| Rating: | General Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | No Archive Warnings Apply |
| Category: | Gen |
| Fandom: | Thor (Movies), The Avengers (Marvel Movies) |
| Relationship: | Loki & Thor (Marvel), Thor & The Warriors Three, Sif & Thor (Marvel), Frigga | Freyja & Thor (Marvel), Odin & Thor (Marvel), Loki & Odin (Marvel), Frigga | Freyja & Loki & Odin & Thor (Marvel), Brunnhilde | Valkyrie/Loki (Marvel), Thor & Avengers Team, Loki & Avengers Team, Clint Barton & Natasha Romanov |
| Character: | Thor (Marvel), Loki (Marvel), Frigga (Marvel), Sif (Marvel), Heimdall (Marvel), Warriors Three (Marvel), Jane Foster (Marvel), Darcy Lewis, Erik Selvig, Phil Coulson, Clint Barton, Jasper Sitwell, Nick Fury, Alexander Pierce, Maria Hill, Tony Stark, Natasha Romanov (Marvel), James Rhodes, Bruce Banner, Thaddeus Ross, Emil Blonsky, Betty Ross, Brunnhilde | Valkyrie (Marvel), En Dwi Gast | Grandmaster, Ebony Maw, Cull Obsidian, Topaz (Marvel) |

If I Could Start Again

by Taaroko

Summary

Stormbreaker strikes Thanos a couple inches to the left of where it does in canon, with much more satisfying results. However, revenge alone won't fill the voids left behind by all that Thor has lost. The Time Stone might be able to help with that.

Infinity War Thor is thrown back into his younger body on the night of the botched coronation. He's going to be doing things a lot differently this time.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Thor hurled Stormbreaker towards Thanos. It cut through the power of all the stones and struck just where Thor had intended: right at the left shoulder. He landed behind it and bared his teeth in a mirthless grin. This was not a joyous victory, but damn if it was not a satisfying one. The arm hung useless and Thanos’s eyes were wide with pain and disbelief. “I told you you would die for that,” said Thor. He pushed the axe even deeper until it severed the arm completely.

“You’ve doomed us all,” Thanos gasped. “I would have saved the universe.”

“You call it salvation, slaughtering half of my people when they were already but a fraction of Asgard’s numbers from mere weeks ago? Wiping out the dwarves and leaving only their king behind to suffer?” said Thor. “You think yourself a just god, capable of making the hard choices, but there is nothing in you but cruelty. My brother was right. You will never be a god.”

Thanos tried to attack with his remaining hand, but with a mighty roar, Thor swung Stormbreaker again, this time for the neck. There was another spray of violet blood, followed by two more thumps. The Titan had fallen.

All around Thor, the battle was coming to an end. The gauntlet lay on the grass at his feet, still on Thanos’s severed arm. The green gem in the thumb setting faced upward. Time.

How little time it had taken for Thor to lose everything. His world. His friends. All but a pitiful remnant of his people. His entire family. It seemed incredible that he had cared so much about losing his hair and his hammer so recently. Neither mattered to him at all now, and what was losing an eye compared to nearly everyone he had ever loved?

He had stopped Thanos. He had gotten his revenge. What was left for him now but to go back to the refugees who’d fled with the Valkyrie? Surely there was nothing else he could do. And yet...

Thor wasn’t really thinking. Someone was calling his name—Rogers, perhaps. People were realizing Thanos had fallen. Thor barely heard them. He used the point of Stormbreaker’s purple-stained blade to pry the Time Stone free of the gauntlet, then bent down and picked it up.

“Thor, what are you doing?” It was the rabbit. “You shouldn’t be holding one of those things in your bare hand.”

Thor ignored him. He clenched his fist around Time hard enough to drive it into his flesh. Burning green light erupted from between his fingers, growing steadily brighter. He could suddenly see his entire life stretching out behind him. All those centuries of taking everything he had for granted. He saw the future stretching out ahead of him too, in all its possibilities. Many of them showed cause for hope, but none showed the faces he longed to see again.

Dimly, he could hear voices shouting at him to let the Stone go, but he would not. He clung to it even tighter, though the pain was building. He turned his gaze to the past and yelled as he felt himself unraveling.

X

Thor felt a sensation not unlike missing a step when going down stairs. He was no longer on the
battlefield on Earth, being consumed by green fire; instead, he found he was sitting on the steps in one of the feast halls in the palace. There was an overturned table, with food, plates, and cutlery strewn all across the floor. “What?” he breathed.

Soft footsteps came from behind, and when he turned and saw whose they were, he felt like he’d been struck in the chest. Loki. Very much alive, though his hair was rather shorter than he was accustomed to of late. “Brother?” he said, getting to his feet. “Is this Valhalla?”

Loki stared at him in confusion. “Valhalla? We are in Asgard. Why would you—”

He didn’t get the chance to finish his question, because Thor had lifted him off his feet in a crushing hug. “Thor! What are you doing?” Thor only hugged him tighter. His little brother was really here, solid and warm and breathing—well, perhaps he was holding on too tight for that last one, but he was alive.

And that wasn’t all. “What’s this?!” Four people walked into the room, three of whom Thor had thought he would never see again. The tears that had begun building up the moment he saw Loki now flowed freely from his eyes—both of which he now realized felt like his own.

He was dimly aware of Loki managing to push him off. “If not Valhalla, then surely this is a dream,” he said.

“My coronation?” Thor repeated, and then he realized. He remembered flipping that table in his wrath. He remembered Loki coming around the pillar to sit with him, and then Sif and the Warriors Three entering. Right before they went to Jotunheim.

Right before it all went wrong.

_Time_. The Time Stone had sent him back. None of it had happened yet. And now, none of it had to.

An incredulous laugh burst its way out of him, and he dashed over to his friends, unable to contain his happiness at seeing them again. He hugged Fandral, Hogun, and Volstagg (causing the latter to drop his plate), and even Sif, for though she was not dead in his time, it had been years since he’d last seen her. She was the only one whose startlement didn’t prevent her from hugging him back.

“Well,” said Fandral. “You’re certainly taking this setback better than we anticipated.”

“Yes,” said Volstagg, determinedly putting together another platter of food. “It hardly seems the moment for such an outpouring of affection, not that I’m complaining.”

Thor paid no attention. He rounded on Loki. “Where are Mother and Father? I must see them.” He ran a hand through his hair—which was no longer short. “And Heimdall will be in the Observatory.” On impulse, he stuck out his right hand. He could already feel the familiar response. “It’s all still here.” Mjolnir flew into his hand, and he laughed again through his tears, tossing it up and catching it. It felt oddly small now, but so wonderfully familiar.

“Thor,” said Sif, touching his arm. “Why do you speak as though...I don’t know...as though you’ve been gone for years?”

“Because I have,” said Thor. “The Norns have given me a second chance, and I intend to make the most of it.”

“What are you talking about?” said Loki. He had come around to stand beside the others. All five of
them stood before him, exchanging bewildered and concerned looks.

“I don’t know that you’d believe me if I told you. I’m still not sure I believe it myself.” He couldn’t help staring around at absolutely everything. How had he never noticed how beautiful it all was? Home.

“You must let us decide that for ourselves,” said Hogun.

The smile slid from his face as the weight of everything he’d lived through returned to the forefront of his mind. “My friends,” he said, voice full of emotion, one hand on Loki’s neck, the other on Fandral’s shoulder. “I am not the callow fool who thought to sit upon Hlidskjalf today. I am the Thor of a most terrible future. In a mere handful of years since I first lived through this day, I have watched nearly all that I hold dear taken from me while I was unable to stop it.” His grips on them tightened. “I have seen Ragnarok, and worse.” Their alarm greatly increased at this. Ragnarok was the worst fear of every Asgardian. “But on my life, I will not let it happen this time.”

After that extraordinary pronouncement, Thor strode from the hall, leaving all of them dumbstruck in his wake.

“Can it be true?” said Sif faintly.

“You think he was lying?” said Fandral.

“Thor hasn’t a single dishonest bone in his body,” said Volstagg thickly around a bite of cheese. “As incredible as his claims were, he sounded perfectly sincere. I shudder to think what he has experienced. Worse than Ragnarok?”

“I don’t think he was lying,” said Sif. “But how can such a thing be possible?”

“You know more of magic than any other in Asgard, Loki,” said Hogun. “What say you?”

“I have never heard of magic that can alter time,” said Loki. “But that does not mean it’s impossible. However, it is far more likely this is simply an imposter. What better way to engineer Ragnarok than by replacing or taking control of the Crown Prince?”

That possibility had plainly occurred to none of them, and they all looked horrified. “Then how can we be certain he is truly Thor and under no fell influence?” said Sif.

“Leave that to me,” said Loki, and he left to follow Thor—or whoever he was. This evening was not going at all how he had thought it would. His little scheme with the Frost Giants had successfully delayed the coronation, and right now, he should have been guiding Thor towards something incredibly reckless that would finally prove to Father how foolish it would be to give him a throne. After Thor flipped the table over in his rage, it should have been but the work of a moment to do just that. Instead, in the blink of an eye, Thor had become a completely different man, one who described the Thor Loki knew as a callow fool and acted as though everything around him was wondrous, no longer remotely bothered by the botched coronation.

He caught up to Thor two corridors later, halfway to the throne room. Thor spotted him. “Good,” he said, and he slowed his pace until Loki was at his side. “There is much for both of us to discuss with Father.”

Loki stared at Thor intently. He probed with his seidr for any signs of foreign magics about him. There was nothing but the familiar crackling elemental energy that always resided beneath Thor’s
skin. And yet he was still acting nothing like Thor, even in the simple movements of walking. His stride wasn’t a cocky strut; rather, there was a quiet self-assurance to his step, and he carried himself with genuine regality, despite the way he kept looking at everything around them like he found it both painful and beautiful. Loki had planned to test the waters carefully, but instead he opted for a more direct approach. “How can I be certain you are not some imposter in my brother’s form?” he asked.

Thor smiled, but it looked pained. “How would you have me convince you? Shall I recount stories of our childhood or our adventures together?” He asked it without a trace of uneasiness.

“That would be a start,” said Loki.

“Well, there was the time when we were children when I thought I had found the most magnificent snake, but then it turned into you, and you stabbed me.”

Loki had to bite back a laugh. Thor saw his reaction and chuckled. “I told that story recently, and you had the same response to it then. Why did you do that? I know it was only the first of many oh-so-humorous stabbings, but I never knew what prompted it.”

“I hardly remember,” said Loki. “I think we had been learning about some war where the victors won through subterfuge, and you declared that you would never fall for such tactics.”

“Ah, so you felt the need to prove me wrong,” said Thor.

“Naturally.”

“Was that satisfactory, then? Do you believe I am who I say?”

“It seems increasingly likely,” Loki admitted.

“Well, then there is something we must discuss before we see Father.” His tone had become rather stern all of a sudden, and he had stopped walking. The Thor Loki was used to never had the patience for something like sternness; when he disapproved of anything, he would either toss out an insult and then forget about it or else flash straight to anger. Even if this truly was Thor, merely older and wiser, Loki did not like being unable to predict his moods and actions.

“What would that be?”

Thor glanced around before saying in a low voice, “I know it was you who let the Frost Giants into the vault.”

Loki only barely succeeded in not reacting. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said.

Thor laughed. “If you’re going to lie, at least put your usual skill into it.” Loki glared at him, now seriously weighing the merits of stabbing him. If he was really Thor, it would be excellent revenge for that remark. If not, he would have stabbed an enemy of Asgard. “Don’t worry,” Thor went on. “I won’t tell Father. I know your intentions weren’t treasonous; you only wanted to delay my becoming king, and you were right. The Thor you know would have made a very poor king indeed.”

“You have a strange way of attempting to convince me you are Thor. He would sooner cut off his own hand than admit I am right about anything.”

“Experience has been a ruthless teacher. One of its lessons was that I would have done better to listen to my brother’s counsel more.”
Loki stared at him. He’d stopped hoping he would hear words like that from Thor a long time ago. If this was an imposter, he was either extremely stupid or extremely clever.

“The first time I lived this day, by the end of it, I had started a war with Jotunheim and Father banished me to Midgard as a mortal in punishment. It was a punishment I sorely needed, but it meant that I was not here for you when you needed me most.” There was something beyond regret in his voice. Grief.

Loki felt a great sense of foreboding. When he needed Thor most? He suddenly remembered the first odd thing Thor had said, and the foreboding increased tenfold. What had happened? Was it the war with Jotunheim? Had he fallen in battle? “Why did you think you were in Valhalla when you saw me?” he asked.

“Because…” Thor swallowed hard, and thunder rumbled outside. “Less than two days ago for me, you were murdered before my eyes, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.”

Loki wasn’t conscious of accepting that this was really Thor, but his hand found its way to his shoulder. Part of him had always believed his elder brother was indestructible and untouchable, the golden prince of Asgard renowned across Yggdrasil for his strength and valor, and the best Loki could ever hope for was to be the shadow trailing in his wake. He had never seen Thor hurting like this, and for all that he had schemed lately to keep him off the throne, the sight of him hunching inward as though he was nursing a gaping chest wound was painful—more so even than the idea of his own death. “I’m here, Brother,” he said. Somewhat awkwardly, as he hadn’t been the one to initiate this in a long time, he pulled Thor into a hug. “You have stopped it, don’t you see?”

Thor let out an incoherent, guttural sound and returned the hug, his shoulders shaking. “I swear to you, I will not fail you again.”

Chapter End Notes

I don't really have a problem with Thor aiming for the chest with Stormbreaker. Like someone said on Tumblr recently, he was quite a distance away with about 1.5 good eyes, wielding a brand new weapon for the first time, and up against all six Infinity Stones. He's pretty much going to aim for the center of mass and hope for the best at that point. And I also like the idea that, on a symbolic level, Thor is all about heart and not so much about head, so to him it would just make sense to aim for the heart because that's what matters most to him. But anyway, aiming for the center of mass means that the left shoulder is easily within the margin of error, so he can chop that arm right off. The initial impact would be enough to sever all the nerves controlling the arm, which means no finger-snapping for Thanos! Boom.

One thing I really wish had happened in IW was someone, anyone, calling Thanos out on his utterly crap ideology. Just so we could establish that he won't listen to reason and isn't actually operating on sound logic (this is why him being in love with Death and trying to impress her would've been a better motive for him to have). Thor isn't really the right character to engage Thanos in an ideological debate, but it was still pretty satisfying to write that one paragraph of it.

What I pictured happening to Thor when he held the Time stone is pretty much the same thing that happened to Red Skull when he held the Tesseract—except that he traveled
through time, not space.

One of the things that particularly intrigued me about this premise was that I do not think Thor would be the typical secretive time traveler, especially in a situation where no one has advised him to keep anything secret and he has no notion of there being any risk of paradox or negative consequences. He's so unabashedly straightforward that I think, if he could go back in time like this, it wouldn't even occur to him to try to act like his younger self enough to avoid suspicion. He'd just get on with doing what's needed to make sure things turn out better this time, and it's such a Thor thing to do that I'm not sure anyone would doubt he really is Thor for very long. But he'd definitely be really emotional about seeing everyone and everything he's lost again.
Chapter Notes

Thor eventually mastered himself enough to release his hold on Loki. It was something of a surprise that his brother had allowed the embrace to go on so long, let alone initiated it, but it had gone a long way towards removing any doubts he still had that he was truly back in his own past with a chance to prevent the many calamities he’d lived through. It also gave him hope that things were not so broken between them already that they could not be mended.

Loki was watching him with his brows furrowed slightly in concern. It was hard to believe how much younger he looked. Had it really only been eight years since this moment? He shifted under Thor’s gaze, fidgeting with his hands as he often did when anxious about something. “Well, shall we go to Father, then, or are you going to stand there all night?”

Thor frowned. “On second thought,” he said slowly, “it might be best to wait until after the Odinsleep. As I have no intention of starting a war today, there is no immediate threat.”

“You? Second thoughts?” said Loki with a raised eyebrow and a smirk. “You’ll have me doubting your identity again if you keep this up.”

Thor gave a rueful chuckle. “I’m sorry I cannot put you at ease by blundering my way forward like I always have. There is far too much at stake.” Including his relationship with his brother. He would not settle for merely preventing his death, and he would not make the same mistake he had apparently made all his life—that of assuming that everything was fine just because Loki voiced no discontentment. It had taken him quite a while after the destruction of the Bifrost to understand that his little brother had not simply gone mad over the course of three days. Happy people did not try to destroy entire planets just because they found out they were adopted.

“You don’t even want to show off your sudden maturity to Father so that he will change his mind about cancelling your coronation?”

“No, Mother can be regent as usual. One more time will make little difference. Though perhaps I should recommend you for the throne instead.”

Loki’s mouth fell open in a rather comical fashion, but he quickly snapped it shut again, his face reddening and his fists clenching. “If that was a jest, it was not an amusing one.”

“It wasn’t a jest!” said Thor, hastily stepping out of stabbing range, just in case. “You are far more skilled than I in every area of statecraft. Politics, diplomacy, economics, strategy, negotiation.”

“That is not the point. Even if I wanted the throne, Asgard wouldn’t have me!”

“Why not? You’re as much a prince as I am.”

Loki gave him a look that was equal parts incredulous and withering. “Perhaps you haven’t gained any wisdom from your dark future after all, if you think the people would be just as content with the silver-tongued trickster ruling over them as their golden warrior prince, especially right after they turned out over a hundred thousand strong just to see you begin your first turn as regent. They would think I had used my ‘cowardly sorcery’ to usurp your place.”

Thor suppressed a wince. Loki’s tone was one of disdain and indifference, but now that he knew to
listen for it, he could hear the hurt it masked—the longing for recognition and approval he kept buried deep. Words full of bitterness, rage, and despair echoed through Thor’s mind from another time. “I never wanted the throne! I only ever wanted to be your equal.” Well, he’d just have to show him that he was.

He laid his hand on Loki’s shoulder. He hoped he wasn’t making him uncomfortable with the overflow of affection, but after what he’d been through, he wasn’t likely to be able to contain himself any time soon. “Brother, any who fails to see your worth is a fool, and I am ashamed that there were times when I was such a fool, even though it’s been your sorcery saving my and our friends’ lives every other adventure we’ve ever gone on. I might be the king our people think they want, but you are much closer to being the sort of king they need.”

Loki scowled and shrugged Thor’s hand away, but the blush on his pale cheeks told him that he had taken his words to heart, no matter how begrudgingly. “Pretty words, particularly coming from you, but you’re still the firstborn, so don’t think you can simply dump your responsibilities onto me just because you’re finally aware of how unprepared you are to shoulder them.”

They began walking in the direction of the family wing of the palace. The first few minutes passed in comfortable silence. Thor continued to drink in every detail of their surroundings, torn between utter joy that it was still here and anguish over his memories of its destruction.

