bordered on comical. The entrance wasn’t all that wide and the security personnel struggled to position themselves in a way that they didn’t choke the flow of traffic in and out of the Palisade.

Not that Loki or Brunnhilde were laughing. A slip up here would have dire consequences.

Brunnhilde went first, handing Jalmar’s identity card over to the desk clerk and trying not to cling too tightly to her bag.

‘ Didn’t you leave like an hour ago?’ the desk clerk said between an impressive succession of yawns. ‘You’re missing the evening meal.’

Brunnhilde shrugged her shoulders tiredly. ‘You are too, aren’t you?’

‘The work never stops.’ The desk clerk snickered, then handed Jalmar’s card back to Brunnhilde. ‘Enjoy your evening, darling.’

Loki made a conscious effort not to track Brunnhilde’s passage past the last rings of guards. Looking anxious and watching people too intently was the first step to attracting unwanted attention from Thanos’ armed thugs. So he simply passed Lysante’s identity card to the clerk and commiserated about the constant necessity to work long past reasonable hours, especially now that there were two fugitives in town. By the time Loki got the card back, he was certain the desk clerk had been a missed opportunity to recruit one of Thanos’ men to Loki’s cause.

For every path we tread, we leave behind a dozen paths untrodden.

‘Good evening, gentlemen,’ Loki said pleasantly to the security guard at the back of the atrium as he moved past them, then, the moment he was out of their sight, wiped his cordial smile off his face. ‘You needn’t have waited for me, Jalmar.’

‘The way you were going, I thought you were about to ask the clerk out on a date,’ Brunnhilde replied.

Loki swallowed about half a dozen inappropriate responses and motioned in the direction they needed to go to reach the upper levels. Few people crossed their path in the labyrinthine corridors in the Palisade. Those who were still working, and there were a decent number doing so, were busy at their terminals, trying to finish off the day’s work rather than idling in the hallways. More numerous were the cleaning drones, preoccupied with scrubbing the floor and removing built-up dust on the light-fixtures.

Brunnhilde took in a sharp breath as they finally reached the complex section where the inner circle’s personal quarters were situated. Loki patted her on the shoulder, more relieved than anything else that he wasn’t the only one struggling with his nerves.

This area of the Palisade didn’t have the brutalist aesthetic dominant through much of the rest of the complex. Plush carpeting stretched out with nary a scuff-mark to be seen and in the small recessed bays set into the walls, climbing plants snaked their way out of their glazed pots. Loki could barely breathe as they passed one door after another. They weren’t labelled, but Loki could imagine who occupied the suites that lay on the other side of those doors. It was imperative they weren’t discovered here.
‘This’ll work out,’ he said softly.

‘Of course it will,’ Brunnhilde replied.

The door to Thanos’ apartments was at the end of this hallway. Its size — it had to be twelve feet tall — immediately set it apart from the rest. Brunnhilde gestured for Loki to hang back, while she strode over to the panel used to input the security code to the door. He did as bidden, although he wasn’t sure what he would do if they were discovered while Brunnhilde pulled off the panel’s casing and plugged in her datapad in order to break into the Palisade’s security system. The small blaster hidden under his clothes didn’t inspire him with confidence.

‘Any luck?’ Loki asked after a few minutes of furious typing and several irritated grunts emanated from Brunnhilde.

‘Wait for it,’ she muttered. ‘Wait… here.’ She grinned, but when she scrolled down her expression faltered somewhat. ‘It’s odd, the password hasn’t been changed in more than two months.’

‘And it should’ve been updated the moment they discovered they’d had a break in,’ Loki said, more to himself than in reply to Brunnhilde. He and the Valkyrie exchanged uneasy looks, but neither of them had an answer. ‘It could just be an oversight I suppose.’

‘Or it’s hubris.’

‘I don’t…’

Brunnhilde pulled out the cord she’d connected to the wall-side panel with more force than was necessary, sending a dull thump down the hallway. ‘Maybe it’s one thing, maybe it’s the other. Our plan stays the same, doesn’t it?’

‘True.’

She was already typing in the code before Loki had finished speaking. When she pressed the last button, something inside the wall shifted and the door popped open. His hand on his stolen blaster, Loki crept into the suite.

Lights flickered on, revealing a cavernous room. Thanos, it seemed, thought interior walls unnecessary. The same could have been said for most comforts an average person would clutter their house with. The carpet ended at the threshold and unpolished tile covered the floor without so much as a rug to make the cold floor more palatable. The few pieces of furniture — a lonely table in the middle, two cupboards pressed against the side wall, a pair of straight-backed chairs — were all made out of steel and discoloured wood.

‘This suite isn’t a place to live, this is a punishment,’ Brunnhilde said as she shut the door behind them.

Loki’s gaze lingered on the cacophony of steel poles and leather straps that dominated the right side of the space — some kind of exercise equipment as best as he could guess. ‘The cavern of a fanatic.’

‘At least we know he sleeps.’ Brunnhilde pointed to the shadowed space behind the rigged up exercise equipment, which Loki hadn’t noticed until this moment. There was a bed back there: steel frame, a thin mattress, no blanket. ‘This layout isn’t ideal. I expected a more enclosed space.’

‘There must’ve been walls here once,’ Loki said, peering at the tile-work under his feet. There were obvious breaks in the pattern that roughly matched the suite layout from the files Brunnhilde had stolen. ‘He must’ve had them removed. We’ll have to manage with the layout as it is. What do you
Brunnhilde set down her bag and unzipped it. This was another fiddly part of the operation. For their own safety, they had packed the explosives and the detonators separately, which meant that they now had to assemble the bombs. Loki started to help, but Brunnhilde was more proficient with the various wires and he seemed to only get in her way. He slipped the remote to the detonators into his pocket, then pulled out the camera they also needed to set up in here.

It was a small thing — about the width of his thumb, but the lack of internal walls complicated matters. He had planned to plant the camera above the doorway to the bedroom, which as it had turned out, didn’t exist. Loki examined the exercise equipment, then dismissed the idea. Chances were Thanos would want to train and he was bound to notice something attached to his equipment.

‘You two shouldn’t be in here,’ Nebula said.

Loki jerked around to find Nebula standing just past the doorway, a drawn sword in her right hand. He winced. The door had moved quietly and he had been preoccupied with his thoughts; he hadn’t noticed it open.

\textbf{Do I … Honestly, the chances of talking our way out of this one are rather low.}

Behind him, Brunnhilde rose to her feet and Loki suddenly had another thing to think about. The form Brunnhilde had adopted this evening was a small one, possessing a great capacity to perform complex calculations without a need for a computer and no muscle mass worth noting.

‘How did you know we were in here?’ he asked. He stalled, but the answer was also likely to give a clue about what they should expect if he and Brunnhilde were to make it back to the other side of the door.

‘I made updates to the Palisade’s security systems. A few tricks — an alert should an old password be used, a fake interface for anyone trying to hack their way in, and so on. I’m not as stupid as you think I am, Loki.’ Nebula’s jaw shifted forward as she swallowed. ‘It is Loki, isn’t it? I’d recognise your voice no matter whose face you wear.’

‘Of course you would,’ Brunnhilde shot back. She had come up to stand next to Loki, but didn’t stay rooted in place there. She offered him a meaningful side-long look, then kept moving sideways. Nebula would probably assume Brunnhilde was trying to encircle her. In truth, neither Brunnhilde nor Loki wanted to be in the vicinity of the explosives. ‘It’s the kind of thing you always know about the person you love.’

Nebula’s eyes widened and when she spoke, her words were spat out through clenched teeth. ‘He nearly killed my sister. If I’m reading this right, you are here to kill my father.’

‘I am,’ Loki declared. Both Nebula and Brunnhilde stared at him. It had been a long time since he had uttered anything with that degree of boldness. He took a few steps towards Nebula, confident now that there was no one watching her back — she was here on a personal mission. ‘You know why I’m doing this. Just look around you, look at yourself and remember everything he has done to you. He’s wrecked your entire life. He —’

‘He’s my father!’

‘He’s a cancer to the universe.’
Nebula drew her second blade and descended upon him with such fury that Loki didn’t have time to register what was happening. Only Brunnhilde’s blaster saved him. The shot obliterated the blade of the weapon in Nebula’s left hand, sending molten shards of metal into Loki and Nebula’s eyes.

Half-blind and all too aware of the gouges the metal had singed into his face, Loki rolled off to the side. He rubbed his eyes, then clambered up only to find himself short of an opponent. Nebula had abandoned her assault on him for an attempt to take out Brunnhilde and her blaster.

Brunnhilde fired off another two shots, both of which Nebula managed to avoid. On the next one, the blaster misfired. That was the problem with these weapons. The smaller they were, the less charge they held and the few of this type in the Sanctuary’s inventory were of shoddy quality. Loki wasn’t the least surprised that the blaster had all of half a dozen rounds in it. There was no recharging it right now either, so Brunnhilde tossed aside and ducked out of the way of Nebula’s attack.

‘Nebula! Listen to me!’ Loki shouted. ‘He’s not your father. He killed your family and took you as a pet.’

She spun around to face him. ‘Not a word more, Loki.’

He hurried forward lest her attention turn back to Brunnhilde and met her remaining sword with his knives. Nebula’s fury was palpable in every strike. There was no changing her mind — not tonight, possibly not ever. She fought with such intensity that even against two opponents she held her own and in fact, she was slowly driving them backwards.

Then Loki went for a low strike, but found neither Nebula nor her sword. She had slid sideways and caught the fistful of Brunnhilde’s clothing, which gave her enough leverage to throw Brunnhilde into Thanos’ exercise rig.

The move left Nebula facing away from Loki and he seized his chance. He leapt for her. She ducked and Loki tumbled gracelessly over the top. He landed hard on the tile floor, his skull coming down with such a force that he was sure he had cracked a floor tile. Nebula pulled the knives out of his hands.

‘You’ll regret this,’ Loki mumbled and grimaced as he tasted blood.

Nebula frowned, then leaned forward. ‘I can’t quite hear you begging for mercy there, Loki.’

‘You’ll regret this,’ he repeated more loudly, but the words came out slurred. He had bitten deep into his cheek as he fell and blood was now pooling into his mouth. He swallowed as much of it as he could. From his vantage, he could see between Nebula’s heavy boots — Brunnhilde had scrambled back to the explosives and was doing something with the wires. ‘Nebula, listen to me. There’s nothing Thanos can offer you other than blood, murder and a painful, premature death.’

‘You’re a liar,’ Nebula spat back. ‘There’s a reason your own kind want nothing to do with you.’

‘Yes, I know.’

Loki sighed, then let out an unhinged, mirthless laugh as he begged the air for the base materials he sought. It didn’t take much after that — a push up, a thrust of his arm, a release of his magic. An ice spear crackled into existence in Loki’s hand, striking just under Nebula’s sternum then up into her chest cavity. He let go of his makeshift spear as Nebula’s feet gave in under her and she tumbled down.

‘Here’s one lesson we never got to,’ Loki said. He caught Nebula’s sword and pulled it out of her reach. ‘Never share your real tricks with the enemy.’
Nebula tried to reply, but only frothed-up blood spurted out. However much of her had been modified, by the way she trembled, not quite able to move for the pain, Loki guessed he had found a part of Nebula that had been mere Luthomoid. He turned away, uncertain if the nausea that threatened to overwhelm him originated in the blood he had swallowed or in what he had just done.

‘Solid work there, Odinson,’ Brunnhilde said. ‘We should put her out of her misery though. Better Thanos finds her body than she crawl over and call an alarm.’

Nebula let out a violent gargle. ‘Ooh late.’

‘What?’ Loki grabbed her by the collar.

‘L…ock.’ More froth followed and something like a cough. Nebula clenched her eyes. ‘Down.’

Loki released his grip on her and scrambled back, less because of Nebula’s words, than his inability to look at her. He sprinted over to the wide window at the far end of the suite. The window overlooked the back of the Palisade complex and had a good view of the perimeter wall. Every sentry post was lit and there were soldiers everywhere. While lacking immediate back up, Nebula had ordered the entirety of the Palisade to go into lock down mode before she came to confront Loki and Brunnhilde.

_What now? They’ll be searching inside the complex too, they’ll get to this room soon enough._

‘This has got to be salvageable,’ he said even as he realised that they might have blown their opportunity to set up a trap for Thanos.

He took stock of the room — they could attempt to scrub it of all evidence that a physical altercation than taken place here, he could even figure out what could be done about Nebula, but the computer systems would betray them. There would be a log of an unauthorised entry already. They didn’t know what other protective measures Nebula had set up and in attempting to clean up the log, they might only make things worse. Nebula certainly wasn’t about to explain to them what she had done.

‘The bombs are ready,’ he muttered, desperately hoping a solution would come to him if he only thought hard enough. There was one answer, an ugly one, but his mind kept circling back to it. ‘Maybe if we just wait here.’

‘No, you and I are getting out of here.’ Brunnhilde grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him along towards the door. ‘Thanos isn’t happening today, but there is still a way out of here and we’re going to take it. Thanos’ own ship is docked here in the Palisade. What’s the bet they keep it fuelled and prepped to go?’

‘It’ll be guarded.’

‘Everything that’s worth anything is guarded on this asteroid.’

Loki shook Brunnhilde’s hand off his shoulder and reclaimed his knives. ‘We came here to kill Thanos.’

‘Don’t be an idiot,’ Brunnhilde replied. ‘What’s the likelihood he’ll be the next person to walk into this room, not a squadron of armed guards? It’s done. We had a chance, it didn’t happen. We’re not blowing ourselves up for nothing.’

‘Fine,’ he spat out. ‘Fine.’
Loki cursed the Norns; for good measure he slipped in a few curses he had picked up from Wong as well. They had come so far and it had come to nothing. As the Valkyrie pressed the exit button to the door, Loki glanced back to Nebula. She lay on the ground, quivering and surrounded by an ever-growing puddle. There was a peculiar sheen to it. Oil mixed in with her blood, Loki realised. He flinched away and followed Brunnhilde back out to the hallway.

Not a moment after Loki’s heels struck the carpeted floor, the doors to the neighbouring suites burst open and armed men poured out. It seemed Nebula too had left a trick up her sleeve. Loki swore. Five. Six. Nine. He lost count, but there were too many — the odds entirely against him and Brunnhilde.

‘Hold on, hold on!’ Brunnhilde shouted. ‘What’s going on here?’

‘You are trespassing,’ replied a one-eyed Kronan, who had stepped out the front of the gaggle of guards now blocking the hallway. The squadron leader from his uniform insignia. Loki wished he still wore his own; he could have attempted to pull rank. ‘Drop those weapons and come along with us.’

‘Yeah, no.’

Brunnhilde had appropriated Nebula’s surviving sword and now brought it up. Loki pulled a face. Knives and swords wouldn’t be enough here, nor the small blaster Loki still had hidden. He dropped the glamour over Brunnhilde, then the concealment spells woven over his own body.

‘It’s the ones everyone’s been looking for!’ one of the guards exclaimed.

His words met those words with raucous laughter. Those who brought the two fugitives to Thanos had been promised great rewards. Loki imagined that with them pinned as they were — the only other exit out of Thanos’ quarters was through the window and the grounds beneath that window were crawling with armed men too — this squadron of guards could already fantasise about the glories they would earn in exchange for Loki’s head.

_The night’s not over yet, my friends._

He flung out his hand and unleashed a torrent of ice at the guardsmen. Its force knocked them off their feet, sending them crashing into the walls. Loki sprinted over the now drenched carpet, Brunnhilde in step just behind him. This show of Jotunn magic hadn’t bought them much time, however. Almost immediately, Loki could hear them moving and shouting to one other.

‘They’ll have comms units,’ Brunnhilde shouted. ‘They’ll call for back up!’

He understood what she didn’t say — he still had the remote detonator in his pocket. Trying not to slow his pace, he fumbled for it, but at the same time tried to come up with an alternative. He came up short. The blaster didn’t have enough shots to take them all out and would probably be too slow anyway. Bring down the ceiling on them? No guarantee someone wouldn’t survive the crush.

Knowing that every step he took tested the remote detonator’s range and diminished their chances, Loki made his decision. He sank his fingers into the buttons on the remote. The building roared and a violent trio of vibrations tore through the floor. They were far enough not to feel the explosion’s heat, but within moments the smell caught up with them.

‘Fire control, sectors forty-four, fifty-three, sixty-one!’ blared the smooth, robotic voice of the Palisade’s emergency system. ‘Evacuation order for all non-essential personnel. Evacuation order for all non-essential personnel. Fire control, sectors forty-four, fifty-three, fifty-two, sixty-one!’
Loki snuck a glance back, but saw only smoke. Still, he and Brunnhilde didn’t moderate their pace. On the stairs, they found pandemonium. Administrative and service staff, who had been told the complex was in lockdown only minutes ago, had now been told to evacuate and were in complete panic. Plenty of the soldiers were no better — debating between themselves as to who constituted essential personnel in this situation. Others yet scrambled to get up the stairs and do something about the spreading fire. No one had a second to spare to take a careful look at Loki and Brunnhilde so they simply pushed their way down and through to the seventh sector.

A frazzled-looking Chitauri Other swept in front of them at the exit to sector seven. ‘Who are you?’ she said. ‘You can’t use these doors.’

‘The fucking building’s on fire, you idiot!’ Brunnhilde replied.

That left the Other hesitating, but then she narrowed his eyes. ‘You look like —’

Loki aimed his blaster at the woman. An eye-watering flash. The Other fell to the ground, a sizzling hole where her right cheekbone had been.

Brunnhilde skirted around the still-twitching body and threw open the door the Other had been guarding. Loki grinned. Finally, some proof that the Norns didn’t utterly despise him — Thanos’ ship was a mere fifty metres away.
Those fifty metres turned out to be fifty metres too far. As Loki and Brunnhilde ran out onto the tarmac, a squadron of soldiers came around from behind the ship. These were not Palisade guards either, but an expeditionary company that must have been called up to reinforce the Palisade’s perimeter.

Loki was the quickest to react. He aimed his blaster at the closest soldier and managed to strike down a second one too by the time the soldiers responded with blasts of their own. They roared with rage — a sound Loki realised was familiar. This was a squadron of the same Exian company he had been charged with training. Between their seldom worn full-battle regalia and the murk of the spreading smoke from the fire, Loki hadn’t recognised them. But those battle cries were unmistakable and for the first time, he appreciated fully the impact of that vicious clamour.

*Sor**y, boys, I’m not coming willingly.*

‘Go ahead!’ he shouted to Brunnhilde and he let out a massive wave of energy, sending it rushing towards the Exians.

He took out those closest to him, but the force of the wave didn’t have the impact he had wanted. Heavy on their feet, the Exians were also hard to sweep over. Loki ducked behind a maintenance cart and sent another blast at the Exians, but there wasn’t much left in the weapon. He could feel his skin burn where it came in contact with the blaster; the next shot was just as likely to blow off his thumb as wound any of the Exians.

It was an unfair fight. The Exians didn’t bother with the swords strapped to their sides, they relied on their heavier and larger blasters, which had a good twenty times capacity of the weapon Loki held in his hands. Worse yet, with every second, they were drawing closer. The window of opportunity was closing.

Swallowing the blood building up in his mouth — the wound in his cheek from his fight with Nebula had reopened somewhere along the way — he brought up his hand. The lingering heat from the blaster was an excellent focus point. He forced that heat to materialise and then imbibed it with energy a thousand times its source. A whip of green-hued flame crackled through the air, forming a temporary barrier between Loki and the approaching Exians.

He ran, but fire wasn’t going to slow down a blaster shot. Within moments, pain tore through his left leg — from his knee, up his thigh and then down, resonating through his bones all the way down to his ankle. Loki slid to the ground. His eyes watering, he reached for his knee and found only a charred mess where the joint used to be. As far as blaster fire went, it was pretty much a direct hit. He tried to get up and got nowhere. His undamaged leg was no more willing to cooperate than the injured one.

He whipped his head around. The broad-shouldered silhouettes of the Exians were nearly upon him now.

*Allfather, if this is…*

Mechanical parts hissed as they shifted into position. Lights flared up, cutting bright beams through the smoke. Then, the cannon fire. Loki grinned as Brunnhilde took up the ship’s cannons and showed the Exians how things were really done. Under the cover of friendly fire, Loki did his best to crawl over to the hatch of Thanos’ ship.
Unfortunately, Brunnhilde couldn’t take them all out. Loki had drilled some basic tactics into them. They found safety behind technical equipment scattered around the tarmac and began firing back at the ship, trying to find weaknesses in its defences. And some continued firing at Loki. Crawling was too slow. He wasn’t going to make it.

Loki gulped down a breath of ash and cinders, then performed the only spell he could think of. The magic surged through him with the velocity of a lightning storm and coalesced around the blast wound. The burn of the healing left him screaming as much as the blast itself had, but it was quick. Within two seconds, the bones and the tendons had knotted back together.

His vision swam — that single spell had cost him more than all the magic he had performed over the previous three days put together. The beams of light emanating from the ship became his beacons as he stumbled over to it. He found the hatch and clumsily, pulled himself inside.

‘Loki!’ Brunnhilde shouted from somewhere within.

His throat had gone dry and he was sure he was shaking. Not trusting his eyes, he followed her voice until he stumbled into the cabin.

‘You good?’ Brunnhilde asked, then immediately went on, ‘Right, lift off.’

He collapsed into the nearest chair while Brunnhilde rushed about from one control panel to the next; this wasn’t a ship designed to be crewed by one person. She seemed to be managing though, better than she would have if Loki tried to help in his current state. Loki reached for the controls to the cannon and fired a volley without taking care to aim at anything in particular. This was as much as he could contribute at that moment.

‘That’s…’ Brunnhilde hesitated. ‘We need ground control to release the clamps. The ship can’t take off otherwise.’

It took him far longer than it should have to grasp what she was saying. Longer yet to formulate a reply, ‘Can’t we blast them off?’

Brunnhilde leaned forward to look out the cabin’s windows. ‘None of the canons can turn to that acute an angle. We need to go —’

‘We’re not going back out there,’ Loki replied, hoping his voice held a gravitas he in no way felt.

He pulled himself upright, ignoring the lingering weakness in his knees, and shifted over until he could see the edges of the two clamps keeping the ship grounded. When coupled with a modicum of intellect, magic was a subtle art. But presently, he had neither the time nor the mental capacity to think the problem through, so he simply tore off the clamps.

As the ship lifted off, Loki felt himself slip sideways.

‘Are you back with me?’ Brunnhilde asked. Under the garish, orange-tinted lights inside the cabin, every feature of her face seemed to have become exaggerated. With Loki’s vision still somewhat swimming, the end result was surreal. Loki turned his head away, but that didn’t deter the Valkyrie. ‘Hey, a verbal confirmation would be great.’

‘Yeah, I’m conscious,’ he replied.
He had no idea how much time he had lost, but he had a sense that it was more than a couple of minutes. He had woken up slumped on a chair in the pilot’s cabin; only the seatbelt kept him from tumbling out. Outside, darkness reigned, the outlines of the numerous asteroid around them barely distinguishable. Loki’s vision, meanwhile, still swam with trails of the blaster fire.

“How long was I out of it?” he asked.

Brunnhilde glanced to him momentarily, then flicked her gaze back over to the controls. ‘About two hours. You missed all the fun; I had to shake off a few pursuing ships. Now I’ve just parked us in a particularly dense asteroid clump. Your unconscious arse was sliding all over the floor while I was trying to lose the pursuing fighters, I was getting rather worried you were dead.’

‘If you say so,’ Loki said dryly.

‘Let me look at your leg.’

‘It’s fine. I healed it.’

‘Loki, let me see it.’

He sighed and shifted over so Brunnhilde had unobscured access to his left leg. There was a gaping hole in his trousers where the blaster fire had burned away the material and the area around was discoloured with dried blood, but as Loki had promised, Brunnhilde didn’t find the grotesque wound that had been there two hours ago. Only light bruising remained and that too would be gone soon enough.

‘Your arm still needs re-breaking, doesn’t it?’ Loki said. ‘I’ll fix that, just give me a few hours of rest.’

‘It’s been like that for three days, another three won’t matter.’

‘I don’t need three days.’

Brunnhilde seemed to try to stifle a laugh, but didn’t succeed. ‘Whatever you say, Odinson.’

Loki let the comment go unanswered; any attempt to argue the point further would leave him sounding like a child. The real way to win was to show Brunnhilde that he didn’t need three days to recover. Whether this was actually the case of course, he wasn’t sure.

*I’m pathetic. A few big spells and I’m gone. A sorcerer, by Bor’s prickled arse. Hardly worth calling myself that anymore.*

‘Loki,’ Brunnhilde said sharply.

He jerked at the sound and found himself clenching the rim of his seat. Swallowing a breath, he forced himself to shake off the tension in his body, but it achieved little. Brunnhilde peered down at him with an expression that reminded Loki of the palace’s stable-master when he examined some terribly wounded animal and considered whether putting the beast down would be the most merciful thing to do.

Loki was about to tell her to leave him be, but Brunnhilde began to speak before he could.

‘I’m sorry about how it ended with Nebula,’ she said.

‘Let’s not talk about that.’
‘That’s fine, if you don’t want to, we won’t. I just wanted you to know that I was sorry.’

Those cooing words feigning understanding about what he felt left Loki gritting his teeth. He barely accepted these sorts of sentiments from his mother, he certainly didn’t want to hear anything of the kind from the Valkyrie. What was the use of a ‘sorry’ anyway? What was she sorry for? If she meant the fact that Loki would probably never see Nebula again, Loki had never expected their pseudo-friendship to last in the first place. Or was she sorry for persuading Loki to attempt what they had? Neither of them had known Nebula would interrupt them. Or was it a sorry for the ice spear that ended up in Nebula’s chest? Or was it for the explosion? Why should she be sorry? Loki had conjured the spear. Loki had set off the bombs.

‘I could’ve persuaded her to turn against Thanos,’ he said. ‘She would’ve changed sides, it was only a matter of time. But not back in that room. I had a thought when I was last alone with her that I should tell her the truth. I should’ve done it then.’

Brunnhilde cocked her head. ‘You have no proof she would’ve switched sides. Had you told her, you would have blown your cover and would’ve had to kill her there and then.’

*But I do have proof.*

‘No, no, if I had laid it out to her, she would’ve listened. But that back there in the Palisade wasn’t about Thanos. She was furious with me.’ He closed his eyes and let out a bitter laugh. ‘You warned me about allowing her to become too attached to me.’

‘Did I? I don’t remember to be honest.’

Loki was certain she remembered the exact conversations he was referring to, but he supposed it was a small gesture of kindness on Brunnhilde’s part not to rub it in. Plenty of other people would have. He forced a semblance of a smile and nudged his chair to swing around. ‘Do you think there’s anything edible on this ship? Or alcoholic?’

‘Hope so. I could really use some of that 150 proof whisky they do back on Sakaar.’

Although 150 proof was probably a bad place to start, Loki wouldn’t have minded gathering up the contents of any liquor cabinets that belonged to the Children of Thanos and working up to 150 proof. He stood up, paused for a moment to make sure his legs were steady under him and then set off towards the cabin’s exit.

‘Damn it,’ Brunnhilde hissed before he had taken three steps.

‘What?’ he said, but he saw them before Brunnhilde had formed a reply — a sleek fighter ship.

Four came after it. Loki knew this design. Like most of the better pieces of military machinery in Thanos’ arsenal, they were originally a Kree design and had undergone only minor modifications in order to be adapted for use by Thanos’ soldiers. There were plenty of missiles aboard as well as a laser cannon. And the ships were fast.

‘What are the specs on this?’ Loki asked. ‘How are the shields? What’s left of the artillery?’

Brunnhilde rushed over to bring up the system log, all the while speaking to herself under her breath. ‘How the bloody fuck did they find us? And so fast too. The guys who were after us before are space dust.’

The comms unit emitted a high-pitched wail. They wanted to open a communication link. Loki grimaced as he accepted the request and tuned the receivers to the right frequency.
‘This is Wing Commander Thar-iru of the 27th Strikers,’ came the sharp baritone from one of the fighter ships. ‘Fugitives aboard the Nesha IV, I advise you to surrender. Neither your shields nor your firepower are a match for this squadron.’

Loki pressed the button to mute the line from the side — the last thing he needed was for Thanos’ men over-hearing what he and Brunnhilde were discussing. As for what he could say, that was limited. He took a look at the information Brunnhilde had pulled up. Loki was unsurprised to find that the wing commander on the other side of the comms line wasn’t lying. Nesha IV had formidable capabilities for a transport ship, but she was no match for five proper war ships.

‘Thoughts?’ Loki said.

‘You have any more magic tricks up your sleeve?’ Brunnhilde snickered bitterly. ‘I mean, we could give it a go. The ship’ll be crippled in a best-case scenario —’

‘It might have a bearing on your next action to know this,’ Wing Commander Thar-iru added. ‘Nesha IV is Lord Thanos’ own vessel. It carries a number of tracking devices. Even if you try to flee, you will never escape the Great Titan’s justice. Surrender is your only path to mercy. You have three minutes to decide before I give my men the order to shoot.’

That answered one question at least. And brought to an end any thought of trying to flee. Nesha IV wasn’t a small ship and ‘a number of tracking devices’ could mean almost anything. They could spend days tearing apart every inch of the ship in search of the trackers and never be certain that they got them all. Not that this was a real possibility, Brunnhilde was right — should they manage to prevail in this encounter, the ship wouldn’t come out unscathed. Only fools flew ships through asteroid fields; only madmen attempted to do so in a ship whose performance couldn’t be trusted.

‘Heimdall!’ Loki grabbed Brunnhilde’s hand and pulled her to the back of the pilot’s cabin where there was more open space.

‘What are you doing?’ she demanded.

Loki took a breath and shouted louder. ‘Heimdall! Take us back to Sakaar!’

A rainbow cacophony of colour swallowed the Nesha IV.
It was bright sunlight when Heimdall brought them down on Sakaar. He burned his mark unto a pile of unidentifiable trash in doing so. Loki scrambled over to the next mound, which looked to be more stable and stank less, then collapsed onto his knees.

‘ Couldn’t we’ve done that earlier? ’ Brunnhilde scoffed.

Loki let his head drop down to his chest. ‘ A toddler with the right sensor in his hand would be able to track the dark energy Heimdall used to send us here. Thanos and the Maw would’ve tracked us in minutes. They’ll probably track us now anyway, it’ll just take them a little longer. ’

As Loki spoke, shivers ran up his spine. At times, Thanos lost his temper and acted on impulse, but that wasn’t how it usually happened. He preferred to think problems through, to consider the variables, to find the most damaging response to an insult. And while he worked to track Loki down, he would have enough time to do just that.

*And when he finally does come, it'll be with the fury of a wildfire.*

He didn’t want to contemplate what would happen to him and to Brunnhilde should they ever end up in the Mad Titan’s grasp again, but his mind refused to cooperate. He preferred to think problems through, to consider the variables, to find the most damaging response to an insult. And while he worked to track Loki down, he would have enough time to do just that.

He didn’t want to contemplate what would happen to him and to Brunnhilde should they ever end up in the Mad Titan’s grasp again, but his mind refused to cooperate. The stench of melting plastic and rotted flesh filled his nostrils; the howls of the dying echoed in his ears. Before he knew it, he was dry heaving. Loki’s only salvation was the fact he hadn’t consumed a proper meal in days.

‘Loki? What’s going on with you?’ Brunnhilde grasped him by the shoulders and once the tumult in his stomach subsided, she pulled him to his feet. ‘Come on, this isn’t a place to linger.’

It was a long, largely quiet walk to the city. Loki had nothing to say and Brunnhilde only uttered banal encouragements when his pace started to lag. The two hours he had spent unconscious back on the *Nesha IV* hadn’t built up his strength nearly as much as he’d liked and the trudge through the uneven, trash-laden surface of Sakaar left him exhausted anew. By the time they reached the building when Brunnhilde kept her flat, he was ready to collapse once more.

‘I should’ve fucking known,’ Brunnhilde groaned as she reached for the door to her apartment. ‘I’m assuming you didn’t do this?’

The lock was obviously broken and there were deep gouges all across the door itself. At a light push, the door popped open to reveal chaos. Brunnhilde’s apartment had hardly been well cared for back when Loki had broken in and dragged her along to the Sanctuary, but this was different. Splinters of broken furniture and shards of shattered liquor bottles littered the floor; a number of filthy slogans had been scrawled across the walls.

‘I’m going to figure out what the looters took with them,’ Brunnhilde said. ‘Clear up the couch as best you can and sit down. You’re starting to sway.’

Loki didn’t waste what little energy he still had on arguing. He brushed off the splintered wood and plaster off the couch, then collapsed on it. Brunnhilde moved through the apartment, muttering darkly under her breath as she found more and more damage. Loki sighed and allowed his eyes to drift shut.
When he opened his eyes again darkness met him. He lay on his side, his legs curled up and a thin blanket tangled up around him. Loki untangled himself from the material and sat up. He was still in Brunnhilde’s apartment. Light from the neighbouring building fell through the shattered windows and provided enough illumination for Loki to make out the remnants of the furnishings.

‘Loki,’ Heimdall called out from a distance. A quiet sound followed, reminiscent to the rumble of a spring brook, then Heimdall’s form took shape in the centre of Brunnhilde’s apartment. Wind seemed to tousle his dreads and his eyes reflected a light that wasn’t visible on Sakaar. ‘Are you in need of assistance?’

‘I must look really bad if you’re asking me that,’ Loki replied. ‘Is Brunnhilde here?’

‘The liquor left in the apartment didn’t satisfy her.’

‘Right, of course.’

While he wouldn’t have declined a drink, or twelve, he was glad Brunnhilde hadn’t shaken him awake and dragged him down to a tavern. In truth, Loki still didn’t feel like himself. He reached up to push his tangled hair out of his eyes. When he tried to run his fingers through his hair, he found his hair was peppered with bits of glass and chunks of metal. On further examination, he understood that he had done a thoroughly poor job of cleaning off the couch before he had collapsed on it. There were bits of glass clinging to his clothes too. But he lingered on the misshapen bit of metal he pulled out from his hairline. The way it reflected the light was familiar.

‘Is this a remnant from Nebula’s sword?’ Loki asked. ‘The one Brunnhilde shattered with her blaster?’

Heimdall’s head tilted a little, but no answer came. Or rather, Loki supposed there was an answer in that silence. Heimdall was reputed to see everything, but it was hardly the case. It was well beyond the bounds of reasonable to expect him to pay attention to how random pieces of junk had ended up in Loki’s hair.

Loki ran his tongue over his parched lips. ‘How about something you can tell me then. Is Thanos dead?’

‘No. He was with the Maw studying the infinity stone in the laboratory.’

Loki nodded. It was no more than he had expected. To have killed Thanos in that blast would have been a magnificent stroke of luck and luck rarely ran in Loki’s favour. There was an obvious follow-up question to Heimdall’s words, but Loki couldn’t quite bring himself to voice it.

‘Did…’ he tried again and cut himself off. He suspected he already knew an answer, but as long as he didn’t have a confirmation, there was still a chance he was wrong. There was hope in uncertainty.

If Heimdall was cognisant of Loki’s internal torments at that moment, he chose not to acknowledge this. Instead, he briskly explained, ‘Your misadventures with the Titan are not why I come. I bear a message from your mother.’

‘Go on then?’ Loki replied, happy to embrace the change of topic.

‘Your father has awoken.’

‘That’s…. that’s good to hear. The best news I’ve heard in a long time actually.’
‘She asks for you to return. If only temporarily.’

The smile on Loki’s face faltered and he rested his head against the back of Brunnhilde’s couch. It was too easy to imagine himself back in his mother’s gardens, laying out all his griefs while they sat by the brook, surrounded by flowering bushes. And he would take slow walks with his father while Odin regained his strength. And in the evenings, he and Thor would sit by the fireplace in Thor’s room and Thor would ramble incessantly until Loki knew every single thing that had occurred in his absence.

It was too easy also to imagine the gardens aflame, his father, still weakened from his long illness, struck down by a Chitauri spearman and Thor bearing the full brunt of Thanos’ mercy.

‘Please tell my mother that I am glad to hear father has improved,’ Loki replied coldly, ‘and that I hope she and Thor are well, but I won’t be returning.’

‘I will relay your message,’ Heimdall replied. If he had thoughts of his own about Loki’s reply, he kept them out of his voice and merely added, ‘Is there anything else you wish your family to know?’

Loki shrugged as he rolled the bit of metal still in his hand between his fingers. It was no easy task to narrow down the sum of the million chaotic thoughts in his mind into something coherent.

‘Tell my brother it would be prudent to fortify Asgard’s defences,’ he said in the end. ‘As a precaution.’

Loki pulled his coarse blanket tighter across his shoulders, although he knew the action was unlikely to improve the tremors that rattled his body every twenty seconds or so. As far as the concoctions available on Sakaar went, the one he had taken the previous night was far from the best. The after-effects were always unpleasant. But it possessed an advantage other didn’t — it allowed Loki to retain control over his mouth. Nothing ruined your mood quicker than realising you had just spilled your deepest secrets to a room full of naked strangers.

‘Wow, you look like shit,’ Brunnhilde noted as she climbed over the balcony railing and took a seat beside Loki. After two days of trying to clean up the mess in Brunnhilde’s looted apartment, they had given up and found accommodation elsewhere. The apartment was the size of a rat’s nest; the balcony was its sole redeeming feature. Not that Brunnhilde was interested in the view. She studied Loki with narrowed eyes, then smirked. ‘Are those tentacle marks I see?’

She was riling him up. There had been no tentacled species involved. But Loki’s lips were still swollen and the skin around his mouth irritated. Although the bite marks had faded, Loki still felt the trail his nameless partner had followed down the side of his neck.

How did that seem like a good idea yesterday?

‘I’m back here on Sakaar, why shouldn’t I enjoy the pleasures of local society?’ he said.

‘Yeah, you’re enjoying yourself now all right. I’m not one to judge and I do understand the impulse, but we can’t wait around long. It’s been over a week now. Don’t you think we should get a move on? Thanos is still out there.’

‘Let him have the universe, I don’t give a damn anymore.’

Brunnhilde crossed her arms. ‘So you’re going back to Asgard then? That’s —’
‘No.’ Loki shook his head so vehemently his vision blurred. He went on nevertheless. ‘Asgard is the last place I’m going back to. Here’s good. I mean, I get it now — always a party to go to, always more to drink and something to swallow, always something happening at the arena. No one’s trying to kill me, no one wants anything from me and I don’t want anything from anyone. It’s perfect.’