“Do you truly no longer desire the throne?” Loki asked eventually. Thor looked at him, and Loki raised his hands. “What? All our lives, it’s been ‘when I’m king’ this and ‘when I’m king’ that, and now you’re not even bothered that I brought Frost Giants to Asgard to sabotage your first regency, and you’d rather Mother or I sit on Hlidskjalf in your stead. Forgive me if I’m having trouble wrapping my head around that.”

Thor ran a hand through his hair, still not used to having it at this length again. “I’ll take it if I must, and I’ll do my best to rule our people well and protect them, but the thought gives me little joy.” He smiled, thinking back to his memories of this day. “I remember you asking me if I was nervous before the coronation.”

“Yes, and you laughed me off.”

“I did,” he agreed, “but I should have told you why. Part of it was arrogance and my lack of a true understanding of what it means to rule, but the small part of me wise enough to be nervous was still at ease because I knew I’d have you by my side to make up for the ways in which I might fall short. I may have done a poor job of showing it, but I have always been proud to have you as my brother and my friend.”

“Dear Brother, what has happened to turn you so soft?” Loki said it in a tone of mock disgust, and the pleased blush was back, but Thor felt a pang, remembering when he had hurled almost identical words at him in scathing disdain and rage.

“All those times I spoke of what I’d do as king, I pictured you there as my closest advisor, but I don’t think I’ve ever asked you if that’s what you wanted.”

Loki grimaced and shrugged. “What would be the point? How much freedom does either of us really have to determine what roles we’ll play? You’re for the throne and I’m for whatever advantageous political marriage Mother and Father can arrange.”

“I suppose,” said Thor. “But I can at least see to it you aren’t shipped off to Alfheim or Vanaheim or whatever realm it is to live with your in-laws forever, if you’d rather stay on Asgard.”
Loki frowned at him in a way that reminded him of the elevator on Sakaar, which he took as a good sign. “Are you suggesting that whether or not you lobby to keep me here as your advisor would be up to me?”

“Of course,” said Thor. “I’d love to have you here always, but I wouldn’t force you to stay if it wasn’t what you wanted.”

Loki appeared too stunned by this to form a reply. So instead of waiting until the silence could get awkward, Thor changed the subject. “Hey, what do you say we go to Midgard in the morning?”

Loki’s brow furrowed in confusion and perhaps distaste. “Midgard? Why would you want to go there? Isn’t that where you said Father banished you the first time around? I’d have thought you’d never want to go back after that.”

“Of course I want to go back. I made many excellent friends there and we’ll be needing their help, and they ours, if we are to thwart many of the dangers the next few years will hold.”

Loki gave him a rather condescending stare. “The mortals are barely capable of making it to their own moon. What possible help could they be at thwarting dangers like Ragnarok?”

Thor grinned. “I suppose you’ll just have to find out when we get to Midgard, won’t you?”

Loki glared at him. Thor continued to smile brightly, and after a few seconds, Loki rolled his eyes and gave a protracted groan. “Oh, very well, I’ll go with you.”

“Wonderful!” said Thor, thumping Loki on the back hard enough to make him stagger. The prospect of introducing Loki to the Avengers as an ally had him feeling positively giddy. He was sure that Loki and Stark would get on famously, and Loki would be much more use to Jane and Erik in their work than he’d ever been.

The thought of Jane dampened his excitement somewhat as he entered his chambers. He wasn’t sure what he should do where she was concerned. Should he try to court her again? Avoiding the same pitfalls that drove them apart the first time around would not be the same as getting the jump on enemies he knew were coming. None of those factors had changed. His responsibilities to the nine realms would still keep him away from Earth more often than not. The periods of separation that had felt quite brief to him had been much harder for her. He simply hadn’t been free to prioritize her the way she deserved, and though he gladly would have brought her with him to any realm where she would be reasonably safe, she couldn’t leave the groundbreaking work she was doing behind. In the end, just before he left for Muspelheim, they’d come to the unhappy conclusion that it would be for the best if they went their separate ways.

Thor did not think it would be right to start something with Jane that would most likely have to end, but he also thought it was unfair that only he held the memories of their time together. Perhaps it would be easier to decide when he saw her.

Thor’s musings on everything he needed to do to make sure things turned out right this time were cut short by a soft knock on his door. “Thor? May I enter?”

His heart seemed to freeze in his chest, and he abruptly ceased his endless pacing. “Yes, Mother.”

The door opened, and Frigga walked in. The mere sight of her alive and whole made him feel like a mortal again, or perhaps like a child. He was powerless to do anything but stare. She was so beautiful.
“I’m so sorry the coronation didn’t go as you hoped, ástin mín.” She walked gracefully up to him and lifted a hand to his cheek. “Are you terribly disappointed?”

“No, I am well, Mother,” he said hoarsely, covering her hand with his own. He wanted to hold on and never let go. “I know that under the circumstances, it is best if you act as regent as you have always done before. The Jotnar are less likely to attempt another assault if an experienced ruler sits on Hlidskjalf.”

Her brows drew together and concern filled her eyes. “What is this pain and sorrow I see in you?” she asked.

“It is nothing,” he said. He would destroy Malekith and his Kursed beast before they could so much as lay eyes on her this time.

“It is not,” she replied firmly.

“It is nothing you need worry over,” he amended, catching her other hand too and giving both of them a reassuring squeeze. “I swear it. There is much I need to discuss with you and Father, but it would be better to wait until he wakes. I beg you not to trouble yourself.”

She did not look entirely satisfied by that, but she nodded and squeezed his hands back. “Very well. But what will you be doing while your father sleeps? I want to be sure you don’t harbor any wild notions of retribution against the Jotnar or something equally reckless.”

Thor smiled, but it was a little bitter. She certainly knew him well. “Nothing like that. I was actually thinking of going to Midgard tomorrow. Loki too.”

“Midgard?” she said, looking intrigued. “It’s certainly been a while since you last went there.”

He seized upon that for his excuse. “Exactly. Heimdall has said that the mortals have made great advancements since my last visit. I would like to see them for myself. Perhaps they are close to a point where we could start engaging them in trade and building an alliance. It would be good to begin laying the foundations for that, would it not?”

“You needn’t worry that I will object,” said Frigga, laughing. “It does seem an excellent idea. Perhaps you will still get something valuable out of this regency even if you aren’t on the throne yourself.”

He beamed at her, relieved. “Thank you, Mother.”

“Well then, I will leave you to get your rest before you go.” She stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek, and he pulled her to him in a tight hug. Some of the worry returned to her face when they drew apart, but she didn’t press it this time, and left the room.

X

Loki occupied himself with a book until he was sure Thor was asleep (the thunderous snores took far longer to start up than they usually did, but they were rather difficult to miss), then crept down the corridor and into his chambers. For the second time today, he was about to do something he probably shouldn’t, but his curiosity was too strong to ignore. He simply had to know more about this future Thor had lived and which had wrought such profound changes in him.

Thor was sprawled diagonally across his bed on his stomach, arms stuck out to either side, the covers all askew. Loki snorted. He was just as much of a bed-hog now as he had been when they were children sneaking into each other’s rooms because they weren’t used to being out of their shared
nursery yet. Loki had woken up on the floor on more than one occasion after going to his big
brother’s room for protection from the monsters in his nightmares.

He hesitated for a moment. Breaking into someone else’s mind was one of the darker applications of
seidr. It was supposed to be reserved for use against enemies, to expose their weaknesses or gain
valuable information. To do it to one’s sleeping brother without his knowledge was a serious breach
of trust. But surely the circumstances justified it? If everything truly had gone to Hel in the future
Thor had come back from, then he was going to need all the help he could get to save it, and how
could Loki help him if he didn’t know any details?

Resolve firming, he crouched beside the bed and pressed the heel of his hand to Thor’s forehead.

Chapter End Notes

Looks like I figured out more stuff I could do with this fic after all! I still can't promise
anything when it comes to overall length or number of chapters, but I guess I'll be
updating it when the inspiration strikes. "Interventionism" and "My Brother's Keeper"
will probably take priority because I'm getting to some fun stuff in the former and the
latter has really short chapters that are easy to crank out.

"Know your place" is one of the least pleasant lines Thor has in any of the movies, so I
liked the idea of using it as a chapter title in this fic, where Thor will be doing his best to
convey to Loki that his place is right at his side, not in his shadow.

Now that Thor has had a moment to process the reality of having a second chance, he's
getting more strategic, so he won't just infodump about the future, but he's definitely still
going to be a much more proactive time traveler than most.

"Ástin mín" is an Old Norse endearment like "my darling." Originally I just had Frigga
using the English version, but I thought something like this would be better if I could
find it, and I did! Yay!
There were advantages and disadvantages to using this spell on an unconscious person. The subject didn’t know it was happening—provided he didn’t wake up in the middle of it. Advantage. The subject’s obliviousness meant the intruder was more able to direct what he saw. Advantage. Dreams and fantasy wove together with the true memories, sometimes to the point where it became impossible to tell where fantasy ended and reality began. Disadvantage. The intruder’s own stray thoughts could veer things wildly off course. Disadvantage.

Whether the subject was asleep or awake, entering someone else’s mind was different every time, and it was not something determined by the intruder. Sometimes you became a bodiless observer. Sometimes you watched their memories like a play. Sometimes you could walk freely through the constructs of their psyche as though a visitor in their home, with different memories contained in the different rooms. Sometimes you watched their memories as if through their own eyes.

This time, it seemed to be closest to the third option. First, he found himself standing on the rainbow bridge not far from where the Observatory should have been, except that the great golden sphere was gone. The bridge came to a jagged end, and Father stood at the very edge, holding onto a large, booted foot. Loki peered over and saw that the foot belonged to Thor, who was clutching Gungnir. The Loki of Thor’s memory was holding onto the lower half of Gungnir by one hand. Loki watched himself cry out to Odin, but he couldn’t make out the words. Perhaps Thor had not properly heard them and so could not include them in his memories. The hand slipped farther towards the end of Gungnir’s shaft.

“No, Loki,” said Odin in quiet rebuke. Loki had no idea what this was about, but he watched a light go out in the eyes of the memory version of himself.

“Loki, no!” said Thor, his voice full of dread and pleading. It made no difference, and Loki watched himself deliberately release the end of Gungnir and fall into a swirling vortex below while Thor screamed.

Loki didn’t understand. Thor had said he was murdered, but this… Before he could attempt to make further sense of it, everything blurred and shifted, and now he was standing on a ridge of ash-black soil. The place felt lifeless, and it was lit by what looked like a black hole. Svartalfheim? What the Hel were they doing here? He spun around, wanting to get his bearings as quickly as possible. Thor and another version of Loki—both with rather longer hair than they currently had—were battling...no, it couldn’t be. Dark elves? But they were supposed to be extinct! A woman was standing near where the long-haired Loki was fighting four elves with daggers. She wore Asgardian garb but was rather more petite than most Aesir women and he didn’t recognize her at all. What was more, even if most of them weren’t fully-fledged warriors like Sif, no Aesir maiden who had seen more than six centuries would stand to the side, weaponless, while her princes did battle. Was she a mortal, then?

The long-haired Loki finished off the last of the four dark elves, then glanced over to where Thor, whose opponent looked more like a beast than an elf, was being pummeled into the black dirt. Loki watched his counterpart seize something off one of the elf corpses’ belts, along with one of their split-bladed swords, and sprint over to them. He plunged the sword through the beast’s back. This only seemed to anger it, for it turned and impaled Loki onto the portion of the blade that protruded from its chest. Thor screamed again while Loki gasped, though he also slipped the object he’d
grabbed onto the beast’s belt. It hurled him into the sand, where he convulsed around his wound. He mustered enough strength to sneer at the beast. “See you in Hel, monster.”

It realized what he had done and scrambled madly at its belt, but the device exploded, and the creature was sucked, rather gruesomely, into what appeared to be some kind of weaponized spatial anomaly, like a miniature black hole. Thor heaved himself to his feet and ran to Loki, pulling him into his arms.

The present-day Loki watched this, just as confused as he was by the first scene. Thor wasn’t the most eloquent with his words, but even he wouldn’t have described this as murder, surely. This was an honorable death in battle. The kind any Aesir aspired to—though Loki would have preferred his own to come a few millennia later. Soon, the Loki in Thor’s arms ceased to speak, and his eyes fell closed as an ashy texture spread over his skin. Thor roared in grief. The skies darkened in this dead realm’s equivalent of an oncoming storm, the loose black dirt swirling up everywhere. Within moments, it had obscured everything, and then the scene shifted again.

Now Loki was standing in the wreckage of a spaceship he had never seen before, the floor of which was littered with dead Aesir, as well as a few aliens of various species. An anguished cry that was already becoming far too familiar caused him to spin around, and he saw a large purple alien—a Titan?—pulling a lance out of Heimdall’s chest. What was Heimdall doing on a ship instead of standing at his post? Where had his armor gone, and when had his hair ever been that long?

“You’re going to die for that!” said Thor. Loki was even more startled by his appearance than Heimdall’s. His hair was shorn down to scarcely longer than an inch, there was a patch over his right eye, and the little he could see of him that wasn’t bound in strips of metal looked bruised and dirty. Another strip of metal flew to cover his mouth.

Loki had an extremely bad feeling about all of this. Only one Titan had ever been spoken of on Asgard. The Mad Titan. Father had waged war against him long ago, before the fall of the Valkyrior. But even with their help, it had been a long and bloody war, and Asgard’s victory had not been absolute. Thanos had been driven from Yggdrasil and sealed outside its borders, and the Tesseract, the prize he had failed to claim from Odin, had been hidden away on Midgard. But now, Loki watched as the Titan crushed the Tesseract in his hand and dropped the Space Stone into one of the settings of the golden gauntlet he wore, which looked to be of dwarven make. It already contained a purple stone, and there were four settings remaining.

Loki barely had time to process the horror of what this meant—worse than Ragnarok, indeed—when a version of himself strode into view, past the Titan’s henchmen. He wore leather armor unlike any from Asgard, though still in his usual colors of black and green. He made rather a business of pledging his loyalty to the Titan, but from where the present day Loki stood, he could see the dagger his counterpart conjured behind his back. So could Thor. Were they truly so pressed for options that one dagger was the best he could do? Apparently so, and it was woefully insufficient. The Titan caught his attack in a field of blue energy, then seized him by the throat with his gauntleted hand. He made eye contact with Thor, who strained at his bonds to no avail, and choked the life out of him.

The present day Loki sank to his knees, feeling like he might be sick. Murder. Yes. At last, the term applied. How much of this was accurate to the real events? How much was Thor’s subconscious making alterations?

Shift. They were back on the shattered Rainbow Bridge, but this time it was the one-eyed, short-haired Thor dangling over the edge. Instead of hanging there, holding onto Gungnir, he made a wild grab with his free hand and caught onto Loki before he could let go. “I have you, Brother!” he declared. “It will not be as it was before!”
A cold laugh made Loki jump and Thor awkwardly crane his neck around. A woman with a great horned headdress was standing behind Odin on the bridge. “No,” Odin whispered, but before he could do anything else, she had conjured a wicked-looking black blade in one hand and run him through. Thor and the present-day Loki both yelled, and Odin’s grip slackened. Thor and the dream Loki both fell into the vortex. The woman picked up Mjolnir, which was lying on the bridge, and the scene remained intact long enough for Loki to see the shadow of the her headdress grow until it cast all of Asgard into darkness.

Shift. Loki found himself running in Thor’s wake through the halls of the palace, running as fast as they could go. “Faster, faster! I can change it!” Thor was growling to himself. The hallway appeared to be lengthening before them. “No!” said Thor, and he pressed even faster. Loki was sure he was only keeping up because none of this was real. At last, Thor burst into the room at the end of the corridor—Mother’s private weaving room. He screamed. Loki ran around him and saw that the same creature that had run him through on Svartalfheim had just done the same thing to the Queen of Asgard.

Shift. Svartalfheim again, but now it was the Titan Thor fought. “Dread it,” he said, “run from it...destiny still arrives.”

“No!” Thor bellowed. Instead of Mjolnir, he fought with an axe wreathed in blue flame. “I’m going to change it! This time I’m going to kill you before you can ever lay a hand on him or anyone else!”

The Titan landed a punch to Thor’s chest, sending him flying back. At the same time, his other hand shot out behind him and closed around the throat of the Loki who had been creeping up on him with a dagger. “It will always end this way,” he said, crushing Loki’s throat while Thor watched. “We stand here on a planet your grandfather killed five thousand years ago, and you think you can prevent the consequences by going back a handful of years? Destiny is coming for you, grandson of Bor, son of Odin, brother of Hela. You and all that you love.”

Thor screamed. His one eye blazed white and lightning sparked off him in every direction, and he sent the axe spinning at the Titan. It thudded home in his chest, and he fell, but there was a dark elf waiting behind him, and the woman with the horned headdress was behind him, sitting astride a massive black wolf, her head thrown back in laughter. Behind her, a fire giant, who grew and grew until he obscured everything else. Thor looked around, and the barren ground was suddenly strewn with bodies besides Loki’s. Frigga. Odin. Heimdall. The Warriors Three. Sif. A dark-skinned Aesir woman in the armor of a Valkyrie. A man in a red and gold suit with a glowing light in the chest. A man in a red, white, and blue suit. A smaller man in nothing but tattered trousers, a greenish tinge fading from his skin. All three appeared to be mortals, and there were several other Midgardians mingled in with the dead Aesir as well.

Loki couldn’t bear any more of this, and Thor’s subconscious was plainly becoming less coherent anyway. He removed his hand from Thor’s forehead in reality, which abruptly severed the connection, flinging him back into his own head.

X

Thor woke very suddenly from a terrible nightmare of death and failure, and he found Loki standing over him, his face white as a sheet. But he barely had time to register his brother’s presence before Loki vanished from sight. A second later, the door flew open and slammed shut again.

It wasn’t hard to work out what had happened. Loki, presented with a mystery as intriguing as what the next eight years might hold that Thor wanted to prevent, had decided that he would take a look inside Thor’s mind rather than wait to be told. As a younger man, Thor would probably have been furious with his brother for that—assuming he had paid close enough attention to put the pieces
together in the first place. But now, Thor’s only priority was Loki’s well-being, so he leapt out of
bed and went in search of him.

Finding the God of Mischief when he didn’t want to be found was no easy task. Loki had already
cloaked himself, and no matter how hard Frigga had tried to teach him, Thor had never quite gotten
the hang of sensing illusion magic, let alone seeing through it. The day after her funeral had been a
rare exception, due more to Loki’s misery than Thor’s perceptiveness. So to find him now, he went
from one to the next of all the places Loki could usually be found, calling out for him. He got no
response in Loki’s chambers, the library, or any of the little nooks around the palace where he’d once
come across Loki reading. By the time he trudged out to Frigga’s garden, he was losing hope of
finding him before morning.

“Loki!” he said loudly, for the hundredth time. “Come out! I’m not angry with you, I only want to
talk.” He walked between beds of beautifully cultivated flowers and other plants from all across the
nine realms and beyond. “Much of what you saw is what I have lived, and it isn’t even the half of it,
but none of it is set in stone. I know we can change it!”

“Do you?” came a voice to his right. He turned and saw Loki materialize beside a tree from Alfheim
as he dropped the cloaking spell. “Do you really know that? What if it can’t be changed? You can’t
deny that you fear it.”

“I do fear it,” said Thor. “More than anything, I fear having to watch those I love suffer and die all
over again. But I won’t let that stop me from trying. I have the advantage over our enemies this time.
I know more than they do, and I know what they want and where they must go to obtain it. If I have
my way, Mother will never so much as lay eyes on a Dark Elf, Hela will never harm another soul,
and you will never be within Thanos’s clutches.”

“Then Hela does exist?” said Loki. Thor could understand why that particular point would be of
greater interest to him than Dark Elves or the Mad Titan.

“Yes,” said Thor. “It turns out I’m not the firstborn after all. We have a sister. She’s been imprisoned
in Niflheim for her crimes longer than we’ve been alive. Father wiped all knowledge of her from
Asgard, but she’s the one who slaughtered the Valkyrior when we were still in the nursery. When
she got free, she massacred most of our people. All the Einherjar. Fandral, Volstagg, and Hogun. In
the end, the only way we could stop her was by bringing about Ragnarok.”

A long silence followed this explanation.

“And here I was worried about you on the throne,” said Loki eventually, clearly attempting to lighten
his own misgivings with humor, though judging from his grimace, it hadn’t worked very well. “Is
she what you want to talk to Father about when he wakes?”

“Not the only thing, but yes.”

There was a pause in which Loki looked around at Frigga’s many carefully tended plants. “The Dark
Elves.”

“Not as extinct as we have always believed,” said Thor.

“What happened?”

“We had stumbled upon the Aether by mistake. Malekith and his army came for it, hoping to remake
Yggdrasil in the form they chose, at the cost of all other life in its branches. Mother died defending it.
That broke Father, I think, and then you were gravely wounded avenging her the very next day.
Mortally wounded, it appeared at the time.”

It was difficult to force the words out, and when he looked at Loki, he saw that his eyes were shining and his fists were clenched. “But you stopped Malekith.”

“I did. And this time we will do it before any of that can happen.”

Loki paused again, and Thor saw him picking at the skin of his palm with his fingernails. “Brother,” he said, far more hesitant than he usually sounded. “Did I really attempt to end my own life, or was that mere nightmare?”

Thor closed his eyes, resisting the urge to grab Loki in another hug. “That was real.”

“It looked like it was to happen not long from now.”

“Not long at all. Just three days.”

“Why?” Loki’s tone was one of incredulity mixed with hints of apprehension and contempt.

Thor looked at him. “I could tell you everything I know about that right now,” he said, “but I beg you not to ask it of me.”

Loki’s brow furrowed. “Is it truly so terrible?”

“It was to you, though I have never fully understood why.”

“And you think you can keep me safe by keeping me ignorant of it?” said Loki heatedly.

If Loki thought he could provoke Thor into speaking, he was mistaken. “No,” he said. “I think it all could have been avoided if you had been told long ago, but I am not the right person to tell you. You deserve to hear it from Father.” Loki looked away, not quite managing to conceal an air of sulkiness. “Can you wait until he wakes?” Thor pressed on. “I will speak to him when he does and ensure that you don’t have to wait a moment longer than that.”

Loki took a while to consider. He looked troubled, but after a few seconds, his expression smoothed into something lighter. “The curiosity may drive me mad,” he said with an exaggerated sigh of longsuffering, “so it’ll be up to you to keep me too busy to fret over it.”

“Then you still want to come with me to Midgard?”

He rolled his eyes. “I don’t know that I’ll ever want to go to Midgard, but I’m not letting you make a mess of this by trying to do it all by yourself.”

Thor smiled. “And I don’t have to worry about you using that spell on me again if I go back to sleep?”

At this, Loki looked slightly chagrined. “I shouldn’t have done that,” he said. “It was wrong of me.”


Loki scowled, and Thor hastily dodged an oncoming dagger, laughing.

Chapter End Notes
I'm back! I got stuck for a while trying to figure out how Loki was going to experience Thor's memories/nightmares. I tried to write it where Loki saw it all through Thor's perspective, but that didn't work, as much as I liked it when Loki realized Thor only had one eye. As soon as I let go of that idea, it all came pouring out, but then I got stuck again trying to figure out how they were going to react when Thor woke up. Loki fleeing and Thor having to go look for him was the last thing I needed to make the chapter work, and from there it was pretty easy to write the rest. So we have some angst and horror with Loki finding out a bit too much, but it could have been a lot worse. The reason Thor didn't have any nightmares about Loki being a villain is that he had already forgiven him and moved on by the time Thanos killed him. Likewise, Thor wouldn't dream about Loki being a Frost Giant because that doesn't matter to him at all. I should mention, though, before anyone comments that present-day Loki would've heard the lines "I'm not Asgardian" and "rightful King of Jotunheim," that even the dream scenes based mostly on memory are not 100% accurate. This is all subjective recall with additional inaccuracies because Thor is dreaming. That's why Loki couldn't hear what he was saying to Odin in the first one either.

I will most likely update "Interventionism" and "My Brother's Keeper" before I get back around to this one, but the boys are probably heading to Earth next.
The next morning, Thor and Loki broke their fast with Frigga, who informed them that Odin had slipped into the Odinsleep during the night. She watched Thor more closely than usual throughout the meal, but kissed them each on the cheek and wished them well on Midgard at the end of it. Loki noticed that Thor hugged her rather longer than he normally would, and couldn’t help imitating him at the thought of what the Dark Elves had done to her in Thor’s memories.

Halfway to the stables, they were intercepted by Sif, Fandral, Volstagg, and Hogun. “Well, Loki, what have you discovered?” said Fandral, while they all shot furtive glances at Thor.

“He is who he says he is,” said Loki. “And everything he said is true.”

“Then why have you not taken the throne?” said Sif to Thor. “We heard that the Allmother is regent once more.”

“There is much I must do, and I cannot do it from Hlidskjalf,” said Thor. “Asgard will be in the most capable hands possible, and I am trusting the four of you to ensure that Mother’s regency goes smoothly.”

“What do you mean?” said Volstagg. “Are you leaving? But you aren’t even wearing your armor!” He gestured at Thor’s leathers and Loki’s black and gold surcoat.

“Loki and I will have little need of armor. We are bound for Midgard. If we are to succeed in creating a better future, we must first reforge the alliances I built there the first time I lived these years.”

“Then surely your need is greater than Queen Frigga’s,” said Hogun.

“Yes,” said Sif. “We will come with you.” Her eagerness was reflected on Fandral’s and Volstagg’s faces as well.

“In time, I do hope to introduce you to my mortal friends,” said Thor, “but for now, I want you here to support Mother. We will return when Father wakes, so you will hardly have time to miss us.” He clapped an arm around Loki’s shoulders as he said it.

Loki, who had been bracing himself for the prospect of visiting the dullest of the nine realms with those four making fools of themselves the whole time, was surprised to hear Thor rebuff them. He couldn’t remember the last time he had declined an opportunity to have them about. The princes had been sent on occasional errands together by Odin or Frigga, of course, but it was a rare thing indeed for Thor to choose to leave Asgard with only his younger brother for company. Loki’s spirits lifted, and he berated himself silently for it. It would be foolish to become too used to this kind of treatment from Thor. Surely once they had dealt with the Dark Elves, Ragnarok, their wayward sister, and Thanos, this unusual surge of affection brought on by his grief from the aborted timeline would settle back to where it had been for the last few centuries.

Sif and the Warriors Three looked just as surprised as Loki felt. “Will we be waiting until you return to do something about the Jotnar who got into the Vault?” said Hogun.

“The Jotnar are not one of the dangers we need to worry about,” said Thor. “I would sooner have
them for allies than seek a fight with them now. The more help we have against what’s coming, the better.”

That might just have been the most shocking thing Thor had said since his initial declaration that he had traveled back in time. All five of them gaped at him. Loki was the first to find his voice. “You would trust those monsters to fight alongside us in battle?” he said. Nothing he had seen in Thor’s mind had indicated this particular change of heart, and he found it difficult to credit. “What of your ambition to hunt them down and slay them all?”

“You should not speak of them so,” said Thor. “I was a fool to do so.” He actually sounded pained, though Loki could not imagine why. “Asgard was the victor in a just war, but we are little better than bullies if we cannot treat a defeated foe with respect. The Jotnar should not be under our heel if they can be at our side.”

“Are you quite certain you’ve only come back a handful of years?” said Volstagg.

“You wouldn’t believe how much can change in a short amount of time,” said Thor. “Now, when you report to the throne room, do not speak of any of this to Mother. She does not know that I am from another time. I will tell her, but only after Father wakes.”

“Of course, Thor,” said Fandral. “We will follow your lead.”

“Thank you. Dearer friends I could not ask for.” He embraced each of them again, and then he and Loki continued on to the stables. Gladr and Lettfeti awaited them just inside, already saddled. They mounted and rode for the Rainbow Bridge.

“Have you thought about how you will approach your former friends?” said Loki once they had ridden out past the heart of the city.

“What do you mean?” said Thor. “I will tell them who I am and enlist their help, of course.” He sounded utterly unconcerned about it, which either meant the mortals in question were complete simpletons or that Thor had given the matter very little thought.

Loki resisted the impulse to run a hand over his face. “Then you intend to tell them, as an introduction, that not only are you a prince from another world, but also a time traveler with detailed knowledge of upcoming threats to their own? Has it occurred to you that it might be difficult to persuade them of your trustworthiness? Unlike me, Sif, and the Warriors Three, these mortals haven’t met you yet to know of your trustworthiness, and they likely have no concept of magic, other worlds, or time travel. At best, they will think you mad. At worst, dangerous.”

Judging from Thor’s expression, this had not occurred to him at all. But he did not wave off Loki’s concerns as if they were unworthy of consideration. “Then what should I do?” he asked, frowning.

Loki wasn’t used to being given an opportunity to elaborate, but he recovered quickly. “Perhaps you would do better to treat this as a diplomatic mission rather than some kind of reunion,” he suggested. “As princes of Asgard, we could approach them with the goal of forging ties between our two realms and giving them advance warning of coming threats, which we are naturally in a better position to know about than they are with their primitive technology. That would be a far easier story to sell, and it would achieve the same goal.”

“You are probably right, but that all sounds so formal,” Thor groaned, throwing his head back and looking petulant. “These were my friends!”

“Are you saying that befriending a group of mortals for the second time is too difficult a task for
“The problem is that the Avengers aren’t a group at all yet. Before Thanos sent his Chitauri army to invade, they didn’t have a reason to come together as a team. I don’t know that any of them have even met each other, apart from Romanoff and Barton. And the only reason Thanos took the risk of sending the Chitauri in the first place was that the Bifrost was destroyed and Asgard was unable to provide an army for Midgard’s defense. And a few of the Avengers will never even exist if that invasion doesn’t happen, because with it came the Mind Stone.”

Thor had slumped a little in his saddle and his brow had furrowed by the time he fell silent, as though the full weight of every factor he needed to account for as he sought to change time for the better had only just settled over him him. Loki reined his chestnut steed closer to her pure white cousin so that he could reach out to grip Thor’s shoulder. “Patience, Brother. You’ve said yourself that we have time. Just as Great-Grandfather Buri did not build Asgard in a day, we do not need to save Yggdrasil in a day either.”

Thor’s expression softened into a fond, faraway smile. “You cannot know how I have missed this. You and me, off on an adventure. In some ways, I have returned to a simpler time. It gives me hope.”

“Yes, and you’ve returned an enormous sap,” said Loki, cuffing Thor over the head.

Thor laughed and retaliated in kind, putting Loki in a brief headlock that left them both in danger of falling off their horses.

They reached the Observatory moments later. A broad smile stole over Thor’s face as he strode inside to greet the Gatekeeper. “Heimdall! I cannot tell you how good it is to see you.”

“Can you not?” said Heimdall, sparing one hand from Hofund’s hilt to return Thor’s hug. “My eyes have not deceived me, have they?”

“No,” said Thor.

“Then where on Midgard shall I send you?”

“Really?” said Loki. “No other questions for my time-traveling brother?”

“I have many questions, but questions have a way of answering themselves if I only wait and observe.”

“There are things beyond your sight that we must find,” said Thor.

“The Dark Elves,” said Heimdall.

“And Thanos.” At this, Heimdall’s impenetrable mask of calm actually flickered. “You could not see them before, but perhaps that is only because you didn’t know they were there to be seen.”

“I will look, my prince.”

“May the Allfathers guide your gaze,” said Thor.

X

They landed on the desert sand in a whirl of dust. It was roughly the same time of day on this part of Midgard as on Asgard, which meant it was about mid-morning.
“Now, where are these friends of—,” Loki began, but Thor cut him off with a hand to his chest. The dust still made it impossible to see, and Thor was listening hard. This wouldn’t necessarily happen the same way as before, but just in case… He heard a screech of metal and rubber, and he seized Loki by his surcoat and pulled him out of the way, just in time for a large vehicle to come swerving right across where they had been standing. It couldn’t have done much damage to either of them, but the truck would not have been so fortunate, and Thor had learned that such contraptions could be very costly to repair.

“What the Hel?!” said Loki indignantly. “Did they just try to attack us?”

“Not quite,” said Thor, unable to suppress his grin. At last, the dust began to settle, revealing the truck and its three very familiar occupants, all of whom were gaping at them through the windshield. He lifted a hand and waved at them, his grin widening.

“That woman,” said Loki sharply. “She was on Svartalfheim.”

“Indeed she was,” said Thor, his grin slipping a little as his stomach lurched.

Jane, Darcy, and Erik all climbed cautiously out of the truck.

“Sorry we almost hit you,” said Jane. Her eyes roved over them, taking in their distinctly non-Midgardian clothing. “We couldn’t see anything in that dust.”

“Uh…is there a LARP convention around here that we didn’t know about?” said Darcy. “Also, if hunks like this are LARPing these days, I’m gonna go trade my iPod for an elven princess costume right now.”

“Darcy, shut up!” Jane hissed. She ran a hand through her hair and flashed Thor and Loki an awkward smile. “Ignore her. Do you guys need a ride some...where?” She frowned. Like Erik, she seemed to have just noticed that there was no other vehicle in the vicinity, and she had also noticed the burn patterns on the ground between them. Her eyes went very wide and her mouth dropped open.

“If you’re wondering how we arrived here, perhaps you noticed the dramatic pillar of rainbow light that touched down on this spot a moment ago?” said Loki politely, though there was an undercurrent of glee in his voice. For all his moaning about how dull Midgard was, he had always enjoyed showing off in front of mortals.

“A-are you saying you were inside that event?” said Jane.

“Yes,” said Thor. “I am Thor Odinson, this is my brother Loki. We are the princes of Asgard, and we have come by Bifrost to forge an alliance with your realm.”

“That’s not possible,” said Erik faintly. Thor could tell that he wanted to be skeptical, but the compelling evidence of the Bifrost and the marks it had left on the ground were making that difficult for him.

“Wow, you guys don’t break character for anything,” said Darcy. “I can respect that.”

“I understand if you require proof,” said Thor. He turned to Loki. “Should you do the honors, or should I?”

“Allow me,” said Loki. “If you do it, you might break something.” And with a flourish of his hand, there were suddenly several simulacra of Loki standing shoulder-to-shoulder next to him. Darcy let out a yelp and two sparking coils of metal shot from the device in her hand and passed harmlessly
through one of them.

“...” Thor muttered, and Loki made the simulacra vanish. “Though if you require further demonstrations, we would be happy to oblige.”

Chapter End Notes

It actually took me a while to figure out what the heck to do with this chapter. I stalled out after writing a long scene a couple weeks ago, because nothing else seemed to fit with it. That scene ended up on the cutting room floor, but I might be able to repurpose it for a future chapter.

Thor and Loki’s horses are a couple of the named horses from Norse mythology. Gladr means "bright" and Lettfeti means "light-footed." They seemed like good names to go with the actual horses we saw them riding over the Rainbow Bridge in canon.

This was the first time I've written Jane, Darcy, or Selvig, and so far they're pretty fun to write. I wasn't sure I'd be able to do Darcy justice, but her lines practically wrote themselves, and I'm super happy with them.
“So if you guys are really from another planet, why did you show up in the middle of nowhere and not, like, Washington or New York or something?” said the one called Darcy, elbow hanging over the top of the front seat as she gaped at Loki and his brother, who were folded somewhat uncomfortably into the back. The vehicle seemed to be of rather flimsy construction—sturdy enough to suffice for mortals, but Loki was sure he could easily bend the metal with his fingers if he cared to try, and there had been several ominous sounds when they climbed in.

“The Bifrost connects with other realms at fixed locations,” said Thor. “Our options were limited. But now that we’re here, travel will not be difficult.”

“Are you sure you can’t stay a while?” said Jane, the woman Loki had seen in Thor’s memory of Svartalfheim, glancing at them through the little mirror above the vehicle’s front window. “You’re from another planet! There’s so much I’d like to ask you.”

“Artificial planetoid, technically,” said Loki.

“Artificial?” said Jane.

“Yes,” said Thor. “Our great-grandfather built it some twelve thousand years ago.”

“It isn’t spherical,” said Loki, “but it does have gravity, an atmosphere, and arable land sufficient to support the population.”

“Jane, the road!” said Erik, and Jane tore her astonished eyes away from them back to the meager dirt track, from which they had been veering substantially to the left. With a small yelp, she jerked the steering device clockwise and they were all tossed about a bit as they swerved back onto the path.

“If your great-grandfather was around twelve thousand years ago, how old does that make you two?” said Darcy, who seemed wholly unperturbed by Jane’s dubious ability to pilot the vehicle.

“Just a few years past a thousand,” said Thor. “We only came of age two centuries ago.”

The girl gave a low whistle.

“Wait, but how does that work?” said Jane. “Norse Mythology is way older than that, and you guys are kind of the central figures of it, but you’re saying you only reached adulthood in the last two hundred years?”

“Most of the Midgardian tales we appear in are a mixture of prophecy and fancy,” said Loki. “Very drunken fancy, I expect. For one thing, Sleipnir is older than I am.”

Thor snickered. Loki summoned a dagger and held it up threateningly. Thor raised his hands with an innocent grin. Deciding it might be a poor show of gratitude for the Midgardians’ hospitality if he got his brother’s blood all over their vehicle, Loki reluctantly let the dagger fall back into his dimensional pocket. For the time being.