**And when he finds me here, I don’t much care about what happens to this pit of depravity.**

‘That’s rather rich considering the crap you gave me for staying here for so long.’

‘Hela is my half-sister. Hardly the same calibre of threat.’

‘Are you kidding me?’ Brunnhilde shook her hand and forced herself to calm. ‘I’m going to refrain from breaking your pretty face for the moment because our to-do list is so bloody long. We have his plans for invasion of like twenty different worlds. These planets need to be warned about what’ll soon descend upon them.’

Loki chuckled mirthlessly and waved his hand in Brunnhilde’s direction. ‘If you want to warn them, just go. There’s no use dragging me along. The only thing I’m capable of doing is making things worse for everyone involved. Thanos and his lot excpected of course.’

‘Loki,’ Brunnhilde set her hand down on his shoulder. ‘You’re not in a good place right now, I realise, but will you try to listen to what I’m saying? You talked your way into Thanos’ inner circle. You got the scoop on his scavenger hunt for the infinity stones and I have his battle plans. The exit strategy could’ve been less… hair-raising, but the sum of it is hardly a failure.’

**But that's not why I went to the Sanctuary.**

‘I hold myself to a different standard,’ he said in a haughty tone as he pushed her hand away. Brunnhilde’s lips already thinned at that, but Loki wanted to do this thoroughly. He straightened his back. ‘I see no need to discuss this further with you, Valkyrie. I dismissed you back on Theta-Three. If you wish to leave Sakaar, you are free to do so at any time.’

Brunnhilde grabbed his blanket and pulled. Before Loki could react, she had ripped the blanket off, exposing him to the frigid wind bearing down from one of the nearby worm-holes.

‘Oh, come on, Loki. Do you think I can’t tell what you’re trying to do?’ she sneered.

‘Brunnhilde, leave me the fuck alone. I don’t care what you do, just stop bothering me with your —’

‘If you so want to be left alone, why are you still here? I paid for this apartment, not you.’

Loki cocked his head. ‘Fair point. I’ll be gone in ten.’

Brunnhilde was quick to reply, but Loki no longer cared to listen. He abandoned the balcony railing and stormed inside. There were only a few scant possessions for Loki to gather, so he was done in well under ten minutes. Without bothering to offer Brunnhilde any kind of farewell, he flung open the front door and was a flight down the stairs by the time he heard it slam shut.

At the bottom of the stairs, he slowed his pace. A block later, he came to a stop altogether.

‘Loki,’ came Heimdall’s voice from somewhere behind him.

He spun around and glared. Heimdall had worn out his welcome since he had brought Loki and Brunnhilde back to Sakaar. Thor and Frigga were determined to have Loki return to Asgard and Heimdall had become their messenger boy.
'What is it now?' Loki demanded. 'My decision hasn’t changed since last night.'

'Your father —'

‘Stop,’ Loki said sharply. He didn’t want to hear what Heimdall had to say, all that would achieve was to leave Loki wavering about his resolution to remain on Sakaar and feeling even more miserable than he was already. ‘I’ve had enough of this. I don’t want you relaying any more messages from my brother or my parents. No more contact with them at all. They should just go on like I never existed.’

*It'll be easier this way.*

Chapter End Notes

A quick heads up - I probably won't be posting a new chapter next week since it'll be Christmas and I want to spend some extra time in order to untangle some things in the next block of chapters. By next year we'll be diving straight into Part III.

To everyone celebrating in the next few weeks, I hope you have a great time. And a massive thank you to everyone reading this story. There are 21,000+ hits, 750+ subscribers and close to 1400 kudos on this fic now. I honestly never thought it'd get a response like this. You all are the best :(
‘Is this the one you want?’ Vridu held up a small glass bottle filled with a turquoise-coloured liquid. There were a good dozen options on offer as part of the party canapes, so his uncertainty was understandable.

Loki cocked his head, considering for a moment whether he wanted to rise from the couch and have a careful look at what he was about to imbibe, then decided he didn’t care. These aphrodisiacs were from the Grandmaster’s personal stores, not from some nameless shack in the lower quarter. He beckoned Vridu to re-join him on the couch and grinned when the young Arcturian straddled his legs.

‘You first, Vridu,’ Loki said.

Vridu, who was attending a party hosted by the Grandmaster for the first time, knotted his brows as he uncorked the bottle. Loki slid his fingers up Vridu’s thighs, then wrapped his hand around Vridu’s and guided the bottle to Vridu’s mouth. The Arcturian didn’t need more encouragement to pull off the lid and tip the bottle into his mouth. When about half the liquid was gone, he pulled the bottle away from him.

Loki tilted his head back and parted his lips, which bought out a chuckle out of the typically stoic Arcturian. He rested the top of the bottle against Loki’s lower lip, then tipped the base of the bottle up. The liquid, viscous and flavoured with spices Loki couldn’t name, poured into Loki’s mouth. He swallowed quickly. This promised to be a good evening and he was eager to turn promise into reality.

The aphrodisiac took effect almost at once. Loki had used this one before, he recognised the initial effects — the prickling along the line of his spine, the warm aura that every object around him adopted, the wooziness to his thoughts as if he had just drunk a few pints of Asgardian mead.

‘Up, my darling.’ Loki pinched Vridu’s right buttock, drawing a surprised whelp from the Arcturian. ‘You’re too precious to share. We are going to find a more private place to enjoy each other’s company.’

Vridu stuck out his lower lip and groaned. ‘Must we? I don’t care who’s watching. No one here cares.’

‘As I said, you’re not for sharing.’

Loki drew his hands around Vridu’s thin waist and clambered up, taking the Arcturian with him. With that move, Vridu’s only choices were to slip backwards and onto the floor or to find his footing. Of course, Loki had chosen his partner wisely. Vridu’s adjustment was graceful and realising that he wasn’t going to win the debate, he allowed Loki to guide him to the secluded back area of the Grandmaster’s greenhouse. Loki had gone on a scouting trip earlier and spotted a wide, seldom-occupied lounge long enough to fit four people. It would suit their needs perfectly.

‘Hmm, much quieter here,’ Vridu said softly. He extricated himself from Loki’s grasp and shook off his overcoat, revealing the tight shirt beneath. There were about a dozen buckles on the garment. Probably an Arcturian fashion; Loki hadn’t seen anything similar on anyone else on Sakaar. But whatever the garment’s origin, Loki looked forward to working through those buckles one by one and leaving Vridu trembling by the time Loki divested him of his shirt.
Loki sunk into the lounge and a moment later, Vridu was straddling his legs once more. Loki chuckled. There was no trace of uncertainty or hesitation in Vridu any longer. He leaned in and drew Loki into a kiss. Loki shuddered at the heat of his lips. That was the beauty of Sakaar: so many species, so many surprises. Loki let Vridu take the lead and as the Arcturian slipped his tongue into Loki’s mouth, he ran his hands over Loki’s torso. Despite the aphrodisiac’s effect, Vridu was deft at undoing the buttons on Loki’s vest.

‘Before this goes any further.’

Loki slid his head to the side, leaving Vridu sighing in protest at the sudden disengagement. It was difficult to focus on anything other than the Arcturian, everything past the lounge had lost its sharpness and seemed to float with every shift of Loki’s head. It took a moment to trace the words to a speaker.

‘What do you want, Heimdall?’ Loki demanded.

Vridu turned around as far as he could while still remaining seated atop Loki’s thighs. ‘Who are you talking to?’

Heimdall stood a mere two feet away from them. Or, at least his projection was, otherwise Vridu would have been able to see him too. As far as Loki knew, Heimdall didn’t possess the skills to make his physical self invisible, let alone only to specific people.

‘I told you not to bother me, Heimdall. So what do you want?’ Loki pressed. At Vridu’s disgruntled whine, he conceded an explanation. ‘My apologies, darling. It’s a message from my home-world. The messenger is invisible to anyone other than the recipient.’

Heimdall’s face didn’t physically move, but Loki could have sworn he looked more full of himself than he had ten seconds ago. ‘Midgard is under attack. Your brother has gone to assist the Midgardians.’

‘Under attack from whom?’ Loki patted Vridu on the side of his leg. To his relief, the Arcturian caught the message and slipped off Loki. It was less than comfortable to talk to Heimdall over the shoulder of a man Loki had been about to have sex with.

‘If the substances you have been taking haven’t addled your mind, you should know the answer.’

The mathematics Loki had to do would have been challenging even on a clear head. The wormholes around Sakaar meddled about with time, then there was the matter of calculating the alignment of the Asgardian calendar to the Midgardian one. Loki frowned as he went through the required mental gymnastics. If this was Thanos, the attack was two months early.

Why? Who’s leading it?

Loki ignored Vridu’s pouting beside him, although Loki’s instinct was to grab Vridu and press him close. ‘Why would Thor go?’

‘He is the Protector of the Nine Realms,’ Heimdall replied. He glanced at Vridu, then focused back on Loki. ‘I do not bring any messages directly for you. I merely thought this information about Midgard would be of interest to you.’

Loki glared at Heimdall. The watcher was reputed to be one of the most dutiful men Odin had ever had in his employ. In truth, Heimdall was an insubordinate prick. He simply knew how to bend the letter of the law and the meaning of every order to his will. And he was smug about it. Loki would have admired the talent if it wasn’t used to undermine Loki’s plans again and again. And now
Heimdall was at it once more. Loki had ordered him not to bring any more messages from anyone, whether it be Thor or Frigga or the Norns themselves, so he had turned up to share gossip with Loki instead.

More unpleasant yet, the aphrodisiac was continuing its work. Loki longed for physical touch. He longed to perform all manner of sordid acts until Heimdall had no choice but to turn away and blush like a shy maiden.

Thor always manages to ruin a good party.

‘Vridu, darling,’ Loki said, careful not to touch the Arcturian — touching would only make his words more difficult to bear for both of them. ‘I’m sorry, I have to leave you. There’s a situation to be dealt with.’
Loki fumbled through his clothes until he found the flask he was looking for. His standard policy for any event on the Grandmaster’s social calendar was to arrive with no fewer than two antidotes for the aphrodisiacs and any other mind-altering substances on offer to the party guests. He pulled the cap off the flask and tipped its contents into his mouth.

‘Fine, take me to Midgard, Heimdall,’ he said once the warm buzz at the edges of his mind began to recede.

If the antidote hadn’t fully yet done its job, the force of the dark energy Heimdall had wrapped around Loki tore the last vestiges of the celebratory air he had been enjoying. The Bifrost was always an experience, but the architects of the rainbow bridge had done what they could to channel and contain its raw energy. Since he was not coming from or journeying to Asgard, Loki couldn’t make use of the Bifrost, so once more he had to endure the primordial magic of the universe that Heimdall had only a modicum of control over.

He crashed more than landed on Midgard. The ground beneath him was uneven — all bits of crumbling concrete coated in dust. When Loki flipped over to his side and began to clamber up, he realised he had narrowly avoided landing atop remnants of an inch-thick steel pole that tapered gracelessly to a jagged end. In Loki’s mind, here was more proof that Heimdall deserved to have his hide stripped for insubordination.

A light beam swivelled towards him. He threw up his hand over his eyes.

‘Loki?’ Thor’s voice boomed from the distance. ‘My friends, do not be alarmed! He’s an ally.’

By the rustles that followed, a couple of rifles seemed to have been lowered and several people were approaching. Their boots slipped and their movements were uneven. But with the boom light still rigged up to shine directly in Loki’s face, he couldn’t make out even the silhouettes. Irritated, he moved a few steps to the side. The boom didn’t follow him, but the echo of the light had burned a great red sphere into the centre of his vision.

‘Brother!’ Thor exclaimed, all but tackling Loki as he drew Loki into a hug. ‘Is it really you? Have you any idea about how much I’ve missed you?’

‘And I missed you too,’ Loki replied. In a well-practiced manoeuvre, he extricated himself out of his brother’s grasp before he began to suffocate. ‘Who are the people you are with? Care to make the introductions?’

The Midgardians had caught up to Thor by now. The bulk of them had formed a semi-circle of stiff-backed, uniformed men, but two stood within that semi-circle and theirs were the only names Loki caught in the list Thor rattled off. Phil Coulson. Natasha Romanov. Coulson smiled pleasantly at the two brothers. It was the insipid smile of a middle-ranking bureaucrat who knew better than to make his opinions too clear. Romanov, on the other hand, was still on alert, her finger half an inch from the trigger.

‘I’m Loki,’ he said, ‘of Asgard. How do you do?’

‘Huh. Well, nice to meet you,’ Coulson replied, offering his hand out to Loki, who took it and did his best not to think about his last interaction with the man. ‘Should we be expecting the giant snake to pop his head out of the Atlantic next?’
‘Maybe. There’s a lot of water on this world. Who am I to say where that beastie chooses to make his nest?’ Loki chuckled when a few of the SHIELD agents behind Romanoff and Coulson exchanged concerned glances. If the Midgardians were going to make up ludicrous stories about him, he reserved the right to enjoy the profits of those tall tales.

At the same time, he was back on Midgard for a reason and he didn’t want to slip too far off-track. Loki glanced around, but found few clues to anchor himself. The air was cool and reeked of char. The few boom lights illuminating the area cast everything else into deeper darkness, so there was no making out the details. Coulson and Romanoff’s presence brought the helicarrier to mind, but what little Loki could see didn’t look like the ship at all.

*Maybe we are standing amid its ruins?*

Conceding defeat, Loki asked, ‘Where exactly are we? What’s happened here?’

‘This was a Midgardian research facility,’ Thor replied. ‘They were studying the Tesseract here. Tyr and two accomplices opened the wormhole inside —’

‘Tyr?’ Loki cut in. ‘As in Sif’s father, the traitor, who should be rotting in a cell right now? Why is he involved in this?’

Thor exhaled tiredly. ‘I would’ve informed you, but you didn’t want to be contacted and I didn’t think the news would bring you any joy, so I didn’t go against your wishes. Tyr escaped. A rogue faction of the Einherjar arranged his break out from the cells and spirited him somewhere beyond the Nine Realms. We’ve been searching for them, but there was no sign of him or those who fled with him until today.’

‘How long ago was this?’

‘It’d be more than six months back now.’

That explained a great deal. Loki’s exploits in the Sanctuary had turned Thanos’ eyes towards the Nine Realms. While he dug out his supporters from the burnt out sections of the Palisade, he would have sent spies to gather information to ready his revenge and to prepare to claim the space stone. There were few people more perfect for Thanos’ purposes than disgraced traitors, such as Agnar and Tyr. Better yet, Tyr and Odin had been very close in their younger days. Loki wouldn’t have been surprised if Tyr had accompanied Odin when Loki’s father had hidden the Tesseract on Midgard.

*And earlier, I failed to account for the months I spent on Sakaar before being taken to the Sanctuary. I’d already brought the entire timeline forward before Tyr got involved.*

‘That’s bloody wonderful,’ Loki groaned. ‘So what’s the outcome here? Was the Tesseract taken?’

‘Yes,’ Coulson replied. ‘Before you arrived, we were about to show your brother the footage we retained from the incident. Would it be of interest to you to see it also… your… highness?’

‘Loki will do. And it would very much interest me.’

Coulson nodded and motioned for everyone to follow him. As they all did their best not to stumble over the shattered concrete and twisted chunks of metal, he provided Thor and Loki with the background to the situation. ‘The Tesseract research project was considered extremely high risk and the facility was designed to detonate should the Tesseract laboratory become unstable. The Tesseract has been showing activity patterns over the past three days that we haven’t encountered before, then four hours before the incursion there was an energy surge. An evacuation order for all personnel had already been issued for the site when the Tesseract became fully active.’
‘Are we now walking on top of what remains of the laboratory?’ Loki asked. At Coulson’s nod, he frowned. ‘How do you have footage then?’

‘The video feed from here was always transmitted live to the central office.’

‘Ah, important people were nervous about playing with artefacts they didn’t understand.’

Both Coulson and Romanoff were stone-faced at that remark, and neither of them had anything to more say until they reached a huddle of white tents. SHIELD agents and emergency personnel swarmed the area and there seemed to be more tents in the process of being erected at the back. Coulson took them inside the largest of the tents, which was choked with computers and communications equipment haphazardly set up on plastic fold-out tables.

‘Travers,’ Romanoff said. ‘Pull up the footage of the incident again.’

The SHIELD agents who had shadowed Coulson and Romanoff had fallen back at the entrance of the tent, which was a wise move. The tent didn’t have the space to accommodate that many additional people. As it was, Loki found himself pressed against Thor’s side as they gathered around a trio of wide-screen monitors.

The screens flickered, then footage from the Tesseract laboratory began playing. The three screens displayed three different views. Two cameras had been set high up, one to look down at the Tesseract and the rig holding it in place, the other to the workbenches. The last peered at eye level directly into the luminous blue of the Tesseract.

At first, there was nothing worth watching: laboratory staff trying to finish up their work while the evacuation alarm blared overhead, Selvig talking too much, Hawkeye and another SHIELD agent discussing something among themselves. But as they drew closer to the Tesseract, it began to emanate a visible energy field. Hawkeye and Fury staggered away.

Just in time too, a blue-hued pulse burst out of the Tesseract and spilled out across the room. The camera that had been focused on the Tesseract went dark, but the remaining two cameras caught the wormhole opening and the Tesseract’s energy convalescing into three distinct shapes.

‘Perfect, that’s just perfect,’ Loki spat out.

Romanoff paused the footage. ‘Something on your mind, Loki?’

‘Just the fate of half the universe. ‘Something on your mind, Loki?’

‘This wasn’t quite who I’d expected to see,’ he admitted. ‘The man is Tyr — you’ve already heard Thor and me talking about him, but these others. When Thor spoke of co-conspirators, I’d expected a few of the Einherjari officers loyal to him.’ Catching Coulson’s slightly uncertain expression, Loki went on. ‘The Einherjar are Asgard’s military force. Tyr was their long-standing and well-loved commander until he staged a coup d’etat against my regency.’

Thor leaned forward to peer more closely at the frozen screens. ‘I don’t know the two with Tyr. I don’t even know what planet they’d be from. Do they look at all familiar to you, Loki?’

‘I know who they are.’ Loki pursed his lips. ‘The woman is Gamora. She was a Zehoberai. And the one with the sceptre is Ebony Maw. I have no idea what he is or where he’s from. Not that it matters really, I suppose. He’s dangerous and that’s all you need to know.’

‘How do you know this?’ Thor asked.
‘I encountered them and their master during my recent travels. There was a reason I advised you to pay closer attention to the state of Asgard’s defences.’ Coulson began to speak, but Loki shook his head. ‘I can tell you that entire, miserable tale later. Can we watch the rest of the video? I’d like to know exactly how much of a mess this is.’

*There are three of them here. I came alone and I caused plenty of trouble even before the Chitauri arrived.*

‘Natasha, the play button,’ Coulson said.

The images on the two remaining video feeds resumed and Ebony Maw took two slow strides forward.

*‘Sir, please put down the spear!’ one of the SHIELD personnel shouted out.*

Loki tried to make out his facial features — he was definitely familiar and a high-ranking member of the agency. He had gloated to Loki’s face whenever he had been in SHIELD’s custody. His name, however, eluded Loki.

*Ebony Maw made no move to comply with the man’s banal request. While Gamora and Tyr moved to widen the flanks around the Maw, he simply smiled pleasantly. ‘Do not be alarmed by our arrival on your planet,’ he said. ‘Rather, hear my words and rejoice. You will have the privilege to know the grace and the unbounded mercy of the Great Titan. Shortly, you will all become the Children of Thanos.’*

*‘Who is this Great Titan you’re talking about?’ the agent asked, his face twisting into a frown around his black eye patch.*

*Before the Maw had a chance to reply, Tyr raised the blaster rifle in his hands and shot towards one of the researchers who had been furiously typing at his station. The woman flew back. Tyr was past his prime, but he was still a competent soldier. On the other hand, perhaps not the smartest one. Now that the first shot had been fired, the Midgardians understood what this alien incursion foreboded and they let out their own firepower.*

Amid the booms of Tyr’s blaster, the blue-tinted pulses of the sceptre in Ebony Maw’s hands and the flashes of gunfire from SHIELD weapons, the video feed couldn’t quite capture what was occurring. The microphones, however, picked up enough of the screaming and the shouting to convey the sum of what had taken place.

Then, not half a minute after Tyr’s blaster had initiated the fighting, calm fell over the room. Loki cocked his head; SHIELD agents were good at playing dead until it suited them. Indeed, while Gamora said something to Ebony Maw, her voice too soft for the camera microphone to pick up, one of the agents dragged himself toward the Tesseract.

*Gamora was upon him all of two seconds, grabbing him by the back of his jacket and flinging him over onto his back. She lifted her hand, her sword reflecting the Tesseract’s simmering light.*

*‘I will have him,’ Ebony Maw declared.*

*He strode towards them, oblivious that another SHIELD agent was also on the move. Tyr was more observant. A click of his blaster and Agent Barton crumpled on the ground. The poor light in the laboratory hid the injury, but by the way he had fallen, Loki guessed it wasn’t a wound a human could shrug off.*

*‘This is where it gets really interesting,’ Coulson remarked darkly.*
For the Midgardians. Maybe for Thor too. Loki had no reason to be surprised as he watched Ebony Maw lower the tip of his sceptre and press it against the one-eyed agent’s chest. The man stilled, his remaining eye turning glassy, then straightened up and stared at Ebony Maw with a blank expression.

‘Retrieve the Tesseract,’ the Maw ordered.

‘Who is he?’ Loki asked as the agent pulled the Tesseract out of its containment rig and slid it into a briefcase.

Coulson sighed. ‘Nick Fury. He is our director.’

Nick Fury. Now that he heard the name spoken, Loki couldn’t believe he hadn’t come up with it himself. Fury — the Director of SHIELD himself. A good catch for Ebony Maw. No, the more Loki thought about it, the troubled this development left him. Barton had given him a wealth of information on Midgard, on SHIELD and on the Avengers. And Barton had been a mere field agent. How much more information did Fury hold inside his head?

‘And presumably he knew the laboratory was rigged to explode,’ Loki said as Fury motioned towards the exit. The repeated boom of the evacuation signal swallowed the words that accompanied the gesture, but the rest swiftly followed him.

‘Yes,’ Coulson replied. ‘The detonation was less than five minutes later. They were out of the containment zone by then.’

‘Pity. It would’ve been a good day if you had managed to drop a building and a couple hundred tonnes of dirt on the Maw’s head. Tyr’s too.’

Thor gave his brother a perplexed look as he spoke, ‘You must have lost many good people today.’

‘More than we could afford,’ Romanoff responded. She shut down the video feed and seemed to be about to say something more, but then thought better of it.

The ruins of the research facility made for a poor base of operations, but Coulson was keen to remain relatively close, so a helicopter was arranged to airlift them to a more structurally sound SHIELD bunker the best part of an hour away.

‘My apologies if this is not to your usual standards of accommodation, your highnesses,’ Romanoff said when she brought the helicopter down onto a poorly maintained landing zone.

By the time Loki and Thor had unbuckled their seatbelts, the small squadron of SHIELD agents who had accompanied them had thrown open the cabin door and rushed out to secure the surrounding area. Coulson and Thor were quick to follow them, but Loki trudged out. The bunker really was nothing to be enthused about. The bulk of it had been buried into the hill, with only the weather-worn concrete facade jutting out. Inside, the fluorescent light fixtures inside flickered unpleasantly and the air smelled as if the place hadn’t been inhabited for a decade.

‘Director Fury possessed an encyclopaedic knowledge of SHIELD’s facilities,’ Coulson said. ‘This is the only place this side of the country that he might not know about and that contains the equipment we need.’

‘I trust you’re scouting other SHIELD facilities right now? If your director knew their locations, they seem like a good place to hide,’ Thor said.
‘Unless he’s intelligent enough to know that those would be the first places SHIELD would look,’ Loki replied.

‘Fury is nothing if not conniving,’ Coulson said, ‘but are checking all the locations we know about. Due diligence and all.’

As Loki nodded, he trod over something solid and once he shifted his foot, he cringed. He wasn’t quite certain, but the offending object looked decidedly like dried-out rat dung. The place Barton had taken him to had at least been clean, if rather lacking fresh air. He wondered if Ebony Maw and his accomplices hid in the very same place right now. Not that Loki could guide anyone there. Between the long hours spent on invasion preparations during his last days in the Sanctuary and the infinity stone inside the sceptre warping his mind, Loki hadn’t been in best shape when he had arrived on Midgard. He had let Barton take the lead after they had secured the Tesseract.

‘I may be able to track the Tesseract for you.’ Loki ignored the startled double-take Thor performed. ‘If I have the right equipment. The artefact emits all sorts of energy, but it also spurts out low levels of gamma radiation. Unless they have found some place to bunker down beneath a few dozen feet of lead lining, it should be trackable.’

‘We’ll see what we can do in terms of equipment,’ Coulson replied, but in his tone Loki read exactly what the Midgardian was thinking — his director was an intelligent man, he was undoubtedly hiding out beneath fifty feet of lead right this moment. ‘Agent Romanoff, could you show our new friends where the sleeping areas are. They might want to rest or freshen up while we work through the bureaucratic backlog.’

Romanoff gave them a tour of the areas of the bunker not dedicated to operational support, putting on the air of a hotelier who didn’t quite realise that what he thought was a top-notch establishment was, in fact, a disintegrating shack in the middle of the woods. Thor laughed heartily at her every word, while Loki hung back, only chuckling along where he felt he had to. He was a master liar and she had managed to trick him once before, Loki wasn’t about to give her the opportunity to get the better of them now. But there was no reveal. She finished the tour at a sparsely-furnished room Thor and Loki would be sharing and excused herself, leaving the two brothers alone.

Thor set Mjolnir down on the linoleum-lined floor and sat down on the bed closest to the door. The bed-frame sagged under his weight, not that Thor seemed to notice.

‘What happened with you?’ he asked. ‘You look like you haven’t slept in weeks.’

_Who’d waste time on sleep when you have Sakaar’s high life to savour?_

‘You’re not exactly fresh-faced yourself,’ Loki replied. He considered the other bed, but the bare mattress didn’t appeal. Instead, he leaned against the particleboard wardrobe door.

‘It’s been…’ Thor shrugged. ‘Sweet mercy, Loki, if only you knew how worried we’ve all been. Mother can’t go through a day without weeping, father is always in a foul mood and I can’t concentrate on what’s in front of me for all the dark thoughts I’ve had about why you chose to cut off contact. Mother too was sure something awful had happened. If not for father’s insistence I leave you be, I’d have come and dragged you back to Asgard myself.’

‘Mother always frets. Look at me, Thor. I’m fine, even my limbs are all accounted for.’

Loki had aimed to calm his brother down, but his words seemed to produce the opposite result. Thor shook his head vehemently, his lips taut and his face pale. ‘Did you stay away because of something I did? If so, I —’
‘It had nothing to do with you.’

For a moment Thor’s face took on the playful expression Loki remembered from their childhood
days, usually to be found when Loki had talked their way out of punishment they rightfully
deserved, but it didn’t last. Thor fiddled with the strap of his hammer. ‘Who then? This Thanos
person? You didn’t tell the Midgardians so much as half the story.’

‘I told them what they needed to know,’ Loki replied. He threw his hand up to silence his brother
when Thor began to speak. ‘I’ll tell you the rest. Just bear with me. It’s not a tale I relish telling.’

And it wasn’t an easy story to tell, but Loki muddled over his words less because of the events that
had taken place than out of the necessity to radically edit his motivations for becoming entangled
with Thanos and his ilk. He could only hope that Brunnhilde never crossed paths with Thor and
gave him the opportunity to cross-reference Loki’s tale, because within two minutes Loki’ carefully
constructed lies would come crashing down on his head.

‘I’m sorry about Nebula’s fate,’ Thor said when Loki got to his and Brunnhilde’s hurried return to
Sakaar. ‘The threads of her life were cut too soon.’

‘Were cut? I cut them, Thor. She thought I was a friend and I…’

‘My rashness cost Sif her life and nearly our father’s.’ Thor pushed himself off the bed, sending the
bed-frame violently groaning. He rested his hand on Loki’s shoulder. ‘I wish I could go back and
undo that, but I can’t. You just have to go on, avenge them if you can. And if you can’t, make their
death meaningful in some way.’

Loki shifted his shoulders just enough to shrug off Thor’s hand. ‘You weren’t there, so drop the
subject, will you?’

*He makes it sound like I’m tearing at my clothes and beating my bare chest with grief. She mightn’t
be dead for all I know. And if she is, what of it? I’ve done plenty of nastier shit in my life.*

Loki grit his teeth and pressed his tongue against the roof of his mouth until the lump in his throat
dissipated. ‘Thanos and those who follow him are dangerous; that’s all I care about right now.
Except I don’t know if I even should get involved. All I manage to do of late is to walk into a bad
situation and turn it into an outright disaster.’

‘Of late?’ Thor snickered. ‘One thing I could always rely on when you’re around is that chaos is sure
to follow. But, as good as you’re at getting us into trouble, you’re also ten times better at getting us
out of trouble than I am or anyone else will ever be.’

‘If only that were true,’ Loki muttered.

‘It is true,’ Thor insisted, then sighed. ‘And right now we do have a Tesseract we need to take back.
So what exactly is gamma radiation?’

‘A type of energy that the infinity stone contained within the Tesseract produces.’

‘The infinity stone… it’s the space stone inside the Tesseract, isn’t it?’ Thor frowned. ‘Are we sure
they are still on this planet? What’s not to say they already left Midgard? They could be anywhere in
the universe right now. Norns, Tyr might’ve taken them home.’

‘I…’

Loki fell silent before he could get out anything more. Thor was correct here. While Loki had come
to conquer Midgard, it didn’t mean that Tyr, Gamora or Ebony Maw shared his aims. Ebony Maw certainly wouldn’t demean himself to something as base as megalomania; his life and his soul belonged to the Mad Titan. As far as Loki knew, Gamora too wasn’t in the business of planetary conquest. And what would Tyr want with Midgard? His quarrel lay with Asgard and Asgard’s royal family.

‘Get in touch with Heimdall and make sure the Einherjar is placed on alert,’ Loki said. ‘I’ll still do what I can with Midgardian equipment. If they are gone, the space stone’s signature should at least be distinctive enough for me to tell whether it had been used and where.’

‘Maybe I should return home.’

‘Father and mother are back on Asgard. The realm is not unprotected.’

Thor reached for Mjolnir, but then thought better of it. ‘It may be father would be a better person to reason with Tyr than you or I. They were like brothers once.’

‘Exactly.’ Loki rolled his shoulders as he wistfully thought back to Vridu’s warm lips and shuddered breaths. Loki had been looking forward to that party for days; now he was stuck in some nameless Midgardian bunker. ‘I’ve no desire to see Heimdall’s smug face right now. I’m going to look around, see if there’s anything that’s edible and what Romanoff’s tour left out.’

‘As long as you’re coming back,’ Thor replied.

‘I’ve no plans not to.’ Loki shrugged, then was out the door.

There were few people about in the bunker’s ill-aired and mind-numbingly dull corridors. It was so quiet, he heard Coulson and Romanoff conversing from half a corridor away. Raising an eyebrow, Loki pressed himself against the wall by the entrance to the kitchen. It would have been unconscionable to not make use of an opportunity like this.

‘— was Fury’s own idea, you now plan to use it against him?’ Romanoff said incredulously.

Coulson let out an irritated grunt. ‘We’re not dealing with an ordinary threat, we need someone more than ordinary to counter it. I’ll go corral Stark. He talks a big game about being a free agent, but he’s never one to shy away from heroics and this affair will need heroics. You take care of Rogers. Do be gentle with him.’

‘What about Banner?’

‘I’ve never agreed with Fury on this one. Perhaps if we needed an expert on gamma radiation, I’d bring him in as a scientific consultant, but Loki seems to have it covered.’

‘If we can trust those two.’

A deafening whir of the coffee grinder swallowed the next several seconds, but Loki doubted his missed much. If he couldn’t hear a thing over the machine, he suspected the Midgardians couldn’t either.

‘An enemy of our enemy is not necessarily a friend.’ Romanoff went on when the grinder fell silent. The water tap was switched on, then quickly shut again. ‘Loki spoon-fed us a few facts, just enough to pacify you. He kept the other nine-tenths of the tale to himself. What do we know about them really?’

‘Then make the most of your training.’
‘I was trained to deal with humans, not gods and aliens.’

Coulson took a moment to form his response, ‘Natasha, if there is anyone I can trust to rise to the occasion, it’s you.’

‘Thank you, sir, I’m flattered by for your confidence in me. Although it rather makes what I planned to say next twice as awkward.’

‘Is that so?’

‘May I ask for twelve hours of personal leave?’ Coulson must have reacted badly to those words, because Romanoff quickly added, ‘I know there’s no confirmation on Agent Barton’s status, but he was shot and then the research lab detonated with him still inside. I would like to inform his wife that he’s unlikely to be coming back home.’

‘He was married?’

‘He kept it quiet. Very few besides Fury and me ever knew.’

A cup was set down roughly, then Coulson winced and said, ‘Damn it, Clint. Go then. I’ll hold the fort until you’re back.’

Loki moved away lest Romanoff storm out of the kitchen and realise he had been listening in on their conversation. He waited until her footsteps faded, then backtracked and this time stepped inside. Coulson sat seated at a long table, his hands wrapped around a steaming mug.

*I wonder if he’ll make it through this time.*
‘Loki, the extra equipment you requested has arrived,’ Coulson said, interrupting Loki’s efforts to make sense of what Loki suspected was SHIELD’s attempt at a motivational poster. ‘It’s all being set up in the back.’

‘I’d best make sure it’s done right,’ Loki responded.

Whatever their faults — Loki was familiar with SHIELD’s arrogance and the tale of the organisation’s spectacular fall from grace — they were efficient. By the time Loki strode into the makeshift laboratory, they had already brought in the newly delivered equipment and were pulling apart the rigid, metallic cases in which it had been packed. Loki hurried to lend a hand, though less out of a desire to be helpful than the need to know exactly what he had to work with.

‘How many spectrometers do we have access to?’ he asked. ‘Or, perhaps, the more pertinent question is — what’s their geographic spread?’

Coulson too had jumped in to help with the set up; he was presently trying to untangle a bundle of cords and fit them to the correct sockets. ‘We’ve secured help from a number of European partners, the Japanese, the Argentines… It’s a delicate situation. The Australians got antsy when, as a precaution, we asked whether they could redirect their over horizon radars and such.’

‘So you’re playing down what happened?’

‘Panic seldom helps.’

‘There’s a substantial difference between panic and a considered appreciation of the gravity of the situation.’ Loki plonked a monitor down onto the plastic fold-out table. ‘I’ve seen what Thanos’ men can do; don’t make the mistake of thinking this isn’t serious.’

Coulson’s lips twitched and he seemed to force himself to keep his voice level. ‘I assure you, we’re taking this very seriously. If I might remind you of one thing? Your people brought the Tesseract to this planet. You made us a target.’

Loki conceded the point with a tilted nod and turned to help a pair of junior agents, who struggled to assemble the test boxes they were unpacking.

After the best part of an hour, the room started to resemble a functional laboratory. But when Loki took a step back and took stock, he had to wonder if he had just wasted everyone’s time. Barton had found a place to hide where no spectrometer, radar, satellite or SHIELD spy could track them. How likely was it that Fury couldn’t find a similar calibre of hiding hole?

Or what if Thor’s right and they left already?

The thought sent Loki’s heart racing, but as he considered the logic of such a move, he found himself dubious. Gamora might have been satisfied to claim the Tesseract for Thanos. But she wasn’t alone and Loki didn’t think she was the one giving the orders. Ebony Maw outranked her. And he was a fundamentalist. He would remain until he brought balance to Midgard — a task he couldn’t accomplish unless he had an army under his command.

As for Tyr, his presence made sense the least. Loki had led the attack on Midgard because he had been promised the planet when everything was done and dusted. Tyr had never exhibited any sort of megalomania towards Midgard. In fact, knowing the man, Loki suspected Tyr would consider the
Midgardians too far beneath him to be worth the trouble of conquering.

‘That was then,’ Loki said to himself. ‘The Titan can twist a man until even his closest no longer recognise him.’

Coulson’s head jerked in Loki’s direction. ‘Pardon?’

‘Just thinking aloud, Agent Coulson,’ Loki replied. ‘Presuming that Ebony Maw or his accomplices want to use the Tesseract again, they would want to stabilise it. Otherwise they’ll just have a repeat of what happened at your research facility. I think there’s a way to do it and have a wormhole that remains open for however long you need it to.’

‘For however long you need it to?’

‘Use your imagination.’

Coulson gave Loki a hard look. ‘All right. What would they need?’

‘Quite a few bits and pieces, but most of them are easy enough to find. There are two things I’d concentrate on — a good, steady source of power and iridium. Well, in theory, you could get away with osmium. It has a higher density, but taking into account the ambient temperature of this planet, iridium is what an intelligent person would use.’

Coulson glanced around the room. ‘Agent Concannon? You have a background in chemistry, don’t you? Do you know much about iridium?’

An agent working on a computer at a bench one row away from Coulson and Loki whipped around to face them, nearly dropping the keyboard she held in her hands. ‘It’s a transitional element in the platinum group.’ She frowned, as if trying to remember the contents of a half-forgotten textbook. ‘The second densest metal we know of, very hard, but brittle. It’s also one of the rarest elements on this planet. The annual worldwide production and consumption rates are only a few tonnes.’

Loki nodded; he had yet to hear of a place where iridium was plentiful. ‘If that’s so, Agent Coulson, can your people put together a list of every place that produces and stores the element?’

Agent Concannon, or Antoinette as she preferred to be called, might have had a baby face that consigned her to look like a schoolgirl playing dress-up and she blushed whenever she looked in Thor’s direction, but she did good work. She soon had a list compiled that broke down the laboratories and other facilities that dealt with iridium. Loki reviewed the list. As he went down the page, he crossed out those that didn’t possess the sufficient quantity of the element or the variant containing the ideal number of isotopes. He doubted Ebony Maw wanted to muck about with synthesising iridium — it would be a messy process and the end-products would have a frustratingly short half-life. By the time Loki reached the bottom of the page, only two facilities remained as contenders. One near San Francisco and one in Stuttgart.