“Why did you choose now to come to Earth?” said Erik. He had easily been the quietest of the group
thus far, and had spent most of the time since Loki’s demonstration of seidr casting him and Thor (but mostly him) suspicious looks.

“Because this realm is under Asgard’s protection,” said Thor. “And there are dangers approaching that we must all be ready for.”

“Dangers?” said Jane. “What do you mean?”

“Warlords from other worlds with armies that would destroy all life as we know it. They are enemies we once thought defeated, but we will not make that mistake again.” With a jolt, Loki realized that this was true, and not just for Thor, who was living this time over again. The Dark Elves, Surtur, Thanos, and presumably Hela had all fought Asgard before and lost, but they had not been defeated soundly enough. Had that been arrogance or misplaced mercy?

“And we’re supposed to take your word for it?” said Erik. “You show up here like figures from legend and tell us we need to work with you to defeat extraterrestrial enemies we’ve never heard of. How do we know you’re not the enemies and this isn’t some trick to take advantage of Earth?”

Loki expected Thor to take offense at the challenge to his honor, but it seemed he still hadn’t gotten used to this wiser, more world-weary version of his brother. He inclined his head at Erik. “We cannot expect you to give us your trust so easily, especially not when it concerns the fate of your world. There will be time before the threats grow imminent, and we intend to prove ourselves to you before then.”


Phil Coulson was taking a well-deserved break from his babysitting assignment, enjoying a cup of coffee and a plate of eggs, bacon, and hashbrowns. He’d get an alert if Stark broke house arrest, and the guy hadn’t left his basement workshop in over a day. He was just thinking of giving Audrey a call when his phone rang. He flipped it open and put it to his ear.

“Coulson.”

“I’ve got a new assignment for you.” It was Director Fury.

Well, Coulson certainly wasn’t going to complain. “What’s that?” he said, smiling at the waitress who had come over to refill his coffee.

“The civilian tip line just got a very strange call from Puente Antiguo, New Mexico.”

“Strange how? An 084?”

“Not exactly. A couple of astrophysicists who’ve been working out there for a while were out in the desert studying some kind of weather anomaly when two young men claiming to be the mythological Thor and Loki appeared, seemingly beamed down to Earth in a pillar of rainbow light.”

“Well that’s...different. I’m guessing you have a good reason to think it’s not a hoax.”

“The call came after we got reports of the weather anomaly, and so far at least two other witnesses can confirm the pillar of rainbow light. See what that’s about, will you? I’ll send you Barton and Sitwell. It might still be a hoax, but I’d like to be sure. Between Stark’s ego and the big green dude tearing up that university in West Virginia, I’d rather not have any more surprises this week.”

“What do you want to do about Stark?”
“Looks like he’s spent the morning buying everything he needs to make a particle accelerator and having it all shipped to his house. I’ve got a feeling that should keep him busy for a while.”

They had been on Midgard for a few hours now. The mortals had brought them to a strange, round, metal structure at the end of a street in a small settlement. Erik and Darcy had been attempting, with uncertain success, to contact government authorities, but Loki’s attention was increasingly drawn away from these efforts, for Jane had embarked on an endless series of questions about Asgard and life on other worlds that Thor was eagerly answering. However, Loki noticed that whenever Jane’s eyes weren’t on him, Thor’s expression would tighten as though he had a dagger between his ribs. After Jane asked five questions in a row about the Bifrost and how it worked, Thor produced a book from the small satchel he’d packed on Asgard and pressed it into her hands. “The complexities of the Bifrost are beyond my understanding, I’m afraid, but this book may provide some answers for you.”

Loki decided it was time to intervene. “A word, Brother?”

Thor looked around at him in mild surprise while Jane stared at the book as though it was a priceless treasure. “Of course,” he said, and he followed Loki to a dusty patch of ground behind the building. “What is it?”

Loki rounded on Thor, arms folded and eyes narrowed. “Why did you instruct Heimdall to set us down here? It will take hours for the mortals to summon authority figures, and even then we will not have a clear path to any of your Avenger friends. Are we only here so you can court Jane Foster again?”

Thor closed his eyes, his shoulders slumping. “Are my feelings that obvious?”

“Are they ever not?”

Thor chuckled, but it was a hollow sound. “I have not come here to court Jane, but I would ask your advice about her.”

“You would?”

“Yes, and I beg you not to mock me for it,” said Thor. Loki thought that might prove a difficult temptation to resist, because Thor rarely became embarrassed, and yet he was getting surly and his cheeks had turned pink.

“I won’t promise anything, but I’ll at least make an effort.”

“How considerate,” said Thor. He swallowed, gazing out at the featureless desert. “When Father banished me, Jane and her friends were the ones who gave me food and shelter until I regained my powers.”

“Oh?” said Loki slyly. “And how did you repay her?”

Thor shot him an indignant look. “You call this making an effort? Come on, Loki, I’m trying to confide in you!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” said Loki, holding up his hands and smoothing his expression to neutrality. “Please continue.”

“After the Bifrost was rebuilt and the Dark Elves defeated, I courted Jane for a few years. We cared for each other very deeply, but we both had responsibilities that intruded, and in time it became clear
that we were on separate paths.”

Loki was not in the least surprised to hear that such a courtship had ultimately failed. Mortal lives were so fleeting that it would be foolish to even entertain the idea in the first place, and their respective positions certainly did not help matters. “So what is it that you need my advice about?”

“I thought to hide what I felt, but if you could find me out so quickly, then perhaps others—perhaps Jane will as well. I don’t want to hurt her, but her work could be essential to our success in thwarting Malekith, and perhaps even Thanos. And learning of Asgard and the Bifrost enabled her to advance her people’s understanding of astrophysics much farther than she could have done otherwise. I wouldn’t deprive her of that knowledge just for my own comfort.”

“Which is why you brought a book about the Bifrost to give her.”

“It was her favorite book from Asgard.”

“But you don’t mean to court her again?”

Thor sighed. “The obstacles that drove us apart haven’t changed. If anything, my duties to Asgard and the other realms are even more pressing now than they were the first time. I do not know how long it will be until I am free to show her the devotion she deserves. Likely I never will be.” He looked rather miserable about it. Despite how ridiculous the situation was, Loki couldn’t help feeling a bit sorry for him.

“I think you have the right of it,” he said. “If you don’t see a way forward, then you shouldn’t court her.”

“It would be so much better if we could at least be on even footing,” said Thor. He ran a hand through his hair. “I wondered whether...whether you could share my memories of our time together with her.”

Loki recoiled, revolted. “I will do no such thing!” he exclaimed, making Thor wince. “The only way to transfer memories from your mind to hers would be by using myself as a conduit, and I have no interest in having images of my own brother’s fumbling attempts at courtship and love-making stuck in my head for the rest of my life. Besides, I’m sure she’s better off without memories of you ruining her for mortal men.”

“Then what am I to do?” said Thor, throwing up his hands in frustration. “We’ve already established that I’m hopeless at concealing my heart.”

“If you can’t keep your composure around her, then perhaps you should tell her everything and let her decide what to do with it.”

Thor grimaced.

Loki’s brow furrowed as he watched his brother. “I do not envy you the position into which you’ve been placed,” he said. “Are you terribly heartbroken over her?”

Thor gave another painfully forced chuckle and plastered a smile on his face. “Just enough to make this uncomfortable. Perhaps I should simply leave the rest of the talking to you.”

Loki patted Thor on the shoulder, at which the smile became more genuine.

“You did the same thing when you found out it was over between me and Jane in the other timeline too.”
Loki smirked. “Some things never change.”

By mid-afternoon, Coulson was pulling up to a bizarre round building whose original purpose he could not guess. Sitwell had briefed him on everything they knew about the situation on the drive from the airstrip. It was enough to be reasonably sure that Drs. Selvig and Foster, at least, believed Thor and Loki really were who they said they were, which was why Fury had sent two high-ranking agents to deal with this instead of a pair of trainees, and why Barton was now getting set up on a nearby roof.

A tall, middle-aged man emerged from the building as they climbed out of the car.

“Dr. Selvig?”

“I wasn’t sure anyone was going to come,” he said.

“You and your colleague didn’t strike us as the type to make up a story like this,” said Sitwell.

“Who are you?” said Selvig.

“Agents Coulson and Sitwell, from the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division,” said Coulson. He and Sitwell held up their badges.

Selvig nodded. “They’re in here.”

They followed Selvig inside, where two young women (Dr. Foster and her intern Darcy Lewis, according to Sitwell’s information) were sitting across a table from two young men who looked like they’d come straight from a Renaissance festival, one wearing polished leather armor and the other some kind of fancy cross between a full-length duster and a tunic. Definitely not how Coulson would have expected alien princes to look. His skepticism increased. Dr. Foster was having an animated discussion with the one who matched the description of “Loki” over a book that lay open on the table between them, but aside from the fact that “Thor” had biceps the size of his head, there didn’t seem to be anything unusual about either man.

The sound of the door closing made the four of them look around. On spotting Coulson, Thor first looked like he’d been kicked in the stomach and then like Christmas had come early. He leapt to his feet and opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, Loki elbowed him hard in the ribs and stepped in front of him. “Well met. Are you the government officials?” he said smoothly. He sounded English.

“This is Agent Coulson and Agent Sitwell,” said Selvig. “They’re from the Strategic Homeland…” He faltered, shooting a glance at Coulson.

“SHIELD,” said Coulson. “We’re here to investigate a very unusual report about princes from another world. Thor and Loki, I presume?”

“That is correct,” said Loki.

“Well met, Son of Coul,” said Thor, stepping forward extending a hand towards Coulson. Slightly bemused, Coulson reached out to shake hands, but Thor clasped his whole forearm and clapped him on the shoulder, his gaze intent.

“Uh, thanks?” said Coulson. It took a second or two before Thor let go. Coulson shared a mystified glance with Sitwell, who did not receive the same reception. Since this guy was either fully
committed to his act or the real deal, Coulson decided to play along. “Why don’t we talk about your goals for your visit to our planet? I’ve been told you’re interested in an alliance, which is always nice to hear.”

“Indeed we are,” said Thor.

“Earth’s technology and science have advanced to the point where diplomatic relations with Asgard could be mutually beneficial in the long term,” said Loki.

“Okay,” said Sitwell. “What about the short term?”

“There are powerful beings who seek to do harm to your world as well as ours,” said Thor. “If we are to defeat them, then the mightiest heroes of Earth and of Asgard will need to work together, and the sooner we begin, the better our advantage.”

Coulson raised his eyebrows. If this was some elaborate attempt to get an introduction to Iron Man, he had to give them points for creativity, but they could’ve just gone to the Stark Expo instead of wasting taxpayer money with the charade. “That all sounds great, but unless you fellas can back up your claims, I think we’re done here.”

Loki smirked at Thor. “Well, then. I believe it’s your turn, Brother.”

Thor grinned. “In that case,” he said, tossing an enormous hammer into the air and catching it again, “we should go outside.”

“Facebook is gonna love this,” said Darcy.

“Miss, be advised that if we do see anything worth recording, we’re going to have to confiscate your phone,” said Sitwell.

She slipped the device back into her pocket with a sullen expression, and they all followed Thor out the back.

“Barton?” Coulson muttered.

“Going on a fieldtrip, huh?” he said over the comms.

“Something like that.”

When Coulson and Sitwell made to keep up with Thor once they were all about twenty yards from the building, Loki caught them both across the chest. “I’d stand back if I were you.”

“Why?” said Sitwell. “What’s he going to do that he doesn’t want us seeing up close?”

Loki shrugged. “Do as you please, but remember that I warned you.”

Coulson noticed that Selvig, Foster, and Darcy all seemed very content to stay where they were. He decided to follow their example, and, reluctantly, Sitwell did the same. All eyes turned to Thor as he continued to move away from them. Coulson was about to ask Loki what they were supposed to be waiting for when the first rumble of thunder sounded. He stared up at the sky, and his mouth fell open. It was like watching a timelapse nature film, but in real life. Where there had been nothing but cloudless blue a few seconds ago, heavy storm clouds were now gathering, casting the whole desert into shadow.

He looked back at Thor, who had turned to face them all with his enormous grin, scarlet cape
blowing behind him in the rising wind. Coulson had to admit that it was an impressive sight. He barely had time to wonder if this was the whole demonstration when Thor raised the hammer high over his head. Lightning struck. Everyone but Loki belatedly threw their hands up either to cover their ears from the deafening thunderclap or to shield their eyes from the blinding flash.

“Hey Coulson?” said Barton. A high-pitched ringing sound made him a little hard to hear.

“Yeah?” said Coulson faintly.

“I think I’m a believer.”

“Yeah.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m not really interested in doing a whole lot with Jane, Selvig, and Darcy, but they are important enough to Thor and the canon plot that they needed to be in the story at least this much, and now that Thor and Loki have proven their alien prince credentials to Coulson, things can get moving. Conveniently, the events of the first Thor film overlap with a couple other Phase One movies, and I have finally figured out what I want to do about that. *rubs hands together* This should be fun.
Within hours of Thor’s thunderstorm demonstration, he and Loki had bid Jane, Darcy, and Erik farewell so they could be escorted across the country to SHIELD’s headquarters. It was a strange journey, to be confined in a Quinjet with his brother, a man his brother had murdered right in front of him, a man his brother had puppeteered, and one of the Hydra villains yet to be unmasked.

Loki would remain innocent and ignorant of those and all his other crimes in this timeline if Thor had anything to say about it, which meant that Agent Sitwell’s allegiance was the only real problem here. Thor had known merely a fraction of the treacherous SHIELD agents’ names, and he remembered even fewer, but he could not forget Sitwell, the lone Hydra operative he had met before Rogers exposed them and recruited the Avengers to take them down.

Barton was piloting the Quinjet and Coulson was alternating between making light conversation with Thor and Loki and with his colleagues. Sitwell didn’t often look at the princes, but he was clearly wary of them. Thor waited for a lull where Coulson was talking to Sitwell before leaning closer to Loki. “I must ask your advice again, Brother.”

All children of Asgard were taught two languages. The first was the common tongue, a High Vanir dialect from when Buri first founded Asgard as a military outpost of Vanahem. The second, which took on average a century to master—and the written form even longer—was Allspeak.

There was also a third language, developed alongside Allspeak but for the opposite purpose. It had no name and was taught only to royalty and high-ranking military officials. Where Allspeak used continuous spellwork to remove language barriers, the nameless tongue used spellwork to render the speaker’s words incomprehensible to any but the intended audience. Even a master of linguistics or someone fluent in Allspeak could spend the rest of their lives attempting to translate what they heard and get nowhere. It was as valuable a resource for maintaining the security of the realm as Allspeak was for diplomatic relations with others. Thor hadn’t often had occasion to use it before now.

Loki met his gaze with a raised eyebrow. “Why the secrecy? Do you not trust these men?”

“I would trust Coulson and Barton with my life.”

“Ah, then we do this for Sitwell’s benefit.”

“As well as any recording devices,” said Thor. “The SHIELD has been infested to its core with another organization called Hydra. They seek to sow enough fear and chaos across Midgard that good people will believe they must turn to them for protection. Much of the work I did as an Avenger was helping my Midgardian companions put Hydra’s operations to an end, but if those events follow their original course, they will not be discovered within SHIELD for at least two years.”

“So you’re wondering if you should move against them sooner.”

Thor nodded.

“As a rule, spies are a suspicious lot,” said Loki. As though to illustrate his point, Coulson’s and Sitwell’s spines had grown noticeably stiffer since they began speaking this way, though they had not paused their own conversation. “Why should the ones you trust believe you that the colleagues
they have worked with for years are untrustworthy? If you succeeded in defeating Hydra before, altering your approach could jeopardize that victory.”

Thor frowned. How many people would Hydra kill and how many deadly devices would they acquire in all that intervening time? He disliked the idea. Loki could obviously tell, for he offered, “However, if the changes we’re already making lead to trouble with these Hydra operatives, perhaps we could have Heimdall watch them and make a list of their names so that we can take action if we need to.”

“That is wise,” said Thor.

Loki smirked. “That’s what I’m here for.”

This got a laugh out of Thor, and he clapped Loki on the back. “Thank you for coming with me.”

“Enough of that,” said Loki, giving Thor a shove, which only widened Thor’s grin. He returned his attention back to the SHIELD agents, whose postures had lost much of their tension at the sight of these brotherly antics.

Thor and Loki received many a perplexed stare when they reached the Triskelion. The sight amused him, and he thought Loki was enjoying it too, by the dancing glint in his eye. They were taken to a large conference room where Director Fury was waiting, Maria Hill at his side, along with a shorter man Thor did not recognize. Thor was getting better at resisting the urge to shout a greeting whenever he saw someone he had known before, but he doubted he would ever become accustomed to being looked at with such wariness by former friends and allies. He was quickly gaining a new appreciation for what a valuable commodity trust was.

Barton, Coulson, and Sitwell all took seats at Fury’s end of the table, leaving the other end to Thor and Loki.

“So, the God of Thunder and the God of Mischief,” said Fury. “And here we all thought you were myths.”

“Looks like we were mythtaken,” said Coulson. Hill and Sitwell rolled their eyes, the shorter man’s jaw tightened, and Fury’s expression went even flatter, but Barton quietly fist-bumped Coulson under the table. Thor snorted and Loki allowed himself another smirk.

“Your myths are are woefully inaccurate,” said Loki as he and Thor sat down, “but yes, we are real.”

“Allow us to formally welcome you to Earth,” said the man sitting next to Fury. “I’m Alexander Pierce, Undersecretary to the World Security Council, and this is Director Fury of SHIELD and Deputy Director Hill.” Thor kept his expression neutral with difficulty. He certainly remembered Pierce’s name. Rogers had had much to say about the leader of Hydra. If he was here now, it boded ill for their negotiations.

Sure enough, the next half hour was very trying. While Fury took charge of the discussion, Hydra’s influence was clear. Thor could understand their desire to ensure that the two powerful alien princes and the world they came from were not a threat, but what Fury and Pierce proposed went far beyond reasonable caution. Did Fury realize that he was outlining a plan in which Thor and Loki could only prove their intentions were good by subjecting themselves to what bordered on experimentation by and servitude to SHIELD? Flickers of confusion and doubt from Barton, Coulson, and Hill at various points only proved that something was wrong.

“Will you agree to these terms?” Fury concluded.
Thor was trying to think of a diplomatic way to refuse when Loki leaned forward over the table, his eyes narrowed and his lip curled in a sneer. “We have come to warn you of enemies heading your way, and we have offered to help you prepare for them and defeat them. I fail to see how subjecting my brother and me to a battery of tests of our capabilities, running numerous scans on our persons, or collecting samples of our blood should be at all warranted. We are the Sons of Odin, Allfather of Asgard, Protector of the Nine Realms. Do not trifle with us. We are not oddities for you to study and we are not dogs you can put on a leash. You need the help we offer freely if you are to survive.”