‘How long would it take to get to either of these places from here?’ Loki asked. ‘Can you issue some alert telling them to increase security there? Not that it’s likely to make the difference, but it should slow them down.’

Antoinette’s face fell. ‘I don’t have the authorisation for that. I’ll need…’

She trailed off as Coulson strode into the room with Rogers in tow. Loki cocked his head. Coulson was almost giddy with excitement, an excitement Rogers didn’t share. The man, dressed in non-
descript tan slacks and a chequered shirt, looked about as out of place among the stark monochromes SHIELD agents favoured as Loki himself did. He glanced around the room, his gaze lingering longer on the equipment than on the people at work in the room.

‘This one’s not SHIELD, Agent Coulson, am I right?’ Loki said.

Coulson’s smile widened. ‘You really ought to call me Phil. And yes. This is Captain Steve Rogers.’

Loki put on a welcoming smile and offered his hand. The gesture wasn’t much of an effort.
Certainly, not nearly as much as having to be civil to Romanoff earlier or to Banner back on Sakaar.
Rogers and Loki had found themselves on opposing sides in the past, but he, out of all the Avengers, had treated Loki with a basic amount of cordiality throughout. Besides, the man had chosen to become a fugitive in the last years before Thanos’ victory. Loki could respect a fugitive.

Right now, however, that future — if that future were to eventuate once more — lay years away.
Steve Rogers stood before Loki clean-shaven and with his hair meticulously parted. He shook Loki’s hand, his grasp firm, yet just short of uncomfortable. Loki wondered how many hands Rogers had crushed before he learned to adjust for the serum’s effects.

‘So, you’re from space?’ Rogers said somewhat awkwardly. At Loki’s impassive impression, he blustered. ‘Don’t take me wrong, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Only I thought you’d look… less like us.’

Loki’s lips quirked up. ‘That’s quite an assumption you make, captain.’

He let the concealments around himself drop and laughed as every SHIELD agent in the vicinity staggered back in surprise. Rogers didn’t quite have the same reaction, but he seemed to lose control of his lower jaw and didn’t recompose himself until Loki restored his Asgardian features.

‘The world’s become a strange place since I was last around,’ Rogers said. He cleared his throat. ‘Is that…’

‘Oh no, captain,’ Coulson responded, ‘it’s not you. This is all new to pretty much all of us.’ He frowned, then seemed to recompose himself. ‘Loki, there’s no need to hide yourself for our sake if that’s what worries you. It’s a bit of a shock to see, but one that’s soon overcome.’

‘Actually, I prefer this face,’ Loki replied. ‘Captain Rogers, how much has Agent Coulson explained to you about the Tesseract and what happened last night?’

Whatever words Rogers had to meet Loki’s question were swallowed by Antoinette’s violent string of profanity. Coulson slid past Rogers and Loki in order to get a better view of Antoinette’s computer monitor.

‘What’s amiss, Agent Concannon?’ he asked sharply.

Antoinette’s eyes widened. She started to apologise for the outburst, then shook her head and pointed to the screen. ‘I intercepted a military radio call from the facility of interest near San Francisco. They report they’re under attack.’

‘Thor!’ Loki called out. He had shouted his brother’s name half a dozen times already and received no response. His breakthrough came when a surly SHIELD technician pointed towards the kitchen.
Rounding the corner, Loki caught his brother struggling with a pack of individually wrapped cheese slices. ‘We’ve a lead on Tyr.’
Thor grinned and shoved the cheese back into the fridge. ‘Good. Let’s head outside. With Mjolnir —’

‘Let’s head outside, but you’re going to have to suffer local transport, same as me,’ Loki interjected. ‘It’s not like you know where you’re going. It’ll take just as long to explain as to take you there.’

‘How long will it take?’

‘Coulson says about an hour.’

Thor gritted his teeth and swept out of the room. There was no need to hurry Thor along any further. In fact, his pace through the bunker’s corridors was a challenge for Loki to match and he was glad Thor was likely to see action in the near future. Loki knew well what that tightening of Thor’s jaw foreboded.

SHIELD too was eager to expedite the operation. There was no sign of Stark yet or of Romanoff returning, but Coulson and Rogers stood at the base of the loading hatch to a softly rumbling quinjet.

‘We thought it’d be a good idea to update the Captain America outfit,’ Coulson was saying as he clung onto a familiar vibranium shield, ‘but it’s not quite ready. We can get you a replica of your old get up.’

‘A spare SHIELD uniform will suffice, if one can be found,’ Rogers replied. One of the junior agents mustn’t have shared Coulson’s adoration of Captain America memorabilia; he already had a pack ready for Rogers, who accepted it graciously. After a hesitation, he took up the shield as well.

Rogers was the first up the ramp of the loading hatch, but Coulson, Loki and Thor were only a step behind and two heavily armed SHIELD agents soon brought up the rear. The pilot didn’t wait for them to be comfortably seated. He took off the moment the loading hatch was secured, setting the quinjet on a steep climb upwards.

‘How likely is it that they’ll be gone by the time we arrive?’ Thor asked. He rested Mjolnir across his lap and watched Rogers pull out the various pieces that made up a SHIELD uniform from the bag he had been given.

‘It’s a military research facility with armed soldiers positioned in watchtowers all around the perimeter.’ Coulson replied from the co-pilot’s chair. ‘I called in for reinforcements from a nearby SHIELD facility as well. My laptop is in the back. There’s a feed we tapped into earlier… Travers, you’ve got this, don’t you?’

‘Yes, sir,’ the pilot responded.

The quinjet had already reached cruising altitude. While Coulson shuffled through the narrow space between the pilot’s and the co-pilot’s chair, Travers levelled out the aircraft. Loki glanced out the window. There was nothing to see save a soft layer of clouds that the setting sun painted in gold and orange. There was a deceptive serenity to that view. The quinjet sped over the continental United States at three thousand kilometres an hour. Somewhere below them there had to be a flurry of phone calls happening to ensure the airspace was clear for them and that any jets scrambled after them were ordered to stand down. And somewhere at the end of their journey, the future of Midgard was at stake.

‘Here,’ Coulson said as crunching and hissing started emanating from his laptop.

He turned it around so that the rest of the quinjet’s passengers could see the screen. Loki leaned in to get a better look. As best as he could tell, the camera was positioned a level above the front doors to
The research facility, overlooking the footpath up to the doors and the sliding metal gate at the facility’s perimeter. The metal doors were mangled and the watchtower to the left of the gate had collapsed. It was hard to be sure from the grainy footage and the twisted metal the camera did manage to capture, but Loki suspected something heavy had been rammed through the gate.

‘There’s something approaching. Top right-hand side, do you see it?’ Rogers said. He motioned to the band of sky visible above the remaining watchtower. There was a dark spot there. It moved rapidly and grew in size by the second. ‘Is that a plane?’

‘I think there’s more than one,’ Loki replied. While Rogers unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off, the others watched the screen and followed the approach of the mysterious objects. ‘There are two smaller shapes behind the first one.’

Coulson smiled. ‘Those aren’t planes. Those are SHIELD helicopters.’

A boom maxed out the laptop’s speakers. The camera shook and debris showered down. The image cleared just in time to catch the leading helicopter send a volley into the walls of the facility.

‘Travers, you need to coax more speed out of these engines,’ Coulson called out.

Travers laughed in response and Loki wasn’t sure if he actually made an effort to follow Coulson’s order. The engines didn’t hum any differently, but then they were barely audible beneath the burst of exchanged volleys coming from the camera feed. There was little to see now – mostly grey and brown hued debris flying, punctuated with bursts of bright reds from laser-guided weaponry. The sound, however, was quite clear.

‘A good half of that racket is coming from our helicopters,’ said the SHIELD agent seated next to Thor. He had to raise his voice to the verge of a shout to be heard. ‘Those are definitely ours. I was crew on one for two years; I know what fire from those helicopters sounds like. There’s a distinctive rattle from the gun mount.’

‘Why the fuck – ’ The other SHIELD grunt accompanying them paused halfway through a curse as Rogers shook his head and began unbuckling the belt on his trousers. ‘What are you doing, captain?’

Rogers glanced around, his fingers hooked around the trouser waistband. ‘I don’t think there’ll be time for a costume change once we arrive.’

As if to punctuate the good captain’s point, something whizzed past the camera and came to its end with a spectacular bang. The screen went blank. The rumble of battle turned into a lingering, high-pitched beep that made the Midgardians cringe.

Thor lifted Mjolnir off his lap and climbed out of his seat. ‘Pilot, is our destination straight ahead?’

‘Aah, yes.’ Travers replied.

‘Good.’

Before Loki could react, let alone any of the Midgardians, Thor opened the loading hatch at the back of the quinjet and dove out. Loki ignored the Midgardians’ startled yells and glanced out the quinjet’s left-hand side window. The clouds below them brewed, their colour deepening with every passing second. Lightning flashed and thunder sent the quinjet quivering.

‘Bloody typical,’ Loki said, turning back to the Midgardians. ‘I’m sorry about my brother. He likes to put on a show.’
San Francisco

Loki was no stranger to the violence of battle, nor to the damage Midgardian weaponry could inflict. Yet, when the quinjet reached the outskirts of San Francisco and the research facility came into view, he was taken aback nevertheless. Four SHIELD helicopters and Stark in his usual red and gold left the air above congested. A fifth helicopter was aflame on the ground, only the surviving half of its main rotor distinguished it from the mess of other wreckage scattered about.

Those still alive on the ground made use of these destroyed watchtowers, armoured vehicles and whatever else there was that could no longer be identified with any certainty. Loki sank his fingers into the back of the pilot’s headrest as he took in the view. Gunfire seemed to come from three directions at once — from within the building and from two angles from outside the facility’s perimeter.

Travers let out an ugly snarl. ‘We’ve been spotted.’

One of the helicopters that had been preoccupied with humbling Stark was now banking. Coulson slid into the co-pilot’s chair, but before he had the chance to fire off a single shot, the helicopter’s machine gun showered the quinjet with rounds that looked deadly enough to pierce the quinjet’s armoured hull. Coulson swore and let out the quinjet’s own firepower. The helicopter pilot was quicker, however. He banked the helicopter again. As it turned, the sun, low in the sky at this late hour, shone right through the helicopter’s cabin, illuminating his face enough for the pilot’s eye-patch to become visible.

Loki shook his head. This made little sense. What kind of facility was this to have enough men and enough weaponry to hold off a sustained attack from the air, even with Stark whizzing about and playing the hero? Where was Tyr? More importantly, where was Thor? Loki would never let Thor live it down if he got lost on his way. Or perhaps the iridium was already in Tyr’s hand and Nick Fury’s continued barrage was only a ploy to cover up Tyr’s retreat?

‘We need to get inside this building,’ Rogers said. In a mirror to Loki’s tight told on the pilot’s chair, he clung onto the back of the co-pilot’s chair and did his best to remain upright while Travers took the quinjet through every evasive manoeuver in his repertoire.

Travers scoffed. ‘I can hardly set you down right now!’

‘That’s fine,’ Loki said. He let go of Travers’ chair and tapped Rogers on the shoulder. Together they stumbled their way to the back of the quinjet. Loki pulled the lever that brought down the loading hatch. ‘It’s only about fifty metres. You want to go first?’

Rogers offered Loki a playful smile and jumped out. Loki followed the moment he thought he wouldn’t land atop of Rogers’ head. He had calculated correctly and ended up a few feet away from Rogers. The landing did jar every joint in his legs, but there was no time to shake it out. Loki didn’t remember the last time he had quite so many Midgardians attempting to kill him at one. Bullets sprayed from covered positions both his left and his right, while spent ammunition rained down from the stand-off between the helicopters, the quinjet and Stark.

Rogers sprinted over to Loki and brought his shield up in the vain attempt to protect them both. Of course, a shield only covered so many angles at a time; Loki’s magic had to take care of the rest.

‘Should’ve had Travers take us over the roof instead,’ Loki spat out in frustration.
Rogers shrugged. ‘We need to work with what we’re given.’

He grabbed the lip of Loki’s shoulder-piece with his free hand and began moving towards the research facility building. Loki let himself be pulled along, but he wasn’t willing to endure this gauntlet of gunfire any longer. He put some proper force behind his magic. Everything around them when flying backward. For a moment, there was silence as the gunners were thrown off their positions, then a hissing whirl descended from above.

The missile at the end of that whirl lifted both Loki and Rogers off their feet. Loki’s jaw caught the edge of the good captain’s shield, while Rogers himself came back up with bits of shrapnel embedded into practically every inch of his borrowed uniform. As Loki ran his tongue over his teeth and assured himself they were all still there, he helped Rogers to his feet. The missile had left a crater in its wake, which they had to skirt around as they rushed to what little remained of the facility’s front facade.

‘Don’t shoot!’ Rogers shouted when someone within started peppering them with bullets, but no matter the authoritative tone to Rogers’ voice, the bullets continued bouncing off his shield, sending sparks in every direction.

‘I don’t think they heard you!’ Loki shouted. The shooting from the other parties involved, whoever they were, had resumed and Loki’s attention had to be split between keeping up with Rogers and protecting their rear.

Rogers lowered his shield half an inch. ‘Stand down, men!’

Without waiting for a response, he leaped over the rubble that formed a very rough barricade at the entrance to the building. Caught off-guard by that move, Loki couldn’t quite match Rogers’ jump and had to scramble over the rubble. He made it over just in time to catch Rogers attempting to talk down a beefy corporal, who looked ready to take on Captain America with an empty ammunition box. Loki flicked his fingers; the ammunition box flew out of the corporal’s hand.

‘We’re not the enemy, really,’ Loki said. There were not a lot of them — not even a dozen (even if you counted the two unmoving figures half-buried under the debris). In his mind, it added weight to the thought that Fury’s dramatics outside were mere distraction. If he really wanted to, he would have blown their foxhole apart by now. Loki crouched down in the narrow space not taken by the soldiers or ammunition boxes. ‘We’re kind of like Stark. We’re here to help.’

As Rogers found a place for himself a little deeper into the destroyed atrium, he gestured to the men who held weapons in their hands. ‘Keep doing what you were doing. Corporal, a situation report would be a great help right now.’

The corporal chewed on his lip, his eyes repeatedly flickering to Loki, which Loki supposed was only to be expected. He was dressed in his Asgardian gear.

‘Fuck if I know what’s happening,’ the corporal finally said. ‘It was a normal day, then this girl with green skin and this old guy rammed their hummer through the gates. They were both dressed weird, about as weird as you are.’ He motioned towards Loki. ‘No offence, man.’

‘None taken,’ Loki muttered.

‘Yeah, uh, they had weird weapons too. We held them off until these helicopters arrived with a bunch of SHIELD people and some other weird looking guy. Then Stark and that dude with the hammer. I don’t fucking know that all of this crap is about. We called in for reinforcements and they confirmed they were coming. I think they are out there, but they can’t get through those SHIELD
‘Sounds like a tough afternoon,’ Rogers said. The boom from an explosion outside made him pause briefly, then he went on as if nothing had happened. ‘You’re all done well. Where are the… questionably dressed people now?’

A private, who was in the middle of reloading, snorted. ‘Jumped up on the roof or something. Didn’t look right.’

‘They’ll be after the iridium,’ Loki said. ‘I’m going after them.’

Rogers nodded. ‘I’ll be right after you, just need to give these guys a hand.’

Loki made no enquiries about the captain’s plan. He didn’t care what Rogers did really, not when Thor was potentially alone against Gamora, Tyr and Ebony Maw. Stark would have been more help anyway; it was more difficult to get into Stark’s head than other people’s.

At the second flight up the building’s main staircase, Loki realised his folly. He had no clue where inside this facility, which looked large enough to accommodate at least a thousand people, the iridium was stored. He abandoned the stairs and tried to pry open the first door he came across. Locked. Of course, the entire building was in lockdown. Loki took a few steps back. With a run-up, he rammed his shoulder into it. The window of frosted glass towards the top shattered and the lock split open.

Loki burst inside what turned out to be a vast cavern of desks and cubicles. It looked empty. He frowned. It was late in the day, but what was his luck that there wouldn’t be anyone working back?

‘Hello?’ he called out. ‘If there’s anyone there, I need your help. I only need directions. I’m not armed!’

A rustle came from beneath a desk in the middle of the cubicle forest. A middle-aged man with a beard Volstagg would envy crawled out and upon seeing Loki, brought his hands up above his head.

‘Oh, Lordy,’ he muttered. Even at the distance between them, his widened eyes and pale cheeks were obvious. ‘I really hope you were telling the truth.’

Loki chuckled. He considered changing his appearance to match common Midgardian attire, but a sudden show of magic was bound to only unsettle the man further.

‘Do I look armed?’ he asked in a calm tone. His knives were well hidden. ‘You’re all right, nothing to worry about with me, do you understand? I’m searching for a laboratory or wherever they deal with or store iridium. Can you point me to the right place?’

‘Don’t know really,’ the man responded. The light coming in from the outside changed sharply, drawing the man’s attention. A moment later his unvoiced question was answered as a burning helicopter tumbled out of the sky and landed with a thud that sent flying what few pieces of glass had still remained in the window-frames. The man gulped down a breath. ‘I just do the contracting support here. All I know is all the big labs are in the East Wing, spread over levels three and four.’

Loki sighed. ‘Well, that’s something. Thank you.’

‘Glad I could help then.’ The man knit his eyebrows together. ‘I’ll get back under that table now then.’

‘Sure. You do that.’
Loki heard his brother long before he caught up to him; Thor’s frustrated roar carried well. Loki followed the noise up to the fourth floor of the building. The destruction here was as thorough as out by the entrance. No door or wall was left untouched; barely a piece of furniture retained enough shape to make it possible to make out what it had been; holes had been ripped in the ceiling. Loki wasn’t surprised. Mjolnir wasn’t a weapon suited to enclosed spaces and Ebony Maw, who carried no physical weapon on his person, relied on his surroundings to furnish him with usable tools during a fight.

Loki himself was better prepared. He drew his knives and hurried to the tussling audible above the sound of the continuing battery outside. He found Thor soon enough.

This isn’t great.

Thor was swinging his hammer in defence rather than attack. He tried to ward off Ebony Maw’s assault and at the same time, retain his hold on Tyr, whom he held firm in his left hand. He wasn’t having much success. Ebony Maw was a challenging and wily opponent on any day, and today he carried the sceptre.

Yet at that moment, the Maw stood facing away from Loki. Figuring this was as opportune a moment as there would ever be, Loki took his chance.

‘Behind you!’ Tyr yelled.

Ebony Maw turned, his face twisting with rage. A pulse of azure-hued energy rushed out of the gem embedded in the sceptre and sent Loki flying backward through no less than three walls. He could only be glad that Midgardians favoured wood and plaster as building materials. He came to no major harm. Before he could move a muscle, however, Ebony Maw decided he wanted Loki back. An invisible hand wrenched shut around Loki’s throat and dragged him out of the rubble. Loki flung out his hands, trying to find something solid to hold on to and at the same time, attempting to call on his magic. Against the full power of the infinity stone, he stood no chance.

A cold dread seized him. It was the mind stone that sat nestled within the sceptre. The weapon was likely only recently resized for Ebony Maw’s stature, but the Maw would know enough to pry open Loki’s mind.

He choked out an incomprehensible gargle. The invisible hand around his throat held on too firmly. Even if he could speak, Loki had no idea what he could say to save himself. He had fooled Thanos once. Ebony Maw would remember that insult well; he would make sure to tear out every memory, thought and fantasy Loki had ever had.

‘Release him!’ Thor shouted, pulling Tyr up so Ebony Maw could see the aged man’s flushed face. ‘Release him or I’ll kill your accomplice. Then I will hunt you down —’

‘Then kill me!’ Tyr spat out. ‘I don’t care if I rot in the halls among the damned if that thing you call brother is dead.’

‘Must we have more death?’ Ebony Maw smiled as he shifted the sceptre back a notch. With that small movement, Loki slid the last few feet across the floor and within the Maw’s reach. He rested a long, bony finger on either side of Loki’s nose and pushed his fingers down until Loki’s lower eyelids pulled away from his eyes. Loki’s vision blurred. The hand, which still held him tight,
permitted no air into his lungs. ‘You are Thor, King of the Asgardians, are you not?’

‘I am,’ Thor answered sharply.

‘Enough blood has been spilt today. Do you not agree, your highness? We need not spill more. My master’s plans for this world will come to fruition soon enough, but Asgard need not be touched. You need only to accept the Great Titan’s dominion over this planet and we will have an understanding.’

‘And Loki,’ Tyr hissed. ‘We must have him. He killed my daughter. He killed the Titan’s daughter.’

Ebony Maw let out a huff and went on speaking, but Loki no longer heard his words. His vision was going too — the darkness had started at the edges and was rolling inward and each of his limbs weighed as much as a bullock. He tried one more attempt to call on his magic. The Asgardian magic his mother had taught him and the Jotunn magic of his blood. Both failed him. The world was closing in. He saw only the Maw’s eyes, which even the light of the infinity stone couldn’t warm.

‘Asgard will never accept your terms,’ Thor declared. His voice was loud and coursed with fury, but it seemed to come from a half mile away. ‘Release my brother right now.’

Why is he so far away? We were all in the same room, weren’t we?

Someone shouted. The hand around Loki’s throat gave him an inch of leeway and deposited him on his knees on the floor. It was enough for Loki to cough in a mouthful of air. Spots slid across his vision, but Ebony Maw’s face became clearer. He grinned. By the time Loki realised the Maw was lowering the sceptre towards him, Loki was already screaming.

‘What is this?’ he asks as Thanos takes the sceptre from Ebony Maw. ‘Is this a test?’

‘You could call it that,’ Thanos responds. He tilts his head to the side and is something apologetic in his expression. Nevertheless, he cups Loki’s chin, then presses his thumb into Loki’s temple. ‘This won’t be comfortable for you.’

‘I trust you understand the value of circumspection on this matter,’ Ebony Maw says as he inputs the security code and scans in his fingerprints. ‘It is an honour to be entrusted with this knowledge.’

Loki nods solemnly. ‘I think I would be no less disappointed than the Great Titan would be if he finds my conduct wanting.’

The pain, already unbearable, twisted into a burning agony. Loki’s skull was pried apart and someone had sunk their fingers deep into his brain, their fingernails scraping more and reaching deeper with every second.

‘I know what it’s like to lose. To feel so desperately that you’re right, yet to fail nonetheless,’ Thanos says. Paying no attention to the burning fires nor to the mutilated bodies all around them, he bends down to hook his fingers under Thor’s breastplate and lifts the Asgardian off the ground. ‘It’s frightening. It turns your legs to jelly. But I ask you to what end? Dread it, run from it, destiny
arrives all the same. And now it’s here. Or should I say, I am here.’

A shadow of a smirk crosses Thanos’ face as he brings up his left hand to show off the gauntlet and the power stone nestled within.

‘The universe lies within your grasp,’ the Maw proclaims.

Thanos offers no indication he heard those words — his focus is on his quarry. He studies the Tesseract for the moment, then crushes it as if the containment vessel was nothing more than spun sugar. The shards of the Tesseract fall away, revealing the precious stone within. Loki’s heart skips a beat as the space stone smoothly slides into its intended place next to the power stone and sends out a pulse of energy through the wrecked shell of the Statesman.

The Mad Titan sighs. The sound has an orgasmic quality to it and his eyes never tear away from the gauntlet, but he isn’t content with this victory. ‘There are two more stones on Earth,’ Thanos declares. ‘Find them to me, my children, and bring them to me on Titan.’

The fingers became a blunt ache. But Loki couldn’t bring himself to move. He had no sense of how much time had passed, it might have been a matter of seconds or it might have been weeks. Nothing seemed to exist past the dusty ground his cheek was pressed against. Slowly, his eyes began registering blotches of light. But before he could recover his bearings, the floor moved and Loki’s cheek slid against something metal. He was heaved up.

‘I hope you said your farewells,’ Tyr hissed. Loki couldn’t see him well, although Tyr had to have pressed himself very close to Loki’s face — Loki could smell Tyr’s breath. And he recognised the tone to Tyr’s words. No one took as much offence in Loki’s continued existence as Tyr did.

‘No, Tyr!’ Ebony Maw shouted. ‘Keep him alive!’

Loki pushed Tyr away. It achieved little; the mind stone had left him in a poor state. He tried again, this time putting what energy he had left into the effort to free himself. Still, he couldn’t escape Tyr’s grasp.

‘Tyr!’ Ebony Maw yelled.

The Maw had abandoned his struggle with Thor and made for the windows. Tyr followed, but in having to drag an uncooperative Loki along, he was considerably slower. Thor brought Mjolnir down onto Tyr’s forearm. The strike left every bone in Tyr’s arm shattered and the limb misshapen; he had no hope of holding onto Loki.

Thor brought up Mjolnir once more and what came up had to come down. Thor was a fraction too late, however. Tyr threw himself out the window. Loki clambered up just in time to see Ebony Maw use his telekinesis to catch Tyr before the Asgardian hit the ground. The two of them disappeared inside the closest of the surviving helicopters.

‘Why flee now?’ Thor muttered, following the line of the helicopter’s retreat.

Loki turned around and leaned against the chipped remnants of the nearby wall, letting the wall bear the entirety of his weight. ‘Thor, what are you doing? Go after them!’

‘You’re not well,’ Thor replied after peering dumbly at Loki for a moment. ‘The man in the red suit.
Stark, wasn’t it? He’s pursuing them. The jet we took here is after them too.’

‘I’ll be fine, Thor. So go, will you? We can’t let them get away!’

‘You really don’t look well. I’m not —’

‘I’ll feel much better once you pulverise their skulls!’ Loki sneered. ‘Norns be damned, Thor, will you actually listen to me for a change? Go!’

Thor let out an irritated grunt. ‘You’d better still be here when I return.’
Troubled Minds

With Mjolnir’s hum fading into the distance, Loki surrendered his footing and slid to the ground. Thanos strutting about the ruined Statesman with the Infinity Gauntlet on his arm. Thanos in the possession of two infinity stones. If Ebony Maw hadn’t yet realised what he had pulled out of Loki’s mind, he would the moment he had a few minutes to reflect on the matter.

And that meant they were all done for. Midgard, Asgard, the entirety of the Nine Realms, the entirety of the universe. All the death the first time around, and all the deaths the second time had been for nothing. Ebony Maw would open the portal soon enough. The Chitauri, or whichever foul race had been selected to carry out the massacres in this time-line would come rushing in. Loki, Thor, SHIELD and the nascent Avengers might manage to hold them off for a day or a week. Ebony Maw and Gamora might even have to call for reinforcements. The Midgardians might even use up their stockpiles of atomics. It wouldn’t matter — destiny wasn’t something you could run from.

Thanos’ words. Except, he said it better.

‘Shouldn’t have gotten involved. I knew it was a bad idea and I did it all the same.’ Loki rubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand. ‘I always was an idiot.’

Closing his eyes, Loki let out a pained chuckle. Perhaps it would soothe some of the damned if they died knowing that their deaths would be infinitely quicker and kinder than Loki’s own? After all, in damming them, he had damned himself too. Tyr, Gamora and Ebony Maw had little in common, except their hatred of Loki. A hatred Thanos himself undoubtedly shared too. Even putting aside Loki’s efforts to bring down Thanos’ crusade from the inside and his attempt to murder Thanos himself, Tyr had shouted that Loki had killed the Titan’s daughter. Loki had never steeled himself enough to ask Heimdall the question, but Tyr had been gracious enough to provide confirmation. Nebula was dead. By Loki’s hand.

And here was another pointless death on his ledger. It shouldn’t have mattered, not when he had condemned the half the universe, yet Loki still found himself swallowing the lump in his throat. He pushed the knuckle of his index finger between his teeth and bit down until the pain began to echo the lingering throbbing in his head.

‘This can’t be the way this ends,’ Loki muttered and despised himself for the unevenness in his voice.

There was no point in running or hiding. Thanos’ children would scour the universe until they dug up whichever hole or crevice he had crawled into. He supposed could wipe out his memory. He had never tried it, for obvious reasons, but over the years, while researching for other things, he had come across a number of potentially useful spells. Some seemed quite thorough. A few days of digging around the palace library back on Asgard was bound to dredge up a spell that even the mind stone couldn’t undo. But then if Thanos got his hands on the time stone, he could reverse whatever Loki did to himself just as he reversed Wanda’s efforts with Vision.

The time stone.

It was right here on Midgard. Not yet in Strange’s possession; Strange was probably still ignorant of the very existence of the mystic arts at this point. Loki stared at the deep imprints his teeth had left across his index finger. He could try to persuade Strange’s predecessor to help him. And if she refused, he could steal the damned amulet. But what then? Start the cycle again? Time travel was a wonderful tool, but could do nothing to address the fundamental issue — the knowledge locked in
Loki’s head presented an existential threat to the universe.

No, it was safer to wipe his own mind. Thor, the Avengers, Brunnhilde and whoever else was out there stood a much better chance against Thanos if he couldn’t torture the truth out of Loki.

‘He’ll still try,’ Loki reminded himself. ‘Now that Ebony Maw saw what he saw. Torture — the kind that would make the last stay in the pits of the Sanctuary a pleasant memory, that’s what awaits. And if I survive the torture and he gains nothing, he will kill me. And I won’t even know why I’m being tormented.’ He shook his head. ‘Or to go back again, right now. Wipe my memory the moment I go back. No, that’s stupid. How will I know what I came back for? I’d have to leave enough to nudge me and he’’ll unravel me from that single loose thread. And again, death. It always ends in death.’

Maybe father was right. My birthright was to die.

‘Maybe all of this could’ve been prevented had he just left me there in that wretched Jotunn temple.’ Loki laughed bitterly.

Faint thumps of hurried footsteps came from somewhere above. Loki glanced up just as Rogers emerged from a hole in the ceiling and landed gracefully amid the wreckage. Rogers himself looked less than graceful. His hair was in disarray, white powder peppered his face and wide gashes across his SHIELD uniform exposed his pale skin.

‘Are they all gone?’ he asked. He trudged over to the broken window Loki sat beside, carrying himself with an air of a man who had just lost a fight he couldn’t afford to lose. Yet, his face darkened further when his gaze focused on Loki. ‘You don’t look so great. Are you injured?’

Loki found he didn’t have an answer to that question. Yes, his head, his throat, his neck hurt, but the physical pain hardly seemed to matter. Nothing mattered anymore. Loki peered up blankly at the Midgardian and shrugged.

‘Would…’ Rogers’ brows drew together. He set down his shield and sat down on the dusty ground next to Loki. ‘Do you know where your brother is?’

‘He flew off somewhere in that direction.’ Loki motioned back to the broken window.

‘Why?’

‘Ebony Maw and Tyr fled from us, Stark and my brother went off after them. Oh, Coulson in the quinjet as well. Perhaps they’ll catch the Maw, or at least Tyr.’

‘I hope so,’ Rogers replied. ‘The woman. Gamora, was it? I believe she’s fled as well. I was on the lookout for you, then I caught a glimpse of her on the third floor. I pursued her for a while and we clashed, but I couldn’t bring her down. She made a good few tonnes of the building collapse on top of me. By the time I dug myself out, she was gone.’

A small part of his mind, a relic of his younger days, found amusement in Rogers’ failure, but the mirth was fleeting. Loki ran his thumb over the still visible teeth-marks across his index finger. ‘Did she have the iridium on her?’

‘She had a vial of something on her.’

Gamora on the third floor — where some of the laboratories were supposed to be. A vial on her person. Even with Loki’s mind still somewhat addled by the infinity stone, the pieces now fell into place easily. Gamora had been tasked with securing the iridium, everything else had been a distraction. And they had fallen for it. Even Rogers’ encounter with Gamora had been an accidental
This was a right disaster.

‘Do you think we can commandeer the helicopter and follow their trail?’ Rogers asked as he pulled himself up until he could see out the window. ‘Or should I take you to a medic first? I don’t know much about your… species? Is that the right term? Anyway, you look like you could use some rest.’

‘There’s nothing your medics could do for me.’

Loki shook his head and refused to listen to Rogers’ reply. It was tempting to stay where he was, in fact, to never move again at all. The captain was stubborn and his cajoling would go on for a while, but he would tire eventually. After that Loki would have the pleasure of contemplating in peace about precisely how much of an idiot he was. But the thought of Thor out there, possibly in the Maw’s mercy, nagged at him.

He pressed his left hand against the wall behind him and clambered up. The window offered a good vantage point of the battle’s aftermath. Loki cocked his head. He had counted five helicopters before. Two hadn’t survived the fight and were now smoking wrecks on the ground. One he barely made out in the rapidly fading light. It had touched down further away, well beyond the facility’s perimeter; there was no longer a space closer that would have served as a safe landing zone. Of the remaining two there was no sign.

‘You mean to take the one that survived the battle?’ Loki said. ‘I wouldn’t recommend it. There’ll be damage all over it; it won’t make it far.’

Rogers fiddled with the strap on the inside of his shield. ‘I’ve flown in worse.’

‘Is there a particular direction you think Gamora would’ve gone? She might not have caught up with the other two yet and she does carry the iridium on her. If we can catch up to her —’

‘What’s going on down there?’ Something close to silence had fallen over the area in the past couple of minutes; now shouting and bursts of gunfire came from ground level once more. ‘Come on, this doesn’t sound good.’

With that, Rogers scrambled down to investigate, pausing only to make sure that Loki was behind him.

As they returned to ground-level, the sun finally sank below the horizon. Lit by what last few rays remained, squadrons of soldiers flooded the area, moving like ghosts between the rising plumes of smoke. And in the gathering darkness, a single, desperate voice pierced the air. This wasn’t the adrenaline-fuelled holler of battle nor the howl of the grievously wounded. Fear – that was the only thing to be found in that sound. Rogers, of course, understood the situation as quickly as Loki did and rushed over to the source of those screams.

‘What’s going on here?’ Rogers demanded.

As best as Loki could tell, the military were clearing the battle-site and were making a muck of it. Six infantrymen in full combat gear had converged on the upturned wreck of a light-armoured vehicle. Their focus wasn’t on the vehicle itself, however, but solely on the woman caught in the narrow band of dirt between it and a body riddled with bullets. Or, rather, she had been their sole focus.
Rogers’ question had earned him three automatic rifles pointed at his face.

‘Who’s asking?’ hollered the shortest of the infantrymen. With the soldiers’ attention drawn away, the woman’s screams had turned to gasping sobs and half-comprehensible pleas. Nor did the short distance between them warrant the shouting. Rogers gave Loki a side-long glance; they hadn’t discussed with Coulson what the world should be told about Loki and Thor. Loki also didn’t know what had been released to the public about Captain America’s return from the annals of history. The infantryman seemed to take this hesitation as an insult. He jerked up his rifle and looked through the sight mounted on the weapon. ‘Identify yourselves or I’ll make mince out of you.’

‘Sir!’ came an alarmed shout from somewhere behind Loki. ‘They are on our side. They helped us out. Well, the one with the shield did, but the… The point is — they’re not hostiles.’

It was the same corporal who had been daft enough to try to take out Rogers an ammunition box, but he was at least intelligent enough not to throw himself in front of the rifles aimed at Loki and Rogers. He came around the side and stopped there. The infantrymen’s shoulders softened a little, but their rifles didn’t shift an inch.

‘My name is Loki Odinson,’ Loki said. Now that they had butted into whatever was going on with the woman, it was evident that they wouldn’t extricate themselves out of this situation without giving some explanation.

Much like Loki, Rogers’ gaze kept drifting back to the road leading away from the research facility. Likely, he quietly made similar calculations also — the soldiers, their blood still pulsing with the heat of battle, wouldn’t just stand by and watch if they tried to leave. But another violent engagement today would help no one.

Nor am I up to one right now.

‘Captain Steve Rogers,’ Rogers said with a mild grimace.

‘Sergeant Major Thornton,’ the shortest of the infantrymen replied. His gaze lingered on Rogers as he went on, ‘Pardon me, sir, what are you two doing here?’

‘We are —’

‘We received information that insurgents were planning an attack on this facility,’ Loki cut in. He had no idea what Rogers wanted to say and he didn’t care to find out. The situation was delicate. ‘They were after certain chemicals that may be used to stage a large-scale terrorist attack. Unfortunately, by the time we arrived, the attack was already underway.’

Thornton motioned for the other two men to lower their rifles, then reluctantly brought down his own. ‘What agency do you work for?’

‘They jumped out of the SHIELD jet,’ one of the other infantrymen said. Although he had followed his sergeant’s order and lowered his rifle, his finger still inched towards the trigger. ‘They’re not the good guys here.’

At the mention of SHIELD, the woman’s head lifted. Beneath grime, ash and blood, which dripped from her temple as freely as her tears, were the remnants of a SHIELD uniform. Loki tilted his head to get a better angle of the armoured cars’ interior. A badly burnt corpse lay twisted inside.

I can’t believe it, but I actually wish Coulson and Romanoff were here. They could’ve dealt with this.

‘We’re not SHIELD.’ Loki sighed. ‘You know Tony Stark? As in Ironman? It’s kind of the same
thing with us — free agents, occasionally pitching in where we can.’

‘Vigilantes.’ Thornton snorted.

The corporal bristled. ‘Come on, sir. Captain Rogers took down half the SHIELD bastards who were firing at us. And if not for Stark, they’d’ve brought down the entire building on top of us.’

Loki supposed he ought to have been thankful Rogers couldn’t go five minutes without playing the hero, but he doubted the corporal’s support would be enough to convince Thornton. Chewing on his bottom lip, Loki tried to come up with an explanation that didn’t involve aliens or glowing sticks of magic. ‘It seems SHIELD has been infiltrated by rogue agents,’ he said in the end. ‘Your man’s right, we arrived on a SHIELD craft with several SHIELD agents escorting us. Those agents had called for reinforcements when news came about an attack here, but when we arrived, what we thought were our reinforcements started firing on us.’ Loki gestured towards the woman. ‘Why don’t we ask your detainee for her side of the story?’

The corporal inched closer to Loki and Rogers. ‘Sir, —’

‘Corporal Esposito, have we run out of body bags?’ Thornton interjected.

‘No, sir.’

‘Then get on with your work and don’t stick your nose where it don’t belong.’ Thornton nudged the barrel of his gun towards the woman. ‘Enlighten us then.’

She stared at him for a long moment, then slid her tattered sleeve across her mouth. ‘I don’t… I barely remember anything. An alert came in. We were all rushing, about to head off and then the director came. He was with a strange man.’