Fury raised an eyebrow. “Is that a threat?”

“It’s a fact,” said Thor. “Would that our realms could treat together under better circumstances, but that will have to wait until we have weathered the coming storms.”

“Why’s an advanced civilization like Asgard interested in what happens to a little backwater planet like ours?” said Barton.

“Your world sits at the heart of the nine realms of Yggdrasil,” said Loki. “A kind of cosmic crossroads. It is true that your technology is rather primitive and there is currently little of value you could offer us in terms of trade, but we cannot allow Midgard to fall into the wrong hands.”

“Several conquering armies have coveted it in the past for its strategic position,” said Thor. “The Shi’ar, the Jotnar, the Kree.” At this last one, he was surprised to see Fury, Pierce, and Coulson exchange a brief, alarmed glance, but he went on as though he’d noticed nothing, “Asgard has fought all of them back.”

“If you’re so good at protecting us from afar, then why make contact at all?” said Hill.

“Not so long ago, you succeeded in taking your first steps beyond the boundary of this planet,” said Loki. “It may only be decades before you are capable of entering a field of play you have never dreamed of. Surely you would prefer not to stumble onto it blind?”

“Maybe not, but in my experience, the guys with the most power aren’t generally interested in helping the people at the bottom get power of their own,” said Fury. “They’re only interested in making sure the pecking order never changes.”

“You don’t understand,” said Thor. He had grown so frustrated that it came out more like a growl, and he had to press his hands flat to the table to stop himself clenching them into fists. The level of static electricity in the room was also rising, and he had to keep that under control too. Causing a thunderstorm just now would not be helpful. “Our fates are bound together. A slumbering army of Dokkalfar lurks in unknown space, awaiting their chance to tear down our universe and replace it with darkness. They do not have the weapon they need to accomplish this, but if they obtain it, Asgard will fall as surely as Earth. And the Dokkalfar are nothing to the Mad Titan, who, with his world-destroying legions, is after that same weapon as part of a set of six—one of which he already possesses—and if he unites them all, he will wipe out half of all sentient life with a single snap of his fingers. Earth cannot hope to defeat these enemies alone, and even Asgard may not prevail against them, for they are not our only concerns. It is not just that you need us to survive; we need each other.”

Perhaps he was only seeing what he wanted to see, but Thor thought Coulson and Hill, at least, looked somewhat convinced.

“Alright, how would you propose to prove Earth can count you as allies?” said Fury.

“Give us a mission,” said Thor. “Something real. We each have centuries of experience in battle, so
find us a battle where you would not risk your own warriors.”

“To be clear,” said Loki before any of the humans could answer, “Whatever this mission is, Asgard is not interested in becoming embroiled in squabbles between individual nations of Midgard. We will gladly do battle with any threat to civilians, but we will not be artillery for one government to brandish at another.”

There was a pause, and then Fury nodded. “We might be able to come up with a job for you.”

Pierce looked at him sharply. “Could we have the room for a few minutes?” he asked. Coulson, Barton, Hill, and Sitwell all stood up and headed for the door. Thor and Loki followed, though Thor thought he saw the briefest flash of gold out of the corner of his eye. None of the humans had noticed.

X

“You’re still in the room, aren’t you?” said Thor in the nameless tongue once they were all waiting outside in the corridor.

“Obviously,” said the projection Loki had sent with the others, while his real body remained cloaked from view inside the conference room.

“Well don’t get caught.”

“What do you take me for?”

Thor scowled. Loki grinned. What did Thor expect? That he was going to wait patiently outside while a pair of mortals discussed what to do with them? Particularly after the way Thor had reacted when the shorter one introduced himself, and after what they’d already said straight to their faces?

Within the room, Alexander Pierce seemed to be forcing himself to remain calm. It was a moment before he spoke. “What are you doing, Nick?” he said. “Are you really just going to capitulate to the demands of a couple of aliens we know nothing about?”

“I’m not sure I’d call them ‘demands.’ It seems like a pretty reasonable request that we don’t treat royalty from a powerful world that might be friendly like lab rats.”

Pierce narrowed his eyes. “You were never going to insist on the tests in the first place, were you?”

“No. I just wanted to see how they’d react to something that outrageous. You saw how desperate Thor was. That was a man who’s afraid he might lose everything he loves, and he thinks working with Earth is his best shot. I don’t think they’re lying about what’s coming.” Loki raised invisible eyebrows, impressed. Fury was a perceptive man.

“And what if they turn out to be the threat?” said Pierce. “Or if they do help Earth defeat these alien warlords, only to turn around and conquer it as a prize? How are we supposed to fight back if we don’t even know what they are or what they’re capable of?”

“If we treat them like enemies when they’re offering an alliance, then we won’t be giving them any choice but to be our enemies.”

“So you want to just throw a couple of powerful unknowns into an already volatile situation and trust that their goals will align with ours?”

“Not really, but thanks to General Ross, I’ve got at least one powder keg about to go off, and the
Council tied my hands. I don’t have the funding to send in any kind of response team if Ross pokes that large, green bear again, but now there might be another option.”

“You think Thor and Loki could bring Banner in?”

“Something like that. They want a job defending civilians against a situation we wouldn’t risk our own men on? It seems like the perfect fit.”

Pierce exhaled through his nose. “If this goes sideways…”

“Then I will take full responsibility.”

Chapter End Notes

I was expecting this to be another building block chapter, where nothing particularly exciting happens but the stuff it covers is too important to moving the story forward for me to skip, but writing a Hydra-compromised SHIELD that doesn’t know it’s Hydra-compromised turned out to be way more tense and interesting than I thought. I really loved writing Nick Fury, and Pierce makes a fascinating foil for him.

I don’t think the Aesir have an encrypted anti-Allspeak language for talking about secrets in the comics, but they totally should. If magic can work as an auto-translate system, it should be able to do the opposite, and something like that would be ridiculously useful for a state that spent so many millennia engaged in conquering worlds.

Brownie points to whoever spots the Buffy reference. I couldn't resist.
After Fury and Pierce’s (as far as they knew) private meeting, Thor and Loki were supplied with SHIELD level 3 security lanyards to wear around their necks, which gave them access to the mess hall, briefing rooms, and lodgings. Coulson was assigned to be their attaché for the duration of their visit to Earth, meaning that it was his job to explain their assignment to them and accompany them wherever they went.

They ate a fairly tasteless meal with him in the mess hall—Thor thinking wistfully of drinking with Erik Selvig and helping Jane cook breakfast as he ate an assortment of limp steamed vegetables, noodles in cheese sauce, and some kind of breaded meat that seemed unlikely to have come from an actual animal—before he showed them to their quarters. From ceiling to floor, everything in their adjoining rooms was a sterile white, but they were serviceable enough. Royalty Thor and Loki might be, but in their adventures they had spent many a night sleeping on nothing but bare ground (and it had only been days for Thor since he’d been crammed in a psychedelic party ship with a few thousand Aesir for several weeks); they were used to less than ideal sleeping arrangements.

In the morning, after a breakfast only slightly less bland than supper had been, Coulson gave them a limited tour of the Triskelion, introduced them to a few more SHIELD agents, and brought them to the briefing room. Thor had forgotten how rudimentary Midgardian technology was at this point. None of the screens could be manipulated by touch and all of the images were two-dimensional. Stark would be changing that soon.

“General Ross has been hunting this man for years based on the claim that he stole military secrets,” said Coulson. Pictures of Banner and Ross occupied the whole of the main screen.

“Did he?” said Loki, his expression shrewd.

“Not in the traditional sense,” said Coulson. “We’re not talking about files or prototype defensive or offensive technology. These ‘military secrets’ are locked in Dr. Banner’s own physiology. He was working with Ross on military-sponsored medical research. Ross wasn’t honest about his goals, though, and if Dr. Banner had been fully informed, he probably wouldn’t have participated, let alone volunteered himself as the first human test subject.”

“What happened to him?” said Loki.

Coulson hesitated. “I’m guessing Norse culture borrowed a lot from you guys.”


“Do you have berserkers?”

“We do,” said Thor. Without seidr, he wasn’t sure how Midgard could truly have berserkers, but he didn’t challenge Coulson’s use of the word. Perhaps the concept had merely come from their garbled myths.

“Good,” said Coulson. “Then what I’m about to show you might not be that unfamiliar.” He touched a button on his device, and the screen began to play somewhat poor quality, silent footage of an average-sized man transforming into a green, muscular monstrosity and wrecking a laboratory.
“By the old man’s beard,” said Loki. He sounded at least slightly impressed. “He survived that transformation?”

“He did,” said Coulson. “And fortunately it wasn’t permanent. Unfortunately, it wasn’t the only time it happened. Dr. Banner realized that the military was more interested in duplicating this result for use in warfare than they were in curing him, and he’s been on the run ever since. He’s had a number of other incidents.” Coulson touched another button, which brought up a map scattered with a handful of red dots, each paired with numbers of casualties, wounded, and the amount of property damage done in those locations. “But all our information is that he’s done everything he can to prevent and minimize them. There’s no denying that he’s dangerous, but what Ross wants violates just about every ethical and human rights consideration there is.”

“And what does SHIELD want?” said Thor.

“To get Dr. Banner the help he needs, whether that means treatment or space. Either way, that starts with keeping him away from Ross.”

“I take it previous attempts to contain him have failed,” said Loki.

“Every one,” said Coulson. “And those tended to be where the most collateral damage happened. We’re hoping you guys can do better.”

“So our objectives would be to retrieve him in defiance of this general with minimal impact on people and property,” said Thor.

“And the less Ross is able to learn about SHIELD’s involvement, the better. The agency isn’t on the best of terms with him.”

The briefing continued for the remainder of the day, and even so, Thor could tell that SHIELD was keeping back a lot of information. Explanations of Banner’s situation, while thorough in covering his recent movements and what he was capable of, carefully omitted the details of how he’d gotten into it, with only vague references to the botched experiment. Files on General Ross and his soldiers were even thinner—they were essentially only given their names, ranks, and photographs, so they would be able to recognize them and avoid drawing their attention.

Thor was perfectly confident that he and Loki could accomplish this mission, regardless of what SHIELD chose to keep from them, but he wished his own memories would be more useful. He and Banner had never really discussed events from before they met. For the most part, Banner had seemed content to listen to the rest of the Avengers’ tales rather than contributing his own, and he had done the same as a Revenger. Thor felt another pang at the thought of starting their friendship over again after everything he’d been through with the Banner of his time.

X

The initial plan was that they would be sent out “in the field,” as Coulson put it, the following day, by which point SHIELD expected to have locked down Banner’s location. However, they had just eaten another uninspiring meal in the mess hall when Coulson received a call on the odd communications device he used. Within the first few seconds of it, his spine stiffened and some of the mildness in his expression hardened. When he closed the device a moment later, Loki was watching him expectantly, and Thor said “What news?”

“We just got a bead on Banner’s location, but it’s a bead Ross got over an hour ago.”

“Then speed must be of the essence,” said Loki.
“That it is. We’ll be leaving from the hangar in fifteen minutes.”

Precisely a quarter of an hour later, they were boarding the same aircraft from the previous day. Barton and Sitwell were there again, but the pilot was someone new. The mortals strapped in. Loki and Thor didn’t bother to follow suit.

“What can you tell us?” said Coulson as the pilot maneuvered the craft out of the hangar. He had to speak very loudly over the noise of its propulsion systems.

“We’ve piggybacked onto Ross’s comms,” said Barton. “They just raided the office of Dr. Samuel Sterns, alias Mr. Blue, and carried Banner out on a stretcher. We can’t be sure what happened yet, but Sterns’s lab is full of data and materials they want to requisition. The ranking officer on the scene is Major Kathleen Sparr, with Captain Emil Blonsky, UK Special Ops as her support.”

“I thought Blonsky was in critical condition,” said Coulson sharply.

“Apparently not,” said Sitwell.

“Isn’t Blonsky the one we watched Banner hurl into a tree in the video one of the young scholars recorded?” said Thor.

“Yep.”

“And he’s back at work?”

“Sounds like it.”

Loki glanced at Thor, but Thor only looked bewildered. Clearly he had no knowledge of this Blonsky beyond what Coulson had told them in the briefing room, and no idea why he should prove so much less breakable than the average mortal man. However, that wasn’t the most pressing piece of information at the moment. “If Ross already has Banner, then what can be done?” he asked. “Not that he would be much of an obstacle for us, but I’m assuming you don’t want us incapacitating him and his soldiers.”

“That would be a little less covert than we’d like this to go,” said Coulson. “Right now, the plan is to get close and wait for an opening. But we now have the secondary objective of destroying the contents of that lab.”

“We can’t be sure Ross hasn’t already taken some of it,” said Sitwell. “Until we are, a few things will need to go back to HQ with us. Fitzsimmons can get working on countermeasures to whatever Ross’s people do with it.”

“Right,” said Coulson. “We’ll see what’s there before we decide how much to send back to the lab.”

As Coulson handed out small devices meant to be placed in the ear for the purposes of communicating as a team, Loki had to admire the insidiousness of this Hydra organization. Sitwell had just gained access to dangerous materials but proposed it in such a way that he kept Ross as the villain and SHIELD on the defensive, and Coulson and Barton hadn’t so much as raised an eyebrow. Perhaps he and Thor could ensure that none of the contents of Sterns’s laboratory survived. Working with SHIELD and against Hydra without appearing to do so and while the former remained ignorant of the latter’s existence could prove very entertaining.

He turned to Thor and, using the nameless tongue, asked, “What more can you tell me of Banner before they drop us into this situation?”
“What do you mean? Coulson has told us more than I ever knew about him,” said Thor, frowning.

Loki shot him an impatient look. “He gave us dry data, which is useful for tracking and fighting him but not for winning his loyalty. You were his friend.”

The furrow between Thor’s eyebrows deepened. “Above anything, Banner mislikes being used,” he said slowly. “He appreciates those who respect him for his mind and don’t fear him for something he can’t help. The damage the Hulk has done weighs heavily upon him, so I do not recommend speaking of that in positive terms, no matter how impressive a warrior he may be. He’s one of the most brilliant mortals I’ve ever known, but only as Banner. As the Hulk, his intelligence is akin to that of a beast—barely capable of speech and consumed by rage. We will have to make it extremely plain that we are fighting with him, not against.”

“Even though if he makes an appearance, we will most likely be fighting him. How does that work?”

“We focus on protecting everything he might attack rather than directly attacking him. If we can get him somewhere clear of mortals, that can change. Gaining Banner’s trust is how we will eventually gain the Hulk’s.”

Loki nodded. “Alright. But what about the fight? He can’t be much of a challenge for us, can he?”

Thor grimaced.

“You cannot be serious,” said Loki incredulously.

“He has come...close to besting me in battle,” said Thor. “Do not underestimate his strength. Or his speed.”

“Alright,” said Loki. Thor’s insistence that the Midgardians would be useful in upcoming conflicts was beginning to make sense. He was about to ask Thor about the Hulk’s fighting techniques when there was a burst of sound from the speakers that were patched into Ross’s operation, followed by a panicked voice.

“The Hulk is in the street! I repeat, the Hulk is in the street!”

All five of them sat up straighter and glanced at each other in alarm.

“That’s impossible,” said Ross’s voice. “You get ahold of yourself, young man, you get it together!”

“121st Street, heading north on Broadway!” the soldier yelled.

“Damn it, give me eyes down there!”

“Yes sir!”

A video feed opened up on the screen behind the pilot, showing an enormous beige creature with grotesque muscles and a ridged spine wreaking havoc in a crowded street.

“What the Hel is that?” said Thor.

Loki stared at him. He didn’t know?

“Travis, what’s our ETA?” said Coulson, eyes fixed on the screen.

“Another seventeen minutes, sir!” said the pilot.
Coulson swore, and they watched the footage cut off midway through the bloodcurdling scream of
the man recording the scene. “Okay, new objective. Whatever that thing is, if it’s still standing when
we get there, we’ve got to take it down or get it clear of the city. We’ll have to worry about Banner
and the lab later.”

However, it wasn’t long before matters became even more complicated. Moments later, Sitwell held
his hand to his ear and looked at Coulson. “We’ve got another situation.”

“What is it?”

“A report from Agent Romanoff.” Thor reacted to this name the same as he had to Coulson, Fury,
Barton, and Hill. Another former friend, then. “It looks like Ivan Vanko’s alive. The prototype
Hammer Industries drones just went rogue in the middle of the Stark Expo, and so did Rhodes’s suit.
Their main target is Iron Man, but there are thousands of civilians in that park. Romanoff’s going
after Vanko. She’s requesting backup.”

“And I will provide it,” said Thor, getting to his feet. “Where is this Stark Expo?” Everyone stared at
him. “What?” he said. “You wanted to see what my brother and I can do? Watch closely.” He
summoned Mjolnir to his hand. “Tell me the way to the Expo, and open the back of this craft.”

“The Expo’s in Queens,” said Barton while Coulson and Sitwell continued to gape. “Northeast of
here. I’m guessing it’s pretty hard to miss right now.”

“Thor, wait!” said Loki, grabbing him by the arm. He used the nameless tongue. “You’re going to
leave me to face that creature you know nothing about alone?”

“Yes,” he said. “You will be more than a match for it.”

“How do you know that?” said Loki, irritated and feeling the first stirrings of panic. “This didn’t
happen the first time!”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Thor, grinning and clapping a hand to Loki’s neck. “I have faith in you,
Brother.”

“Sap!” said Loki, shoving Thor away. He was still annoyed, but the panic had been replaced by a
fiery determination. “Go, then!”

“I’m coming with you,” said Barton, unfastening his restraints as the tail end of the craft opened and
wind howled around them.

Coulson looked like he was about to object, but he didn’t get the chance.

“Alright,” said Thor.

“I’m not sure I’d recommend that,” said Loki.

Barton shrugged and snapped a pair of goggles in place over his eyes. “What’s Nat’s channel?”

“Six,” said Sitwell.

Barton tweaked something on his earpiece and Thor’s, handed Thor’s back to him, and set to work
rigging up some kind of cable harness so that he didn’t have to rely solely on the strength of his arms
to hold onto Thor.

“Give Romanoff my best,” said Coulson, having recovered his mild affect.
“Yes, sir,” said Barton with a grin, and then he and Thor had jumped into open air. Barton gave a whoop and Thor began to spin Mjolnir until it blurred. Within seconds, they had flown out of sight.

In the relative quiet that settled in after the doors closed, Loki found himself the object of three stares, including the pilot’s, who had turned around in his seat.

“So,” said Coulson. “Can you fly too?”

Chapter End Notes

I had to watch The Incredible Hulk one and a half times in preparation for writing this chapter and the next. (It’s my least favorite of all the MCU movies, so that wasn’t very fun, but this story is fun enough to make up for it.) Figuring out how to weave the endings of that and IM2 together in such a way that Thor and Loki would have to split up was really tricky, but it’s super handy that one happens in Harlem and the other in Queens.

Originally, I thought Clint was going to parachute after Thor, but logistically that would not work at all, because he’d land miles away from Thor’s destination. Luckily, he’s crazy enough to do it this way instead.

I’m so excited for the next chapter, you guys. It’s the reason I’ve been updating so quickly for the last few.
Deus et Machinae

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the time it took for the Quinjet to reach the location the soldier provided before his death, the conflict seemed to have come to an end. As they flew, they had watched disjointed footage and listened to scattered audio of the battle that had taken place between the large beige creature—who was apparently Captain Blonsky—and the Hulk not long after Thor and Barton’s departure.

Loki’s first glimpse of the scene was of Blonsky chained atop the cracked pavement in what appeared to be the ruins of a building and the Hulk bounding away, pursued by another flying craft.

“I guess we missed the action,” said Coulson.

“Not necessarily,” said Loki, eyes narrowed as he surveyed the circle of men closing in on the trussed up monster.

“What do you have in mind?” said Sitwell.

“Well, whether or not Banner escapes, it appears that Ross has a new specimen within easy grasp.” One Thor had no knowledge of, which meant he was not destined to become a friend of the Avengers.

“You think you can do something about that when they’re surrounding him?” said Coulson.

“Let me down and I’ll show you.”

Coulson signaled to Travis, who flew them low over an adjacent rooftop. Loki didn’t wait for him to land, but slammed the button Barton had used to open the back and leapt out while it was still a good thirty feet up. The density of his own body compared to the materials of mortal structures could do considerable damage after a fall from that height, but a simple spell created a temporary cushion under the balls of his feet, and he landed without a sound. The next spell cloaked him from sight, and he vaulted over the side of the roof and darted down several flights of metal steps to reach the ground. When he dropped the cloak, he emerged looking indistinguishable from Ross’s men, and he infiltrated their ranks without any of them noticing.

“Not bad,” said Coulson in his earpiece. “Is it the second prince’s job to be in charge of espionage?”

Loki couldn’t reply without the soldiers around him hearing, but he smirked. It was, of course, never difficult to impress mortals, but Coulson had observed him at work for all of a minute and already naïvely assumed his skills must give him great prestige on Asgard. He might be surprised to learn that they did rather the opposite, but still, Loki decided he liked the man. His humility and sincerity were rare for one of his profession. Perhaps that was why Fury had chosen him to be attaché.

“I’ve got an armored truck en route,” said Ross. “We’ll load Blonsky up and get him into containment.”

“You think we can keep this thing locked up, sir?” said one of the soldiers.

“No, soldier, I think we can rehabilitate him. And even if we can’t, he’s still a valuable resource.”
“I can’t believe you!” said the dark-haired woman standing near him, her lovely features contorted in anger. Loki recognized her from the briefing materials. The daughter of Ross. “After what he just did to this city and all those innocent people, you still want to do this to more soldiers? What’s it going to take for you to let this insanity go?”

“You think I sanctioned this?” Ross retorted, gesturing at the creature. “Blonsky was reckless. He didn’t follow protocol or wait until there was a safe way to do it. He did this to himself.”

“Blonsky was a cautionary tale! So was Bruce! Why aren’t you listening? You can’t keep doing this. It’ll end the same way every time, but there isn’t always going to be someone there to save you from yourself.”

“Someone escort Dr. Ross to a hospital,” said the general curtly. She glowered at him but allowed herself to be led away.

“I’ve heard enough,” said Coulson. “If you can get Blonsky out of the general’s clutches without anyone getting killed, do it.”

The creature appeared to be effectively restrained by the enormous chains, but he—no, one glance was enough to reveal that Blonsky was most certainly now an it—was not unconscious. Its eyes roved around the men aiming their weapons at it, looking less like it had been beaten than that it was biding its time. So despite its grotesque form, it still had some measure of intelligence. The idea that Ross could rehabilitate it was laughable.

Loki considered for a moment. He couldn’t simply kill it while it lay restrained. That would be too difficult to explain, and he suspected that even Coulson would not approve. But if it were to escape its restraints first…

He performed a combination of spells similar to the day before when Pierce asked everyone to give him and Fury a moment alone: he created a simulacrum to take his place while cloaking himself, and he slipped between the soldiers towards the creature and moved around to get a better look at the chains. Large they were, but they were only made of Midgardian steel. Loki summoned a dagger to his hand, and with a single motion, severed one of the links. The enormous hands immediately shifted under the chain. It could sense that they had weakened. Job done, Loki resumed his place, dispelled the simulacrum, and waited.

X

Barton had been right: with all the drones flying around it, the Stark Expo would have been difficult to miss. There was still a mile or so to go before they reached it, and the drones appeared to be swarming after two airborne figures. “Where shall I let you down?” Thor called over his shoulder.

“High rooftop, central location,” said Barton. “Once I’m in position, feel free to do your thing. Hey, Nat, I’m coming in with that backup for you.”

“Great,” said Romanoff’s voice. “Focus on the drones and clearing the park.”

“Who’s backup?” said Stark. “Are we talking more SHIELD agents or is this about that Avenger Initiative thing? Do we get the Hulk? Please tell me we get the Hulk.”

“Tony, focus!” said Rhodes.

“You still locked on?”

“Yeah.”
“Drop your socks and grab your Crocs; we’re about to get wet on this ride.”

“Wait, wait, wait!”

Thor watched as Iron Man and War Machine flew narrowly through a large hollow globe structure, against which six of the clumsier pursuing drones exploded. He pushed Mjolnir to go faster. Of his Earth friends, it had been the longest since he’d seen Stark—not that he’d had much time to interact with any of the others during the battle—and that was the first time someone other than him had mentioned Avengers. Perhaps by the end of the night, five of the original six would be back together, with Loki on the right side this time. How much longer would it take before they found Rogers?

“This is a good spot,” said Barton. Thor dropped them down carefully onto the indicated rooftop, and Barton unclipped the harness. Then he took flight again and slammed directly into a drone, knocking it out of the sky. It plowed into the pavement, narrowly missing several civilians. “Have you got a less messy strategy? I don’t think you’ll get that lucky twice.”

“Apologies,” said Thor. He spotted Iron Man just as War Machine collided with him in midair and they both fell through a glass dome not far from where he’d set Barton down. None of the drones were following yet, so Thor seized his chance. Perhaps they could draw all of them to that single location, as they had done with the Ultron bots. As he flew, he could hear a jumble of voices arguing over the comms. Something about Stark no longer being close to death, an omelette, and a ‘Hammeroid attack,’ which Thor had to assume was Allspeak having its usual difficulty with Stark’s creative turns of phrase.

Thor landed inside the dome not far from where Iron Man was pulling War Machine to his feet. They both faced him, their masks open. “Well met, Stark, Rhodes. I am Thor Odinson, and I am here on behalf of SHIELD to join your battle.”

“Uh…,” said Rhodes.

“Hey Romanoff, what’s the idea?” said Stark. “We don’t have time for Shakespeare in the Park.”

“What are you talking about?” said Romanoff.

“What’s going on?” said a voice Thor thought might be the lady Pepper. “Who’s there?”

“Some huge blond dude with a cape and a big-ass hammer,” said Rhodes.

“Trust me, he’s someone you want fighting on your team,” said Barton.

“Okay, and who are you now?” said Stark.

“That’s Agent Barton,” said Romanoff.

“Oh, a coworker of yours? He hasn’t already been working at Stark Industries for the last couple of weeks too, has he?”

“It might surprise you to know that SHIELD doesn’t entirely revolve around you,” said Romanoff.

“Uh, guys, this is fun, but you’re about to get dogpiled,” said Barton.

“We must make ready,” said Thor.

“Too late,” said Rhodes. The first of the drones landed inside the dome and was quickly joined by the rest. The masks on the suits closed over Stark’s and Rhodes’s faces.
“These are fun odds,” said Stark.

“I know a way to improve them,” said Thor. He raised Mjolnir high in the air, calling lightning to him, and directed it straight at Iron Man and War Machine. However, instead of humming with increased power, both suits toppled motionless onto the ground, while all around them, the drones began firing.

X

About five seconds passed, and then the creature let out a roar and burst free of its chains. All of the actual soldiers yelled and fired their weapons at it. It merely laughed and got slowly to its feet. They all retreated a few paces as their weapons began to make hollow clicking noises, leaving Loki the only one standing within a ten-foot radius of it. This did not escape its attention. It laughed again.

“Brave little soldier. You think you stand a chance? The Hulk ran away. There’s no one to save you now.” His eyes flicked to Ross and he bared his teeth.

“The general is right, isn’t he?” said Loki loudly. “You did this to yourself.” He needed to make the creature more interested in attacking him than Ross and his men. Fortunately, that was something Loki was very practiced at.

“Get back, soldier!” said Ross. Loki and the creature both ignored him.

“I did,” said the creature, lumbering closer with a menacing grin. “And it is magnificent.”

“Oh,” said Loki. “I see. Then becoming a sexless golem was intentional. To each his own, but I’m not sure gaining bony spikes on one’s spine is a fair trade for the loss of genitalia. Or was there never anything between your legs to begin with?”

With a furious roar, it lunged for Loki, who leapt up, planted his boot on its head, and pushed off at an angle so that he would land facing its back. Before it could react, he planted two Nidavellir daggers to the hilt in its lower spine. They slid in easily enough (unlike the noisy but completely ineffective weapons the mortals had used), and the roar became one of pain, but the creature did not immediately collapse, as anything whose spinal column had just been severed should. Apparently he hadn’t cut deeply enough. It turned around and fixed him with its blood-shot glare.

“Oh, shit,” he said. He wasn’t fast enough to avoid being seized in one large hand, and then he was flying through the air. He went crashing through the stone column several yards away and came to a rolling stop somewhere amid the rubble.

“Loki!” said Coulson in his ear, sounding horrified. “Are you alright?”

“Not to worry,” he grumbled, getting to his feet and dusting off his clothing. The impact had dispelled his disguise. He noted irritably that he had acquired a few scrapes here and there. He had so wanted to still be in pristine condition when he met back up with his brother. “I did more damage to the column than it did to me.” If knives and a beating from the Hulk weren’t enough to finish this monster off, then he was going to need to try a different approach.

The creature was now bearing down on the mortals, so Loki reformed his disguise, seized the largest intact chunk of brick within reach, and lobbed it at its head. It struck its mark, and the creature halted and turned. Cupping his hands around his mouth, Loki did something he was glad Thor was not there to see. “IS THAT THE BEST YOU CAN DO?!” he shouted. He waited a few seconds to be sure it was angry enough to pursue him before turning tail and sprinting for the building he had dropped down onto moments before. “Heimdall?” he called as he scaled the metal steps back up to the roof.
“Heim-what?” said Coulson.

“Yes, my prince?” the familiar calm, deep voice replied in his head.

“You will have my eternal gratitude if you show me the precise location of the nearest Bifrost site.”

“What? Who are you talking to?”

“That’s quite the enemy you’ve found,” said Heimdall. “Looking for a quick escape?”

He glanced over his shoulder and saw that the creature was crouching in preparation for a leap that looked like it would carry it all the way up to the roof. It was certainly inconveniently quick on its feet. “Something like that.”

“The place is called Kingsbridge.”

“How appropriate.” As he gained the rooftop and began sprinting across it, Loki’s immediate surroundings vanished, his vision taken over by Heimdall to show him the way across the city to a small park. A patch of ground at the center of a clearing glowed gold with the Bifrost’s designs. The effect ended just in time for Loki to leap to the next rooftop, and when he looked over his shoulder, he saw the creature airborne right behind him. Somehow, he had to reach a point some six miles to the northeast before it could catch him, all without letting it kill any mortals. He hoped Thor was having much less fun, whatever he was doing. This was entirely his fault.

X

“What the hell was that, Thor?” said Barton’s voice in his ear. “Those are the guys you’re supposed to be helping!”

“What? But...but I thought I was helping!” Thor spluttered as he slammed his hammer into drone after drone, their primitive projectiles bouncing off his skin and armor like hail. These were far less impressive robotic foes than Ultron had been. “Stark! Rhodes! Are you well?”

“How could you possibly think hitting them with lightning would be helpful?” said Barton.

“I only thought to increase their power!” said Thor, flinging Mjolnir in a line so that it crashed through several more drones before returning to his hand. “The suits are powered by electrical energy, are they not?”

“Yeah,” Stark grunted. He was still lying facedown on the ground, so his voice was muffled, but he was plainly alive and unhurt. “Doesn’t mean lightning is healthy for ‘em.”

Thor felt completely wrongfooted. He’d supercharged various Iron Man suits numerous times since the skirmish over Loki that had been his and Stark’s first meeting. It had always worked!

“Maybe that was something you should’ve thought about before all these guys who fight using electricity showed up,” Rhodes muttered. He, too, sounded unharmed.

“Yeah, thanks,” said Stark. “It was already on the upgrade list, but I’ve been a little busy synthesizing a new element and not realizing Hammer Time here existed or that Vanko was still alive.”

Thor groaned before headbutting an approaching drone, sending it crashing into the far wall of the enclosure. He could have kicked himself for his folly. He had been so accustomed to the capabilities of Stark’s suits that it had never occurred to him his lightning might damage an earlier model, but he
should have known better. Stark in the time Thor had known him had constantly been thinking of upgrades for his technology. It had been foolish to assume that the ability to convert electrical attacks into energy for the suit had always been part of the design.

“You have my deepest apologies,” he grunted while tearing the arms off another drone after hurling Mjolnir at two that had been aiming for Iron Man. “Are the suits damaged beyond repair?”

“Nope, I think it—yeah, booting up now. Welcome back, JARVIS.” Thor looked around and saw that crushed or dismembered drones littered their surroundings. Some still sparked or twitched, but none was intact enough to continue attacking. He helped Iron Man and War Machine to their feet.

“You took all those things down by yourself?” said Rhodes.

“Of course,” said Thor. “I want to help however I can.”

“Then you better get back out here,” said Barton. “I could use some eyes in the sky in case any of these drones gets up while we’re clearing out the civilians.”

“Hold up,” said Romanoff, “You got one more drone incoming. This one looks different. The repulsor signature is significantly higher.”

“Yeah, I see it. Not sure that’s a drone,” said Barton.

“Get going, Thunderstruck,” said Stark. “We got this.”

Thor nodded and whirled Mjolnir overhead.

To the creature’s obvious and very entertaining frustration, it was unable to lay hands on Loki again despite its superior speed. Whenever it drew too close for comfort, Loki simply ducked to the side and left a simulacrum running in his place. When the creature seemed to catch on to this strategy, he complicated it even further by using multiple copies. In this way, Loki was able to lead it mostly along rooftops or through deserted alleys towards Kingsbridge. But with all his tricks, he still only managed to gain about ten seconds on his enemy by the time he reached the spot Heimdall had shown him. He did not waste them. He reached into his dimensional pocket and withdrew six small throwing knives and flung them into the dirt in a circle, marking the edges of the Bifrost site. “Make ready, Heimdall,” he said.

“Yes, my prince.”

No sooner had Heimdall replied than the creature came crashing into the park. The few mortals in the vicinity screamed and fled, leaving them with no audience. There was also no sign of SHIELD’s flying craft, which was good. Loki didn’t want it anywhere near the area just now. He stepped forward out of the circle of knives.

“What are you?” said the creature. “Where did you get this power? What else has Ross been hiding from me?” There was as much greed in its eyes as there was anger.

“Oh, this didn’t come from Ross.” Loki grinned and shed his mortal disguise. Then, deciding to do the thing properly, he added his full ceremonial regalia. “I am Loki Odinson, God of Mischief, second prince of Asgard.” He raised his helmeted head high, the grin fading into a scornful sneer. “This power is my birthright. You could travel to the ends of the universe and never gain what I already possessed as an infant.”
The creature snarled, then lunged. It passed right through yet another simulacrum, which vanished, and went sprawling, its head, shoulders, and right arm landing inside the circle Loki had marked. A split second later, the brilliant column of energy came roaring down. The creature’s legs and left arm flailed briefly before going limp and beginning to shrink. The Bifrost ended, leaving its mark burned into the ground and three-quarters of a naked human corpse lying beside it.

Chapter End Notes

Ahahaha, I cannot tell you how happy I am to have found another opportunity to make a Deus ex Machina pun title. It's basically my favorite thing to do.

So this idea for how Thor and Loki would interact with the climaxes of IM2 and Incredible Hulk was basically the reason I decided to write more of this fic instead of leaving it as a one-shot. Initially, I thought there wouldn't be anything fun or interesting for them to do, but oh boy was I wrong. :D I got this mental image of Thor joining in to fight Hammer drones and then accidentally frying Tony and Rhodey's suits when he meant to power them up. Whoops! (Also, if Thor can take on the power of a dying star and only end up a bit sooty, he is definitely bulletproof.)

It took a while longer to work out what would happen with Loki and Abomination, but I'm super happy with that side of things too. One of the most irritating things about Incredible Hulk for me is that Betty stops Hulk from killing Abomination, and then he just kinda leaves him there, even though he's still awake and there's no one else who stands a chance against him. How did that not end badly? I'm so confused. Also, that's not even how it ended in the original script. In the original script, Hulk straight up breaks Abomination's neck. Which would have been far more sensible, but I suppose it was too dark or whatever. So it was fun to have Loki fix that nonsense, and it was even more fun to have him comment on Abomination's...anatomical inadequacy, because that was such a weird design choice for the filmmakers to make when they could have simply given Blonsky improbably stretchy pants too.

Next chapter will conclude the crossover stuff for those two movies, and the Brodinsons will probably head home for a super uncomfortable family chat not long after that.
Okay, a couple things I want to clarify. When Loki casts a simulacrum, that's just an illusion. It can speak and move, but that's it. A projection, on the other hand, is when he sends part or all of his conscious mind on an errand outside of his physical body. They look the same as simulacra and are also incorporeal, but projections can perform spells and adapt to new situations. Projections require more effort and leave Loki's physical body more vulnerable, but they're super useful. I'm basing the idea of simulacra vs. projections off of canon, because at various times Loki's illusions (and Frigga's, for that matter) appear to be able to do different things.

Now, this chapter has a non-linear timeline. We'll be jumping back and forth between Thor and Loki getting debriefed by Fury and Pierce in the Triskelion and more of their adventures in Queens and Harlem. I've tagged each scene with the location, so hopefully it won't be too disorienting. I really liked this setup because it broke up the monotony of the debrief and made it a little more fun.