‘Did he carry a staff?’ Rogers asked softly.

‘Yes!’ Her eyes widened. ‘He pressed it against my chest and everything faded away until his voice was the only thing I could hear. Then there was a battle, wasn’t there? I remember flashes of it. I don’t understand it; I was trying to bring down a SHIELD quinjet. Why would I do that? And then… I woke up and I was here and everyone else was… Oh, God, everyone else is dead.’

So much for no glowing sticks of magic.

‘May I examine her quickly?’ Loki asked. With obvious reluctance, Thornton gave his nod and Loki moved over to the woman. He shifted her blood-soaked locks until he found the narrow, inch-long gash. ‘I wager you have a good concussion to go along with this blood. You were probably unconscious for a while, long enough to clear your mind of the influence that staff had over you.’

Thornton made a face. ‘What the heck are you talking about? Mind-control?’

‘More or less.’ Loki straightened back up with a loud grunt, making the woman flinch away.

‘Yeah. You know what? Colour me surprised.’ Thornton muttered. ‘SHIELD has always been filled with fuck-wits and weirdos.’ He let out a loud scoff and went on. ‘Jesus H. Christ. This is so beyond my pay grade.’

To Loki’s mild amusement, Thornton meant what he said. He had his squad pull the bleeding SHIELD agent to her feet and marched them all straight to his commanding officer. But if Thornton wanted clear orders as to what he ought to do next, there were none to be had. The commanding officer decided to confer with his fellow officers about proper protocols for the situation and they
soon fell into a heated argument about doctrine, jurisdictions and rules of engagement.

‘Do you have a mobile phone on you?’ Loki asked Rogers, speaking quietly so he didn’t interrupt the healthy debate going on around them. ‘They gave you one, right?’

Rogers winced. ‘They did. I left it on the table back in the bunker; not really used to carrying it around just yet.’

‘Where’ve SHIELD been keeping you? As much as I appreciate the hospitality of the local military, I need to find my brother. And we need to rendezvous with Coulson and his people. Or we can encamp at Stark’s? I hear he has a tower all to himself.’

‘Tony Stark lives in New York,’ Rogers replied. ‘It’s a city on the other side of the continent. And that’s where SHIELD… That’s where I’ve been lately. I do have Coulson’s number memorised if that helps.’

‘Well, that’s something,’ Loki muttered, then raised his voice. ‘Sergeant Major? Could we borrow a phone for a minute?’
'It'll be all right,' Rogers cooed. He drew his arm around the woman's narrow shoulders and led her inside the quinjet.

Loki glanced back at the scowling soldiers. Whatever phone number Rogers had memorised, Coulson hadn't been on the other end of the line. The first two times the call went unanswered. On the third, the call went straight to Romanoff and here she was thirty minutes later, in a quinjet of her own. The craft's surface, still wet from some storm-system she had cut through on the way, glistened, refracting the beams of the soldiers' flashlights. Although Loki and Rogers had warned about its arrival, the first sight of the quinjet still sent the infantry into a flurry of shouting and they hurried to take up positions. A senior officer had to shout for everyone to stand down.

The military turned even more hostile when Romanoff declared that she would be taking the injured SHIELD agent with them. Loki wasn't familiar with the peculiarities of the local legal code nor with military procedures, so he couldn't follow the trail of the discussion about the agent's fate. Romanoff, on the other hand, had a good grasp of the complexities of military policy on detention of enemy combatants. More than enough to stump the soldiers eager to keep the SHIELD agent for their own questioning. Romanoff was gracious about it, but as she climbed inside the quinjet and swept past Loki, she allowed herself a self-satisfied smile.

'Care to be my co-pilot?' she asked him. Neither her tone nor her mannerisms gave any hint of the grim task she had just returned from.

Loki considered the question, then shook his head. 'You seem to have it covered.'

'Let me know if you change your mind.'

While Romanoff brought the quinjet into the air, Loki trudged over to the bench along the right-hand-side of the jet and took a seat, stretching out his legs. The leather of his boots was barely visible beneath the muddle of dirt, some kind of white dust and specks of blood.

Midgard in all its glory.

He flicked his fingers and gasped.

'Loki?' Rogers' head shot up.

'Just remembered I had a date scheduled for tomorrow. Quite a lovely lady; I hate to stand her up.' Loki replied briskly. Inwardly he berated himself. The last time he had tangled with the mind stone, he had been left unconscious and any attempt to use magic had him hissing with pain for days. He should have anticipated that today's abuse would inflict its own damage.

Rogers seemed unable to determine whether Loki was being disingenuous or not. His hands hovered over the first aid kit he had open across his knees. 'Is there no way you can get in touch? Let her know?'

'Maybe.' Some minute muscle moved in Rogers' face, but in that barely perceptible change the squeaky-clean persona of Captain America threatened to shatter. Loki swallowed. Uncertain of whether Rogers was about to spill some deep trauma of his upon Loki or if he expected Loki to start
sharing the details about his fictitious date, Loki fumbled for a change of topic. His attention fell onto the woman curled up on the bench next to Rogers. 'What was your name again?'

She had told Rogers earlier, but Loki hadn't been listening.

'Tilly,' she mumbled, barely audible.

'Did the creature with the staff say anything?' Loki asked. 'To you or to anyone else?'

'I don't remember.'

Next to her, Rogers studied the various packages that had been stuffed inside the first aid box; a dressing now soaked up the blood from Tilly's head wound, but the rest of her was still in rough shape. 'It's ok if you can't remember, but if there is something, even something you're not sure about, you need to tell us.' He ripped open the plastic around a roll of bandages and motioned for Tilly to pull back her ripped left sleeve. 'It could be crucial information.'

'It's all so hazy,' she replied.

'How about you start from the beginning?'

Tilly drew her brows together and whimpered as the movement irritated some injury under her skin. 'We were all in the office. There'd been a mad rush in the morning after a directive came from HQ to update our security protocols, but by then we'd finished and we were just kind of goofing off, talking about Francesca's head-case of a mother-in-law. Then Director Fury burst in and demanded we scramble to deploy.'

'How did he get inside?'

'Were you warned that Fury was compromised?' Loki asked before Tilly had the chance to respond to Rogers' question. She shook her head.

So much for SHIELD understanding the gravity of the situation, Loki reflected bitterly. Likely the SHIELD higher-ups thought it embarrassing to admit to their cannon fodder that one of their senior leaders was now a zombie under control of an alien. It didn't take much imagination to figure out how to get inside a building if no one thought you were a threat. Fury could have approached one of the agents out on his lunch-break or something similar. A few friendly words were often enough to coax an unsuspecting person into a place where their screams would remain unheard and then it was a matter of a strong stomach and a bit of patience. And the sceptre in Ebony Maw's hand eliminated the need for the unpleasantness information extraction entailed.

In the periphery of Loki's vision he could see Romanoff glancing back at them, her attention more focused on the conversation between her passengers than on the controls in front of her. Perhaps it would have been prudent to wait until they were back on the ground and Romanoff could do the questioning; she would get more out of the girl than Loki or Rogers. But Loki needed to focus on something other than himself and Rogers too was plainly hungry for information.

*Romanoff can sink her nails into the girl later.*

'Did you do as Fury directed you to?' Loki asked.

'Yeah,' Tilly replied, her words barely audible. 'Most of us anyway. There was some rumour about the director that someone had overheard earlier and a couple of people hesitated. Fury and the strange man that was with him — he didn't look human —'
'Big nose? Carried a big sceptre? That's Ebony Maw.'

'Him, yes. He approached us and started touching us with the sceptre one by one. The others realised something wasn't right, but I didn't have the time to react. I think I was the third one he reached. And then it was like looking at the world through ten feet of river water. Everything was distant and distorted.'

Tilly continued speaking, but Loki had to turn away and focus on the soft hum of the engines instead. It didn't help much, merely taking him back to that fever dream of his failed invasion of Midgard. He had sat back then in these same quinjets, fighting to peer through the wall the mind stone had woven around his psyche. Only years later, after he had the chance to study the space and the reality stones up close, did he understand fully what had happened. The infinity stones were as distinct in their moods and behaviour as any living creatures. And the mind stone was unique in its malice. It wanted to devour everything within its reach; Loki was certain that the mind stone had inflicted as much damage on his mind as Thanos himself had.

Perhaps this was his mistake — he hadn't travelled far enough back. Loki had never found out how Thanos and Ebony Maw had come to possess the mind stone, but he got the sense that it wasn't a recent acquisition. It was impossible now to say how much of Thanos' mad plan and Ebony Maw's slavish devotion to his master had been twisted under the mind stone's influence.

'Oh God.' Tilly's sharp gasp wrenched Loki out of his musings. She buried her face in her hands. 'Oh God, no.'

Loki threw Rogers a questioning look, but the man looked as lost as Loki.

'Tilly, darling. What's wrong?' Rogers pressed in as gentle a tone as he could manage.

'Nathan. My boyfriend.' She brought her hands down and sniffled. Her silence lingered. Loki was about to prompt her again, when she continued. 'We've only been dating a year, but I think he was about to propose. I found a box with a ring hidden behind his cutlery drawer. He worked out the back in R&D, so he arrived late. Everything had gone to hell then. And I saw him, aiming for this Ebony whatever. I shot him. Didn't even think about it, just shot him four times in the chest.'

'You had no control over your actions,' Loki replied and Rogers echoed his words albeit with somewhat different phrasing.

Tilly didn't find comfort in that of course. And now that she had begun to speak, words poured forth with the force of a gale. It seemed she wanted Loki and Rogers to know every little thing there was to know about Nathan, but at the rate she was speaking and with the tears that soon began dripping down her cheeks, Loki could scarcely make out a third of what she said. He quietly excused himself and let Rogers deal with her. Loki had a feeling Rogers was a natural with weeping women.

Loki certainly wasn't, so he headed for the one woman who, in his estimation, would never allow herself so much as a single genuine tear in front of him, and climbed into the co-pilot's chair.

'Have we much further to go?' he asked.

Romanoff cocked her head. 'Why? The jet's a bit slower than what you're used to?'

'Only a tad,' Loki replied. He shifted in the chair, trying to find the optimal position and idly fiddled with the seatbelt buckle.

For all of Rogers' efforts to calm Tilly down, her agitated words and intermittent sniffling still dominated the quinjet. Romanov was clearly listening-in on their conversation — a spy always
hungered for information. Loki, on the other hand, did his best to tune out the sound. The woman had the misfortune to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. She knew little and remembered even less.

Minutes stretched into what felt like hours. Loki rested his head against the cool glass of the quinjet's window and stared at the black nothing below them. He guessed they had left the continental United States by now and were somewhere over water. Earlier on they had flown over endless lines of lit highways and spider-webs of towns lit up to ward off the night's darkness. Now, there was nothing, not even Migdard's sole moon to keep them company.

He had to wonder how much further Romanoff intended to take them. The flight to San Francisco had been long. The one right after Loki had stolen the Tesseract had been longer still, but this one felt longer again. Probably the longest Loki had ever spent inside one of these jets.

_The flight to Stuttgart was mercifully brief._ Loki lifted his head off the glass. _Was that why Barton chose Stuttgart over San Francisco? We were already nearby? Barton had worked in Europe before; it's not inconceivable he'd have a safe house there that Fury didn't know about._

'If you're getting fatigued,' Loki said, turning to Romanoff, 'just say the word. I can take the controls for a while.'

Romanoff smiled — the kind of smile that would have left many a man hot and bothered. 'Thank you for the offer, but there's no need. We're nearly there.'

'Where's "there" exactly?'

'A SHIELD operational base.' Romanoff exhaled tiredly. 'I know what you are thinking. Agent Hill has given her personal assurance that our destination is secure and there won't be a repeat of what happened in California.'

Loki surmised that Romanoff didn't fully trust that promise, although he couldn't be sure whether the doubt was due to her understanding of the calibre of their adversaries or some personal enmity with Agent Hill. Loki himself never thought much of her. She had always trailed behind Fury and chuckled entirely too eagerly at the man's attempts to make himself sound intelligent.

'Actually, here we are.' Romanoff guided the quinjet's nose downward and towards a distant cluster of lights that had just come into view.

Loki bit down on his lip in an effort to keep himself under control as the quinjet sped towards their destination and it became clear that it wasn't an island they were about to land on. No, they were heading for SHIELD's pride and joy — the helicarrier USS Gibraltar.

_The more things change, the more they stay the same._

'I'm still unclear on what I saw,' Thor hissed into Loki's ear. They had all done their best to get cleaned up before they gathered here and Thor no longer looked like he had crawled through a mud pit, but the conference room's garish artificial lights came down at the exact right angle to highlight the newly-acquired dings in his armour. 'Was the Maw attempting to bring your mind under control and you resisted him? Is that why it looked different than with the Midgardians? Or was it something else?'

All too cognizant of the way everyone else in the room attempted to listen in on the conversation without looking like they were doing so, Loki turned in his swivel chair until he could look at his
brother directly. 'I managed to fool the Titan back in the Sanctuary and gain his trust. The Maw wanted to know how I managed to do so. He wasn't gentle about it.'

'So there's a way to resist the sceptre?' Agent Hill asked.

'If the prodding is shallow and brief, but it's not a skill a Midgardian could learn,' Loki replied.

Hill's eyes hardened, but she didn't get a chance to question Loki further. Coulson and Stark finally strode into the room, nearly a quarter of an hour late. Both of them looked about as healthy as Loki felt. Coulson's left arm was in a sling, while Stark had acquired a mild limp and a dark welt spread down from his right eye-sOCKET almost to his jawline. Loki raised an eyebrow — Stark's blossoming welt neatly matched the maroon-coloured felt panels that had been erected across the walls to improve the acoustics in the conference room.

Coulson took the seat at the head of the table, while Stark took the other end, pushing his chair back enough so he could put his feet on the table. Thankfully, the conference room table was long enough to accommodate twice their party and Loki didn't have to smell Stark's feet. The rest of those present were slumped into chairs along the table's wider sides. Hill, looking perturbed by Stark's behaviour, sat to Coulson's right. Rogers was to his left and had occupied himself with some papers bound within a tan-coloured folder. Romanoff sat impassive between Rogers and Loki. And Thor simply ignored the three unoccupied chairs down from Agent Hill, preferring to pace back and forth with his fingers clenched around Mjolnir's handle.

'Not a win all around, I take it,' Rogers said as he flipped shut the folder in front of him. 'Where did you lose track of them?'

'And where were you, Rogers?' Stark replied. 'Got stuck figuring out how to use a toaster?'

'Toasters were invented in the Nineteenth Century,' Romanoff responded dryly.

Stark, never one to let another person have the last line in a conversation, was about to share another of his insufferable quips with the world, when Coulson cut in. 'Let's not digress too far. I believe we have a lot to go over. Captain Rogers, how about we start with your report?'

Rogers was quick to deliver an informative and succinct account of his perspective on the day. Having been by him for most of the debacle, Rogers' report held no revelations for Loki, save the realisation that the man only looked fully comfortable when he slipped back into his military persona. How long ago had Rogers been pulled out of the ice? Loki would have wagered it couldn't have been more than a month or two.

Stark jumped in after that. This made sense — he had been the first on the scene in San Francisco, but Loki suspected he simply didn't want to be outdone by Rogers. Stark spoke in clipped sentences, not bothering to hide his irritation nor to filter the irrelevant asides that peppered his speech. Nevertheless, he got out what they needed from him. He had held off the attackers in San Francisco, then pursued Fury's helicopter south almost into Mexican territory until the helicopter finally came down onto a busy shopping centre. Another clash ensued until Ebony Maw managed to disable Stark's suit.

Thor and Coulson confirmed Stark's story. Thor had pursued them a bit further, but lost track of the Maw and his accomplices somewhere in the crowded city. The news left Hill muttering angrily under her breath. As it turned out, ever since Ebony Maw had taken Nick Fury, she had been mopping up the resulting security spill. Now she had a public relations disaster in California to handle as well.
'Loki?' Coulson said when the rest of the gathered fell silent. 'You haven't said much so far.'

He shrugged. 'You've already covered all relevant ground between you.'

'Is that so?' Thor asked. 'Why was Ebony Maw insisting that you had to be taken alive?' Sometime during Stark's grandstanding, he had ceased his mindless roaming and came up to stand at the edge of the table, his hands resting on the back of unoccupied chairs. His eyes blazed with fury, but then he must have seen something in Loki's face because his expression softened. 'Would you rather talk about it one-on-one?'

'I would, but it's rather late for that now.'

'Whatever you have to say won't leave this room,' Hill assured him.

Has she been listening at all? The sceptre will take everything you have.

Loki drew his fingers across the tabletop. It wasn't real wood, only a half-hearted imitation. For all the dark grains and knots he could see running across the table, he needed only to slide his fingers across the surface to feel its unnatural smoothness. He sighed. 'He used the mind stone on me, not in an attempt to control my mind as with others, but specifically to pilfer through its contents. In my memories he found something he shouldn't have.'

'What did he see?' Stark demanded. He had slid his feet off the table and nudged his chair closer. 'How dangerous is it?'

'Very.'

Thor frowned. 'Loki, what precisely are you talking about?'

'It's information we don't want the Maw or his master to know. I don't think it'd be prudent for me to share with you anything more than that; information is safest when it's compartmentalised.'

'I'm not sure I follow,' Romanoff said. 'If he already saw what he wasn't meant to, what are you trying to protect.'

It all seemed too difficult right then. Loki was almost glad Coulson had chosen to meet in the bowels of the helicarrier where there were no windows to be found, because his thoughts kept drifting back to the beckoning cold waves of the Atlantic. He needed only to walk out onto the helicarrier's deck and toss himself over the edge. If the fall didn't kill him, he would drown sooner or later.

Loki clenched his eyes shut momentarily and forced in a few calming breaths. The mind stone had broken something within; he wasn't thinking straight. Or perhaps it was just fear. Brunnhilde had told him time and time again that he couldn't think rationally when it came to Thanos.

Him, yes. Remember how well it turned out the last time you decide to fling yourself into an abyss?

The rest of the table still waited on him to answer Romanoff's question and by their expressions, it was clear they were unimpressed by his previous response. Loki exhaled slowly. 'I think he only saw snippets. Enough to know it's important, but it would be largely nonsensical without context.'

'Is it enough to influence his plans?' Coulson asked. His phone buzzed, but after glancing at the screen, he slid it back into his pocket.

Hill's voice swallowed everyone else's responses, 'How can we hope to answer that question if we don't know what he saw?'
In actual fact, Hill wasn't entirely correct. This wasn't about what Ebony Maw saw inside Loki's head, but what he thought he had seen. How much had he grasped at the time and how much would he remember subsequently. Loki had to question whether the Maw would be cognizant of the colours of the stones nestled inside Thanos' gauntlet. Would he wonder why the power stone, rather than the mind or the space stone, were the first Thanos acquired? Loki had the uncomfortable suspicion that first and foremost Ebony Maw would focus on Thanos' words in the last memory: *there are two more stones on Earth.* Ironically, this wasn't actually the case here and now. Back on the Statesman, Thanos had been referring to the time and the mind stones, the latter of which was already in Ebony Maw's possession.

'Fine, I will tell you this much,' Loki said. 'Ebony Maw is under the impression there are other artefacts on this planet that his master would want.' He waved away Coulson's attempt to throw in a follow-up question and continued, 'In regards to his plans. If you are searching for something, you don't want to take the risk of losing the item in the chaos of war or of accidentally killing someone who knows crucial information. But that's what I would do, I cannot vouch for Ebony Maw's trail of thought in his decision-making.'

'Then we need to cover all bases,' Rogers said. 'Do we have a list of their next possible targets?'

Romanoff shook her head. 'No, we need to narrow their options. We need to distract him from his invasion plans and have him chasing ghosts.'

'So we wave a McGuffin in front of their eyes, then snatch it away?' Stark said. He jerked forward in the chair. 'I can get behind that.'

*Sure, let's play with the time stone like it's a petty trinket.*

'Offer them me,' Loki said, surprising himself by the confident tone to his words. He ignored Thor and Rogers, who immediately rejected his proposal. 'Ebony Maw, Gamora, Tyr, Thanos — their hatred for me is the one thing that binds all of them together. Now the Maw also knows that the contents of my mind are highly valuable. I'm not bait they'll be able to resist.'

Thor drew himself to his full height. 'Loki, what you suggest is ridiculous. Tyr won't be satisfied until he wrenches your still-beating heart out of your chest. From what I gather of the woman, she won't —'

'But the Maw needs me alive! He will control them.'

*Until he decides I've outlived my usefulness.*

'And when he no longer needs you alive?' Thor asked.

Loki ran his hand through his hair and forced a smile. 'I know you, Thor. You won't let it get that far.' Thor's next words died in his throat and by the time he recomposed himself, Loki spoke over him anyway. 'It's an unpleasant scenario, I know, but I am the only sure way to draw them away from their current plans.'

'We do stand on firmer ground if we make them come to us instead of wasting time trying to guess where they might strike next.' Romanoff said. An uncomfortable tension had already infested the room, now Romanoff's words left everyone determined to avoid looking anyone else in the eye. She waited a few moments, but received no reply, so she went on, 'If this is the plan we're going with, the right choice of location is critical.'

'Not the helicarrier,' Loki replied. 'How many hundreds of people are needed to keep this thing in the
air? Enough people have died already.'

Rogers leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. 'Loki, we appreciate your offer, but there's no need to turn yourself into a sacrificial lamb.'

'Have you a better plan, captain? Or you, brother?'

Thor glared at Loki, then muttered a curse that would have left their mother aghast. 'So be it then. I don't like this, brother, but I know better than to argue with you once your mind is made up.' He fiddled with the leather strap on his hammer. 'I don't know what the best location would be, however, I can be useful in arranging a meeting. The Maw suggested to me that a deal could be made. I can tell him that I have changed my mind and want to discuss terms. It's a matter of getting the message to him.'

'Isn't that the plot of the B-grade movie playing in the cafeteria upstairs?' Stark responded.

'If we do this, it would be better if they think we're not expecting them at all,' Rogers said. He turned to Coulson. 'Would it be possible to get the word out that Loki was spooked by what happened in San Francisco and has decided to go into hiding? Then not-so-accidentally leak his safe-house location?'

Coulson cocked his head. 'Might work. Maria, let's not pretend Fury hasn't figured out a way to get to SHIELD's internal communiques. We might as well take advantage of that.'

'Can we do this away from major population centres this time?' Hill asked. 'I like Loki's sentiments about minimising casualties.'

Stark pulled out his phone. 'I do own a lodge in Switzerland that I don't care for.'

**Chapter End Notes**

1. There are a number of SHIELD helicarriers named in the comics, but the helicarrier in Avengers I is never named. Gibraltar seemed as good a name for a floating island as any other.

2. In case some of you missed it – I posted up the first two deleted scenes for this story last week. If you are interested in checking those out, you'll find them under 'Above All Shadows – Deleted Scenes' on my profile page. More deleted scenes are coming in the next couple of weeks.
Standing by the back porch of Skark’s Alpine lodge, Loki let the bitter wind roar over him and through him. It pulled at the knots in his hair and tore the heat off his bones, which was almost soothing.

Ever since he had arrived on Midgard, his days had been filled with frenetic activity or travel. Back on Sakaar, he had feasted on the grand mania of the place — a madhouse where the patients revolted and lived in a state of perpetual celebration. And the Sanctuary, stuck between Thanos and his miserable children, who clung onto a barely habitable chunk of asteroid, had merely been a madhouse of a different kind. Here, now that they had finished the bulk of the preparations, the uneasy quiet of anticipation ruled their days. Loki didn’t care for this limbo. It left too much breadth for his thoughts to prosper and his mind was bursting with dangerous thoughts.

He had tried to re-focus, to occupy himself as others had done. Rogers had found the Stark’s library collection. Romanoff was relentless in trying to talk her way into Loki’s confidence and it was becoming more inventive. It became more difficult for Loki to foresee her traps, so it was easier to avoid her entirely. Thor was barely better. Loki would have ventured in the work room, where Stark had sequestered himself to tinker with his suits – the tactile act of hammering something to destruction did hold some appeal, but Loki couldn’t deal with Stark’s self-satisfied word vomit for more than five minutes at a time.

‘Sir?’ came an uncertain, almost-familiar voice. Loki turned to see Agent Antoinette Concannon at the top of the steps to the lodge’s back door. ‘You shouldn’t wander too far by yourself.’

‘I’m not by myself, am I? Nor am I wandering. I’m standing here, planted quite firmly to one spot,’ Loki replied. He didn’t know the exact setup, but SHIELD was supposed to be swarming the area with agents. He wouldn’t have been surprised if half a dozen people had eyes on him at every moment.

Antoinette’s eyes flickered to the tree-line behind Loki. ‘Still, you should be inside,’ she said and pulled a bundle of dark-coloured cloth out of the messenger bag slung off her left shoulder. ‘And you should definitely have these with you.’

‘Should I?’ Loki said as he pulled the fabric aside and revealed the two knives he had left behind in San Francisco. ‘Ah, indeed I should. Thank you for recovering these.’

‘It’s no problem. See you around, Loki.’

Loki waited until she had gone back inside, then examined the knives more closely. He had no reservations about using other weapons if he needed to, but he was fond of this pair. They were elven smith-work and had additional spells on them to fortify their edge and durability. Nothing seemed amiss. The leather handles sat perfectly in his hands; the blades reflected the wisp of the waxing moon without a single blemish to mar the reflection. With a melancholy smile Loki slid the knives into their allotted places on his person.

If it came to it, he could use one to cut Ebony Maw’s throat and the other on his own. He had to be realistic about it. His mind was a ticking bomb, there needed to be a way to defuse it. The knives were one way out. The supplies he had pilfered from Stark’s stash of dangerous chemicals in the work room was another. The booby trap in his mind was a third. But the more dangerous the situation was, the more precautions needed to be taken.
Thor would hate him for it, Loki knew. He ran his fingers through his hair and winced as he caught a tangle of knots. Or he could still back out. All Loki had to do was call on Heimdall and bully him into dumping Loki somewhere obscure. He could also disappear into the wormholes between the worlds that the coming Convergence was tearing open further every day. He could even just hide on Midgard.

Be realistic. There’s no hiding from them forever. Better to choose where to make a stand, when it’s still possible to make a difference.

A bird hooted angrily in the trees as Loki clenched his teeth and willed himself to climb up the four steps to the back door.

‘Where is my brother?’ Loki asked the air as he returned to the heat of the house.

‘He is in the games room,’ the disembodied voice of Stark’s butler replied. ‘Shall I relay a message to him?’

‘No.’

The lodge’s exterior looked typical of the region — stone foundations, timber walls and a steeply slanted roof to limit the snow build-up on the roof. The lodge’s interior, as with anything Stark lay his hands on, was grandiose, slick and over-engineered. Loki strode across the polished, well-heated floors and ignored the lights that flickered on when the sensors registered Loki’s presence. He passed also on the glass elevator, heading instead for the wooden stairs — one of the few original features left in the building. Stark was clearly more at home amid concrete, glass and steel than surrounded by hardwood and the crackle of a well-tended fireplace. What that said about the man Loki could only guess.

Loki had been up in the attic before; they had worked through every room in the four-storey building when they first arrived and needed to review the security plan they had put together off Stark’s archived blueprints of the lodge. There hasn’t been time, however, to explore it any depth, so Loki was’t immediately clear on what Thor was doing with a garishly coloured cardboard box in his hands.

‘I doubt it's edible,' Loki said. 'A better bet would be the kitchen downstairs.'

Thor let the comment pass without reply and set down the box, only to pick up another one. There were two entire shelves of these, Loki realised. Different sizes, different designs. The cardboard on some seemed decades old, others seemed to be brand new and wrapped in a thin layer of clear plastic. There were all stacked haphazardly on a bookshelf shoved between an over-stuffed couch and a television that looked to be wider than Thor’s arm span.

‘What are you doing, Thor? Can’t sleep?’

‘All this waiting about. How can anyone sleep?’ Thor replied. Mjolnir sat neatly on the floor by the door to the room, while Thor ran his fingers along the sides of the boxes and read aloud the text printed on the lids. ‘Monopoly Star Trek edition, Risk. The game of global domination. Hungry hungry hippos? Have you come across any of this before, Loki?’
'I think these are just children's toys. Rather like we used to play Hetlu or Ragnar's Jest.'

'You always cheated,' Thor said, stepping back from the shelf that housed the boxes.

Loki snorted. 'And then you always got furious and tried to whack me over the head with anything heavy that might be nearby. I think we're even on that count.'

'Neither of us liked to lose.' Thor rested against the rectangular wooden table that stood in the centre of the room and looked dubiously over his shoulder at its recessed tabletop, which was lined with green felt. 'Loki, is something troubling you?'

Loki bit down on the inside of his cheek. Thor had been trying to have a deep and meaningful conversation with him ever since the San Francisco debacle. Loki had gone to a great deal of effort, and no doubt frustration to them both, to slip away every time. He would have greatly preferred to extricate himself out of this one too, but that couldn't be done. He needed Thor.

'What do you mean?' Loki asked, making sure his voice was perfectly even.

Thor, for whom words had never been a strength, was immediately flustered. 'I suppose you're not quite yourself lately, ever since you returned from your travels, I mean. For instance, it's clear you don't care for Tony Stark, yet I've yet to see any insects crawl out of his cup or hear of snakes in his bed.'

'We're not children anymore, Thor. And we are the man's guests here.'

'Bad example perhaps.' Thor reached out to pick up a ball out of the cluster someone had set up to form a triangle amid the table’s field of green felt. He rolled the ball, purple and with the number four printed on its side, in his palm. 'Very bad example actually. And it goes back further, I think. I have no idea how to phrase it, other than to ask you straight out, so I might as well. Do you have a death wish, brother?'

Loki stifled an unhinged chuckle and squared his shoulder so he stood straighter. ‘What in all the realms above are you talking about?'

'How is it ridiculous? We used a very similar set up back in the Green Wood campaign back on Alfheim. Twice. What about the Sapphire King escapade? Same thing there. And you were the bait when we needed to raze that nest of Zmej.'

'Except back then you didn’t look like you were ready to tie a noose around your own neck. And let's not forget about Jotunheim.'

At this point, Loki was genuinely lost. 'What does Jotunheim have to do with all of this?'

'I was hoping you'd enlighten me, because I have no idea what’s going on inside your head lately. Are you feigning this or do you genuinely don't recount you were ready to trade yourself and the entirety of Jotunheim for my sake?'

'It was a bluff.'

'I don't believe you,' Thor replied so sharply the room’s two narrow windows reverberated.

Loki skirted around a couch and came to stand by the recessed table where his brother kept his hands busy by inspecting the coloured balls resting on the felt. 'You're my brother, Thor. I couldn't see
another way to get you out of there."

'What about the Jotnar?' Thor pressed. 'And don't spew the same venom Tyr would. They're your kin.'

You're my kin.

Loki refused to voice the obvious answer, however. This conversation wasn't going in the direction he needed it to, in fact, it was going precisely in the opposite direction. Here was perhaps an opportunity to bring it on track. But sentimentality wasn't going to cut it, not yet, he needed to get a rise out of Thor first. 'Since when do you care about the plight of a few frost giants?'

'You're a frost giant too, Loki,' Thor said. To Loki's frustration there was little anger to be found in his brother's words. He was about to respond, but Thor motioned for Loki to wait his turn.

'Jotunheim taught me a lesson I should've learned at a much younger age. When they first captured me, I couldn't see anything and only heard snippets. Once they brought me to Utgard, however, Sigran gave me back my sight and hearing. During the time they kept me in Laufey's Hall, I was witness to all the comings and goings in that house. It didn't take long to see how similar life there was to life inside the palace on Asgard, although the Jotnar were poorer and more desperate. They aren't beasts we read about in our storybooks, just people like any other.'

Thor's brows drew closer together. He tilted his head back until he peered up at the vaulted ceiling above them.

'Then I returned to Asgard and learned my lesson anew,' he said. 'I'm used to you telling me tall tales. So when you first told me what happened on Asgard during my absence, I thought you exaggerated and assumed it was likely about half of what you said was true. What an unpleasant surprise truth was when the trials began. I was glad you weren't there to hear the bitterness pouring out of Tyr and Agnar.'

'And thus, the frost giants are not wholly evil and the Asgardians are not wholly good? Is that your great revelation?' Loki replied.

'Mock me all you like, brother.'

'It's not half as fun when you are ready to roll over and take it.'

'Aah, so that's the secret?' A shadow of a smile crossed Thor's face, but he forced himself to remain sombre. 'I've answered your question, Loki. You've yet to answer mine.'

'Of course I don't have a death wish. I have a great many books left on my reading list.' Loki took a second to compose himself. 'But Thanos is a grave threat. And my actions on Jotunheim have been weighing on my mind also.'

'Your words don't fill me with confidence.'

Nor me. This is the single most uncomfortable conversation you and I have ever had, in both timelines.

'It was a selfish thing to do. Do you know that Midgardians have codified the rules of armed combat? They would consider the damage I ordered Heimdall to inflict on Utgard a grievous war crime.' Loki reached for one of the balls on the table — solid black, save for a small white circle on one side. 'It can't happen again; our father raised us better than that. So when they come and if there's a chance the Maw will be able to get into my head, I want you to kill me.'
‘What?’

‘The things I know cannot fall into enemy hands.’

Thor grabbed Loki’s shoulder and pulled Loki forward until they stood with no more than an inch between them. ‘This isn’t my brother talking. Have you utterly lost your wits?’

‘Thor, I realise this is the most difficult thing I could ever ask of you,’ Loki said. The proximity between them was uncomfortable, all the more so because due to the height difference between them, Loki had to angle his head up sharply. ‘But we have to look past the bond between us and remember what our father taught us: seek out not war, but be ready for it. Thor, sometimes people don’t come back from a war.’

‘Loki —’

‘Remember too the oaths you swore when you were crowned,’ Loki continued, drowning out Thor’s attempt to respond. ‘You swore to guard the Nine Realms, to preserve the peace, to pledge yourself only to the good of Asgard. If you allow me to live, you’ll let Thanos win and in so doing you’ll break every oath you swore that day.’

Thor shook his head, staggering back from Loki until he backed into the corner of the table. ‘No, I’m not listening to this. You are my brother!’

‘And you’re a hypocrite! And not worthy to be king if you would choose me over the fate of the universe.’

Thor clenched his fists and stared at Loki, his jaw slack. For several, painfully slow seconds he tried to force out a response, but it wouldn’t come. He sighed and trudged over to a low armchair on the far side of the room, collapsing into it with a weary sigh. ‘I’ll never be able to look our mother in the eye again. I’m not sure father would even survive this; he’s still not fully recovered from that Jotunn spear. And I don’t know what I’d do without you. The past months… No, Loki, it disturbs me that you’d even consider asking this.’

‘Although our father had only one throne to pass down, he raised us both to be kings. I know what duty means as well as you do.’

Technically, I’ve actually ruled Asgard longer too.

Loki turned the glossy black ball in his hand. He had all but forgotten he still held onto it. It must be an accessory to another Midgardian game; the people of Midgard had too much free time on their hands. He flung it down onto the green felt and watched it bang against a couple of the other balls then roll into a hole cut into the corner of the table.

His brother still sat brooding, so Loki slid into the armchair opposite him. ‘Thor,’ he said, prompting his brother to lift up his head. ‘We have spent many hours planning and I have confidence in those plans. We’re discussing the worst case scenario here, do you understand that?’

‘Can you leave me to my own thoughts for a while?’ Thor asked. His voice cracked twice before he finished the sentence.

‘If you think that’ll help.’

Loki left his brother alone in the games room, careful his retreat didn’t make too much noise. He couldn’t quite pinpoint why, but the thought of his boots thumping against the bare floor seemed obscene at this moment. At the second flight of stairs down, he stopped entirely. Where was he
going? There was no chance he would get any sleep this night nor did any other part of the lodge appeal. These stairs were as good a place to while away the hours as any other.

‘Intruder alert,’ announced the butler from some speaker embedded in the stairway railing. ‘It’s coming from the south-east boundary.’

*It might be that my last hours are already coming to an end.*
Coulson and his team had done extraordinary work to misdirect Fury for this long. As much as the stalling gave Ebony Maw more time to make his own plans and left time for Tyr’s arm to heal, it had been inevitable. Loki had needed time to prepare, Stark – to build a new suit, SHIELD – to lick their wounds clean. Loki would have preferred one more day, but then, he seldom got what he wanted.

‘Then let the back-up know, Jarvis,’ he said sharply.

The AI offered no response, but Loki trusted Stark’s skills enough to assume it would follow instructions without requiring direct supervision. He rested his hand on the staircase railing, then swung his feet over and launched himself into the air. He landed with a loud thud down on the ground floor. To his irritation the overhead lights flickered on, flooding the lodge with light. If there was anyone outside, they would have already spotted him. And the only thing Loki could see out the windows was his own reflection.

‘Jarvis,’ he muttered as he crouched down to make himself less conspicuous, ‘cut out these lights.’

The lights dimmed in a coordinated sequence, but Loki stayed where he was. The AI would have alerted the others also; he had seconds to get everything right.

Loki’s preparations hadn’t included plans to spend the night crouching in fear between Stark’s living room couches. He closed his eyes and reached for his magic. When he opened them again, he grinned. His vision had acquired two shadow visions that saw the world from different angles. It was disorientating to stare up at illusions of himself and see himself staring back at them through their eyes. But they did look good. Solid. Intelligent.

There was stomping upstairs. Thor and Rogers were on their way down.

Loki didn’t dare to admire the products of his craft any longer. He left his two illusions standing in the middle of the living room while he continued to keep low and hurried towards a darker corner of the house.

‘Nat’s out there with SHIELD. She confirmed we have incoming,’ Stark declared as he burst out of his workroom, already donning a new version of the Ironman suit. ‘No sign of the unholy trinity yet, but I’m sure they won’t miss the party.’

For once Loki was in total agreement with Stark. He reached inside the inner pocket of his coat and fished out the ear-piece Coulson had supplied (and Stark had tinkered with); there wouldn’t be a repeat of the chaos in San Francisco here. Loki’s illusions echoed his movements.

‘The hell?’ Stark spat out as he jerked to a stop at the sight of them. Loki bit down a laugh. They hadn’t discussed the illusions in their plans – a strategic decision on Loki’s part. He preferred to make a bit of last-minute mischief to risking the chance that the Maw could tear out every detail of their preparations from Thor’s or the Midgardians’ minds.

‘A simple magic trick, nothing more,’ replied the illusion closest to Stark, which Loki decided to dub as Illusion One. Thor and Rogers had also converged on the dimly lit living room, so Illusion One shifted a couple of steps closer to Thor. ‘I’ll stay by you, brother.’
Thor looked pained at those words, but nodded.

*How long will it take him to figure it out this time?*

While the second illusion drew its knives and moved closer to Rogers, Loki cloaked himself in a facsimile of Romanoff’s body and crept towards Stark’s workroom. The room was unlocked, so he pushed it open and made himself comfortable on a lone stool behind a bench heaped with scraps of warped steel and shredded plastic.

What Thor never quite grasped was that there was a whole gamut of spells that produced illusions and their end results differed greatly. Some illusions were solid, some not. Some spoke, some remained mute. Some moved independently, some had to be guided like marionettes. The ones that were capable of movement sophisticated enough for prolonged combat, unfortunately, required close directions and it strained Loki’s faculties to guide not one, but two illusions with the force of his mind.

Illusion One remained with Thor and Stark, but Illusion Two followed Rogers out onto the front porch of the lodge. Gunfire echoed through the valley as if the air pulsed with constant, miniature thunderclaps. Light flashed to the east and two hundred metres above the level of the lodge – bright orange of SHIELD tracer-rounds and scattered beams of torches.

‘They need help up there,’ Rogers sighed.

Illusion Two furrowed its nose. ‘The point is to draw them in, not to scatter –’

‘Are you afraid of a fair fight?’ Tyr shouted. ‘Come out, you whimpering pup!’

Neither Loki nor the illusion immediately saw their adversary. The illusion took the stairs down from the porch, then moved slowly through the six-inch-deep snow. Tyr stood aloof about a hundred paces away, like a harbinger of death on that blanket of white.

The illusion smiled. ‘Here I am, old man. Do your best!’

The mountainside trembled with the wrath in Tyr’s yell as he crossed the distance between them and aimed his sword for the illusion’s left flank. The illusion blocked the blade with one knife, then attacked Tyr with the other. But there was no easy victory in that move. Although Tyr was long past the days of his youthful glory, he remained a more skilled close-combat fighter than Loki, let alone compared to the relayed skill Loki could offer to his illusion. Only Rogers’ shield kept him breathing.

Worse yet, Thor, Stark and the illusion with them had found their adversary as well.

*Why did I think this was a good idea? All be damned.*

Loki cradled his head in his hands. Illusion Two had just ducked down to allow Rogers to swing out and punch Tyr in the nose, sending blood spraying. Illusion One had just slid an armchair across the length of the living room, but Ebony Maw whipped it off to the side like it was a leaf caught on the wind.

‘Stop breaking my things,’ Stark snapped as he hovered two feet off the floor. His words would have perhaps had more weight if he didn’t then charge up a missile from the arsenal in his arm. The Maw put up an energy field over himself and Gamora and deflected the explosive, making it burst in the middle of the room instead. A wall, thankfully not a weight-bearing one, crumbled to pieces and wisps of fire spread throughout. The fire suppression system kicked in, dousing everything and
everyone in stale water. ‘Fine. I didn’t like that wall anyway.’

Another missile, more thunder and lightning from Thor, more of Ebony’s counter-strikes. The sprinklers soon ran out of water. Illusion One found the energy within one of the resulting fires and magnified it to form a wall between himself and Gamora, but she just leaped straight through it. The illusion drew back; Loki wasn’t keen on engaging in two rounds of hand-to-hand combat simultaneously. But she pursued him, like a lion trailing after wounded prey.

‘Thor!’ Illusion One called out.

And Loki’s brother hurried to answer the call for help, but Ebony Maw had his own plans for how this night would go. A pulse of raw energy from the sceptre aimed at Thor’s right arm sent Mjolnir flying out of his hand. A gale of telekinesis threw Thor against the back wall and pinned him there. A final touch – Ebony Maw ripped apart the furnishings, the walls, the floor, even parts of Stark’s new and improved suit. These became raw materials for a cage capable of containing even Thor.

Loki blinked. Illusion Two had taken a cut to the cheek; Tyr now bled from his knee, but kept fighting. Illusion One threw a knife at Gamora. The weapon struck her handle first and achieved nothing. Zahoberei skin was quite impervious to knife handles. The illusion lifted its hand to throw the second knife only to feel the horribly familiar tug of Ebony Maw’s magic.

‘No!’ the illusion hollered desperately.

Stark, his suit no longer capable of flight, sent another missile at Ebony Maw. This was no more successful than his last effort – it only caused further damage to the lodge and drew Gamora’s attention to him. However, it did give Illusion One the opportunity it needed. It dropped the second knife and reached into a pocket to pull out a small flask. The lid was designed to pop off with ease. The liquid inside, viscous and very acidic, didn’t go down its throat quite so easily. The illusion gagged, the lining of its throat already eviscerated. Loki himself had to press his hand into his mouth to stop himself from crying out. Stark’s workroom hosted a plethora of corrosive, violent and deadly agents, but none of them afforded a quiet death. Ebony Maw had given up his hold on Illusion One and shaking his head, tried to undo the damage. It was too late. Bloody froth poured out from between the illusion’s blistered lips and its limbs spasmed. If Loki couldn’t go peacefully, he would at least go fast.

Thor’s cries provided a grizzly soundtrack as the illusion’s body surrendered its fight for survival. The limbs stilled and the froth thinned. Loki held his breath as the Maw knelt by the corpse. He was aware that the other illusion was still fighting for its survival, but refused to care – what Ebony Maw did next took precedence.

Loki had done this once before; he had Thor fooled for two years. But Thor understood magic little better than the average Midgardian. Ebony Maw was another matter. So Loki was unsurprised to see Ebony Maw using his long fingers to pry wider the illusion’s still-open eyes. Finding no satisfaction in the eyeball Loki was careful to keep unfocused and immobile, the Maw’s fingers shifted lower and grasped the illusion’s chin.

Ebony Maw snarled with disgust. He flicked his hand. Loki’s vision of the destroyed living room dissipated as rapidly as smoke on a windy day. The game was up; the illusion was gone.

The sharp corners and cold highlights of Stark’s playroom came into focus as quickly as the Maw’s face had faded. The sound-proofing was solid in here; whoever had built this room didn’t want to be disturbed by people carrying-on elsewhere in the house. What the sound-proofing smothered, however, the ear-piece in Loki’s ear broadcast perfectly well. Judging by the shouting, Thor and
Ebony Maw were evenly matched in their anger.

*Why the hell is she taking so long?*

Gritting his teeth, Loki attempted to ignore the sound his ear-piece beamed in and to refocus on his remaining illusion.

As Rogers threw his shield, aiming at Tyr’s throat, Loki forced the illusion to glance around so he could re-orient himself. The fight had taken all of them hundreds of metres down the mountainside and the sprawling, four-storey lodge, lit up with spreading flames and flashes from Ebony Maw’s sceptre, now seemed like an insignificant thing in the distance. The combatants themselves were amid a wide band of exposed, snow-laden mountainside between two patches of pine wood.

The illusion palpated the trampled snow. It held one knife firm, the other had slid out of its hands. There was no sign of it. The snow was fine and powdery, every move they made disrupted it further and there was no guessing where in this snowfield the knife had ended up.

Rogers made another attempt at using his shield as a projectile, but this time Tyr was ready and thrust out his hand to catch it. The shield had enough momentum in its spin to throw the Asgardian off balance. He ended up prone on the snow. Yet he didn’t relinquish his hold and clung onto the shield while panting heavily.

Loki pressed his palms together. The illusions just weren’t as competent fighters as he himself was and with his mind split between two dangers, he was certain Rogers had been taking the brunt of Tyr’s bluster. Could Captain America tire? Loki didn’t want to find out. Besides, this fight had gone on long enough.

‘Tyr,’ he called out. ‘You daughter was spiteful, arrogant and a whore! I rejoiced when she died.’

Even in the poor light, the widening of Rogers’ eyes was unmissable. Tyr’s reaction wasn’t so restrained. Of course, Loki had counted on precisely this. As Tyr rolled to his feet and rushed to bridge the dozen feet between himself and the illusion, the illusion lifted his left hand a fraction. Cold convalesced around its palm and down along its fingers. The resulting spear of ice had a longer reach than Tyr’s sword.

‘We should’ve fed you to the wolves the day we found you,’ Tyr spat out. Despite his anger, he hadn’t yet abandoned reason completely and long years of experience told him that an opponent armed with a spear should be approached with caution. He came to an abrupt stop just beyond the spear’s reach. ‘Come at me if you dare, you pathetic whelp.’

‘Really? Because it looks like you’re the one scared of me!’ the illusion said, taking on a more relaxed pose, but with the spear still pointed at Tyr’s torso. He could see Rogers moving behind Tyr, but was conscious of avoiding tracking the man’s movements lest Tyr caught something in the shift of his eyes. Loki nudged the illusion into an unhinged laugh. ‘Is this how it was back on Gjallir? You waited around until they surrendered out of boredom?’

Rogers slid a knife between plated armour pieces over Tyr’s back. The man cried out in pain as he spun around to attack Rogers, but it was unwise to turn your back on the God of Mischief. The illusion’s spear found purchase in Tyr’s left thigh, piercing straight through. The weapon snapped under Tyr’s weight as he slumped down on the snow, but the remaining shaft was long enough for the illusion to make a second strike.
'Wait!' Rogers shouted.

The illusion stopped in mid-thrust. 'Believe me, he deserves this.'

'He might have information.'

Loki studied Tyr through the illusion’s eyes. He bled heavily, but he was still trying to get up. The Einherjar considered dying on your knees a pathetic way to face one’s end, all the more so when that death came on the dredged up snowfield of a second-rate world. Loki would have considered it a good day if he could give Tyr precisely this kind of death.

Metal groaned.

The illusion glanced around and failed to identify the source of the sound.

'Didn’t we meet each other just outside?' Gamora asked.

Loki’s vision snapped back to focus on Stark’s workroom. The light flickered intermittently, which didn’t help the disorientation resulting from the sharp jerk away from his illusion, and the smoke poured in. Gamora had torn out the door. She now stood between two half-assembled robots with crimson blood dripping off her sword.

Shit.

‘Loki, right? The master of lies has stolen another face,’ she said.

He climbed off Stark’s stool while he contemplated his next move. He could continue to cloak himself in Romanoff’s body, but what good would that do? She was physically weaker. Apparently they had clashed already and Gamora seemed no worse off for that interlude. For all Loki knew the blood on her blade was Romanoff’s. On the other hand, to strip off the magic would expose him to all, not just to Gamora.

She made the choice for him.

Loki scrambled back, away from her raised weapon and winced as Rogers’ worriedly demanded that Loki respond to him.

‘It’s God of Lies actually,’ Loki muttered as Romanoff’s soft skin gave way to coarse Jotunn blue. And although Gamora had guessed the truth, she was startled all the same. Loki brought up his hands, his palms facing Gamora. ‘One thing I’m never going to lie about, however. Your —’

She must have guessed where his words were heading, because she launched at him then with the fury of a rabid beast and the grief of a mourning sibling. Loki had to use every available piece of machinery and furniture to keep her at bay.

‘Why are you cowering away?’ Gamora demanded.

Why indeed.

Defence was easier than attack and Rogers was still jabbering on about what they should do with Tyr. Loki gritted his teeth. Tyr didn’t matter anymore; Rogers could figure that out on his own. Besides, Loki could feel his magic beginning to strain. As Loki moved an electric drill to meet the downward strike of Gamora’s sword he also cut off the spells that had been feeding the remaining
Clarity returned to his vision as the shadows of the illusion’s sight dissipated. Loki grinned, grabbing a long metal rod of a nearby bench. He didn’t know precisely what it was, but it looked like it was an interior piece of the Ironman suit; it looked capable of withstanding a couple of whacks from Gamora’s weapon. And now that his full attention was on Gamora, the knots in the pit of his stomach somewhat relaxed. Gamora and Nebula had been trained by the same instructors. Loki could predict Gamora’s moves more often than not.

More problematic was the thickening smoke. Gamora and Loki certainly left their own trail of destruction in their wake, but the workroom wasn’t yet on fire. The same couldn’t be said for the rest of the house. Loki had no pleasant associations with smoke and flames, but he could survive in a smoke-drenched space for a while. Could Gamora?

Taking a chance, Loki flitted to the side at Gamora’s next attack. He feigned a counter-strike, then pulled back as Gamora took the bait and nudged them both towards the doorway out of the workroom. Before long they were at the threshold and the dark, foul-smelling smoke was so thick Loki could see no further than a few feet away.

The building groaned. Gamora took a small step back and seemed to glance up at the wall behind Loki. The lights flickered one last time and petered out, then a second, far louder and lasting groan, resonated through the lodge.

‘That doesn’t bode well,’ Loki muttered.

He abandoned his next planned attack and sprinted towards the workroom’s lonely window on the far side of the room. He had half-expected Gamora to make use of the opportunity and try to take a swing at his exposed back, but she simply followed him. With a wave of his hand, Loki shattered the already cracked glass and with a second he ripped the security bars out of the window. The window-frame wasn’t wide enough to allow a dignified exit; he ended up rolling twice across the snow outside the lodge before his body exhausted its momentum.

‘Ebony!’ Gamora shouted.

Loki rolled onto his back and scrambled up, but Gamora grabbed him before he had fully straightened up. He kicked out and found her knee cap. She hissed in pain, yet her grip on him didn’t slacken. Gamora wrenched him around and Loki let out a shuddered breath.

Fire was spreading through the lodge and the flames were now sizable enough to illuminate a large section of the surrounding mountainside. While Loki had been preoccupied with Gamora, Thor and Ebony Maw had torn a great hole in the lodge’s ground floor wall and their struggle had spilled out onto the snow. Thor, Ebony Maw and Stark, Loki realised a moment later. Although the man’s suit was mangled, he continued to help Thor in what ways he still could.

‘Ebony Maw, I have him!’ Gamora yelled. Loki pulled his hand out of her grasp and found her ear. He clamped his fingers around it, then pushed down with all his strength. This time Gamora did react to the pain enough to allow Loki to slip out of her grasp.

It was too late, however. Loki staggered away from her and right into Ebony Maw’s path.

A hollow, copper-coloured circle appeared in mid-air.

_Finally!

The circle, humming with magic, rained embers as it swelled until it was large enough for a person to
step through. Ebony Maw’s nostrils wrinkled as the Sorcerer Supreme emerged from the portal, which snapped back to nothing immediately behind her, and conjured a bright mandala spun out of Eldritch magic. The Maw sent out a pulse of energy from the sceptre, but it was slow and tentative as if he were merely testing the newcomer.

He wasn’t so soft when Loki redirected the flames of the burning building towards him. Loki had to rip off the half of the roof that hadn’t yet been consumed by fire to put enough solid matter between himself and the retaliative strike Ebony sent in his direction.

The world shattered. It took Loki a moment to realise what had happened. Wong had shown him the mirror dimension once but that future seemed like a lifetime ago now. Ebony Maw too seemed disorientated. He stumbled as the ground under their feet began folding onto itself and with a snarl, tried to cut through the layer of shards that separated this dimension from their own. He succeeded only in momentarily lighting up the dimensional barrier.

‘What trickery is this?’ he said. His voice was calmer than Loki expected and there was a trace of genuine curiosity in it. No doubt he was contemplating whether the Sorcerer Supreme could be persuaded to become an ally.

She smiled politely, bringing up a second glowing mandala to shield herself with. ‘Welcome to the multi-verse, my friend.’

‘Show me how this is done and you will be rewarded with everything you have ever desired,’ Ebony Maw said. ‘My master is generous.’

‘Your master is a madman and you’re no better than he,’ Loki replied. He came to stand beside the Sorcerer Supreme, who looked amused more than anything else, by Ebony Maw’s proposal.

‘I already possess everything I desire,’ she said lightly.

Magic spun all around them; Loki wasn’t even sure who had initiated the attack. The cold ground, the burning lodge, the distant trees, the starry sky — everything around them seemed to fold onto itself, as if they were trapped inside a kaleidoscope. Ebony Maw gave up on trying to find a solid surface; elevating himself in the air and making liberal use of the sceptre’s energy. His telekinesis, however, was about as useless as Loki’s own. There was nothing about to send flying at someone or to throw up in defence.

Yet even outnumbered two to one and fighting on unfamiliar ground, the advantage the sceptre provided was hard to overcome. Sweat beaded on the Sorcerer Supreme’s forehead and the raised ridges of scars running across her skull now stood out as the rest of her skin took on a darker shade of pink. Loki was sure his own hair was soaked with sweat. And he no longer remembered which way in this endlessly folding world was supposed to be up and which down.

Soon, he found himself trembling from over-exertion and the knots in the pit of his stomach began to tighter once more. The illusions had been a way to play for time, everything else contingencies in case the Ancient One failed to arrive. But victory continued to elude them. There was a point where Loki had to contemplate the chance that he mightn’t be able to take down Ebony Maw even with her aid.

‘So what, you miserable fool,’ Loki muttered under his breath. ‘What are you going to do now? Surrender?’

Perhaps the Maw heard him, because he snarled and sharply threw up his hand. The energy his spell contained sent his opponents flying backwards and tumbling deep into the whirl of the kaleidoscope.
Neither Loki nor the Sorcerer Supreme sustained any lasting damage, but it gave the Maw a chance to direct his attention back to the barrier keeping him contained to the mirror dimension. He directed a massive burst of energy from the mind stone to the wall of floating shards. The barrier splintered, tossing the three of them back into their home dimension.

Smoke and flame greeted them, but also the rest of their team. Thor came at the Maw before any of the three magic-wielders were back on their feet. Mjolnir caught the pulse of energy from the sceptre and sent it dissipating in all directions. Loki and the Sorcerer Supreme made their own attack on the Maw. Loki’s was three inches off target, but her whip of whirring magic caught his left arm. Like an underwater monster hungry for its prey, the whip wrapped several times around his hand, twisting tighter with each one, then pulled. The Maw careened to the side. As he fell he threw out his other hand to catch himself for a moment releasing his vice-like grip on the sceptre.

Loki summoned it and caught it. He ducked; the Maw was already recovering and eager to get his weapon back. Loki’s heart skipped a beat.

_I know a trick for this one._

He slid his hand along the sceptre’s shaft and called up on his withering reserves of magic. The sceptre vanished. It was now in the very same portal dimension where he had once hidden the Tesseract; Midgardian sorcerers weren’t the only ones who knew how to play with relative dimensions.

‘What’ve you done?’ the Maw demanded.

Loki shrugged. ‘Sent it off to the trash piles of Sakaar. Good luck finding it.’

Ebony Maw’s eyes narrowed and although Loki hadn’t ever thought it possible, his skin took on a deeper shade of grey. He lunged at Loki, clearly ready to kill Loki with his bare hands. Thor and the Sorcerer Supreme stepped into his path.

‘Give it up,’ the Sorcerer Supreme said. Her voice had shed its pleasant overtones. ‘Leave Earth and tell your master that this world not his for the taking.’

The Maw refused to listen to her sage advice, but without the sceptre he couldn’t match the power of the Sorcerer Supreme, Loki and Thor. Soon he was focused only on avoiding capture. Whatever mania or slavish devotion drove him, an instinct for self-preservation also resided somewhere in his mind and Ebony Maw soon understood the reality of the situation.

He decided to make a tactical retreat.

Chapter End Notes

For those who’re interested, the second chapter of the deleted scenes is up.
Ebony Maw’s flight caught them all by surprise and for a moment, they stood frozen. Loki was the first to react.

‘Don’t let her out of your grasp!’ he shouted to Stark, who had managed to grab onto Gamora.

He wasn’t quite the match for her skills or alien physiology. One well-practised manoeuvre and she flipped Stark over her shoulder. He landed onto his back with a dull thud. The Sorcerer Supreme tutted as she unravelled the bright mandalas she had been using as shields and wrapped the cords of magic tight around Gamora’s body.

‘Thanks for the help there,’ Stark grumbled, his words somewhat slurred. There were splits in both his upper and lower lip and one of his front teeth was missing. He motioned towards the Sorcerer Supreme. ‘Who are you exactly?’

‘Later, Stark,’ Loki replied.

He glanced down the mountainside. The fire in the lodge continued to spread and with the growing devastation, it also offered more light. Rogers and Tyr were clearly visible now. Rogers seemed to be dragging the uncooperative Asgardian up the mountainside. Loki chewed on his lip. Tyr was badly injured; Gamora was contained with formidable magic. Surely, Rogers and Stark could handle these two.

Thor seemed to have the same thoughts. As he swung Mjolnir by its strap, he said, ‘We can’t allow the Maw get away.’

The hammer’s momentum pulled him into the air before anyone could respond. The Sorcerer Supreme chose to rely on her astral projection. Loki, however, merely ran. He had a vague notion that the other two would stop Ebony Maw in his tracks and he would come from behind, but he soon regretted his decision. He hit a particularly deep patch of snow and his boots began to sink into the snow almost up to the knee. Even a blind person would have been able to follow the trail of Loki’s ponderous trek. Ebony Maw, on the other hand, left far more nebulous evidence of his passage. He relied on his magic to carry him forward, travelling faster than Loki could and leaving only a thin frothed up layer behind where his magic disturbed the snow cover. Then, even that much disappeared.

Sweating through the armour that was enchanted to wick away sweat — his Jotunn form tolerated his Asgardian garb poorly, Loki summoned an emerald-hued light-ball. He guided the ball above his head, toward the pine branches and examined the area around him more closely.

‘I can’t feel him any longer,’ the Sorcerer Supreme’s astral projection said tersely.

‘Nor I,’ Loki replied. He wasn’t exactly surprised. It required a substantial commitment of magic, but Loki knew how to make himself invisible to certain people when he wanted to avoid scrutiny. Why shouldn’t Ebony Maw know a similar trick? Unfortunately, the only way Loki knew to tear off that magic involved knowing exactly where the spell’s caster was located.

Loki flicked the light-ball lower once Thor landed beside him. He had anticipated Thor would be scowling and fuming with anger — their adversary had just slipped away from him for a second time, so Loki was caught off-guard when Thor grabbed him and in a single, panicked breath asked, ‘This is really you? Loki? You’re not an illusion, aren’t you?’
I suppose I did put him through the wringer this night.

‘I’m really me.’ Loki rested his hand on top of Thor’s and felt his brother’s clenched grip somewhat relax. ‘I would’ve told you, but I couldn’t let you risk giving away the surprise.’

‘The way your double killed itself. After what you said to me earlier, I —’

Loki shook his head. ‘Now isn’t the time for this, Thor. The Maw has lost the sceptre, but he’s still a threat. We need to find him.’

‘He’s without his sceptre and without his allies,’ the Sorcerer Supreme said. ‘He doesn’t have a face to easily blend in with the local population of this planet. Plus we do have the other two, who can be persuaded to talk. He can be found, I think.’

What she said sounded great, but Loki had his hopes dashed too often in the past to fully embrace her optimism. He jerked his head back towards the direction of the lodge. ‘In that case, we don’t want Tyr to bleed to death.’

In his focus to catch up to Ebony Maw, Loki hadn’t been fully cognizant of how far he had travelled and now that the adrenaline had begun to wear off, he started to feel the full weight of his tiredness. It didn’t help either that there were now too many aching spots across his body to be worth counting. The walk back was a miserable exercise. The fact that the astral projection moved freely beside him was infuriating.

‘Did you get the Maw?’ Rogers called out when they finally made it back. He and Stark had dragged Gamora, who was bound so tight she couldn’t move an inch, closer to Tyr. Rogers stood on full alert next to Tyr’s prone form, his eyes flicking every few seconds between the wilderness around them and their two captives.

‘Do we look like we have him?’ Loki replied. ‘We’re going to have to pry out the location of his hiding hole from the other two. Tyr is still alive, yes?’

‘He is.’

How polite of the good captain not to mention he’s the only reason I didn’t gut Tyr when I had the chance.

‘Ok, I say later is now,’ Stark declared. He had stripped off the remaining pieces of his suit and was now in clothes entirely inadequate for a Midgardian to be wearing in this temperature, not that it seemed to bother him. He motioned first to Loki, then to the Sorcerer Supreme. ‘The one that acted like the real you was the fake, am I right? That’s how you managed to die and the Maw just dissolved your body. All right, magic is fun like that, sure. But who is this? Where did she come from?’

‘Wait, you had two doubles then,’ Rogers said. ‘The one with me became sluggish and then disappeared altogether. Gave me a fright and a half.’

‘My apologies, Rogers. The double was distracting while I dealt with Gamora, it had to go,’ Loki said.

He dropped to his knees beside Tyr and checked the man’s breathing. It was shallow, but not overly strained. Loki began prying off the man’s bloodstained armour — it was difficult to do much for an injury you couldn’t see. The armour, still the same Tyr had worn as the captain of the Einherjar, was elaborate and much of it was slick with blood. Loki’s fingers slipped as he tried to release the smaller latches holding the shoulder-pieces together, so Thor crouched down to help. They worked together
until the bulk of Tyr’s armour lay spread out beside him.

Thor pulled the fabric of Tyr’s trousers back until it ripped and better exposed the badly oozing wound in Tyr’s thigh. ‘Was this your blade, brother?’

Loki nodded and turned to the Sorcerer Supreme. ‘I don’t suppose you’d be kind enough to do me another favour and give us a lift to the helicarrier.’

‘Is it that bad? It’ll be here in fifteen minutes tops,’ Stark replied. ‘We’re still lacking an introduction, Loki. Is this a cousin of yours? The Goddess of Unanswered Questions?’

She chuckled, extending her hand out to Stark. ‘I’m the Sorcerer Supreme. I can assure you, I’m as native to Earth as you are, Mr Stark.’

‘Earth has sorcerers now?’ Rogers muttered. ‘The future is turning out to be a strange place.’

‘You’re right on the mark there, cap.’ Stark chortled.

Silence reigned for a few seconds, then Rogers said, ‘If we’re going to wait for the helicarrier, I’m going to check on Nat and see what mess Ebony Maw and his lot left behind. It’s been a while since I heard from her.’ He forced a smile. ‘A pleasure to meet you, Sorcerer Supreme.’

What did Gamora do to Romanoff?

Loki brought his hand up to his ear, hoping to get a status report from whoever was left to give a report and realised that his ear-piece was missing. It had to have fallen out along the way — perhaps when escaping the burning lodge, perhaps somewhere in the mirror dimension. He had been too preoccupied with the fighting to notice.

Not that he would have been able to hear much if he did still have the ear-piece on him. As Rogers slipped into the distance, the questions thrown at Loki mounted. Loki suspected Stark was attempting to distract himself from his injuries and the harshness of the local climate by grilling him. So, while Loki and Thor did what they could for Tyr, Loki humoured Stark and explained what he had been doing during the battle. Eventually, however, Stark couldn’t shake off the limitations of his body any further and began shivering so severely he was nearly incomprehensible due to his chattering teeth. He moved closer to the lodge where the flames could offer him some badly needed heat.

‘Stark, don’t get too close,’ Loki said. ‘You had all manner of chemicals inside. There’s no telling what the flames could get to at any moment.’

Stark took two reluctant steps back, his face scrunched up and his eyes watering from the smoke. ‘There’s not going to be anything left to salvage, is there? Goddamn it, this was my dad’s baby. He worked on this place for years.’

‘It was a fine house, Tony,’ Thor muttered. He ripped off another piece off the bottom of his cloak and wrapped it around Tyr’s thigh. The wound on his back they could contain as long as they kept him lying on his side, but the blood flow from thigh injury refused to be stemmed. ‘Sorcerer Supreme, have you any skill as a healer?’

‘Just let me die,’ Tyr groaned in reply.

Loki leaned in and whispered into the old man’s ear. ‘Not yet, old man. Not until you have repaid for all the disrespect you’ve ever shown me.’

He would have gone on. Neither Thor nor Stark were paying attention to his words, while the
Sorcerer Supreme only seemed amused, but a deep rumble in the distance caught him mid-thought. A few moments later, a great light climbed above the crest of the mountain to their west and Loki realised that the rumble was merely the sound of the helicarrier’s engines. He patted Tyr on the shoulder and rose to his feet as the USS Gibraltar began its descent into the valley, the force of its engines bending the slim pine trees and sending snow flitting in every direction.

Two days later, the overflowing medbay of the USS Gibraltar seemed to be on the minds of many aboard the helicarrier. Loki had been on his way to the bridge when he noticed the elated tones of the SHIELD personnel around him, which struck him as odd. SHIELD had lost more than three hundred people in the past fortnight, most of those on board knew someone who hadn’t made it, so until now the atmosphere on the helicarrier had been dour and sedate. Curious, Loki followed the hubbub of excitement until he found himself in a crowded corridor that led to the medbay’s main doors.

‘Brother?’ Thor called out. He was slumped against the wall further down the passageway.

Loki pushed through the crowd until he reached Thor. ‘What’s happening out here?’

‘I came to speak with Tyr again. Why the Midgardians gather here, I don’t know,’ Thor said, speaking softly to avoid drawing the attention of the SHIELD personnel in the vicinity. ‘His doctors say he’s ready to be transferred to a cell.’

Loki nodded; this issue had vexed Thor ever since they captured Tyr. Fundamentally, there was a capacity issue aboard the USS Gibraltar, which was an operational base and not a floating prison. There was only one cell Thor and the Midgardians considered secure enough to hold an alien with strength and physiology far superior to the average Midgardian, yet they had two prisoners on their hands and no one thought it was a good idea to keep them together in the same cell.

‘You want to take him back to Asgard,’ Loki said. He tilted his head so he could see through the gap in the blinds hung over the medbay windows. Tyr lay on his back, hooked up to several machines. Not visible from Loki’s vantage angle were the three SHIELD agents stationed inside the medbay to guard Tyr.

‘He still has crimes to answer for back on Asgard,’ Thor said, ‘but the Midgardians want to extract every bit of information he has out of him. And they want to prosecute him for the crimes he committed on Midgard.’

The plan to put Tyr on trial was news to Loki; Coulson and his team were reticent to discuss much with Loki ever since they returned to the helicarrier. They were unimpressed by his decision to keep them uninformed about his plans in Switzerland and irritated by his refusal to explain what he had done with the sceptre.

‘I don’t want to stir up ill-feelings among the Midgardians,’ Thor added, dropping the volume of his voice even further.

Loki turned his back to the medbay window and looked up at his brother. ‘Then be a help, not a hindrance. We have cuffs on Asgard that will contain him. Have them brought down here.’ A corner of his lip twitched upwards. ‘And remember that dwarven mouth mask? You’d do everyone a favour if you had that brought over too; his tongue is insufferable.’
‘That thing hasn’t been used in centuries.’ Thor cringed.

Loki bit into the inside of his cheek and made a concerted effort to focus on the time-line he was currently in. ‘Has Tyr said anything worth hearing yet? Every time I come near him, he rambles like a madman.’

‘About as much as Gamora has.’ Thor tugged at his vambrace. ‘There was one thing he resolved for me last night when I spoke to him. I wanted to know how he escaped his cell back on Asgard. It wasn’t as productive a conversation as I’d hoped, but he did explain what happened to Sigurd.’

‘Who?’

‘Tyr’s son-in-law, married to the second of his daughters. He disappeared the same night Tyr did. From what I knew of the man — a capable sorcerer and seldom on good terms with his father-in-law — he didn’t seem like one to become involved in the escape plan. I was wrong. Sigurd was instrumental in organising Tyr’s escape and he remains back in the Sanctuary. Apparently, he wanted to prove himself to his father-in-law once and for all.’

‘Good riddance,’ Loki muttered, then thought better of it. He did have a vague memory of Sigurd — a handsome and talented young man and utterly smitten with his wife. When he wasn’t doting on his two young children, he was in the library. ‘What’s he been doing in the Sanctuary?’

‘Helping the Maw understand how infinity stones work, according to Tyr.’

*Then it’s likely Sigurd is as responsible for the accelerated time-line to the Tesseract theft as I am.*

A flurry of excitement among SHIELD personnel massed in the corridor drowned out Loki’s string of violent profanity. But at someone’s shout the chatter stilled and the Midgardians parted, pressing themselves against the corridor walls. A wheeled bed, flanked by six guards, was pushed through the corridor and into the medbay. From where Loki and Thor stood, they had no chance of making out whether there was someone lying in that bed, but once the medbay doors swung shut, the Midgardians exploded into chatter once more. Loki finally picked up enough of their words to understand – Nick Fury had been found.

Loki supposed this ought to be seen as a positive development. In fact, the entire Switzerland escapade looked like something close to victory. They had deprived Thanos of an infinity stone and had captured two of his followers. It had been a long time since Loki had tangled with the Titan’s children and it hadn’t turned into an utter disaster.

Yet it hardly felt like a victory. Ebony Maw remained out there somewhere, in possession of the Tesseract. Neither Gamora nor Tyr had provided any helpful information thus far. Romanoff was still under vigilant medical supervision, recovering from severe internal injuries. Stark stubbornness is the only reason he was still on his feet. And Thanos remained as potent a threat as ever.

Loki tucked a stray lock of hair behind his left ear. ‘We’d best make ourselves useful in what ways we can be to the Midgardians. Get those cuffs brought over, Thor.’

‘I will,’ Thor replied. ‘Perhaps I can find something to help with Gamora as well. You’ve still had no sign of the Maw?’

‘They had another go at facial recognition this morning.’ Loki rolled his eyes. ‘More hideously ugly Midgardians and none of whatever species Ebony Maw spawned from.’
Loki used his fork to scrape out the meat mixed into his rice. Having now spent half a week on the helicarrier, Loki had come to realise that the food served aboard wasn’t quite as unpleasant as he remembered it being. He suspected Fury had ordered he be fed left-over scraps when he had been in SHIELD custody on the USS Gibraltar.

However, this particular meal — the “Indian Curry Special” as the menu board advertised it — had to be a mistake. The meat was chewy, the sauce powdery and the rice tasted like the chef had developed short-term memory problems and ended up salting the rice three times over. Unfortunately, Loki had arrived very late and all the other options listed on the menu had run out. No doubt the helicarrier’s crew knew which meals were palatable and which one would be best thrown overboard.

‘Enjoying your lunch?’ Thor asked, making Loki jump in his seat. He had been too preoccupied with contempt at his third-rate curry to pay attention to his surroundings. Thor took a seat opposite Loki. The rest of the cafeteria tables were unoccupied, both the helicarrier mechanics in their overalls and the SHIELD operations personnel in their slick office attire had filtered out to resume their work.

‘By your face, I’d say you wouldn’t recommend it.’

‘I’ve eaten worse, I suppose.’

Thor rested his elbows on the table and pressed his fingers together. ‘I’ve spent the morning in Gamora’s cell.’

‘Is she talking yet?’ Loki asked. After Thor returned from Asgard, Tyr became even more uncooperative than he had been and Thor had turned his attention to their other captive.

‘Not a great deal, but some. In fact, you’re her favourite topic.’

Loki rolled his fork between his thumb and index finger, then set it down against the edge of the plate. ‘I’m not surprised. I made her father look like a fool and killed her sister. She has more than enough reason to hate me.’

‘She talked a little also about what she got out of the Valkyrie about you. You told me that you heard about Thanos and his plans while you were on Sakaar. Yet you told the Valkyrie that our father sent you out as a spy. Your story doesn’t add up, brother. Why is that?’

‘I hoped our home-world and father’s name still had some meaning for her,’ Loki replied smoothly as he moved his plate to the side of the table.

‘Really?’ Thor frowned. ‘I don’t follow the logic. I’ve never met her, true, but I’ve heard a bit about her from you and now from Gamora. This is a woman who abandoned every oath she swore and ran off to drink away the rest of her days, what does our father’s name mean to her? By both your account and Gamora’s, the money you offered was what swayed her. So why bring up our father, why bring up Asgard at all? You only endangered the realm by doing so if you were discovered. And you were.’

Loki tried to suck in a breath through the building tightness in his chest, but the sense that his ribs were constricting and crushing his lungs refused to dissipate. He shook his head.

‘I made a mistake,’ he muttered.

‘I know you, Loki. This isn’t the kind of mistake you make.’
Loki crossed his arms. ‘Well, this time I did. What’s the point you’re trying to make here? Are you accusing me of something? It might have slipped your mind, but the whole debacle with Laufey was still fresh on my mind back then.’

‘How long were you on Sakaar the first time?’

Loki glanced around them. The kitchen staff were packing up and the lone person out in the cafeteria itself was lost in his world, his headphones blasting music as he wiped down the tabletops. The door across the room was propped open, but Loki wouldn’t help his cause if he avoided his brother’s questions by physically walking away. In fact, doing so would only leave Thor more determined to dig to the heart of the matter.

‘Not long, Thor. I wanted to occupy my mind with something and Thanos’ crusade for supremacy became my answer.’

Thor dropped his head momentarily, then looked back up at his brother. ‘Are you sure you didn’t leave Asgard because you wanted to seek out Thanos? It’s a curious thing what Gamora relayed from her chats with the Valkyrie. Brunnhilde remarked that you seemed familiar with how the Sanctuary was run and she thought there was something personal between you and Thanos from the beginning. Would that the Valkyrie were here, I’d very much like to speak to her myself.’

Brunnhilde was lucky she was galaxies away, otherwise, Loki would have given her what she was due for babbling all this to Gamora. It took every ounce of self-control he possessed not to visibly react to Thor’s words or to swear at his own idiocy. Brunnhilde had been a mistake from the beginning. He should have been thorough back when he first realised she was a loose end and put her out of her inebriated misery.

‘I had a vision. Or a couple rather,’ Loki said. ‘They didn’t show me anything good.’

‘Hmm. Of course.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘What was your trail of thought here then?’ Thor asked. He pushed his chair back and stood up. He didn’t quite end up pacing the room, but he kept couldn’t stand still either. ‘All right, I accept you didn’t want Thanos to know you had visions about him, so you made up the cover story about being an Asgardian spy in case things played out badly. But why lie to me and to our mother about why you left? And to claim that you were upset about finding out about your true parentage, that’s cold, even for you. You must’ve recovered from the shock very quickly if you were ready to do that, much quicker than I did.’

Loki chewed on his bottom lip. ‘You always were rather slow.’

‘Then explain it to me! You love showing off how much smarter you were than me.’