Pierce tossed onto the table a transparent bag containing two bloody Dwarf-forged daggers and a folder, from which numerous images spilled out. Most were of the Bifrost’s mark beside Blonsky’s corpse, but there were a few that showed the Bifrost itself, lightning striking the Stark Expo, and a laboratory containing nothing but a man whose head appeared to have exploded. “Well I can’t say I’m not impressed, but is this really your idea of building an alliance?”

“We completed our mission,” said Loki placidly. “I trust our work was satisfactory.”

“We satisfactory?” said Fury, who was standing beside Pierce with his arms crossed. “Tony Stark and James Rhodes are lucky to be alive. Dr. Banner is still in the wind, Coulson found Samuel Sterns dead in his empty lab, and the whole internet is buzzing about that pillar of light in Kingsbridge and the monster that chased a guy all across Manhattan.”

“In fairness to my brother,” said Loki, “he was not briefed on the capabilities of these ‘Iron Man’ suits, as our original assignment focused on Dr. Banner. He knew only what Agent Barton was able to tell him en route to the Stark Expo.”

X

Queens

Thor would have preferred remaining in the enclosure to assist Stark and Rhodes with the enemy he’d passed on the way out, but he could understand if they wanted him elsewhere for the moment. His blunder may not have harmed them physically, but their pride was another matter. They did at least seem to appreciate that he had taken apart the drones unassisted, so perhaps he had not lost too much ground with them.
He flew thrice around the park. Without the attacking drones and with the guidance of Barton’s colleagues and local authorities, the evacuation appeared to be going smoothly. However, Thor’s attention was caught by a small boy sitting on the steps of a pavilion. He wore a mask that resembled Stark’s, but had it pulled up away from his face, and he was rubbing tears away from his eyes with his fists. Thor landed and set Mjolnir down before approaching the child. He squatted down in front of him. “Are you alright?”

The lad looked up at him, his face the very picture of misery. “Wh-ho are you?” he asked, hiccupping.

“I am Thor Odinson. And you?”

“Pe-eter. Peter Parker.”

“Why do you weep? Are you hurt?”

“No,” he said. “I he-elped Iron Man fight those robots, but now I don’t know where my aunt and uncle are.”

“Well we must find them so you may tell them of your heroic acts!” said Thor. This earned him a shaky smile from Peter, which revealed at least three adult teeth that were only partially grown in. He reminded Thor of Leif Volstaggson, who was about two hundred—roughly the equivalent of this boy’s age for an Aesir. “Here, climb up on my shoulders. Perhaps you only need more height to be able to see them, and I have plenty to spare.”

“Were you fighting too? Against the robots?”

“I was.”

“Then you’re on Iron Man’s side?”

“I am.”

“Okay,” said Peter. “I’m not supposed to talk to strangers, but if you fight on Iron Man’s side, then I think I can trust you.”

“You honor me, young warrior. I will not betray your trust.”

Peter giggled. Thor turned around and crouched down, and the boy clambered up his cape and sat on his shoulders.

They walked thus for a few minutes, Peter chattering all the time about how cool Iron Man was and how he’d known he would stop the evil robots from the start. Evidently this had been some kind of festival celebrating science and technology before all the chaos erupted, and Peter had begged his aunt and uncle for weeks to bring him until they finally agreed. Suddenly, there was a cry of “Peter!” from behind them.

Thor turned around, and Peter exclaimed in delight. “Aunt May! Uncle Ben!” A man and woman were running towards them. They looked about Stark’s age. The man’s wavy brown hair was graying at the temples and he wore a pair of spectacles, and the woman had tied her hair in a knot at the top of her head. Both appeared unharmed. Thor bent down, and Peter leaped directly from his shoulders into their arms.

“Oh thank God!” said the woman between showering her nephew in kisses.
“We were so worried!” said the man, hugging them both. He looked up at Thor, at which point his mouth fell open.

“Aunt May, Uncle Ben, this is Mr. Odinson. He was fighting the robots with Iron Man, and then he helped me find you.”

“We can’t thank you enough,” said May. “We were getting hotdogs when those things attacked, and when I turned around, Peter was gone.” She looked at her nephew. “The next time there’s danger, you stay close, okay?”

“Okay, Aunt May,” he said, head drooping.

“Come on, we should’ve been out of here ten minutes ago,” said Ben.

“Yes, and I should report back to Barton,” said Thor. “Perhaps we will meet again one day.” He stepped back a few paces, summoned Mjolnir to his hand, and suppressed a grin at their astonished faces as he spun it overhead and took to the air. No sooner had he done so than there was an explosion from the dome where he’d left Stark and Rhodes. He spun around in time to see glass and metal flying.

He hastily pressed his earpiece. “Stark! What happened?”

“Vanko’s down,” said Stark.

However, another voice in the background gave a feeble laugh and said, “You lose.” Suddenly, the chest pieces of the wrecked drones on the ground began flashing red and beeping.

“All these drones are rigged to blow,” said Rhodes. “We gotta get out of here, man.”

“This might be a good time for some of that lightning,” said Barton.

“Agreed,” said Thor. From here, he could see three of the drones. He might not have been able to do this the first time around, but now it was easy. As the beeps and flashes increased in frequency, full-strength bolts of lightning struck, leaving blackened, inert husks behind. He moved on to find another pair of them and did the same. It was as far as he could get before the rest exploded, but only a few remained outside the dome. The worst damage was to the dome itself, which had already been empty.

“I was only able to deactivate five before they could explode,” said Thor.

“You did good,” said Barton. “From what I can see, no one was near the others. Ready to head back?”

“I would speak with Stark first.”

“Uh, now might not be the best time for that.”

Thor opened his mouth to ask why, but he had his answer as soon as he saw Stark. He was standing in most of his suit on a rooftop not far from the one Barton was positioned on, and he and the lady Pepper were enjoying a tender embrace. Thor let out a chuckle that turned to a full laugh when he spotted Rhodes standing nearby on the same roof, looking nonplussed. To give them a moment, he did one more flyover of the park, which was now empty of civilians, before circling back to Stark’s roof.

“You don’t have to do that. I heard the whole thing,” Rhodes was saying.
“You should get lost,” said Stark.

“I was here first!” said Rhodes. “Get a roof!”

Thor touched down a bit to the side of them, trying to be unobtrusive, but he immediately drew all three pairs of eyes onto himself. He grinned and gave a sheepish wave. “Hello. We did not have the opportunity to properly meet in the midst of the battle.”

“Yeah,” said Stark. He stared at Thor. “You two definitely see him?”

“Yep,” said Rhodes.

“Uh-huh,” said Pepper, whose arms were still around Stark’s shoulders.

“So what’s your deal?” said Stark. “Get struck by lightning at a Renaissance festival, ended up with superpowers?”

Thor laughed again. “No, and I think you will find the truth far stranger. I am Thor, son of Odin, Crown Prince of Asgard and God of Thunder, and I have come to Earth with my brother Loki to make allies of those who protect this world.”


“Wait, you’re an alien?” said Rhodes. “The Norse Gods are real, and they’re aliens.”

“What?” said Pepper. “Aliens are real now too?” She looked like she’d had just about all she could take in the last few days.

“Indeed, my good lady,” said Thor, offering her a courteous bow. “We always have been.”

She let out a hysterical-sounding laugh and leaned against Stark.

“I thought aliens were supposed to be little and green,” said Rhodes.

“There are certainly many species with green skin,” said Thor. “The Cotati, the A’askavarii, the Zehoberei, the Makulans, the Skrulls—” He broke off when he noticed how wide Pepper’s and Rhodes’s eyes had gone. “However, we Aesir have the same range of skin and hair colors as the people of Earth.”

“Represent,” said Rhodes.

“Huh,” said Stark. “How come you speak English but it’s all formal and archaic? Did you miss the last few patches for your galactic translator?”

“I am not speaking English. I am using Allspeak, which is why I seem to you to be speaking your own tongue. I have been told by speakers of many languages across different worlds that the result sounds archaic. My brother understands the mechanics better. He could perhaps explain why that is.”

There was a long pause, one of the more uncomfortable ones Thor had experienced on Earth—that didn’t involve Darcy, anyway—and then Stark seemed to come to an abrupt decision. “Can’t say I don’t want to learn more about friendly space Vikings,” he said. “How about you drop by sometime. I’ve been thinking about schematics for that auto-charge upgrade. Should be able to whip it up in a couple days. You could help me give it a test run.”

“Yeah, and you totally came up with that before tonight,” Rhodes muttered.
“Hey, you stole my suit,” said Stark. “You don’t get to complain.”

“About that. My car got taken out in the explosion, so I’m gonna have to hang onto the suit for a minute, okay?”

X

Triskelion

“Stark and Rhodes are both unharmed,” said Thor, “and Stark has even invited us to visit his home.”

“Romanoff’s final report does indicate that the casualties would’ve been higher without your help,” Fury admitted.

“But your actual assignment—,” began Pierce, but Loki interrupted.

“—Has been completed,” he said. “Our objectives were to keep Dr. Banner and the contents of the laboratory out of General Ross’s hands, and, as a last-minute addition for which we were given no preparation, to prevent the transformed Captain Blonsky from killing any more civilians. All of this, we have done.”

“You needn’t be so modest, Brother,” said Thor, clapping Loki on the back. “Your success this night was far greater than mine.”

“The walls of that lab are coated in Sterns’s brains!” said Pierce.

“Not by my hand,” said Loki. “I noticed a recording device in the laboratory, similar to the ones here. Have you examined it?”

X

Harlem

“Clever plan, my prince.”

“I thought so,” said Loki.

“I would appreciate a warning the next time you intend to splatter my Observatory with blood and severed body parts.”

“Duly noted.” He felt very smug. It wasn’t merely that he had succeeded in leading the monstrous Blonsky to his death; the chase itself had also provided an excellent distraction. He’d only truly run the first mile of it, leaving a projection and simulacra to do the rest while he cloaked his real body and located the laboratory of Samuel Sterns. Major Sparr would soon regain consciousness in a completely empty facility, and neither Hydra nor Ross would have an opportunity to lay hands on any of these materials, as they would all remain safely tucked away in Loki’s dimensional pocket until he could find time to dispose of them.

“Now,” he said, “if you could direct me to Dr. Banner?”

“You haven’t quite finished where you are.”

This cryptic remark and a quiet sound behind him were all the warning he got. His hand shot out and closed around a wrist, and there was a yelp of surprise. Loki turned and saw that his would-be attacker was a short man who would have been thoroughly unremarkable had it not been for his grotesquely distended skull. He was holding some kind of needle in the hand Loki had caught, and
had clearly been trying to stab it into his neck. “Drop it or I crush the wrist,” he said.

The fingers immediately opened and the needle clattered to the floor.

“Dr. Sterns, I presume,” said Loki. “If you wanted me to return your materials, you chose the wrong approach.”

Sterns’s eyes were suddenly alight with a maniacal gleam. “You—you’re not human,” he said. Loki had the distinct impression that he was imagining cutting him open to see what his non-human innards were like. If he were not so utterly unthreatening, Loki might have found that unsettling. As it was, he merely felt disdain. And perhaps revulsion.

“Indeed not. But while I have never been, it would appear that you have only recently abandoned the designation.” The man’s head visibly pulsed, and he cringed and pressed his hands to it. “What have you done to yourself?”

“I’ve expanded my mind,” said Sterns, recovering from whatever pain he’d just experienced and cackling at his own dreadful wit. “I understand so much more than I did. I was like a child before.”

Loki watched him, his expression flat. A vein over Sterns’s enlarged forehead was throbbing in a rather diseased fashion. “It doesn’t look terribly stable.”

“This was the result of accidental contamination. I need—” He winced again. “—my materials to finish it. I know how to make it work now.”

“How unfortunate,” said Loki, folding his arms. “Because I will certainly not be giving any of those back to the one who tried to attack me and turned Blonsky into what he became.”

“Blonsky.” Sterns’s face split in a grin. “He’s magnificent, isn’t he?”

“How would you define magnificent? A rampaging beast who slaughters any innocents in its path?”

“They don’t matter,” said Sterns. “He’s above them now, just like we are. Just like Dr. Banner could be if he would just accept—” He broke off with a groan and fell to his knees, the pain in his head plainly becoming too much to bear.

“Superiority without compassion begets tyranny,” said Loki. It was something Odin had told his sons many times in their youth. “And in any case, Blonsky is dead.”

“What? How?” he panted. “What...did you do?”

“I used a carefully controlled spatial rift to cut him in two.” He walked towards the exit, unconcerned by the moans of pain and dismay behind him. “Enjoy the fruits of your hubris, Dr. Sterns. Perhaps, in your final moments, your enhanced intellect will enable you to discern precisely how you brought this upon yourself.”

X

Triskelion

“How can we trust what that footage shows when we now know you can make yourself invisible and send copies of yourself anywhere you want?” said Pierce.

“Examine the remains,” said Loki. “They will tell the same tale I have. If I am guilty of anything, it is allowing the man’s own actions to take their course. I chose not to restore his equipment to him.
After cleaning up the consequences of his other experiment, I did not trust him to use it merely to save his own life.”

“Alright, but what about Banner?” said Fury. “According to Barton, there wasn’t a hint of green on him in the end, but you let him slip through your fingers.”

Thor and Loki glanced at each other, silently debating what they should say. Predictably, it was Thor who ultimately decided on the truth.

Chapter End Notes

Pretty much the only reason to include the stuff with Peter, Ben, and May was that it was going to be adorable. Thankfully, this is fanfiction, and I don't have to justify keeping pointless adorableness to an editor. I'm putting Peter at something like nine years old at this point.

I am really not a fan of Sam Sterns and his super brain, so I decided I was going to have it blow up on its own just to simplify matters. The only story involving a big-brained super-genius that I have ever enjoyed was that one episode of Jimmy Neutron in which it happens to Sheen. (Yes, this includes Megamind. That one kinda fell flat for me. Not sure why.) It's the stuff of weird, hokey '60s sci-fi. Not my thing.

Next up, how things went with Bruce. (How did I think this entire mission was going to fit into a single chapter? It's turned into three. So far.)
Loki quickly departed the bare laboratory and stepped out into the street, not particularly keen to be present for the moment when Sterns met his fate. By his guess, it would be rather messy. He didn’t bother to disguise himself; all the mortals in the vicinity were too preoccupied with the wreckage the creature had left in its wake to notice anything as inconsequential as unusual clothing.

“Loki?” said Coulson. “Did we lose you?”

“I’ve been to Dr. Sterns’s laboratory,” said Loki. “Do try to keep up.”

“We found what’s left of Blonsky. Effective, yet gross. Are you leaving the lab now? We still need to get his materials before Ross has a chance to requisition them.”

“Already taken care of,” said Loki. Some of the people he passed were in military garb, but they paid him no more mind than the civilians.

“What do you mean, ‘taken care of’?” said Coulson, the slightest hint of apprehension in his tone. Loki wondered what it would take to actually crack the man’s mild façade.

“There is nothing left for Ross to use. I have emptied the lab.”

“Emptied it how? It’s only been fifteen minutes. What, did you throw everything in a bag of holding?”

“Bag of—no, it’s in a dimensional pocket,” said Loki, puzzled by the term.

“Oh,” said Coulson. “Sounds handy. Can you fit anything in there?”

“The limits are set by how much energy one is willing to invest. Something I underestimated once as a boy.”

“What happened?”

“My mother found me unconscious and bleeding from the nose and ears beneath half the contents of the palace larder, which put paid to Thor’s and my plans to sneak off on a grand adventure that week.”

“I’m guessing you two were kind of a handful.”

“She certainly didn’t earn the title Goddess of Motherhood for nothing.”

“Well, ready to rendez-vous?”

“I still have an objective to complete. And you might want to drop by the lab in the meantime.”

“Why’s that? I thought it was empty.”

“Sterns is there. Blonsky isn’t the only one he experimented on, though he did say this was an accident.”
“Wait, what?” said Coulson, but Loki had removed his earpiece and dropped it into the dimensional pocket too.

“Heimdall?”

“Banner is traveling northwest,” said the Gatekeeper promptly. “You won’t be able to catch him on foot.”

“I never expected to. Have Thor meet me there, if he can.” With that, still in the middle of the street, Loki performed a spell that would have given any other mage from Asgard, Vanaheim, or even Alfheim great difficulty, but which he had been able to do as easily as breathing for as long as he could remember: he shifted his form, trading it for that of an Asgardian horned owl, and flew up over the buildings and into the open air.

Thor flew back to the rooftop where he’d left Barton, who grinned when he saw him. “That was a little shaky at first, but I think you stuck the landing okay.”

“Then you know it was not my intent to harm Stark or Rhodes?”

“Nah, you tore those drones apart like they were tin foil. I’m pretty sure you could kick all of our asses without breaking a sweat if you wanted to, but you didn’t.”

“Nor will I,” said Thor. “I would have all of you for friends, not merely allies.”

“I think I actually believe that,” said Barton.

Thor’s mouth fell open, then lifted in a delighted smile. “You do me a great honor, Agent Barton!” He moved forward and pulled Barton into a hug before the man could do more than grunt in protest.

“Yeah, yeah, put me down.”

Thor let go of him and stepped back. As he did, Heimdall’s voice sounded in his mind. “My prince, your brother requests that I relay a message to you.”

“Tell me the message,” said Thor. Barton frowned at him.

“He has defeated Blonsky and emptied the laboratory of Samuel Sterns, and he is now in pursuit of Dr. Banner.”

“I will help him,” said Thor. “Where is Banner?”

“Did your earpiece switch chan—holy shit,” said Barton. Thor barely noticed, for Heimdall had taken over his sight and was showing him the way to Banner. He was beyond the city and barreling through the forest to the northwest, still in Hulk form, with a helicopter hot on his heels. The vision vanished and his present surroundings reappeared, including a very alarmed-looking Barton.

“What was that?”

“My brother is closing in on the Hulk. I must go to him.”

Barton tapped his earpiece. “Nat, you got this? Thor and I have to get back to the other situation.”

X
Though the Hulk had covered at least another mile of forest by the time Thor flew with Barton to the place Heimdall had shown him, it was not difficult to track him farther, as he was leaving a wide trail of broken branches and overturned earth that was clearly visible from the air.

They weren’t near enough to see exactly what happened, but the helicopter must have become too vexing for Hulk to ignore, for the craft in the air ahead of them suddenly listed dramatically to the left. A second later, something large struck it, and it began spinning out of control and losing altitude. In another few seconds, they saw that it no longer had a tail, and the Hulk was on the ground, bellowing and brandishing an uprooted tree as though ready to hurl it at anything else that came after him.