‘There’s nothing to explain, Thor. You’ve made up a grand conspiracy on the words of a prisoner. Have you considered that she might be playing you?’ Loki grabbed the rim of his plate and slid off his chair. ‘Now, excuse me, I’m going to occupy myself with something more productive than this unwarranted interrogation.’

‘Loki!’ Thor forced himself into his brother’s path. When Loki turned to skirt around the long table to his left and take an alternative route to the door, he grabbed Loki by the upper arm, sending the leftover curry scattering across the linoleum floor.
‘Look what you’ve done now, you fool,’ Loki scowled.

‘I’m sure you know a spell for that.’

‘It’s the principle of the matter. Now let me go.’

With a sigh, Thor released Loki, but then added, ‘There are lies within lies within lies in your tales. You look like you are drowning under their weight. And I haven’t forgotten what you asked of me back at Stark’s house. Whatever trouble you’ve gotten yourself in, I want to help. But I can’t help you if you tell me nothing.’
‘Any news from your brother?’ Stark asked.

Loki shook his head. ‘If he has something worth sharing, he and Rogers will report it directly, not through me.’

Despite his severe case of pneumonia and lingering effects of a bad concussion, Nick Fury had managed to offer up the first piece of genuinely useful information they’d had — after San Francisco Fury had found a nest in Tunisia where Gamora, Tyr and Ebony Maw could plot their next move. Thor and Rogers had immediately left for North Africa in case the Maw had found his way back there. Unfortunately, when they arrived they reported that they had found no sign of him or the Tesseract. Rogers decided he and Thor would stay longer, perhaps a day or two, to properly investigate the area in case some clue revealed itself, but his tone made it clear he doubted this would be the case. Everyone else had similarly low expectations.

In truth, Loki was just glad he and Thor wouldn’t be in the same room in the immediate future. Thor couldn’t content himself with what he’d had to say when he cornered Loki in the cafeteria and his continuing scrutiny left Loki ready to blast apart every piece of furniture aboard the helicarrier.

‘Is the sound on this thing even on?’ Stark reached for the volume controls, but stopped short and swallowed a breath.

Loki leaned in and nudged the sound up on his behalf. Stark had left Switzerland with fractures to several ribs, a concussion, four broken fingers and about a dozen other injuries. It would be months until he recovered fully.

_Could’ve been worse. Had Ebony Maw truly cared to kill him, he could have ripped out the arc reactor._

Stark’s eyes narrowed. ‘What’s that look for?’

‘You look like you should be on bed rest,’ Loki replied. He pushed the volume up again until the speakers finally beamed in Doctor Prothero’s inane inquiry about Gamora’s opinion of her breakfast.

‘Yeah, ‘cause you look like you’re back from a six-month sabbatical in Hawaii.’

Loki offered no response. Although he had avoided the bathroom mirror the past few mornings, he had caught his reflection in the glass walls and the endless polished surfaces to be found on the USS Gibraltar. The purple bags beneath his eyes were unmissable.

‘What does breakfast look like on your home-world?’ Doctor Prothero continued in a smooth, soothing tone. Coulson had introduced her as the preeminent criminal psychologist on SHIELD’s payroll. Her voice carried a faint trace of familiarity for Loki, but neither her face nor her name stirred recognition. There had been many SHIELD personnel rotating through his cell before Thor took him back to Asgard. ‘Is it customary among your people to eat breakfast?’

Loki rolled his chair back a little so he could have a better view of the screens that dominated the small, dusty room. SHIELD, as ever, weren’t satisfied with a single video feed. One camera tracked Prothero, one was narrowed in on Gamora and three more covered her cell from various angles. There was no possibility of privacy for Gamora, who presently lay on the narrow bench opposite the cell’s entrance.
'You think this’ll work?’ Stark asked.

‘Prothero’s methods?’

Stark made a vague gesture with his less mangled hand, which Loki construed to mean agreement with his question, but he had no easy answer for Stark.

In Loki’s experience, Midgardians had a strange attitude to interrogation techniques. There were many worlds, including in certain cases on Asgard, where torture was considered merely one of the standard options to get information out of a prisoner. Yet many Midgardians looked queasy when the possibility was brought up. Certainly, SHIELD had allowed a bit of roughening up and a great many threats, many of them delivered by Thor, but they hadn’t acted on them.

Threats were never going to make an impression on Gamora. She had once pulled out all ten of Loki’s fingernails in punishment for subordination and grinned through every moment of the procedure. But then, Loki wasn’t sure whether pain would produce results when it came to Gamora even if SHIELD were to embrace such techniques. For most of her life, she had been Thanos’ victim as much as she had been his tool.

And yet, they had at least received insults, filthy insinuations and warnings about Thanos’ wrath in reply to the threats. With Thor and Rogers, the two most capable of matching Gamora physically, out in Tunisia, Coulson’s higher-ups decided it was time for a change of strategy. Thor was now to be relegated to the surveillance room where Loki and Stark presently sat, and Prothero would take the lead. The results so far: Gamora’s resounding silence.

‘Coulson said it’ll take time,’ Loki said half-heartedly.

Stark rubbed his chin with the knuckle of one of his unbroken fingers. ‘De-radicalisation has been proven to work for terrorists. We’re on new ground with aliens.’

There was a distinct lack of snark in those words or arrogance in Stark’s expression. Loki peered at the man for a moment before he understood. Stark had peeled off his smirking playboy persona — this was work and he wanted an opinion from someone with more expertise than he possessed. Loki had seen hints of this side of him back when they prepared for Ebony Maw in Switzerland, but that had been on matters concerning communications technology and engineering, and certainly never directed at Loki.

_Trust him to warm up to anyone who can exasperate SHIELD._

‘It’s not something we do back on Asgard,´ Loki said. He paused while Prothero prodded Gamora with another set of questions that she failed to answer, then went on. ‘I understand Prothero’s approach in theory. There is something cult-like about Thanos’ followers and their fervour can approximate that of your religious fundamentalists. But I can’t say whether this approach would work with Gamora.’

‘And we mightn’t have time to find out.’

‘Exactly.’

Loki pressed his hands together and clenched his fingers. At every admission of their continued peril, a traitorous thought ingratiated itself deeper into his mind. He needed only to extend his hand. He needed only to walk into the cell and let the stone do the work. Ebony Maw had torn into Loki’s mind; Loki was perfectly capable of tearing apart Gamora’s.

_Don’t. This isn’t about that._
The door behind Loki and Stark was flung open.

‘Loki?’ Coulson called out as he strode into the room. His eyes flicked to the computer screens, then back to Loki. He went on more softly, but with no less urgency. ‘I need you to have a look at something. Stark, you too.’

‘Have you…’

Loki gave up on his question when Coulson swivelled on his heel and motioned for Loki and Stark to follow him. Saying nothing, Coulson pursed his lips through two levels of the helicarrier and along five corridors until they reached a wide, L-shaped room where the helicarrier’s science team was headquartered. Coulson ordered for the staff in the room to take a break and once they had filed out, he hurried towards a cluster of four computer screens that showed aggregated data of every spectrometer SHIELD had tapped into.

‘There was a spike in activity about a ten minutes ago,’ Coulson said.

Loki minimised the current data and brought up the analytics for the previous hour. ‘Yes, I can see it.’

He hoped neither Coulson nor Stark noticed the slight tremble of his hands as he and Stark worked through the analytics. A single spectrometer in Western Hungary had picked up the rapid spike in gamma radiation, then an alarm came from equipment in Bavaria, then, within five minutes, spectrometers all across Europe reacted. SHIELD’s technological reach was impressive considering the general level of Midgardian scientific understanding. It certainly gave Loki enough data to quickly pinpoint the origin of the radiation spike — a hydroelectric plant in Austria.

_Norns, why do you torment us so?_

‘This was the place he used,’ Loki said, pointing to a speck on the topographic map he had brought up. ‘Hardly matters really. The Maw’s gone.’

‘Are you certain of that?’ Coulson replied. ‘Tony, what do you think?’

Loki tuned out Stark’s reply as he tried to focus. He supposed he wasn’t certain. It was possible that Ebony Maw brought down reinforcements to replace Gamora and Tyr. Loki peered at the radiation measurements once more. ‘It was a brief spike. One person travelling, by the looks of it, not many. By all means, send a scouting party out to Austria, but I would wager they won’t find much.’

Coulson pulled off his suit jacket, moving gingerly over his still-healing arm and hung the jacket over the back of a nearby swivel chair. He leaned against the edge of the table. ‘Do we count this as a good thing or not?’

‘Phil, we lost him,’ Stark replied and clenched his teeth together so firmly, the tension was obvious in his stiff jawline and the taut tendons in his neck.

‘Lost?’ Loki’s chuckle came out humourless and bitter. ‘Do you really think he’s been spooked off by the might the Midgardians? He still has the Tesseract. And he’s not accustomed to disappointing his master, he will try to reclaim the sceptre. How that’ll look, I can barely begin to guess.’

_Switzerland was merely a skirmish in a bloody war. What we achieved there might be meaningless in another week._

Loki sucked in a breath in an effort to calm himself, but it was no use. The lights overhead flickered and every computer monitor in his vicinity exploded.
Chaos, barely contained panic and desperation had dominated the rest of the day. Coulson ordered a scientific scouting team to Austria, who quickly confirmed what Loki had already concluded — Ebony Maw had harnessed the hydroelectric generator to open a portal and left Midgard. The Tesseract, of course, had gone with him.

By nightfall, Thor and Rogers were back aboard. Their continued presence in Tunisia was useless now and they had been recalled. The focus turned to attempting to plan for the Maw’s next move. SHIELD abandoned all semblance of patience with Ebony Maw’s accomplices or, reportedly, with Fury. Loki too found himself cornered in Coulson’s office and inundated with questions about what else Thanos might have in his arsenal that could be a threat to Midgard. The more answers he gave, the grimmer Coulson’s expression grew.

Loki would have been amused by the man’s distress if the thoughts in his own mind didn’t leave him just as uneasy as Coulson had become. The flurry of activity on the USS Gibraltar had quietened down as the clocks crept towards midnight, but Loki’s mind had refused to still with that small voice whispering into his ear, prodding him towards paths he refused to contemplate again. And so this night seemed to stretch into a thousand nights, each as long as a galaxy’s circuit around the black hole at its heart.

Pursing his lips, Loki walked slowly along the edge of the helicarrier’s unmanned deck. The USS Gibraltar presently hovered at an altitude where the air was too thin for Midgardians. The crew did have oxygen masks on hand, but they didn’t venture out in these conditions unless they had to.

Yet, he wasn’t alone, he realised. A magic, neither the intimately familiar magic of Asgardians nor the wild magicry of the frost giants, drifted over the deck like smoke in a summer breeze. Loki didn’t care for its signature. The wielder had it under control, that much was certain, yet there was a wild undercurrent. It was an animal that obeyed its master, but was far from tame.

‘Does the sceptre whisper to you?’ asked the Sorcerer Supreme as her astral projection emerged from the empty air in front of Loki.

‘I’d wondered if we’d be seeing you again,’ he replied, taking half a step back.

‘The Earth is open to many dangers.’

Loki gathered he wouldn’t get a more concrete answer for what she had been occupied with since she muttered two words of farewell and opened a portal back to Kamar Taj while the rest of them waited for the helicarrier to finish its descent into the valley. He supposed it was none of his concern anyway, Thanos was enough to deal with. On the other hand, it did irk him that while she told him practically nothing, she expected an honest answer out of him.

‘Does it whisper to you?’ he asked, not bothering to mask his irritation.

‘It knows it doesn’t tempt me.’

_It knows you’ve already succumbed to temptation and draw power from a different trap. One no less dangerous than an infinity stone._

‘That stone needs to be rehoused within a different vessel,’ Loki said with a sigh. ‘One like the Tesseract, which was designed to actually contain its powers. The sceptre was created so the wielder can make full use of the mind stone’s powers and now…’
She drew her hands together in front of her stomach. ‘One day. Soon. But not yet.’

‘What would you have us do then?’ Loki asked, although he wasn’t enthused to have to voice such a question. While he had learned his lesson about the mind stone, the Midgardians had little idea of what they were dealing with. ‘Do you plan to take it for yourself? You’ll have to battle SHIELD for it, I expect.’

‘I don’t think you’ll let me if I tried. You can be very creative when pushed into a corner.’

The Sorcerer Supreme’s projection smiled as she spoke, but Loki found nothing pleasant or amusing in her words. He bit down a string of curses and instead asked, ‘You know, don’t you?’

‘It’s difficult not to notice how threads of time are spun and twisted around you,’ she replied. After a moment, when Loki didn’t respond to her words, she went on, ‘This I don’t know, but I suspect — you’ve wielded the mind stone before.’

‘It was a complicated relationship.’

‘You’re wiser now.’

Loki let out an exasperated huff. ‘Wise enough, I hope, to know that having a sceptre in my hand isn’t a good idea.’

‘That was a different timeline and you were a very different person back then.’ The Sorcerer Supreme’s projection crossed the narrow space between them and pressed her ghostly hand against the left side of Loki’s face. ‘You’re on the right path here.’

He frowned. ‘Have you seen it?’

She grinned — a cheeky look that belonged on the face of a child about to steal a pot of honey from the pantry, not on the face of the sorcerer who has lived several times longer than what was the natural lifespan of her species. But that silent expression left Loki breathless. So there was still the right path to follow. One out of how many? Strange claimed back on Titan that he had found one out of several million and he had died for it.

A thought Loki had somehow never considered, despite all the times he had mulled about what he was attempting to do back in the past, struck him then. What if he still followed that same path Strange had seen back then? Strange had sacrificed himself for Stark and it had been Stark’s message that nudged Loki to abandon all caution and try the time travel spell. It was a uniquely comforting thought — it offered meaning to all the deaths along the way.

But as the Sorcerer Supreme slid her hand down, her sling ring cold against the skin of his cheek, there was something in her expression that warned Loki off basking in good spirits too heartily.

‘You’ve come tonight because you’ve something to tell me.’

‘Nothing you don’t already suspect,’ she responded. ‘Victory seldom comes without its price.’

He chewed on his lip for a few seconds, then gulped in a lungful of the thin air. ‘And this path exacts a bitter toll. Yes. I… I think I’ve known that was a possibility for a while now.’

‘I’m sorry, Loki.’

How’s sorry going to help?
Not trusting himself to reply with anything civil, he merely nodded. The Sorcerer Supreme seemed to realise that she wouldn’t get much more out of this conversation. Or perhaps she had foreseen it. She muttered a quiet farewell and began to turn away, only to pause.

‘Tell your brother the truth,’ she said, glancing back over her shoulder.
Loki sighed and climbed out of bed, flinging out his left arm as he did so. His hand made a graceless swipe over the bedside table and sent flying everything that had been stacked on it.

On the other side of the room, Thor rolled onto his back and groaned. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Nothing, nothing,’ Loki replied hurriedly. None of the lights in the small cabin they shared on the USS Gibraltar were lit and the moonlight that fell through the narrow window afforded Loki only enough light to make out the shapes of the two books he had kept on the bedside table. He nudged them out of the way, then grabbed his coat and slid on his boots.

‘Where’re you going?’ Thor asked as Loki opened the cabin door and the uninviting, electric lights from the corridor flooded the cabin. Thor propped himself up and attempted to glare at Loki through half-open eyes; he didn’t much appreciate having his slumber disturbed.

‘To relieve myself, what else?’ Loki replied. He made certain there wasn’t even a hint of genuine contrition in his next words. ‘I’m sorry to have woken you. Get back to sleep, I’ll be back in five minutes.’

‘Close the door behind you then, will you?’ Thor grumbled. He sank back onto the mattress and pulled the blanket over his head.

Making sure to leave the door open by an inch, Loki indulged himself in a small, self-satisfied smile. The blankets they had been given were thin. The fact they provided little warmth bothered neither Loki nor Thor, but the material was also too thin to block out the light now beaming into the cabin, which would leave Thor irate soon enough.

He muttered polite greetings to those he passed — primarily the watch-keepers on the way to a shift change and intelligence analysts scheduled to be on call through the night. By the time Loki had descended two levels, however, his smile faded. He slipped his coat over his shoulders and ran his hands through his hair in an attempt to make himself look presentable. His pace had already been unhurried, but he halted completely before a pair of well-armed, surly SHIELD agents at the door to his destination.

‘Phil Coulson requested I assist with the prisoner’s questioning,’ Loki said. ‘If you could let me through?’

‘And you are?’ asked the more senior-ranking agent of the two.

Loki faked an embarrassed smile. ‘Right, of course. I’m Loki Odinson.’

‘Phil Coulson requested I assist with the prisoner’s questioning,’ Loki said. ‘If you could let me through?’

‘And you are?’ asked the more senior-ranking agent of the two.

Loki faked an embarrassed smile. ‘Right, of course. I’m Loki Odinson.’

‘Ah, yes, we’ve been expecting you, sir. One moment, please.’

The agent who had addressed Loki turned to deal with the door, while the other kept his eyes locked on Loki, but there was no sign of real concern in his movements. Many people had taken their turn at visiting Gamora since she had been brought aboard the helicarrier and these two guards had earlier received a message from their superiors advising them of Loki’s imminent arrival.

Loki had contemplated a number of plans that had involved making himself invisible for a time or relying on his illusions. Then he realised that it would require far less effort to fool a fingerprint scanner and send an email from Coulson’ address to the helicarrier’s security team.
On the other side of the door, the air was cooler and Loki’s footsteps seemed to reverberate against every inch of the thick walls. The glass bowl Gamora was contained in had finger-marks across it; Loki couldn’t determine which side of the glass they were on. Gamora herself had moved little since Loki had last looked at footage of her. She sat in her cream-coloured prison suit on the sole piece of furniture inside the cell — a low bench with a painfully thin pad. Her head rested against the glass wall and her eyes stared into the middle distance, focused on nothing.

‘Close the door and don’t let us be interrupted,’ Loki told the guards. Once the door shut behind him, he walked over to the chair Doctor Prothero had left behind and pushed it closer to the glass. As he sat himself down, he offered Gamora a warm smile. ‘Which is worse in your opinion? That sad excuse for a bed or how the lights never go out in here?’

‘I’ll tear your intestines into shreds before I’m done with you,’’ she replied, her voice low and raspy.

‘Gamora,’ Loki said, ‘I owe you an apology. I know you won’t care for what I have to say and I do understand. I too have a sibling I’m fonder of than I care to admit to anyone and when I thought he was gone, I… well, it was never my plan to hurt Nebula. She was amazing. As a fighter and as a person.’

‘Didn’t stop you killing her.’

He drew his hands together. ‘She stood between me and the Mad Titan.’

‘Just so you know: you’re shit at apologies. Now, fuck off.’

It was tempting to listen to Gamora and simply leave. He had come to say a great deal and although he had agonised aplenty about what he was about to do in the previous hours, now that he was before her all those plans, which had already been vague and half-formed, melted into nothing. He rose from the chair and used his magic to slide it right to the back, next to the door to the room. Taking a deep breath, he walked up to the glass.

‘It’s strange for me to see you like this,’ he said. ‘The first time we met, our positions were reversed and I have to say, you did Thanos’ work with gusto back then. But knowing now what became of you in later years, I suspect even then you had your doubts. Of course, that was then and this is now. I have interfered and I fear I’ve pushed you down a path you weren’t supposed to take.’

Gamora’s eyebrows drew upward. ‘I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.’

Yes, well, I hardly know myself.

Loki glanced back to the door — no one there, which was exactly as he wanted it. But he didn’t dare to look up to the cameras.

‘Did Ebony Maw explain to you what he saw when he looked inside my mind back in San Francisco?’ Loki asked.

‘He said you know more about the infinity stones than you told us. No surprise. You lied about everything else, why not the stones too?’

Loki snorted, then schooled his face and forced himself to stay on track. ‘Not quite. Perhaps Ebony Maw kept the details to himself in an effort for his own benefit somewhere along the way. Or, more likely, he himself didn’t understand.’ Loki squared his shoulders and tapped his fingers against his thigh. ‘He saw me and my brother aboard the Statesman.

‘It was a refugee ship — the sole ship that managed to get away when our world was destroyed. It
carried the few thousand Asgardians who survived that calamity, myself and the Tesseract, which I had managed to smuggle out of Asgard’s vaults during Asgard’s last, desperate hour. Then your father came, with his children. They had just destroyed Xandar and took the infinity stone held there. They killed half the people on board, forced me to give up the Tesseract and then set the refugee ship on fire, condemning anyone still trapped within.’

‘I don’t understand what you’re saying.’ Gamora replied, frowning. She rose from the bench and crossed the cell to stand opposite Loki.

‘Time-travel. I’m from the future where Thanos won.’

Norns, that was almost too easy to admit.

Gamora recoiled, but then shook her head and glared at Loki. ‘This is another lie.’

‘Would that it were. It was a masterful thing — he bad his time and then he took possession of all the stones within days. And then it was a snap of his fingers to turn half the universe into dust. Except it wasn’t half, not even close. Disorder, fighting, hunger everywhere. There was no balance, no peace, no prosperity, only death upon death upon death.’

‘You’re lying!’

‘About what?’ he asked. ‘The time-travel, or that Thanos is actually capable of doing what he always said he would?’

Gamora started to reply, but then abandoned whatever she had been about to say. She peered at Loki as if trying to find clarity in his expression. After a painfully long pause, she muttered, ‘This can’t be true.’

‘You know it can. You remember what he did to your home-world and to your parents. And to Nebula’s world. You’ve heard rumours, no doubt, about what happened there after Thanos brought balance to the populace.’

She swallowed and moved away from him, retreating back to the relative seclusion of the bench at the cell’s rear. There was a gangway running all around her cell with platforms leading right up to the glass on each side, but Loki decided it was better to wait where he was and give Gamora the opportunity to mull over what he had just revealed. However, as the silence lingered, he found himself unable to stay still or to contain himself. He had kept so many secrets since he had returned to the past — in fact, he’d had plenty of secrets before that too — now that he had exposed one fraction of those hidden truths, he longed to tear them out and blurt out everything.

‘Do you want to know what happened to you and Nebula in my original time-line?’ he asked.

‘No.’ Gamora leaned forward and propped her elbows on her knees. In a low, hesitant tone she went on, ‘Yes.’

‘Back then I was the one who led the attack on this planet and tried to steal the Tesseract. My plan was a failure, I was captured and my adoptive father sentenced me to rot in a cell for the rest of my days. You and I never met again, but you made a name for yourself, so I heard stories about you often enough once I found a way to escape my imprisonment.

‘After a thousand years of war, the Kree Empire and Xandar agreed on a peace treaty, which was widely celebrated, but not accepted by all. One of the Kree fanatics… You might know him already. Ronan the Accuser? He made a deal with Thanos: an orb that contained the power stone in exchange for the total destruction of Xandar. Thanos sent you and Nebula to help Ronan recover the Orb.’
‘He wouldn’t do that,’ Gamora said.

Loki cocked his head. ‘How many worlds have Thanos and his follower brought peace to by halving their population? The total obliteration of a world is merely a step further. And in exchange for an infinity stone? Are you certain he wouldn’t be tempted?’

‘But… I don’t —’

‘You didn’t. Thanos’ alliance with Ronan was the last stroke for you. You betrayed him and attempted to steal the orb yourself. You were arrested and in prison found yourself among a motley crew of petty criminals. The reports were hazy on the details, but they did have certain facts locked down. You and these petty criminals managed to escape from prison and joined the battle for Xandar, eventually defeating Ronan. The power stone was left with the Nova Corps on Xandar and you went off with your band of misfits until Thanos made his final move.’

‘Band of misfits? You don’t make it sound so appealing.’

‘As I said, we never met face to face again. All I know about your eventual fate came from one of these misfits — a genetically engineered raccoon with a penchant for stolen prosthetics. He and Nebula were the only ones to survive the Infinity War, he was… well, he didn’t cope. He was a danger to himself last I saw him.’

Gamora sucked in her cheeks and made a move to stand up, then changed her mind. ‘How did I die then?’

‘I don’t know,’ Loki said. ‘Not the details at least. I was rather occupied with trying not to die myself at the time. I learned this much: your ship picked up the distress call from our refugee ship, but found only one survivor — my brother, who informed you and your friends about Thanos’ recent successes in claiming the infinity stones. Then you split up. Thor and the raccoon headed to Nidavellir, while you, your boyfriend and two of your other companions headed to Knowhere.

‘It was too late, as I understand it. Thanos already destroyed Knowhere and now, he captured you. You and you alone knew where the soul stone was. He had Nebula, so he tortured her until you relented and revealed the stone’s location to him. Nebula said you and Thanos left together. When he was next seen, he admitted that you were dead and had the soul stone in his possession.’

Gamora shook her head, clearly refusing to look Loki in the eye, then turned away entirely. ‘So he….’ She inhaled sharply, then took several slower breaths. ‘And Nebula?’

‘She turned on him somewhere along the way too. She’d returned to the Sanctuary to kill Thanos, but he captured her. The torture was a punishment as much as a way to coerce you into doing what he wanted you to. She escaped and survived the devastation your father inflicted on the universe. After, Nebula, Thor and Stark went to get revenge and kill Thanos. That didn’t work either. The last message I got from Stark said that Nebula was dead and that your father had my brother.’

‘My father,’ Gamora mumbled hesitantly.

‘Adoptive father,’ Loki conceded. ‘Not that it matters. I didn’t lie about my heritage back on the Sanctuary. My blood-father disposed of me when my existence became an inconvenience. As for Odin, he was a warmonger in his youth and lied to me and Thor our entire lives. It doesn’t matter who your father is. It’s part of growing up — you leave your parents’ shadow and decide what sort of person you want to be.’

‘You think you have a way with words, don’t you?’ Gamora said. She still stood upright, which is
more than Loki would have expected considering what he just shared with her, but her shoulders did seem to sag and deep frown lines creased her face. ‘You stand here all high and mighty, but you can’t be. You tried to steal the Tesseract, the man who raised you imprisoned you for life. What despicable things had you done to warrant him doing that to you?’

Loki stifled a wince. ‘I made a deal, just like Ronan did. The Tesseract in exchange for dominion over this planet.’

He had expected her to laugh or to mock him, so he was somewhat put-off by Gamora’s obvious confusion. ‘Why this planet?’

‘Believe me, that decision wasn’t my finest moment.’

‘You know, the more you say, the less I like you. And I pretty much thought you were scum from the moment we met.’

Loki bit back a vicious remark about Gamora’s lack of feminine virtues; he had come so far with her, he couldn’t let it all come to naught out of personal enmity. ‘This isn’t about me. It’s not even about you, Gamora. This is about Thanos and the irreparable damage he plans to inflict upon the entire universe. I trust you know what I want from you.’

‘He is still my father,’ Gamora replied, though her words were barely audible.

‘Come now, Gamora. He killed your real father. And your mother. Then he took you and brainwashed you until you became a pointy instrument perfect for furthering his ambitions,’ Loki’s eyes ran over shapes of the cold Midgardian architecture all around them, then narrowed in on the cell’s occupant once more. ‘Half the universe, Gamora, remember that. Half the universe weighed against your need to get a pat on the head from a monster.’

_Have I made my point sufficiently?_

Loki grimaced. He could have gone on for an hour more, but Gamora still refused to meet his gaze, which didn’t bode well. He tapped his fingers against the thick layer of the cell wall and turned away. ‘We’ll continue this tomorrow, shall we?’

Expecting no reply from Gamora, he unlocked the door and swept back out into the corridor. He made it all of four steps past the doorway when Thor descended on him.

‘Let go!’ Loki demanded as Thor grabbed the front of Loki’s shirt and dragged him into the surveillance room. With a frustrated snarl, Thor all but flung him into a chair. ‘That was uncalled for!’

‘What you told her — was that true?’

Loki straightened up in the chair and chewed for a moment on the inside of his lip. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘You left the door ajar. I waited for you to come back, but you didn’t, so I wondered if you’d come to some harm. The guards said you were inside, so… Norns, it doesn’t matter! What did I just overhear?’

‘I’ve no idea what you overheard.’

Thor leaned forward, resting his hands on the arms of Loki’s chair. ‘You were talking about an Asgardian refugee ship when I got here. So, is it true? Time travel that is. Why would you tell her
when you refused to tell me?’

‘Refuse? You just heard plenty. Think of it more like… killing two birds with one stone,’ Loki replied with a chuckle. He dug his feet into the floor and pushed until the chair began sliding backwards, and out of Thor’s reach. ‘Come on, brother, I can get out of bed without making a massacre of my bedside table.’

If the situation hadn’t been so tense, Loki would have burst out laughing. Although they were both full-grown adults now, the pleasure that came with playing Thor never lost its lustre. Often enough Thor too found it amusing and was a good sport about becoming the target of Loki’s mischief, but this wasn’t one of those times. His hands were clenched. His hair, in utter disarray at this late hour, and his narrowed eyes gave him the air of a feral wild man.

‘You probably have questions,’ Loki said in a level tone. He had the feeling that if he wasn’t cautious with Thor here he would find himself shoved through the wall. And perhaps, even if he were cautious. Thor had a lot to learn about his little brother.

‘Your tale to the Zehoberai was the truth then?’ Thor pressed.

‘It’s a rare occasion, but I am capable of forcing such a thing out of my mouth.’

*So much for caution.*

‘Loki,’ Thor replied, adopting a tone of warning he no doubt learned from their mother. He slid his hand through his hair and pulled the locks away from his eyes. ‘How far back did you go? Why was Asgard destroyed? Why… No, I can’t have heard it right. You said you led the attack on Midgard in Ebony Maw’s place?’

Loki closed his eyes. This conversation was precisely what he had wanted to avoid all along. Confessions suited him ill, in fact, something painful rose up deep in his guts and threatened to leave him doubled over. Exposing himself to Gamora had been easy — she meant nothing to him. But Thor was another matter.

*There has to be a way to smooth what I’ve got to explain. Not that I deserve for anything to be smoothed over.*

‘About a decade.’ Loki made the conscious effort to open his eyes, but focused on his untrimmed nails rather than on Thor’s face. ‘Why did I go back? There wasn’t anything left of the future, as far as I could tell. Everyone who could’ve done something was dead. Thanos still had all the infinity stones. What was to stop him using them again? Not that there was anything he could’ve ventured to do that would match what crimes he’d already committed. I didn’t have a solid plan. I just wanted him dead or if I couldn’t do that, I wanted to save you. It was to be some small measure of recompense for my part in Thanos’ victory.’

Thor offered no answer to his words. Uncomfortable at the silence, Loki ventured a hesitant glance at his brother. His expression was decidedly odd — caught between horror, pity and something else Loki couldn’t quite grasp, which unnerved him all the more.

‘Norns have mercy, Loki. What did you do?’ Thor finally asked. Demanded, really.

Loki saw then what the rest of the night entailed for them both. Thor would throw out questions, each more cutting than the last, and Loki would force an answer. The tale would come out in shambolic snippets, leaving Thor more and more irate. And the knots in Loki’s stomach would twist tighter and tighter until he couldn’t bring himself to utter a word more.
He wondered if it mattered. If he were to tell the truth, no matter how he chose to explain it, nothing good lay on the other end of that tale.

Thor turned off the screens that beamed out footage from Gamora’s cell and reached for one of the other chairs in the room. Seating himself, he nudged the chair closer to Loki, the chair-wheels hissing over the dusty floor. ‘Whatever it was, that was a different time-line and you’ve clearly come to regret your deeds. I won’t judge you on them, if that’s what you’re concerned about.’

‘Don’t make promises you can’t keep. It’s a dangerous habit for a king.’

‘I don’t speak as your king, but as your brother.’

Loki pressed his fingers together, then sighed. ‘You remember, I expect, that I planned to disrupt your coronation by inviting frost giants into the Weapons Vault? Well, the first time around, I went through with it. Just about everything that came after flowed from that decision of mine, with ever more dire consequences.’
‘How could you even contemplate such a thing? To take advantage of our mourning? You selfish swine, a right —’

‘Thor! Listen for a moment more, please.’

‘No,’ Thor said through gritted teeth. Before Loki could utter another word, Thor stormed out, his shoulders shaking with fury.

Loki had anticipated the conversation would go poorly, and it had. He hadn’t even finished recounting how he had ambushed their father, assumed his identity and stranded him on Midgard. Nevertheless, Thor’s abrupt departure stung as vividly as a physical blow would have.

‘What a wonderful night this turned out to be,’ Loki muttered under his breath.

There was no sense in following Thor while he was in a mood this foul, it would only bait his anger. Nor was Loki certain he dared to.

Really, he had no idea what he was supposed to do with himself now. It was still the middle of the night and he could trudge back to their cabin — it was unlikely Thor would have returned there. Yet there seemed no point to moving so much as an inch. He wasn’t foolish enough to think that he would be able to fall asleep.

On the other hand, there was something pathetic about sitting here, in a dusty room no more than six paces across, and peering at the slate-grey walls. He was even still slumped in the same chair Thor had shoved him into earlier. Loki supposed one answer was to head over to the laboratory and make use of what equipment had survived his tantrum the other day. He could tinker about with a mock-up of a detection system intended to alert SHIELD to Ebony Maw’s return, but realistically, Loki doubted he would be of any use on that front at this moment. His brain felt like it was stuffed with wool.

Loki rubbed his eyes and turned his wheeled chair in a slow semi-circle. There was one place he would have liked to be. His mother’s gardens would be lovely at this hour, their paths devoid of all distraction and the air heady with the scent of flowering jasmine. Perhaps his mother would be there too and they would talk. Not of Loki’s many misdeeds or even what the future might hold, but of ordinary things. Of the spells Loki might explore, of the tulips Frigga thought to plant next spring and of a dozen trivial things that became the subject of involved conversations within a family.

Of course, such an occasion might be an empty dream now. Thor wouldn’t keep what Loki had told him to himself and their mother could well react to the revelations as positively as Thor had. Or Thor could banish Loki from the Nine Realms altogether; it was perfectly within his power to do so.

‘Mr Odinson?’ Loki turned his chair around until he was face to face with the speaker — the same guard who had demanded Loki’s name on the way to Gamora’s cell. Rather more bleary-eyed now, he had half his body-weight resting on the handle of the surveillance room door. ‘The prisoner wants to speak to you.’

Really? Perhaps this night isn’t a total loss just yet.

Thor had turned off the monitors earlier and neither brother had bothered to touch them since. Loki turned the nearest one back on. He found Gamora pacing the width of her cell, occasionally muttering something too softly for the microphones to pick up.
'Did she say what she wants me for?' Upon receiving a despairing shake of a head from the guard, he went on. ‘I’ll best get back in there then.’

‘Your authorisation was for one-time access only. Agent Coulson would have to re-approve you,’ the guard replied.

‘Surely Coulson would be asleep at this hour.’

The guard’s expression was unsympathetic. ‘What would you like to do then, sir?’

‘Oh, for…’ Loki tugged at the cuffs of his coat; right now he was long past caring about tiptoeing around SHIELD. ‘Just call him up and tell him what you told me. Whatever happens after that, happens.’

The guard slunk away and either Coulson hadn’t been asleep or he was quick on his feet when woken, because he charged into the surveillance room minutes later. He had changed his standard business suit for a white, short-sleeved shirt and a pair of navy track pants, but his hair was as neat as Loki had ever seen it.

‘What are you up to now?’ Coulson asked. By the speed with which he had burst into the room and the hint of a flush across his cheekbones, Loki guessed the guard’s call had left him irate, but Coulson hadn’t raised his voice. After dealing with Thor, it was a welcome change. ‘The security team are asking me to re-authorise you to speak with the prisoner. Odd, considering I never gave such an authorisation in the first place, let alone for you to speak with her alone.’

Loki raised an eyebrow. ‘Must’ve been a miscommunication somewhere. Does it matter now? I’m rather more interested in what she has to say to me. I’m sure you feel the same.’

Judging by Coulson’s expression that wasn’t what the man had wanted to hear. Fortunately for Loki, it was also the undeniable truth. Coulson sighed and motioned to Loki to follow him.

Gamora’s eyes flickered to Coulson as he and Loki walked in. ‘I’ve don’t want him here.’

‘You’re a prisoner and I’m a guest here. We both need to humour our hosts,’ Loki replied as Coulson stopped on the edge of the gangway to the cell and crossed his arms. ‘Well, what did you want with me?’

‘Where did Thanos and I go before he killed me? Do you know the name of the place?’ she asked.

Coulson offered up an uncertain grumble; Loki ignored him. This was a decisive point and he couldn’t focus on explaining the basics to the Midgardians right now. Loki tapped his fingers across the cell’s curved wall. ‘Vormir. That’s what your sister told those who survived, once she and Stark found their way off Titan.’

Gamora swore under the breath, then repeated the profanity more loudly.

‘Does that name already mean something to you?’ Loki asked.

She furrowed her brows and her jaw quivered for a moment before she forced out a response. ‘You shouldn’t know that. I never told anyone and made sure no one else could follow the trail.’

‘You believe me then?’

‘Yes.’
Loki was careful not to look pleased. This was a difficult moment for Gamora, he didn’t want to put her off by looking like he enjoyed getting what he wanted from her, although he was quite satisfied with the development. ‘And you’ll help us?’

‘I…’ Gamora clenched her eyes shut and when she opened them again her eyes were watering. ‘I think I must.’

‘Thank you,’ Loki replied. He was about to go on, but Coulson coughed. Loki pulled himself back against the guardrail of the gangway so he had some chance of looking both at Gamora and at Coulson at once. ‘Don’t look so forlorn, Agent Coulson, we’ve just found ourselves an ally.’

Coulson smiled, that same vapid smile Loki had come to detest in the man. ‘Oh, I rejoice at these news, but I’d like to know the reason for this abrupt change of heart.’

‘He doesn’t know?’ Gamora asked.

‘This planet is still coming to terms with the knowledge that there is intelligent life elsewhere in the universe. I didn’t want to overwhelm them,’ Loki smoothly lied through his teeth. It wasn’t a necessary lie, but he liked how this explanation sounded. He tried to focus on his next step, at least until Thor stormed back in and demanded to know the rest of the story. ‘Gamora, start thinking of ways we can deal with Thanos. I’ll brief Agent Coulson on where we’re at.’

Or rather, make him watch the surveillance tapes. I’ve explained myself twice tonight, I’m not doing it the third time.

Loki did end up explaining himself again, and not just to Coulson, but to Stark, Rogers and Romanoff as well. In their typical pedantic Midgardian fashion, they wanted to know every detail, no matter how irrelevant. The meeting room Coulson had corralled them into had no windows, but Loki was sure that he if were to step outside, he would find the helicarrier bathed in bright sunlight.

‘You’re taking this well,’ Loki remarked when silence finally fell in the room and everyone eyed off the plate of pastries positioned in the centre of the conference table. ‘Better than I thought you would.’

Between the four Midgardians, who were spread along the sides of the broad table, it was difficult to decide which of them looked the most incredulous at that comment. But it was of course Stark, who was the first to form a reply.

‘The man beside me was in deep freeze for half a century. You’re a space wizard, last week we had a delightful time meeting a local wizard. Time travel, sure, why the hell not?’ he said, playing with the edge of the bandage that kept two of his broken fingers in place while the bones healed. He cocked his head. ‘Don’t suppose you remember who wins the next World Series? Or the Kentucky Derby?’

‘Is Stark Industries in financial trouble? Should I sell off my stock?’ Romanoff asked. There were stitches in her cheek, which restricted the movement in her facial muscles and left her words slightly mumbled. This was actually the first time Loki had seen her since Switzerland and in his opinion, she belonged back in the medbay.

Stark flashed her a grin. ‘I just want to know who’s going to host the best party.’
‘I should’ve guessed,’ Romanoff replied. ‘Two somewhat more pertinent questions, Loki. Why tell us this now? I gather this is the information you didn’t want to share with us lest it get back to Thanos. And where’s your brother?’

‘He didn’t take the news as lightly as you did.’

Keen to avoid their sympathetic looks, Loki glanced down and pulled his coat forward until the garment covered more of his torso. Between Gamora, Thor, Coulson, and Coulson calling in every Avenger that could be found, Loki hadn’t had the chance to return to his cabin and dress himself properly. Missing half the layers he usually wore left him feeling uncomfortably exposed.

‘Loki?’ Coulson pressed.

‘Right.’ Loki cleared his throat. ‘I didn’t answer the other question. Ebony Maw would’ve returned to Thanos by now, which means Thanos has been informed that I know more than I told him. He’s coming for me already, the particulars of why are less relevant. On the other hand, Gamora is the way to even our odds. But I could hardly talk to her without having to provide an explanation to you all as well — how else would she or I explain her change of allegiances?’

Rogers reached across the table and grabbed a tart off the plate. Loki wasn’t sure if it had been Coulson’s demand or some junior agent eager to earn a pat on the back, but the pastries and a large thermos with freshly brewed coffee had been delivered to the room. For a good quarter of an hour, no one had touched either the plate of pastries or the coffee thermos, but Rogers had broken some unspoken agreement between the Midgardians. Seconds later, Romanoff and Coulson had poured out cups of coffee for everyone, while Stark pulled the plate closer to himself and was examining his options.

_Midgardians have got to be the most confounding species in the universe._

‘Can we persuade Tyr to help us too?’ Rogers asked between small bites; he was careful not to spill crumbs on the table.

‘Not a chance. If he hears what I did the first time around, he will consider it a confirmation of every vile thought he ever had about me.’

Coulson stirred sugar into his cup. ‘Thanos’ atrocities do rather drown out yours.’

‘Tyr seems like a pro-genocide kind of guy,’ Stark jumped in before Loki could respond. He finally settled on a cinnamon doughnut and pushed the plate away from him. ‘And how much use is he really? From an intel perspective, the man can’t know half as much as Gamora; he wasn’t around our Big Bad as long. Physically? He’s kind of old. Plus Loki and the Cap did a solid job on him.’

‘With regards to Tyr, it is more or less as Stark outlined,’ Loki admitted.

‘Phil, bring her in,’ Romanoff said. ‘At the least, we should hear out what she has to say. This time travel business is very dramatic, but it’s less pressing right now than the chance Earth might be the subject of another alien incursion.’

‘Quite true. Hang around here for a while, ok?’ Coulson grabbed his coffee and headed out, leaving Loki and the rest of the Midgardians with nothing to do except to pick at their breakfast.

Loki was on his second almond croissant when he heard the familiar thunder of heavy footsteps, but the sound cut off abruptly a few moments later. He set down his food and waited for the door to swing open. It didn’t. Frowning, Loki excused himself and slipped out of the room.
Thor stood three paces from the doorway, a small branch tangled in his hair and Mjolnir’s strap clenched so tight the leather was diggin into the back of Thor’s hand.

‘Been flying?’ Loki said, motioning towards the mess in Thor’s hair. He didn’t want to reopen the conversation between them with banalities, but his mind refused to offer him any more graceful openings.

Thor made a non-committal grunt, then went on. ‘I just saw Coulson, he said you were all in there.’

‘So why are you out here?’

Not that I can’t guess.

‘Didn’t want to be around you,’ Thor replied. ‘I tried to see it from your perspective and perhaps you were hard done by, but so are other people. You nearly killed me. You helped Asgard’s enemies bring down our defences. You made use of my grief and our father’s to your advantage. Are you now asking me to put that aside?’

Loki felt all warmth drain from his face. He had the beginnings of twenty responses on his tongue and the endings to none of them. Back then, the other Thor — his Thor, he had forgiven Loki. But that Thor wasn’t this Thor. This Thor hadn’t witnessed those events firsthand. His brush with captivity and his kingly responsibility had forced him to mature over the past year, but he remained younger and less experienced. And less forgiving of Loki’s trespasses.

This is the price that must be paid for meddling with time.

‘I told you what you demanded I tell you,’ Loki replied, and hated himself for how stiff and unnatural his words sounded. ‘What you do with this information is up to you. Yet it doesn’t change our current circumstances, does it? Thanos is still out there and still a threat. We need to find a way to be rid of him; I don’t think that requires you to —’

‘Do you ever stop talking?’ Thor pushed past, ramming hard into Loki’s shoulder and strode into the conference room.

A lone custard tart sat in the middle of the plate and the thermos stood empty. Loki waited for Thor or Stark to make a grab for the remaining tart, but both men were preoccupied. Thor had made sure to position himself as far away from his brother as possible and now glared at Loki from across the room. Stark’s attention, on the other hand, was narrowed on SHIELD’s prized captive.

Coulson nudged Gamora into a chair at the head of the table. With an irritated sigh, she brought up her shackled hands to rest on the smooth tabletop. These were restraints Thor had brought over from Asgard — the lock was impossible to pick and they were enchanted to leave vicious burns should the wearer move too quickly. In Loki’s opinion, they were more than adequate to contain Gamora, but SHIELD had their own thoughts on the subject. Before the door swung shut behind Coulson, Loki spotted a dozen men on alert out in the corridor.

‘You say you’re willing to talk to us now,’ Coulson began testily.

Gamora turned her head sharply to look at him; he hadn’t taken a seat and instead hovered at her shoulder. ‘I am.’
‘Do you know where Thanos is?’ Loki asked, speaking quickly so that he could get his question in before anyone else in the room.

‘Not precisely now, I haven’t been in touch with him for…’ Gamora’s eyebrows drew together. ‘For however many days it has been since you took me. He was approaching Outer Tanaj Territory at the time and I expect he will have reached the Tanaj Sector proper by now.’

The name Tanaj meant very little to Loki. He had heard it mentioned in passing a couple of times while in the Sanctuary, but never learned any detail about the planets that sector contained nor met anyone from there. There was no chance the Midgardians knew any more than he did, although they made their best effort to look like they were following Gamora’s words.

Loki pressed on with the questioning. ‘Is he in the middle of another invasion?’

‘He’s bringing reinforcements to Proxima Midnight’s forces. I haven’t followed the situation reports coming back closely, but from what I’ve heard, I think our… Thanos’ troops are over-stretched in that campaign. They met more formidable resistance than anticipated in Tanaj and Corvus Glaive’s two armies are still entrenched in Anelaxu. He had some setbacks recently as well.’

*Is that Brunnhilde’s doing? The operational plans for the subjugation of the Anelaxi were definitely among the documents she stole from the Palisade.*

‘It does sound like Thanos’ forces are over-stretched,’ Rogers said. ‘Is there a chance he’s likely to hold off on an assault on Earth?’

Gamora shook her head. ‘Ebony Maw and I already committed to taking this planet; contingents were held in reserve for us. And when you consider what the Maw learned from Loki’s mind, I don’t believe there’s any chance they’d be reassigned. In fact, it’s more likely Thanos will call back forces he has out in the field elsewhere and recommit them to this planet.’

‘And then there’s the problem of the space stone,’ Loki added.

‘Exactly. This is an advantage Thanos didn’t possess ‘til now. It won’t take them long to set up the stone so they can open a stable wormhole and that will make Thanos’ armed contingents the most mobile in the universe. You might’ve bought this planet a few days or a couple of weeks, nothing more.’

Colour faded from the faces of the Midgardians and even Loki found himself taken aback by Gamora’s words. He had known as much, certainly, but she phrased the capabilities the infinity stone offered the Titan and Midgard’s resulting vulnerability in blunter terms than Loki himself liked to characterise it.

‘We closed Loki’s wormhole back in his original time-line,’ Stark said.

‘This won’t be the same,’ Loki responded. ‘I opened that wormhole in New York, with the device powering it set up atop your own skyscraper. It’s easy to shut down a device when it’s accessible. Thanos will open the wormhole from his side — that is from whichever obscure galaxy he happens to be in. That means every soldier, every cannon and every ship he is going to send towards this planet will be between you and the space stone.’

Stark huffed. ‘We’re fucked then. That’s what you and Gamora are saying, right?’

*Yes. Definitely, yes.*

‘Not if Thanos’ troops never reach Midgard,’ Loki said.
‘Can we ally with any of these places he’s invading, form a coalition?’ Coulson asked. ‘How far away is Tanaj territory?’

Gamora offered him a condescending look, then her eyes flickered to Romanoff and Stark, whose injuries from the battle in Switzerland remained impossible to miss. ‘Tanaj is many more light years away than your little ships will travel over the entire lifespan of your species. Nor am I clear on what your planet might have to offer as a coalition partner.’

‘Forget the distance for now,’ Thor replied. It was the first thing he had uttered since he’d stepped into the room. Loki was in fact surprised he was following the conversation at all. While everyone else focused on Gamora, he seemed unable to shift his gaze away from Loki for more than a few seconds at a time. ‘The distance is unimportant. You know Thanos well, how would you kill him?’

The natural green of Gamora’s skin turned dusky and Loki threw his brother a reproachful look. The fool clearly didn’t understand that there was a big difference between deciding to co-operate with your former enemies and deciding to murder the man who had raised you. The move from acceptance of the former to the latter wasn’t a process of an idle hour. Yet, Loki too was curious to hear Gamora’s answer. He had spent some time contemplating the very same act. Maybe there was something obvious he had missed, like Thanos being deathly allergic to cashews.

Gamora replied after a long pause and reluctantly. ‘Planting explosives in his bedroom would’ve worked, but he’s become more careful, verging on paranoid, after the Palisade was destroyed. Everything is searched now, I don’t think the same idea has a chance of working anymore.’

‘All right, to sum up,’ Romanoff said. ‘A battle on Earth is a losing proposition, we must come out and make our strike, not play defence. We know also that Thanos isn’t an easy target — powerful physically and aware that he could be targeted. Think, Gamora, how do you get the man to drop his guard?’

‘Does he trust you?’ Coulson asked. He must have tired of being up on his feet, because he reached for the closer of the two remaining chairs in the room and sank into it.

‘I won’t be able to get you aboard his ship without being noticed, if that’s what you’re asking.’ Gamora lifted up her shackled hands and used the handcuffs to rub her forehead. ‘You know, Loki, I thought you had some plan when I agreed to help you. This is just a discussion about how we’re all going to get ourselves killed.’

‘More exciting than sitting in that cell though, isn’t it?’ Loki replied dryly.

‘Not really.’

Stark and Romanoff chuckled at Gamora’s reply, but Thor just jerked his chair back. ‘You’ll all get yourself killed, I won’t,’ he proclaimed. ‘Gamora and I will go to meet Thanos. It’ll be like what we discussed earlier, after San Francisco. I’ll pretend I am eager to hear what he has to offer me and as tribute, I will offer him Gamora — a prisoner of the Midgardians whom I rescued. We’ll talk terms and when he’s not expecting it, I will kill him.’

‘And the two of you will go alone?’ Rogers said. ‘No, too risky.’

‘Don’t underestimate my strength,’ Thor grumbled.

It was a risky plan, outright reckless in fact, but even if Thor’s plan was driven by his present foul mood, Loki had an inkling that there was a grain of a workable strategy in there. As much as it was uncouth denigrate to one’s allies, the bulk of the Midgardians would be a hindrance and not a help.
Both Romanoff and Stark were walking invalids after a skirmish on Midgard. Banner? He’d gone head to head with Thanos back on the Statesman and lost without Thanos having to resort to using the infinity stones in his possession. There were the weapons SHIELD had developed by harnessing the Tesseract’s power and Coulson was no doubt contemplating using right about now. But they weren’t superior to weaponry that could be found elsewhere in the universe and easily accessible to Thanos’ troops.

Out of everyone and everything Midgard could offer, only Rogers and the Ancient One might be a help. Except, Loki had no idea how their intrusion could be hidden if Thanos’ security was as solid as Gamora claimed it was. Besides, Ebony Maw had noticed when Loki made use of his magic. He was certain to feel and immediately recognise the magic the Sorcerer Supreme relied on.

‘I’ll go with you,’ Loki said. ‘You can’t take Thanos on alone.’

Thor’s jaw clenched momentarily and as he spoke he seemed to be on the verge of launching over the table to tackle Loki. ‘Why would we want you there? You’ve said it yourself, more than once, the knowledge you possess is the only thing Thanos needs to make himself master of all. So come out with it, what game are you playing now?’

‘I too have an infinity stone. Have you forgotten that?’

‘And what if he takes it back? You’ll be right there!’

Coulson started to say something, but Loki cut him off. ‘Then kill me! We’ve had this conversation before, Thor!’

Loki’s raised tone left the walls reverberating and when the vibrations faded, the silence in the room left most of the occupants physically squirming. Only Loki and Gamora seemed immune to the tension. She cocked her head, looking at him appraisingly.

‘How do you plan to justify your presence to Thanos?’ she asked. ‘He might welcome me back, in his own way, and Thor, but you’ll be delivered to the interrogators right away. What use would that be?’

‘You’re staying here. I’m going to pretend to be you,’ Loki replied. He clicked his fingers together and turned into a mirror image of Gamora, sans the shackles of course. Ignoring the mixed reactions from his audience, he went on. ‘Pardon, my frankness here, Gamora. It’s not that I suspect you might have second-thoughts and sell-out my dear brother. It’s more that you’re not reputed to be a great liar. Nebula reported that Thanos knew all along you’d lied to him about the soul stone; he merely waited until he needed to extract the information out of you. I’m a little more practised when it comes to lying about anything and everything in existence.’
‘Good luck,’ Gamora said and chuckled. ‘Shit. Never thought I’d be saying that to you.’

Loki muttered a few quick words of gratitude in reply and stepped away, his feet shuffling over the rough surface of the helicarrier’s deck. Citing changing climatic conditions, the ship’s crew had dropped the USS Gibraltar to a lower altitude. They were still well-above the ocean, but low enough that the Midgardians could suffer to be outside without resorting to cumbersome breathing apparatuses. This allowed an entire party to gather to witness their departure: Rogers, Stark, Concannon, Travers, Hill and about two dozen SHIELD agents whose faces were very familiar, but whose names Loki never bothered to learn.

‘Loki!’ Thor called out from the ramp up to the quinjet that would shuttle them over to the nearest patch of land available.

When Asgardians travelled, they inevitably left their mark. In light of Midgard’s present precarious situation, it seemed a poor idea to allow Heimdall to burn a hole into one of the more formidable assets the Midgardians could rely on for their defence.

Eager not to anger his brother further, Loki ran across the runway and up the ramp. Not a second after he was on board, either Romanoff or Coulson closed the hatch. No doubt frustrated they couldn’t do more, Romanoff had volunteered to pilot the quinjet, while Coulson had argued that, since she was still recovering, a co-pilot would be a prudent addition. However, as the quinjet’s engines kicked in and it rose into the air, he climbed out of his seat, letting Romanoff work on her own.

‘I can’t say I’m big on this plan,’ he said, moving to the back end of the fuselage. ‘We’ve no way of verifying the accuracy of what Gamora said.’

‘I know,’ Loki replied.

Does the man think me daft?

In fact, Gamora was the least of Loki’s anxieties. How many had there been on Titan against Thanos and still lost? How many had fought in Wakanda? Two men against the Mad Titan seemed a folly. The only consolation Loki could find was the thought that the Avengers’ and the Guardians’ previous failures were proof that the obvious strategy wouldn’t work and they had to try something different. Thor and Loki venturing out to face Thanos head on was that alternate strategy. But Loki couldn’t bring himself to embrace that notion. Loki and Brunnhilde had set out to kill Thanos once before and failed dismally.

Thor, who presently peered out the quinjet’s window with his jaw tight and his shoulders squared — every inch of him the warrior-king from the sagas, was the sole reason Loki hadn’t yet commandeered another of SHIELD’s quinjets and fled as far as he could. Loki knew his brother. As much as Thor’s temper made him insufferable to live with at times, it could also become a potent weapon.

‘You’ve offered clemency to the Titan’s daughter, have you not?’ Thor said, tearing his gaze away from the window.

‘We told her from the first day that we could negotiate the charges against her if she cooperated,’ Coulson replied. ‘We’ll honour that. And if he does descend upon us… Never mind, we’ll cross that
bridge when we get to it.’

‘I swore to protect Midgard, I intend to fulfil that oath,’ Thor responded.

Loki frowned. There were so many ‘what ifs’ and ‘what abouts’ in this scenario, surely even in Thor’s mind, yet none of them wanted to give discuss the possibility of failure. But this wasn’t a time for cowardice. He ran the tip of his tongue over his lower lip, then spoke. ‘Should Thor and I fail, it’ll be up to you and your team to put together one last line of defence.’

‘You and Gamora were quite emotive about how inadequate humanity —’

‘When pressed against the wall, I’d take Midgardians over many other species in this universe,’ Loki replied. ‘The last time you and I met in the old time-line? I’d just lured Thor into that lovely cell and, with the helicarrier high in the air, sent the entire thing tumbling tens of thousands of feet to the ground. You saw what I did to my brother — a god from ancient myths — yet you just walked out and challenged me all the same. I remember you were holding this ridiculously sized gun that you didn’t know how to use. Just an average, middle-aged man, but you didn’t look the slightest bit afraid of me. I put the sceptre right through the chest of course, but you still managed to taunt me, saying that “I lacked conviction” and then you took a shot at me.’

‘Is this meant to be an encouraging story?’ Coulson said. Whether he was cognisant of it or not, he did subtly shift away.

Careful not to slide off balance as the quinjet banked, Loki moved to close the space Coulson’s retreat had created. ‘Inspiring speeches to the beat of a war-drum are Thor’s responsibility. But I can say this much. Nick Fury has a good idea in putting together the Avengers. And his instinct is right, even Banner will be an asset and not a liability. But really, the Avengers don’t mean all that much. This planet is populated by billions of ordinary people. People like you, Phil, who’ll continue fighting when the odds seem impossible. And that’ll be enough.’

‘I pray you’re right.’

Coulson seemed about to continue, but Romanoff lowered the quinjet’s nose, nearly sending everyone else inside the jet tumbling. A rocky island emerged from the blue-grey water, then, well before Loki was ready, the quinjet descended on a deserted beach peppered with shale.

‘This is where we say goodbye today,’ Thor said with forced cheerfulness.

Romanoff leaned out of her seat. ‘Good luck, boys.’

The four of them exchanged numerous wishes of good luck before Loki and Thor finally stepped out onto the pebbled shore. Thor then shouted for Romanoff to take off and watched the quinjet until it slipped into the gathering storm clouds. Loki, meanwhile, merely listened to the water foam up as waves rolled in.

‘Do you believe the words you said to Coulson?’ Thor asked, rolling Mjolnir’s handle between his fingers and the palm of his hands.

‘Oh, if it comes to open battle for Midgard, they’ll fight bravely. And they’ll die bravely, every single one of them.’

‘There’s honour in such a death.’

‘You know what’s better than an honourable death? Living.’ Loki said and immediately dismissed his own words with a wave of his hand. With a sigh, he kicked a pebble, sending it tumbling across
the beach. ‘Thor, I don’t want to go after Thanos with things between us like this. Before you call for Heimdall, we should ta —’

Thor glared at his brother. ‘Heimdall! We’re ready!’

Swearing, Loki scrambled to complete his transformation into Gamora.

It was commonly thought among the Asgardians that Heimdall had the power to see everyone in the universe. Potentially, this was so and as far as Loki could tell, Heimdall quietly encouraged this belief. In practice, however, his abilities had limitations. Trillions of people lived in the universe, he could hardly find one out of those trillions when he didn’t know where to look. He was also liable to lose track when wormholes were involved and blind to anything outside his own dimension. But Gamora had offered up enough information for Heimdall to finally find Thanos — on Melchiorre, the home-planet of the Tanaj Empire.

Or rather, what had been the Tanaj Empire. Heimdall’s magic seared its brand into the ground as Loki and Thor landed and the heat of that brand vaporise the stagnant liquid that had pooled over the ground. Loki gagged at the foul smell, then nearly lurched over as he realised that what he smelled was excrement mixed with drying blood.

‘What is this? Norns have mercy on their souls,’ Thor mumbled.

Keeping a hand over his mouth, Loki followed the trail of Thor’s gaze and almost emptied the contents of his stomach anew. They stood in the middle of a great square surrounded by tall walls of carved obsidian. Someone had neatly bisected the space. On the left — a few scattered pieces of clothing. On the right — piled bodies. Thousands of them, all pressed together so tightly it was impossible to tell what limbs had belonged to whom. Yet someone remained unsatisfied. Soldiers were climbing over the corpses, occasionally discharging their rifles into the tangle of limbs and torsos under their feet.

‘Thanos has taken the planet,’ Loki said. ‘I think they’re making sure there are no survivors here.’

Thor exhaled sharply. ‘This is —’

‘Who are you!’ shouted a hulking Outrider. He jumped off the piled corpses and rushed towards Thor and Loki.

‘Hold on, hold on,’ Thor responded. He slipped his hand through Mjolnir’s strap and let the hammer hang off his wrist as he brought his hands up. ‘We mean no harm!’

_How the fuck does Heimdall decide where we land? It’s like he uses it as an opportunity to make my life difficult every time. Smug bastard._

Loki stepped in front of Thor. The pallid light of Melchiorre’s two distant suns, which seemed all the more inadequate after the vivid shades of the wormhole Heimdall had just sent Loki and Thor through, left much hazy, but there was enough illumination to make out the Outrider’s uniform. Loki cocked his head. ‘Do you not recognise me?’

The Outrider stopped in mid-step, but was silent. Half a dozen more of his compatriots soon caught up to him. One of them piped up in a hesitant tone. ‘Aren’t you Gamora?’
‘Precisely.’ Loki let out a dissatisfied huff. ‘Is my father here? Tell him I have returned and I bring a guest. This is Thor, King of the Asgardians. He’s to be treated with utmost respect.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ said another of the Outriders. Armbands on his biceps identified him as a troop leader and his guttural hiss sent two of his men running towards the three-storey complex that overlooked the square. ‘I don’t mean no disrespect, but why the restraints?’

‘Why indeed?’ Loki turned to Thor and thrust out the shackles towards him. These were a shallow replica of those Gamora had been forced to wear and Loki could have disposed of them himself with ease, but it was dangerous to only half-heartedly commit to a deception. ‘We had a bargain, your majesty.’

‘So we did.’ Grimacing at the swelling numbers of Outriders moving towards them, Thor unlocked the shackles and pulled them off Loki. He let the shackles drop to the ground.

The Outrider troop-leader lifted up the faceplate of his helmet and wrinkled his nose in distaste. ‘Follow us,’ he ordered.

Neither Thor nor Loki had reason to argue with the directions. A good half of the gathered Outriders stood motionless until Thor and Loki passed, then trailed behind, forming a sizable rear-guard. They moved quickly through the square and into the sprawling complex where, thankfully, the stench from the dead wasn’t so potent.

Before they left, Loki had tried to pry out of Gamora everything she knew about the Tanaj. It turned out she knew little more than he did, but from what she had offered him, Loki surmised they were in one of the many palace complexes built for Tanaj’s two imperial clans. It might have even been the grand palace itself. They must have passed through a dozen courtyards, the walls of each more lavishly decorated than the last.

However, at an odd pentagonal courtyard decorated with bright mosaics and carved lapis lazuli, the Outriders came to a stop and the troop-leader turned to Loki and Thor. ‘It is protocol for everyone to be searched or they can’t go further.’

‘If you must,’ Loki replied with a snide tone that he thought was a perfect mimicry of Gamora’s inflection.

The Outriders were thorough, divesting Loki of three knives that he had hidden in compartments of Gamora’s clothing. With a show of great reluctance, Thor relinquished Mjolnir as well. At that point, the bulk of the Outriders fell back. Only five remained to escort Loki and Thor through two more unoccupied courtyards and to a twelve-foot-tall archway of carved azure.

‘The Great Titan will want to see these two,’ the Outrider troop-leader said to a quivering woman who stood by the archway.

The woman was a foot shorter than Gamora and looked to be a native of Melchiorre. She bore a close resemblance to the dead out in front of the palace complex. Loki wondered if she had been there, had merely been lucky enough to end up on the other side of the square. If, of course, it was fair to consider that a lucky outcome. The Outrider’s words sent her quivering even more violently and as she led Thor and Loki through the arched passageway, she seemed to shrink further into herself.

Loki hadn’t been conscious of the quiet in the palace until the sound of laughter and overlapping conversations became audible. Someone was celebrating. Loki wasn’t surprised that once they passed through another agate arch they emerged on the largest courtyard yet. And it wasn’t just the
size that distinguished this one from the rest. A long table was set up in the centre. The space immediately around it brimmed with people — the party-guests seated on low benches and the servants, many of them in stained and torn clothing, rushing about to accommodate every need. Loki made a scan of the table: scores of Thanos’ officers, Cull Obsidian, Proxima Midnight, Ebony Maw and some Tanaj representatives, who were better dressed than the servants, but looked decidedly mortified by their surroundings.

The head of the table, however, was empty. Loki turned to question the Tanaj woman and found she had melted into the hubbub of the celebratory party.

‘Gamora,’ Thanos called out. There was plenty of the noise, which the walls of the courtyard only amplified, but Thanos’ voice cut through it all.

Loki spun around. He and Thor had entered through a side entrance, while Thanos and two adolescent Tanaj had come through the even grander, twenty-foot-high archway of obsidian and lapis lazuli. Thanos still wore much of his blood-spattered battle armour, the shoulder pieces glistened where they caught the suns’ rays.

‘I see it’s time to congratulate you and Proxima on a victory,’ Loki said. As he fought to remain in control of his breathing, Thor’s hand clenched around where Mjolnir’s handle should have been.

Standing beside the two Tanaj adolescents, neither of whom looked like they have reached their adult height yet, Thanos mass seemed all the more formidable. It became worse yet, when he abandoned the two Tanaj. Loki’s breath hitched as Thanos crossed the distance between them and hooked a finger under Loki’s chin, forcing Loki’s head to tilt up. Even with the thick leather gloves Thanos had on, the gesture forced more intimacy than Loki could ever be comfortable with.

‘I trust you made them pay for every hurt and insult,’ Thanos said. ‘You look well at least, if tired.’

Loki made himself release the breath he had been holding. ‘Not quite yet, father, but I will.’

‘Good. And who is this?’

‘Thor, King of Asgard and Protector of the Nine Realms,’ Thor said haughtily. ‘I wish to discuss the future of the Nine Realms with you. As a gesture of good faith, I have facilitated Gamora’s escape and return to you.’

‘Hmm. You don’t look much like your brother.’

Thor scowled and replied with enough venom that Loki wasn’t certain if the words were mere pretence or not. ‘He was adopted and no true brother to me.’

‘Family is difficult, is it not?’ Thanos smiled, but his gaze slipped back to Loki and there was no sign of affection to be found in Thanos’ eyes. Loki was certain, come morning Thanos would want Gamora to answer for her failures on Midgard. ‘I thank you, Thor, King of Asgard, for the assistance you have rendered my daughter. If you wish to speak, we shall. But would you not join our celebrations first? The new emperors of the Tanaj and I have just settled a peace treaty.’

Both young men, who still stood where Thanos had abandoned them, sank their faces towards the flagstones under their feet. In fact, one of them seemed to be weeping. Loki turned to his brother. There was nothing that could be done for the Tanaj now and only one acceptable answer to Thanos’ offer, but while Loki wore Gamora’s face, it wasn’t his place to provide a response.

‘If you have a place at the table for me,’ Thor said, ‘I shall consider it an honour to participate in the celebrations for such a momentous an occasion.’
The celebratory feast stretched late into the evening. Hundreds of lanterns were lit and the surviving palace staff rushed about, taking away one course and bringing out another. Thor, as a visiting dignitary, had been seated close to Thanos and the two scions of the Tanaj imperial clans, while Loki ended up further down the table amid Thanos’ military cadre. He listened in and laughed along to the tales of successful skirmishes and tricky counter-actions, but it was impossible to relax. Every time the servants reached for a plate, their hands shook and every time Thanos’ head turned in Loki’s direction, Loki had to make a concerted effort not to drop his cutlery. It was a relief when the announcement came that the last course of the night had finally been served and the party guests began dispersing.

But that relief proved very temporary, because Thanos soon beckoned Loki to the head of the table.

‘Is this what it’s always like?’ Thor was asking as Loki ignored the painful knots in the pit of his stomach and took the seat Proxima Midnight had recently vacated.

Loki slid his hand over blots of dark stains across the table top, then glanced to the two Tanaj emperors, who still sat at the table and dumbly peered at the scene around them as if stupefied. Loki flashed them a warm smile. ‘From what I heard from the others, this was a hard-won victory.’

‘Not so much in the end,’ Thanos replied. Shouting at the far end of the courtyard momentarily drew his attention; a group of Tanaj noblemen had taken an issue with the accommodations they had been reassigned to and were making a ruckus. ‘You wished to talk, your highness. I certainly appreciate your coming. I’m very interested to hear how this alliance between yourself and my daughter came to be.’

To Loki’s befuddlement, Thor blushed. ‘The Midgardians locked Gamora in a cell when she was captured, but on the third day of her captivity, she overpowered the guards and fled. The Midgardians begged me to aid her recapture and I obliged. When it came to blows, however, I found myself surprised. You daughter fights with more valour than any Midgardian. Still, I prevailed and returned her to Midgardian custody, who found a more secure cell — one Gamora couldn’t escape without aid. But the encounter remained on my mind…’ Thor bit his lip and gave Loki a side-long glance. ‘Well, I began to visit Gamora in secret and we’d talk.’

Thor’s eyes drifted lower, to the curve of Gamora’s breasts. Loki had to try his hardest to transform his instinct to burst into laughter into a show of Gamora’s embarrassment. This was why he loved his brother — when it came to it, Thor could be as creative as Loki.

‘I’m glad you found companionship in trying circumstances, daughter,’ Thanos said. He leaned forward and brought his hands under his chin.

Loki frowned. The leather gloves Thanos had on didn’t match the design of his armour nor had Loki ever seen him wear gloves of any kind before. While Loki debated with himself as to how Gamora would query her father’s wardrobe choices, Thor motioned to the people still lingering in the courtyard.

‘Can we move somewhere quieter,’ he said. The shouting from the Tanaj was escalating and the situation looked about to turn ugly. ‘I’m unaccustomed to discussing important matters in the presence of dozens of strangers.’

‘Certainly.’ Thanos rose from the table and whistled. ‘Cull, watch our two boys don’t get up to
The young Tanaj emperors whimpered at Cull Obsidian’s approach as Thanos led Thor and Loki inside the palace. In Loki’s experience, many species revelled in larger-than-life architecture. The Tanaj, who seemed to grow to no more than five feet tall, were no exception. This palace had grandiose proportions. Yet, obscenely, as Thanos passed under one twelve-foot-tall, gilded archway after another, it almost looked like the palace had been constructed specifically with him in mind. He finally turned back to Thor and Loki when they reached a spacious, circular hall. In contrast to the rest of the palace, there was little finery here. The sole exceptions were the sprawling chandeliers overhead and the ten over-sized statues that overlooked the dual thrones set up on a large dais in the room’s centre.

‘We can speak freely here,’ Thanos declared. The two thrones, rather surprisingly, had been constructed to accommodate only the average Tanaj, so Thanos had no hope of occupying either of them. Instead, he sat down on the stairs of the dais. ‘I do hope your affection for my daughter isn’t the sole reason you’re chosen to forsake your previous allies.’

Thor scoffed. ‘To call them allies is far too generous. The Midgardians have forgotten the true relationship between them and the man on the throne of Asgard. I intend to remind them of how little they are worth. In fact, I intend to remind everyone that they should offer a proper degree of respect to the King of Asgard.’

‘You come to me —’

‘My Einherjar are strong, but not as numerous as they should be. We, Asgardians, are a long-lived race, but we’re also slow to come into adulthood.’

As he spoke, Thor paced the room, seemingly due to his agitation with the Midgardians, but Loki caught Thor’s quick glances while he moved around the space. Like Loki, he was trying to assess the security of their surroundings. There were four entrances to this hall and from where they stood, it was difficult to see whether there was anyone on the other side of the open doors.

When Thor next moved past him, Loki gently rested his hand on Thor’s bicep in what he hoped Thanos would interpret as a gesture of affection. ‘Father, give Thor an army and he will lead them to victory. Then we will all share the spoils.’

Thanos looked dubious. ‘Does your brother still live?’ he asked.

‘He’s with the Midgardians. He was unaware of my plans to depart, but by now he might’ve surmised what has happened. I take it you consider Loki a threat.’

‘He has caused a great deal of trouble for me.’

‘He’s always been a source of trouble.’ Thor fiddled with his vambrace and resumed his pacing. ‘Still, I am of two minds about what ought to be done with him. If directed properly, his mischief can bear good fruit. I wonder if killing him would be a waste.’

Loki shook his head. ‘There’s a saying, can’t remember what planet it’s from — never turn your back on a tamed beast, you never know when it might bite you on the arse.’

Thanos chuckled, which Loki used as an opportunity to climb up the first of the dais steps. As much as every fibre in Loki’s being cried for him to turn and flee, he needed to get closer. The closer, the better.

‘You may be right, Gamora,’ Thor replied. ‘It is likely safer to eliminate him.’
I love you too, brother.

‘No, I need him alive,’ Thanos said. Thor’s pacing left him standing too far from the dais to converse comfortably, so Thanos clambered up. ‘At least for a time, he has to live.’

Loki moved two steps up until he stood behind Thanos and drew his hand up. As he reached into the pocket dimension, the mind stone hummed with frenetic anticipation, matching the beat of Loki’s thumping heart.

‘Father!’ he said sharply.

Startled, Thanos turned around and found the sceptre pointed right at him.
Lest you all take up the pitchforks after this chapter, I promise I won’t keep you hanging an entire week. Chapter 44 and a few more deleted scenes will be up on Saturday.

The sceptre sent veins of cyan-hued energy trailing over and under Thanos’ skin. Loki laughed. He had forgotten the potency of the soaring satisfaction the mind stone imparted upon its wielder and the euphoria that coursed through your veins when you reached out to snatch another’s mind. The blue reached Thanos’ temples; memories that weren’t his own flashed before Loki’s eyes. A busy, prosperous city bursting with people, all of whom rushed past a ragged wisp of a child begging for water. Two girls — undoubtedly Gamora and Nebula in their younger days — argued over a bag of candy. A firestorm vaporised all in its path, roaring out towards a dark horizon where no sentient creature would ever walk again. Loki pressed the sceptre further. He was close, soon he would have Thanos at his mercy, but he wasn’t yet there.

Thanos roared. The mind stone’s energy seemed to convulse, something Loki had never witnessed or heard of it doing before. Before he could react, Thanos had already pushed the sceptre out of the way with enough force to send it flying out of Loki’s hands.

He advanced on Loki. ‘You’ll pay for that.’

Horror took place of the glorious elation of the previous moment. Loki backed away from Thanos and his feet slipped off the stair he had been standing on. He tumbled off the dais.

Loki scrambled back onto his feet. Between half-choked up breaths, he dropped the illusions he’d woven over himself, found the sceptre and clung onto it with every ounce of strength he had. Only one thought remained as he edged closer to utter panic — he needed to keep Thanos away from the mind stone. Loki continued scrambling back and sent a blast from the sceptre in Thanos’ direction, but that only left the Titan snarling with fury.

This is it. Really it.

A whir that Loki had never welcomed half as much as he did now became audible. A second later, it grew louder. Then, with a thunderclap that made even the massive statues above them tremble, Thor held up Mjolnir. Loki sucked in a breath. Thor was here, it wasn’t over just yet.

If Thor’s fists couldn’t quite do the damage that Thanos’ could, Thor was more agile and Mjolnir was a powerful weapon. Had they been matched one-to-one, Thor might well have struck a serious, if not a decisive blow. But they were in the middle of a palace occupied by Thanos’ troops. The tumult of the fighting carried and Outriders soon poured in through the open doors.

Hissing out a string of curses, Loki used a spell to slam all the doors shut. Yet there were dozens of soldiers already inside. And loud thumps came from the corridors; the soldiers on the other side of the doors would force their way inside soon enough.

‘You’re a fool. You both are,’ Thanos sneered as he threw a left hook at Thor’s face. ‘Asgard will pay the price for your mistake.’
Thor ducked under Thanos’ fist, but if he offered a response to Thanos’ threat, Loki never heard it. Three Outriders converged on him, the muscles of their many arms taut and ready to tear him apart. Loki swung the sceptre in a wide arc. He didn’t dare to try mind control in the middle of a battle — that required a degree of finesse that he didn’t have time for with the numbers stacked so heavily against him and Thor, but he was liberal with the energy the sceptre could channel from the infinity stone.

The energy pulse tore through the Outriders advancing towards him and they all slumped to the ground. Yet that hardly solved Loki’s problem. Outriders had been bred to pay no heed to the fate of their comrades. Once the heat of battle subsumed them, they pressed upon the enemy with the furore of rabid wolves. Loki would have to kill every single one of them before they stopped coming.

The door to Loki’s left exploded, sending shattered fragments of the heavy door flying in every direction. More Outriders poured in.

_The longer this goes on, the worse it’s going to get. This palace is teeming with Thanos’ people._

Loki edged out of the Outriders’ reach and tried to take stock. Thor and Thanos had ended up atop the dais. Thor’s mistimed swing left one of the thrones shattered; that was all he had managed to achieve.

‘Think, you pathetic bastard, think,’ Loki muttered.

He sent a small blast at the two Outriders closest to him, then a much larger one at the left-most of the humanoid statues that haughtily gazed down at the battle happening at their feet. It toppled sideways. A small swipe of Loki’s hand and the statue came down across the gaping hole where Thanos’ men had blown out the door.

The makeshift barrier seemed to hold, but to make sure, Loki dropped a second statue across the opening. No doubt with enough effort and explosives, Thanos’ troops could blast through the heavy granite too, but the magnitude of the explosion needed would risk bringing down the entire building. Loki grinned as he deflected an Outrider blade with the shaft of his spear and, one-by-one, brought down the rest of the statues until every entrance into the hall was barricaded. None of them would be leaving until this fight was finished, one way or another.

Loki focused on the Outriders, taking care to keep them away from Thor. He even snuck shots at Thanos where he could, though that had little effect. Neither Thanos nor Thor could find a decisive opening. Loki, however, was getting somewhere — the number of bodies on the floor grew and fewer raced to tear out Loki’s throat.

Thor snarled. Thanos had feigned an attack then dived into a roll; Thor ended up slamming Mjolnir into the ground, shattering every flagstone within a ten-metre radius. While Thor huffed in irritation and straightened up, Thanos was already back on his feet. For the first time, Loki saw him shift away from Thor.

Thanos ripped off his leather gloves and threw them aside. Loki’s eyes widened. Thanos’ left hand looked unremarkable, but the right, well, Loki didn’t know quite what to make of it. It was generous to call it a gauntlet — the apparatus left Thanos’ fingers exposed and it was composed of crude, ill-fitting parts that jutted out at odd angles. Something uncouth had happened to this proto-gauntlet. Some pieces seemed to have been snapped, others were charred and burns bubbled up where the metal met the skin of Thanos’ hand.

Thanos caught Loki’s expression and smirked. ‘A makeshift solution, but it served us well against the Tanaj.’
He pressed his hand into a fist and the bright lights of the throne room disappeared.

Loki found himself in a much darker place – the courtyard where Thanos’ followers had been celebrating earlier. The system’s twin suns had set hours ago and the Tanaj servants had extinguished the bulk of the lanterns. Loki spun around. Thor had regained his bearings quicker than Loki had and already launched himself at Thanos once more. If anything, the wide perimeter of the courtyard offered Thor the advantage. He did his best work with Mjolnir when he had plenty of space to move.

However, the courtyard was still far from empty. The bulk of Thanos’ most fervent loyalists were still there, sorting out uppity Tanaj noblemen. They rushed to their master’s aid.

*Shit. As if the space stone in Thanos’ hands wasn’t bad enough.*

Loki blocked the spear Proxima Midnight thrust towards his stomach, only to come under attack from Ebony Maw. Now having the sceptre in his possession, Loki felt himself more a match to the Maw’s telekinesis than before, but there were only so many attacks he could deflect at any one time. Proxima Midnight aimed her next thrust into his flank and someone among Thanos’ officers had the presence of mind to call for more Outrider reinforcements, who now rushed into the courtyard armed with blaster rifles as well as swords. Beads of sweat ran down Loki’s brow as he battled to remain alive.

He managed to catch only glimpses of his brother amid the furore. Thanos, always glad to take a backseat where there was an opportunity to do so, had let Cull Obsidian struggle with Thor and merely watched the spectacle. Loki forced a large pulse of energy out of the sceptre, enough to overwhelm Ebony Maw’s magic and sent him careening into the courtyard wall. He jerked out of the way of Proxima’s attack, then started pushing through the Outriders that stood between him and Thanos.

Someone grabbed Loki by the back of his neck with such force that he ended on the ground, flat on his back. Proxima pressed her foot on his stomach and brought up her spear, energy pulsing between the weapon’s triad of prongs.

Light overwhelmed Loki’s eyes as the dark sky parted and a great beam came down into the courtyard. Proxima twisted to see what had happened, which suited Loki just fine. He buried the pointed end of his sceptre deep in the meat of her calf and slipped from under her foot. Despite her howl of pain, Proxima reacted quickly. She grabbed Loki’s shoulder and pulled him backward until he once again ended up on the ground, only this time he stared up at the pale face of the Sorcerer Supreme.

‘Need some help there, Loki?’ she asked in a soft tone that was utterly incongruous with the bloody battle underway all around them.

She didn’t wait for him to reply; she already brought up her hands and summoned mandalas dripping with Eldritch magic, then stepped up to challenge Proxima. That gave Loki a chance to gather his wits. That light had been Heimdall’s work; the flagstones of the courtyard now sported the familiar circular brand. He had brought through not only the Sorcerer Supreme, but Rogers and Gamora too. Had this been Heimdall’s idea? Or had the Midgardians negotiated this? It didn’t matter. Once the initial ambush failed, stealth no longer held any worth to Loki or Thor. In fact, they needed all the help they could get.

*Does this mean I’m going to have to thank him if we get out of this alive? Bloody wonderful.*

The tide did seem to turn in their favour. Rogers came to Thor’s aid against Cull Obsidian. Neither his size nor his axe proved a match for the two of them working as a team. Cull fell first to his knees,
then with another blow to the crook of his back, Mjolnir sent him sinking to the ground. He didn’t get back up.

The Sorcerer Supreme made headway against Proxima Midnight, but then Ebony Maw came to Proxima’s aid. Magic flowed freely while Proxima scrambled away and into the throng of Outriders. The courtyard teemed with them now. Some of them merely pushed off to the side the Tanaj who had been caught in the courtyard when the fighting broke out and kept them contained. But the majority were eager to get a piece of those who had dared to attack their master.

Loki did his best to cut through as many of them as he could as he followed the path of Proxima’s retreat. One sword made it through, however. Loki hissed in pain as the Outrider drove his blade through Loki’s upper arm. He turned the sceptre and the pulse of energy from the mind stone eviscerated the Outrider’s face. One way or another, this struggle ended tonight; he didn’t have time for niceties.

‘Let go of me, bitch,’ Gamora shouted. Loki hadn’t seen how it happened, but Proxima Midnight had grabbed her and now dragged her towards Thanos.

Proxima raised her voice so everyone could hear, ‘We’ve a traitor here!’

Thanos grabbed Mjolnir by the hammerhead and chucked it as far as he could; the hammer took Thor with it. ‘Another show of trickery?’

‘No, father,’ Gamora replied. ‘I just couldn’t ignore my conscience anymore.’

For the first time this night, and possibly in all the time Loki had known Thanos, he got the sense that the Titan was disturbed by what was going on. Thanos hunched his shoulders and clenched his jaw, before responding. ‘So be it, daughter.’

That tone didn’t bode well. Not daring to find out what the next moments might entail, Loki pushed past a vicious-looking mercenary, who bore a captain’s regalia. Loki grabbed Proxima’s arm and wrenched her away from Gamora. He winced; it felt like a hundred needles had been sunk into his already aching arm.

A pulse of blue light swallowed the courtyard, but when he pried his eyes open again, he was surprised to realise that he still stood on the same spot he had been a second ago. Only Thanos and Thor seemed to be missing.

Loki spun around. No, he hadn’t made a mistake. No one else was missing, it really was only Thanos and Thor gone. A lump solidified in Loki’s throat.

All be damned.

Thunder roared and, a fraction of a second later, lightning lit up the sky.

‘Thank the fuck,’ Loki muttered, then raised his voice so he could be heard above the din in the courtyard. ‘Rogers!’

The captain had gotten himself caught in a swarm of Outriders. He glanced over to Loki, then seemed to understand. He flattened himself as much as he could and threw the shield over himself, which allowed Loki to unleash the raw power of the mind stone at the Outriders.

Rogers climbed out from the bodies and rushed over to Loki, but Loki shook his head. ‘Work with Gamora here. I’m going to find Thor.’
Loki thought he knew what Thanos was trying to do. It was a logical strategy — separate them and take them on one-by-one. But he probably hadn’t counted on the fact Loki had learned long ago; where Thor walked, thunder and lightning followed. Loki needed only to chart the sound.

Out in the smaller courtyards, it was even darker. There were plenty of soldiers about nevertheless. Plenty of confusion too, as troop-leaders and officers shouted contrary orders. No one paid much attention to him and he was happy for it to stay that way, so he crept along the periphery of the courtyards.

Someone chanted. Loki frowned, trying to place the low-guttural sound. Before he had any success, a band of Tanaj burst in from one of the side arches, chanting and roaring war cries. Loki hurriedly pressed himself against the wall, but he had been spotted already. One of the Tanaj from the very front of the pack, a particularly short one, yelled out an order and then swerved to face Loki.

‘Surrender now,’ he demanded. A new blast of lightning barrelled through and Loki recognised the speaker. It was one of the young Tanaj emperors, the one who had snivelled as he stood at Thanos’ side. He had stripped away much of his elaborate regalia and now held an Outrider sword in his hands. In the voice of one who wouldn’t reach adulthood for years yet, he pressed. ‘Drop your weapon!’

‘If it’s all the same, your majesty, I’d rather keep it,’ Loki replied. ‘Before the night is done, I’d like to drive this thing as deep into Thanos’ skull as it’ll go.’

The Tanaj lowered his sword by a couple of inches. ‘You intend to kill him?’

‘He deserves it, a million times over.’

‘He does,’ the Tanaj replied. ‘Go then. There aren’t many of us left, but we’ll do what we can.’

Loki nodded to the young emperor, then continued moving as quickly as he could, but Thor and Thanos eluded him. Several times, he caught flashes of light that could have only been the space stone in use. Thanos was no doubt toying with Thor; Mjolnir was worth little if the enemy moved too quickly for you to land your strike. Shaking his head, Loki decided that scouting the courtyards would get him nowhere. He wiped away the blood dripping from his injured arm and gritted his teeth as he climbed up the courtyard wall. The roof was slanted and the tiles slippery, so it wasn’t the surest of footings, but the vantage the roof provided him was unparalleled. At the next flash of lightning, he spotted exactly where Thanos and Thor were.

He sprinted across the rooftops. When he was close enough, he sent a pulse of energy at Thanos’ back. The Titan moved and it was only a glancing hit, but it got Thanos’ attention. He tore a decorative sculpture off its pedestal and threw it in Loki’s direction. His aim was worse than Loki’s. The sculpture never gained enough height and ended up sailing through a window instead.

‘Both of you’ll beg to die long before I’m done with you!’ Thanos hollered.

‘You’ll need to get to us first,’ Thor replied. Two spins of his hammer and he was in the air. He landed on the roof, by Loki’s side.

If Thor was hoping for some perverse game of cat and mouse, Thanos wasn’t in the mood. He clenched his fist again. Loki tumbled out of mid-air and landed atop corpses of two Outriders.

Cursing whatever miserable wench had given birth to Thanos and didn’t have the decency to smother him there and then, Loki rolled off the still-warm bodies. He ended up in a muddle of fresh blood and spilled guts.
Loki climbed back onto his feet. Thanos had taken them back to the courtyard where they had started. There seemed to be fewer Outriders flooding into the space and the Tanaj who had been kept at bay earlier had managed to take up weapons too. But there was no sign of an end to the bloodshed.

And if the blood-flow were to slow, it wouldn’t be because the battle had turned in their favour. Thanos had to have troops elsewhere on the planet and definitely in orbit off-world. No doubt someone would’ve called them in by now. Or Thanos himself might be able to use the space stone to bring them here; Loki didn’t know the capability of this gauntlet Thanos had managed to cobble together. How many more reinforcements could Heimdall scrounge up for their side? He couldn’t use the Bifrost to bring people out here, but had to funnel a raw form of dark energy to open the wormhole, which was difficult work.

‘There are two infinity stones here,’ Loki muttered to himself as he helped a Tanaj noblewomen bring down an Outrider. ‘He has one, I have one. They say the Norns are fond of symmetry.’

He inhaled a shuddering breath and turned. Rogers and Thor were having another try at Thanos. Loki took a few steps, trying to keep his mind on the Sorcerer Supreme’s assurances, back on that night that already seemed like a dream from a century ago. *You’re on the right path here.*

One more step. An outrider stepped in to block Loki’s way; Loki brought him down. Three more steps. That seemed close enough. Loki lifted the sceptre and embraced the intoxication of an infinity stone allowed to unleash its full potential.

The light that poured from the sceptre was far brighter than the light of the Bifrost, brighter than entire stars. The mind stone, after all, had been there when the universe began and still held the might of that blast. But it hadn’t been there alone. Thanos raised his hand and the mind stone met its equal.

Heat and pulses of raw energy radiated off the intersection between the two stones. Dark figures, so pathetically small against the grand power of the universe, staggered back, screaming. Loki snickered at them. Their pain didn’t matter. The mind stone probably melted his face and set his hair aflame, but he didn’t care. His pain didn’t matter. He knew only that he needed to push more, coax more out of the stone. If he set the universe on fire, he didn’t care — so be it. The mind stone had to prevail.

‘Give it up! Surrender and you’ll have mercy!’ Thanos roared from somewhere in the periphery of Loki’s consciousness.

Loki clenched his teeth together and forced more out of the sceptre, even pouring every trace of magic contained within his own body. The light swelled and the pulses grew more frequent. But where everyone else had fled, one figure moved in the opposite direction. He brought his hand back and with a thunderclap loud enough to shatter stone, he slammed his hand down.

*Thor.*

The world exploded. Loki was thrown backwards several dozen feet and into a cold puddle of someone else’s blood.
King of Asgard

He lay there for what seemed like a long time, but wasn’t at all sure of how long had passed. His eyes stung, every bone, muscle and tendon in his body hurt. He flung the sceptre away with as much force as he could manage, which wasn’t much at all. Slowly, he crawled out of the puddle and after two failed attempts, managed to get up on his feet.

‘Is Thanos dead?’ someone asked in a shaky voice.

Loki didn’t bother to try to find out who the speaker was, nor, frankly, did he care for the answer to the question posed. He staggered through the courtyard, tripping over the bodies of the Outriders, the Tanaj and the various species Thanos had recruited as mercenaries. There were some amid the countless corpses who still lived, they moved with as much coordination as Loki. He didn’t care to dwell on them either. Only one thing still mattered.

After far too long a search, Loki finally found his brother lying face down, his entire body quivering every time he managed to take a breath.

‘Thor?’

Receiving no reply, Loki gently pushed Thor onto his back. He wasn’t gentle enough; Thor moaned in protest. Some of his armour had been torn away, revealing large patches of charred flesh beneath. His cuirass had proved strong enough to remain in place, but its component pieces were utterly mangled and gouged deep into Thor’s torso. His entire right arm was blackened. The smell of the burns left Loki’s stomach churning. He tried not to show it, but Thor seemed to see right through the facade — with an abrupt cough, he closed his eyes and sighed.

‘It’ll be all right,’ Loki mumbled. ‘A few moments more and you’ll be all right.’

He stretched his hand over Thor’s solar plexus, trying to ignore the volume of blood spurting out of Thor’s wounds. Loki knew every healing spell worth knowing. Between Thor, Sif and the Warriors Three, he’d had plenty of practice too, but he had never had to contend with something like this. Loki reached into his magic reserves and to his alarm, found them very much wanting. He pressed on anyway.

As the spell began to weave through the damage, Thor gasped and his eyes shot open. He threw up his left hand and after fumbling twice, caught Loki’s wrist. ‘W-what’re you doin’?’ he asked, every word forced out with great effort.

‘Healing you, what am I supposed to be doing?’ Loki wrapped his free hand over Thor’s. His skin was cold as ice, but when Loki tried to pry Thor’s hand off his wrist, Thor only clung on more fervently. ‘Let me work, you fool.’

‘Mjolnir.’

Loki gritted his teeth and wrenched his wrist out of Thor’s grasp. ‘Don’t be ridiculous. You and I’ve both seen worse.’

‘Mjol-Mjolnir.’ Blood dribbled out of the corner of Thor’s mouth as he spoke.

All warmth fled Loki’s body. There was only one reason for Thor to be asking for his hammer right now. On the other hand, Thor had never possessed the sharpest of minds. Loki pursed his lips and resumed his spell-work, only for Thor to attempt to swipe Loki’s hands away.
‘Loki.’ Rogers’ hand rested on Loki’s shoulder. He pulled away, but Rogers was actually more interested in Thor than Loki. Rogers gently set Mjolnir’s hammer into Thor’s left hand, muttering something in a soothing tone as he did so.

The hammer’s head had suffered as much damage as its bearer had — a good quarter of it was missing and deep cracks ran through what remained. Seemingly oblivious to the hammer’s condition, Thor wrapped his trembling fingers around the handle. Strangled coughs overcame him, but although his whole body shook with what had to be excruciating pain, his face remained calm.

‘Don’t even think it, Thor,’ Loki muttered, reaching for his magic once more. ‘You’re staying here with me, you understand?’

Thor made a reply but the only word Loki could make out was the one word Loki wanted to hear least. Loki swore, cursed the Norns, the Allfathers, everyone and everything he could think of. He achieved nothing, of course, save expending energy he didn’t have to spare. Blood seeped out of Thor’s mouth, rolled down his chin and dripped down onto his neck.

‘Bro… brother.’ Thor’s eyes widened as he struggled to get the words out and he suddenly seemed centuries younger. ‘Lo… keep… A-asgar…’

Thor’s lips moved for a few more seconds, but he couldn’t manage a single word more. Then even his lips stilled and his eyes lost focus. Loki’s heart pumped at an impossible pace as he slid his hand down the side of Thor’s neck, palpating for a pulse. He tried once, twice, thrice. Nothing.

‘No, no, no,’ Loki muttered.

He grasped for the other plane, where magic always hummed with frenetic energy. Some small measure of that energy resonated in everything, but living things were distinct. He tore through them all: the blue-green auras around the two Midgardians, the signature yellow of Gamora’s Zehoberai aura, the vermillion of the surviving Tanaj. He saw, almost felt in fact, the mass of energy contained within Mjolnir’s damaged hammerhead. He saw even the wispy trails of magic clinging to his own hands. But he saw nothing of Thor. Rogers cleared his throat, ‘Loki —’

‘He’s gone,’ Loki finished for him as he snapped back into the physical plane. ‘No. He can’t…’

Loki fell silent as he ran out of breath and no one else seemed to have anything to say. The silence lingered, its weight growing heavier with every passing second and every breath Thor was no longer taking.

‘Loki,’ Rogers tried again, ‘are you injured yourself?’

Was he? Everything hurt, but everything hurt equally. Loki shrugged, which sparked an exchange between Rogers and the Sorcerer Supreme. They wanted answers from him, Loki caught that much of the conversation, but he refused to engage. He had nothing to contribute. It was as if his brain had shut itself down and only the emergency functions kept going.

He’s gone. How can… He’s gone.

Loki staggered up onto his feet. ‘We need to return to Midgard. The time stone’s there.’

‘Loki, take a breath and listen for a moment,’ the Sorcerer Supreme replied. ‘If you try to undo this, you will unravel everything and there won’t be a way to put it together again. A price had to be paid, a bitter one, but…’ Loki began to turn away, but she simply stepped into his path again. ‘Come with
me and see.’

She held onto his arm, half-guiding and half-dragging him all of fifteen feet to where Thanos lay. The Titan was on his back, his head rolled to the side, but Loki didn’t need to see his face to know he was dead. The damage was too great for anyone to survive. Swaying on his feet, Loki peered down at the man whose very name had sent shivers down his spine for a decade. Thanos was just another corpse on the battlefield now, just like everyone else who had the misfortune to get caught in the fighting. Just like Thor.

No, not quite like the rest. What was left of his makeshift gauntlet lay by the remnant of his arm. It was shattered and the glow of the space stone, which had been nestled inside, was now visible. Thor had done this, Loki realised. Thor had brought Mjolnir down onto the gauntlet and set off the explosion.

‘This is where all our paths have led,’ the Sorcerer Supreme said.

‘Thor’s my brother.’

‘Your brother or the universe, Loki. One or the other, you can’t have both.’

Loki pulled away from her. He would’ve spat in her face if his mouth hadn’t gone dry. ‘No, there’ll be another way.’

The Sorcerer Supreme offered no reply to his words, which somehow stung all the more. He sucked in a breath and pushed his fingers through his hair, his fingernails scraping along the skin of his head. All of this was obscene — the dead, the blood, the rising stench. He couldn’t think while he stood in front of the charred sack of meat that had been the Great Titan. He couldn’t think at all.

‘Hey, you should sit down,’ Rogers said.

Loki certainly didn’t want to sit down. He wanted… well, he wanted to not be here.

He lifted up the broken gauntlet and clenched it. The jagged pieces that still clung to the infinity tone jutted painfully into his skin and dug in between the tendons. Saying nothing, he staggered back to Thor.

Rogers hurried after him. ‘What are you doing? Hold on a sec.’

Loki shook his head as he pulled his brother’s still form toward his chest and tightened his grip on the infinity stone.

Night became bright day. Loki lost his footing, and his grip on the space stone, which had seared a brand into his palm. He ended up on his knees, in the middle of a soft meadow carpeted with now-trampled marigolds and daisies. Birds, likely alarmed by his arrival, produced a chorus of loud chirps and caws. Water rumbled somewhere.

Loki slowly turned his head while his eyes adjusted to the light. Eight apple trees ringed the meadow. He knew these trees. There had been a time where he would clamber up into their branches and pluck the ripest apples.

‘Who’s there?’ his mother called out, her voice carrying the authority of a queen, yet also laden with warmth.

Loki stammered for a reply, but nothing would come save a new wave of panic. He would have to explain and he couldn’t summon a coherent word. He still sat there as if stupefied — his mouth
‘Loki?’ she gasped. Her eyes wide, she sank to her knees beside him. ‘What’s happened?’

‘I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,’ was all he managed before his words turned into desperate sobs.

The musicians had packed away their instruments, the gathered crowd had dispersed and now even the torches grew dim. Loki walked slowly down the narrow ribbon of sand below the paved escarpment. He moved too closely to the tepid water. More often than not, the waves that lapped at the sand caught the trail of his passage; his boots and the bottom of his cloak were soaked.

‘I thought this would be a place to look for you,’ Odin said as he climbed down the stone steps that bridged the escarpment and the beach.

Loki nodded weakly, never taking his eyes off the distant murk. The cool stars and the ghostly nebulae shone brightly enough for the line where the water dropped over the edge to be visible. He knew precisely how many miles lay between the shore and that horizon — his tutors had drilled this basic fact into him long ago, but it didn’t seem all that far. He longed to strip away his heavy, ceremonial clothing and tear off his boots, and swim until he couldn’t swim any further.

That’s a pathetic notion even for a child. There’s nothing of him left out there now, only primordial dust swept along by the cosmic winds.

‘My boy, you’re getting wet,’ Odin said with a barely perceptible hint of a chuckle. ‘Will you not come and sit a while by this old man?’

Odin sighed as he lowered himself onto the sand, then rested his walking stick across his knees. Loki took up a place to his left, but his gaze still lingered on the horizon. It was quiet out here. Sunrise lay a few hours away and neither the father nor the son had guards accompanying them. Water whispered as it rolled in and out; Loki’s breath slowed to match that smooth rhythm.

‘You should return to the palace, father,’ he said after perhaps a minute had passed without Odin a word. ‘Mother shouldn’t have to grieve alone. And tomorrow will no doubt be as demanding a day as today was, I’m sure you’re in need of rest.’

‘I could say the same to you.’

The difference was, there was a possibility his father could embrace his son’s words. He could go to comfort his wife and try to find some peace in their common tragedy. Loki could scarcely look his parents in the eye. What good would he be were he to go to his mother?

As for rest, he had tried. After the healers had patched him up as best they could, they made it clear that he was in dire need of calm recuperation, but sleep wouldn’t come. Besides, there had been a great deal to do.

He had abandoned the Midgardians and Gamora back on Tanaj. While attending to that loose thread, Loki also retrieved the sceptre he had left lying in the middle of the battlefield. Having two infinity stones on Asgard soon proved to be another headache. The sceptre was a malicious weapon, while Thanos’ obscenity of a gauntlet was worth about as much as a ball of scrap aluminium — Loki had been very lucky the mangled apparatus didn’t cause a malfunction on his return to Asgard. New
vessels to house the stones and a place where they could be stored securely had been imperative. And, most draining of all, there had been the funeral arrangements to settle.

Loki tried to wipe away the sand stuck onto the leather of his boots and ended up with sand all over his fingers instead. ‘I suppose I will need to make my farewells before I leave.’

‘I was unaware you meant to leave again.’ Odin frowned. ‘Where do you intend to go?’

‘I hardly know. Maybe Alfheim.’

*Or I can figure out where Brunnhilde ended up. We can wander from one planet to the next, drinking until the universe runs out of alcohol.*

‘Your coronation should take place before you leave Asgard again.’

Loki snickered, but he could make out enough of his father’s morose expression for the mirth to vanish a heartbeat later. ‘What coronation can there be?’ he said. ‘I’m not your true-born son. The last time Gungnir was handed to me, half the palace revolted and the other half did precious little to stop it.’

‘Both you and Thor were my sons.’ Odin’s jaw clenched momentarily, then he seemed to contain himself. ‘Your right to the kingship is no less than your brother’s. I have made that clear and so has Thor. Shortly after you left for Sakaar, he had a will made setting out who would be his successor. His children were to be first in line, the second — you. Since he didn’t father any children during his life, you are his heir apparent.’

Loki sighed as he glanced back to the darkened spires of the city and the royal palace, which towered over all else. ‘A king can issue any proclamation he wishes; the Asgardians will still despise the Jotnar. Nor is this what Thor would’ve wanted.’

‘His will is clear. It was signed and appropriately wit —’

‘A will is only a piece of paper. It can be torn up at any time. You should take the throne, or pass it to that third cousin of yours. Alevi, wasn’t it? Or have the council vote to select a new monarch. Norns, turn Asgard into parliamentary democracy if you must.’

Loki swallowed the lump in his throat and moved to get up, but his father motioned for him to halt. Out of pure habit, Loki obeyed.

‘I have not raised you to flee from your responsibilities,’ Odin said.

‘My responsibilities? I assure you, before the end, it was Thor’s will that I have nothing to do with him, or Asgard or the throne, ever.’

‘I take it you quarrelled.’ At Loki’s reluctant nod, Odin let out a huff. ‘What of it? You quarrelled often enough, all brothers do. You always made up soon enough.’

*It wasn’t our average quarrel, father.*

Receiving no verbal response from Loki, Odin ran his hand over the line where the skin of his cheek and his beard met. ‘What makes you certain he changed his mind on the succession? Did he state so outright?’ Loki shook his head again, which only left his father more exasperated. ‘Then what was it? Did he die cursing your name and all your issue?’

‘I couldn’t make out what he was trying to tell me at the end.’
‘Nothing at all?’

Loki chewed on his lower lip for a long moment. ‘Valhalla. Brother. Asgard. Nothing more than that.’

‘He was addressing you, I presume? Then here’s your absolution for whatever slight you perceive Thor thought unforgivable. A dying man has no time for insincerity, Loki. If he didn’t regard you as his brother then, he would have referred to you in another manner. Or not at all.’

‘I-I don’t think that’s necessarily true.’

‘It is perhaps not quite a universal truth, but you knew Thor just as well as I did. He was quick to anger, but in the end, his nature was to forgive, not to hold a grudge.’ Odin reached out and cupped Loki’s chin, then gently turned Loki’s head until they were eye to eye.

‘What are you…’

Odin wiped away a tear rolling down Loki’s cheek; Loki hadn’t even realised he was crying.

‘Loki,’ Odin said with a weary sigh, ‘if you don’t trust the depth of your brother’s affection for you or the sentiments of our people, would you at least trust me? I am your father and a proud one when I see the man you have grown up to be, but I don’t urge you to take up the mantle as your father. I do so because I was a king once too and I know of no one else in all the Nine Realms who is more capable of taking up this responsibility.’
Loki fiddled with the hem of his right sleeve. No matter how he pulled at it, the sleeve was half an inch too short and the shirt itself, for what had to be the first time in his life, sat too tight around his shoulders. It was his fault. He had wanted to make a statement on this day, but had no idea what that statement was supposed to be.

He certainly had no intention of turning up in his familiar green and gold; today was supposed to be the start of a new era after all. Nor did he want armour. He wasn’t a warrior and wasn’t about to become one. Something red? That had been Thor’s favoured colour. Blue — too evocative of his Jotunn heritage. Purple — he looked ludicrous in purple. In the end, he had decided on black. He was in mourning; there was nothing more appropriate.

The trouble was, by the time he had made up his mind, there had scarcely been any time left for the tailor and his assistants to do their work. They had laboured through the night and, well, the results were obvious.

‘Loki?’ came Fandral’s voice from somewhere behind him. A few moments later, Loki heard the man’s boots saunter across the parquet floor. ‘Lo… your highness? Your —’

Loki spun about so sharply, Fandral jerked to a stop. After a momentary awkward silence, he cleared his throat and offered a courteous bow. Loki motioned for him to straighten up. He could have directed Fandral not to address him by his title either, but there seemed no purpose to it. The relations between them were about to change and Loki had to become accustomed to hearing his name less frequently. The idle ceremonials had irked his patience as a prince, there would be no chance of escaping them now.

‘Your father bad me to tell you that everything is ready,’ Fandral said. ‘It is only you they await.’

Loki leaned until he had a good vantage of the crowd down in the Great Hall. He stood several floors above them, hidden from view by a gilded panel in-cut with semi-abstract flowers — an innocuous feature to help the ventilation in the palace, but also an excellent hiding spot. No one below could see who stood behind the panel, not that many people ever glanced up.

No one was looking up today either. The crowd, although as finely dressed as at the last coronation to take place on Asgard, was smaller and more sedate. Loki couldn’t summon the energy to despise them for this lack of enthusiasm — he too wasn’t in the mood for any sort of celebration.

‘Shall I return with an indication of when you will be ready?’ Fandral asked.

Loki shook his head, only now realising that he had failed to respond to Fandral’s previous remark, then pulled down the shirt sleeves as far as they would go. ‘No. We’d best start before anyone collapses from the fervour of their anticipation.’

Fandral’s lips curled up momentarily, but then he seemed unable to decide whether Loki had been joking or not. Loki didn’t see a reason to enlighten him. He moved past Fandral and headed towards the back stairs down to the Great Hall, trusting that Fandral would follow. Sure enough, the drum of Fandral’s heeled boots soon matched his own footsteps.

‘I don’t think I ever thanked you for lending me the rapier,’ Loki said as they trudged down the
stairs. ‘I would’ve returned it, but it snapped in half when I was up against Laufey.’

‘Then the weapon served its purpose,’ Fandral replied and flashed Loki that same smile that made all the young women in the palace swoon. When they reached the narrow ante-chamber at the bottom of the stairs, however, he schooled his expression once more. ‘I’ll tell your father you are ready. Best of luck, Loki.’

He ducked through the side door and would no doubt skirt the edge of the crowd in the Great Hall until he got to the dais. Loki, on the other hand, had to take the long way around and enter through the main entrance. Sneaking through the side door didn’t befit a king. He trudged, pausing every few feet to acknowledge the palace guards standing watch, but eventually, he ran out of soldiers to divert his attention to and the doors waited before him.

*I could be on Sakaar right now, enjoying the undivided attention of a downright mesmerising set of Widlic triplets.*

Loki took a deep breath and motioned for the guard at the door to draw them open. The moment he stepped through, a roar went up through the hall. Not cheering, but the sum of thousands of people frantically whispering. He didn’t linger his gaze on any of them. His task was to get to the dais. Not too quickly though, he didn’t want to look like he was running there, either out of anticipation or out of fear. But with every step, the wrongness of this moment weighed heavier on him. By the time he reached the dais, his chest felt tighter than his shirt.

The two years he had spent impersonating Odin had disabused him of any notion that he could enjoy the day-to-day duties of a king. If not for his reluctance to leave the Tesseract unwatched, he would have abandoned that charade. But back then Loki had at least been able to blame any mistakes he made or flights of fancy he insisted upon on Odin’s advancing years, as well as the grief of having lost both a wife and a son. Loki wouldn’t have any such safety buffer now. He would rule in his own name. Every mistake made would be his and his alone.

‘Here I am, father,’ Loki muttered under his breath. ‘For a change, your dutiful son.’

He halted at the base of the dais and peered up. His mother and father waited at either side of the throne, while the high-ranking officials of the realm had spread out on the stairs. Many were new faces. More than half of the king’s council had been replaced and Thor had ordered a great number of other appointments over the past year. The Warriors Three were there too. Thor had given them some official positions; Loki had forgotten what those entailed.

Odin took a few steps forward. Loki sank to one knee and the gathered throng behind him fell silent.

‘Loki Odinson,’ his father began. ‘Born among the frost-bitten forests of Jotunheim…’

He couldn’t bear listening to the speech. Although he consciously knew that his father had to have a point to make and had the rhetorical skill few in Asgard could match, the best Loki could manage right now was not to visibly cringe. The people of Asgard had just lost their beloved young king, they didn’t need to be reminded that his replacement was an impostor and the blood-son of their enemy.

‘Loki Odinson,’ his father said sharply. Loki had a feeling Odin had a sharp enough eye to notice his youngest hadn’t been listening to his oratory. Like a chastised schoolboy, Loki jerked and stared up at his father with widened eyes. ‘No one loved your brother more dearly than you and you walk this day bearing the burden of immeasurable grief, but you too were born a prince and raised to be king. Are you ready then to take up the mantle of kingship?’
‘King Thor named me his successor,’ Loki replied softly, too softly for many in the crowd to hear. But he was speaking less for their benefit than to console himself. ‘To reject his will, would be to spit upon the bond of brotherhood we shared since our earliest days.’

Odin nodded, the very picture of composure for the crowd, but Loki was close enough to notice his hand tighten around Gungnir’s shaft ‘Then, as king, do you swear to guard the Nine Realms?’

‘I swear,’ Loki said.

‘Do you swear to preserve the peace?’

‘I swear.’

‘Do you swear to cast aside all selfish ambition and to pledge yourself only to the good of the realm?’

Loki clenched his eyes shut as he offered his final response. ‘I swear.’

‘Then, on this day,’ his father went on, his voice gaining new volume. ‘I, Odin Borson, proclaim you king of Asgard!’

The crowd broke out into applause and a few high-pitched hollers rose above the general cacophony. Loki rose up and squaring his shoulders, turned to face them. He waited for the noise to fade, all the while his eyes darted from one spot in the crowd to another, trying to get the truth of the sentiment. He was here because it was his duty to be here, how many of them were here because when a new king took his oaths, he was supposed to have a crowd at his back? How many were actually glad to bear witness to this ceremony?

He couldn’t take it anymore. Letting them settle on their own, Loki climbed the stairs up to the dais, to the comforting presence of his family. His father smiled warmly, which Loki appreciated although he wasn’t comforted by the gesture whatsoever. That sense of appreciation faded when Odin offered up Gungnir for him to take.

It’s already too late. There’s no unsaying those oaths.

Loki lifted the great spear out of his father’s hands; the weapon had never felt more cumbersome than in this moment.

‘You have already made us proud, my boy — me, your mother and your brother,’ his father said, his voice low so no one apart from Loki and Frigga could hear him. ‘And you will only make us prouder yet. Now, this is done. Take what is yours.’

‘Thank you, father,’ Loki replied reflexively.

He sucked in a breath and walked the three steps over to the throne. As he shifted the weighty material of his ceremonial cloak aside and positioned himself into his seat, all the previous times he had occupied this same seat ricocheted through his mind: his brief regency, the two years he had worn his father’s face, his three days as king after Thor’s punishment and that time, centuries ago, when he had first sat up here.

Back then, Thor and Loki had snuck out late at night in search of jam tarts leftover from the evening’s feast, which the brothers had been too young to attend. On the way back from the kitchen, they had gotten side-tracked and ended up in the Great Hall. Loki couldn’t remember now who idea it had been to climb onto the throne. He remembered well, however, that after the excitement of examining the elaborate back-panels and arm-rests, the late hour caught up to them. Yawning, the
two of them ended up seated comfortably side-by-side in the great seat and feasted.

*Father wasn’t so pleased to find crumbs and smears of jam all over his throne the next morning.*

Loki bit down on his lip to stop himself from chuckling, but when he raised his head and was once more confronted with the crowd gathered for the coronation, all mirth in him fled anyway. There was no exhilaration here, no excitement. Was it because their grief was still too near? Or was it him they objected to? Tyr and Agnar hadn’t been alone in believing Loki’s rule was an affront to every true Asgardian.

It wasn’t him they should be concerned about, of course. The Conversion approached and with it, the Dark Elves. Hela too wouldn’t remain bound forever. In time, other threats would emerge and it would be Loki’s duty to tackle them all.

‘If they despise me, then so be it,’ he told himself. ‘At least, this time around, they still live.’

*And as long as I'm around, that’s not going to change.*

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**Chapter End Notes**

So, this is where we will be leaving Loki. Thank you everyone for sticking through to the end of this story. A writer couldn’t ask for a friendlier or more supportive group of readers.

I have previously mentioned in the comment section that I’ve been contemplating a sequel. After further deliberation, I’ve decided that this story will remain a stand-alone. There are a bunch of possibilities, but none of them come together to form a cohesive story-line. Moreover, I do have three non-fanfiction projects on the to-do list.

That doesn’t mean, however, that I’m abandoning fanfiction. I expect I’ll be back with some short-form stories once Endgame is out. In the meantime, if you haven’t checked them out already, you can find my other recent publications on my profile: the last set of the deleted scenes for Above All Shadows ([https://archiveofourown.org/works/17656361/chapters/41638775](https://archiveofourown.org/works/17656361/chapters/41638775)) and Another Sleepless Night ([https://archiveofourown.org/works/18428843](https://archiveofourown.org/works/18428843)), which is a one-shot focusing on Odin during Loki’s imprisonment in Thor: the Dark World.

Lastly, I’d love to hear your final thoughts on the story. What did you think of the ending? Which were your favourite and least favourite parts overall? Any guesses on what Thor was trying to tell Loki at the end? Was there something you wish Loki had done differently?

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://archiveofourown.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!