Thor landed not far from the helicopter. “Help them!” he told Barton, jerking his harness free. The Hulk was stomping closer to the downed craft, and though Thor had hoped to make a friendlier first impression, there was nothing for it if those humans were to survive. Hoping to draw Hulk to the side, he threw Mjolnir so that it would clip him on the shoulder. It hit its mark, and Hulk’s gaze moved from the helicopter to Thor. He bared his teeth in a dully puzzled sort of grimace, but then Mjolnir struck him again on its way back to Thor’s hand. He roared and threw the tree in his hands. Thor didn’t move quickly enough, and the trunk caught him right in his middle, sending him tumbling over and over around it for about a hundred feet.

He tossed the tree aside and bounded to his feet, a grin on his face. He probably shouldn’t be enjoying this as much as he was, but he couldn’t help it. Now that he had Hulk’s attention, he wouldn’t be using Mjolnir, which surely made him look too much like a threat. There was no lullaby to calm Hulk at this point in time, but maybe an open offer of peace would still have some effect. And if not, perhaps this was an opportunity to prove that he would’ve won that tournament battle if it hadn’t been for the stupid obedience disk.

“Hulk!” he called. “I’m not here to hurt you! I only want to help you get away from Ross!”

The chance of words having any impact on Hulk was always a long shot, but the men in the helicopter chose that moment to prove they had survived by firing a round of bullets at him. He roared again and started towards them.

“No, you fools!” Thor yelled. “Barton, make them stop!” He ran as hard as he could. Hulk was mere yards from Barton and four battered, terrified soldiers clutching their weapons when Thor tackled him from the side.

X

Loki alighted on a large tree branch on the perimeter of the brand new forest clearing his brother and the green beast had created. He shifted back into his usual form and regarded the brawl with raised eyebrows. “Well I’m not getting in the middle of that,” he muttered. After a few moments, he noticed that Thor wasn’t using Mjolnir. It sat waiting at the center of the field while Thor mainly relied on his fists, and it swiftly became apparent that he did not have the upper hand without his hammer.

Resigned, Loki hopped down from the tree. Whether Thor was trying to prove that he could win against his former friend with strength alone or he was simply reluctant to harm him, this had gone on long enough.

X

Once more, Thor found himself on the ground, Hulk’s fists raining down on his head and torso. He was done holding back. Through the pain, he attempted to summon his lightning as he had done on Sakaar and again in the final battle against Hela. It wouldn’t come. He could feel it pulsing and
crackling just beyond his reach, but try as he might, he could not touch it, and blow after blow continued to fall. The list of things he needed to discuss with Father was growing, but right now, there was nothing for it. He would have to summon Mjolnir.

“STOP!” cried a voice from somewhere off to the side, and Hulk actually stopped. He turned to face the voice. Thor rolled to the side and spat out some blood before looking up. A fair woman with dark hair and almost elfin features stood nearby—the woman Coulson had described in the briefing. Betty Ross.

Thor couldn’t help feeling a little petulant. “I was about to win, you know.”

“I’m sure you were,” Betty muttered, not taking her eyes off Hulk, who snarled and glared at Thor again. “Bruce, please! He’s not like the men who came after you. He’s a friend.”

Hulk glowered down at Thor, who managed a smile around his stinging split lip and held up his hands. Hulk turned to Betty. She walked closer and reached up to touch his face. “It’s okay,” she said. “They won’t chase you anymore.” She wrapped her arms around his enormous neck as best she could. To Thor’s amazement, Hulk began to shrink, the green receding from his skin.

When Bruce came to himself, his nose was full of the smell of Betty’s shampoo, and his arms were full of Betty. He stared over her shoulder in bewilderment at the wreckage of a forest around them. How did they get out of the city? Where were the general and his men?

“I’m sorry,” said Betty, gently disengaging from the embrace.

“For what?” said Bruce, hastily grabbing the waistband of his ruined pants so they wouldn’t fall to the ground.

She walked over to an enormous, long-haired blond man in leather armor and a cape, and pulled him easily to his feet with one hand. He brushed bits of grass and dirt off himself and offered Bruce a wincing, slightly bloody grin. Before Bruce could ask Betty who the hell this guy was, a green-gold shimmer passed over her. The next second, a 6’2” man with nearly the same coloring as Betty stood in her place, wearing...he didn’t even know how to describe it, except that it looked simultaneously more expensive and more anachronistic than any medieval costume he’d ever seen. “Forgive my deception,” said the man, “but it didn’t look like your fight with my brother was going to end anytime soon, and your alter-ego seems to respond well to Dr. Ross.”

“Where’s Betty?” said Bruce. “What did you do with her?”

“Nothing at all, I assure you,” said the man. “Her father had her escorted to a hospital because he didn’t want to listen to the excellent argument she was making. She’s perfectly safe.”

“Oh.” Much of his renewed feelings of hostility left him, replaced by confusion. “Then...how did you change your appearance and voice like that?”

“It was hardly as dramatic a change as yours,” said the man.

Annoyance joined confusion, but he was distracted when the blond man stuck his right hand out to the side and a ridiculously huge hammer flew into it, which he casually dropped onto a hook on his belt. “Who are you guys?”

“Thor and Loki Odinson,” said the blond man, wiping his mouth. “It’s an honor to meet you, Dr. Banner.”
Bruce stared around at all the splintered and uprooted trees in every direction. “Am I drugged in a lab somewhere and hallucinating? I thought I was fighting one of Ross’s guys in the city.”

“You were,” said Loki. “But you left him alive and conscious in the heart of the city, bound only by chains. Hardly a permanent solution. Is it common practice among Earth warriors to leave extremely dangerous and unreasonable enemies alive even when you lack suitable containment?”

“Uh...it’s not exactly a situation most people encounter,” said Bruce. “Or want on their conscience.”

“Terribly sloppy. You’ll be happy to know I rectified the situation.”

“I told you you’d be more than a match for that beast,” said Thor, grinning and punching Loki on the shoulder.

“Yes, whereas you ended up taking quite the beating.”

“I would’ve won!”

“Clearly debatable. And how about the Stark Expo?”

Thor looked sheepish. “I might’ve...nearly electrocuted Stark and Rhodes, but I did destroy many robots and helped a young boy find his family.”

“Well done,” said Loki sarcastically.

Something Loki had said finally penetrated Bruce’s confusion. “Wait a second, did you say ‘Earth warriors’? What does that make you?”

“We are not of this world,” said Thor. “We are the princes of Asgard. We’ve come to Earth to forge an alliance.”

“So I’m supposed to believe that two random guys with British accents and weird medieval fantasy outfits are really some kind of...of alien princes? Was the transformation thing some kind of trick?”

“There are many who say that everything I do is a trick,” said Loki. “Why do you think I am known as the God of Mischief? But surely this field of battle is proof enough of Thor’s identity.”

“Right,” said Bruce, adjusting his grip on his waistband. “Well, I’m kind of a fugitive from the military, so if you’ll excuse me…”

“To go where?” said Loki.

Banner stopped looking for the easiest path out of the destroyed forest and stared at him.

“The good people at SHIELD have told us about you, Robert Bruce Banner. You had purpose, respect, position. The love of a good woman. And all of that ended after one experiment gone wrong. All you have left is this power you do not want. You run from it as much as from those who covet it.”

As he spoke, Bruce’s irritation gradually gave way to a weary kind of tension. “What do you want?” he said.

“We want to help you,” said Thor.

“Help me?” Bruce repeated.
“We cannot restore what you have lost, nor can we free you from the curse your science placed upon you,” said Loki. “However, in a few days, Thor and I will return to Asgard. If you come with us, you will be far beyond the reach of your pursuers.”

Thor looked at Loki in surprise. “You want to take him home with us?”

“Why not? Coulson said SHIELD wanted to give Banner space. I see no reason why we shouldn’t take that literally.”

Bruce couldn’t help it. He burst out laughing. “Okay, this is all too crazy to be a lie any sane person would tell, so let’s pretend for a second I believe you guys. My own government has been chasing me for years. They want to do... this,” he gestured at himself, “to other people. Weaponize it. I’m betting they still do, even after what happened in the city.”

“You know Ross well,” said Loki. “But he may find he lacks the materials to achieve that ambition after tonight.”

“All the more reason for you to go where he cannot follow,” said Thor.

“You’re working with SHIELD? Why should I believe that a secret intelligence agency is trying to protect me from the military? Why should I believe that a couple of aliens are trying to protect me from the military?”

“Because, my dear doctor,” said Loki, “Asgard already has more than enough berserker warriors. Our science and technology are aeons ahead of yours. There is nothing new you can show us. I cannot vouch for SHIELD, but you would not have to answer to them on Asgard either.”

“As a royal guest,” said Thor, “you would be as free to roam as any citizen, you would have access to the kind of knowledge your world’s scholars will take millennia to amass, and you will have the peace of knowing that your surroundings are durable enough to withstand an unexpected rampage.”

“What is more,” said Loki. “You would have full control over your Mr. Blue’s illicit equipment and materials.” He flicked his hand, and something appeared in it, which he tossed to Bruce, who managed to catch it despite his surprise. It was one of the bags of blood from Sterns’s lab. “It will be yours to use or destroy as you see fit.” He waved his hand again and the blood bag vanished in a flash of greenish-gold light.

Bruce stared at the two of them. He was still struggling to believe that this was real, despite the evidence. If there had just been two alien princes who wanted to use him like everyone else did, that would have been easy enough to swallow, but the possibility of freedom and no longer being a danger to everyone around him? His situation had been enough to make him eat a bullet. Or try to. His throat felt tight and his chest ached. Did he dare let himself hope?

“Wouldn’t you like to be able to stop running,” said Loki, “at least for a while?”

Bruce didn’t answer. He was torn. It would be completely insane to trust them, but he had never wanted anything as badly as what they offered.

“You don’t have to decide right now,” said Thor. “We will find you when we are ready to return home, and you can give us your answer then.”

“Perhaps I could make it a bit easier for you to evade the general’s clutches in the meantime?” said Loki.

“What do you mean?” said Bruce warily.
“Nothing too dramatic,” said Loki. “You’d still look like a mortal man, and it wouldn’t be permanent.”

X

Triskelion

“I still fail to see the problem,” said Loki, once Thor finished his account. “Agent Coulson told us that SHIELD wanted to keep Banner and the materials and research of Samuel Sterns out of General Ross’s hands. All of this, we have done. If you had different plans, how were we to know?” He met Alexander Pierce’s gaze with a perfectly bland expression. He could almost hear the man’s blood pressure rising.

“You can’t deny that offering to take Dr. Banner and all that research off-world is a pretty damn unorthodox way of fulfilling your objective,” said Fury.

“And you can’t deny that it is an effective one,” Loki retorted.

Fury glared at him for a second or two, then let out a chuckle.

“Nick,” said Pierce. His tone carried restraint and warning.

“What, Pierce? We wanted them to prove they were our allies, not our tools. I’d say that’s exactly what they did. From where I’m sitting, they’re already more reliable than Stark, and Coulson and Barton both vouched for them. If Banner wants to go to Asgard, that’s his choice, and I like that idea much better than having to keep doing damage control whenever Ross gets too close to him.”

“How is Banner supposed to protect Earth against its enemies if he isn’t on it?” said Pierce.

“How can any of us ask for Banner’s aid in the coming battles if we have done nothing for him?” Thor shot back. “My brother and I have offered him a place to learn control without fear of pursuit or of doing further harm. He can return whenever he likes, and he will be free to bring with him any knowledge he gains from Asgard when he does.”

This seemed to give Pierce pause—though Loki suspected it was more because he couldn’t think of an argument against it than that he actually agreed. “And what about Sitwell’s report?” he said.

“What about it?” said Fury. “It didn’t contradict anything in Coulson’s or Barton’s.”

“No,” said Pierce, “but he had concerns about their habit of speaking a language we can’t understand when they talk to each other.”

It was a weak argument, and even Pierce seemed aware of it. Of course, if he knew that Thor and Loki hadn’t merely been speaking their native tongue, but were deliberately communicating in a way no one else would understand so that they could discuss how to handle him and the other Hydra operatives, he might have been more confident in his objection.

“I’d like to move forward with this,” said Fury.

Pierce kept his reaction down to a grimace as he got to his feet. “Fine. It looks like I need to brief the World Council on our new alliance.” He shot Thor and Loki a tight smile and left the room.

“It will be our honor to fight alongside the warriors of Earth, Director Fury,” said Thor. “We will be sure to inform you when we know more about the movements of the Dokkalfar army or the Mad Titan.”
“Yeah, about that,” said Fury. “Now that I’ve got a pretty good idea of what you guys can do, I’d like to talk to you about the Avenger Initiative.”

Loki fully expected that Thor would be so excited to hear Fury utter those words that he would have to throw up an illusion to keep him from ruining all semblance of pretense, but he was wrong.

“Before you do,” said Thor, who looked as serious as Loki had ever seen him, “I must request something of you that you will not like, but please believe that it is only a request, not a threat, and I make it in the hope of sparing the Earth from great destruction and suffering in the coming years.”

“What’s that?” said Fury, arching an eyebrow.

“Our father battled the Mad Titan long before we were born,” said Thor, and Loki suddenly knew where Thor was going with this. He was not at all sure it was wise, but there was nothing he could do about that now. “It was a long, bloody war, and it ended with Thanos in retreat. The reason they fought was that Thanos coveted one of Asgard’s treasures. The Tesseract. One of the six Infinity Stones he seeks.”

“Those things you said he would use to destroy half the universe?” said Fury.

“Yes,” said Thor. “After the war, Father hid the Tesseract away on Earth, among primitive mortals who could not use it, where Thanos would never think to seek it. I fear it is no longer safe here, but more importantly, Earth is not safe as long as it remains. It has been disturbed by humans, and it will call Thanos to it like a beacon. He has been marshalling his forces and planning for another attempt on it since his defeat at Odin’s hands, and soon he will come for it with his armies.”

“So where does this big request of yours come in?” said Fury.

“Allow us to return the Tesseract to Asgard. With it gone, Thanos will have no reason to attack Earth, and our defenses will be strong enough to deter him until we can find a safer hiding place for it.”

Loki kept his eyes on Fury with difficulty. Thor was lying. Loki was astonished—not least because he was actually doing a passably good job of it. But where was the deception? It was true that Thanos would be less interested in a world that held no Infinity Stone...unless the Tesseract wasn’t the only one on Midgard?

Fury looked thoughtful. “I could pretend I don’t know what or where this Tesseract of yours is, but I think that would be a waste of all of our time. Shiny blue cube, about yea big?” He held his hands a few inches apart.

Thor nodded.

“You know, a very dangerous man got a hold of that thing a few decades ago and wreaked a lot of havoc with it,” said Fury. “Why wasn’t Asgard interested in getting it back then?”

“I assume you’re referring to Johann Schmidt,” said Loki. “He came up in a few of our council meetings. Asgard was prepared to act, but our aid proved to be unnecessary after Schmidt was thwarted by some of your own soldiers.”

“I’m sure you and your people have far purer intentions than he did,” said Thor, “but that is immaterial. If you are using it, Thanos can find it.”

Fury watched them silently for a long moment. Then he sighed. “Even if you’re telling the truth, I can’t just hand something like that over to a couple of guys who showed up two days ago.”
“We are happy to give you as much time to consider as you require,” said Loki. “But bear in mind that Thanos will not be so generous.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so Thor vs. Hulk was pretty inconclusive, but that's only because Thor was going easy on him. He doesn't want to hurt him. If he didn't hold back, he'd win, with or without Mjolnir and lightning.

I know Thor said in TDW, "Of the two of us, which one can actually fly," but if Loki can turn into a snake and turn Thor into a frog, then there's no reason he can't also turn into something with wings.

In case you were wondering, Loki made Bruce (who will always be Mark Ruffalo in my fics) look like Edward Norton, because why not. And I will never apologize for describing Betty as having "elfin" features. XD

Oh hey, I think Thor and Loki might finally be done introducing themselves to characters Thor already knows! I was getting really tired of writing the same conversation over and over, but none of them felt skippable.

Up next, party at Tony's, and everyone's invited!
Hylopetes winstony

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When Stark had first tossed out his offhand invitation, Thor had imagined there would be revelry like at Avengers Tower before Ultron’s initial attack, with many future Avengers and prominent SHIELD agents present. However, with Barton and Romanoff on assignment, Banner on the run, and Rogers under the ice, it was only Thor, Loki, and Coulson who set out for Stark’s clifftop mansion the day after the debriefing, and they found the place mostly silent.

Thor had never been to his friend’s home in the original timeline, as it had already been destroyed by the time he was spending more than a few days at a stretch on Midgard. As strange as mortal dwellings usually were, this round, precariously perched cement structure was in a class all of its own—which meant that it suited Stark rather well.

As they crossed the odd front garden, beams of blue light flashed briefly over their faces and they were greeted by the pleasant voice of Stark’s artificial manservant. “Good afternoon, gentlemen. I am JARVIS, Mr. Stark’s user interface computer system. Please, come in. Mr. Stark is just putting the finishing touches on the latest series of upgrades.”

The glass door opened on its own and they walked inside. Thor assumed that this must normally be quite a nice place for Stark to live, but at the moment it was almost more rubble than house. A robot was wheeling around the area overlooking the sea, picking up pieces of broken wall and floor and placing them in a large container. It froze upon their approach, the fingers of its single appendage opening and closing in their direction. From this angle, Thor could read the word “dunce” on the conical hat it wore. He guffawed, and the robot’s arm wilted a bit and it buzzed in a despondent sort of way.

“Was this house recently attacked?” said Loki.

“Mr. Stark and Colonel Rhodes had a minor disagreement after Mr. Stark’s birthday festivities,” said JARVIS. “Also, Mr. Stark preferred to construct his own particle accelerator on the premises rather than seeking more suitable facilities.”

“Maybe that was because SHIELD put him on house-arrest,” said Coulson.

“Considering that he broke your perimeter more than once before completing his work, I would not be so certain,” said JARVIS.

Coulson seemed mildly annoyed by this, but didn’t comment. Loki might have, except that a pair of voices were now drifting towards them from deeper in the house.

“—Still can’t believe you let Justin Hammer put his dainty, callus-free charlatan hands on my suit.”

“You could’ve just told me you wanted me to have it instead of pushing me and everyone else away.”

“That’s true. Not my best moment. I’ll try to be less immature the next time I’m dying. But come on, did you really think you could have just climbed into the Mark II if it wasn’t already calibrated for you to use? I practically gift-wrapped it for you, and—”

“Well who am I supposed to have weaponize the suit for military use when you’re no longer our
“weapons contractor?”

“It didn’t need to be weaponized!” Stark and Rhodes came into view, still bickering.

“Oh really? I thought it was a ‘high-tech prosthesis’, not a weapon,” said Rhodes.

Stark opened his mouth, then hesitated, catching sight of his guests. “…Legally, I can’t contradict that.” He clapped his hands together. “Agent Coulson. Thought you got reassigned. Couldn’t stay away?”

“I’m here with them,” said Coulson. “I’m the Asgardian attaché now."

Stark’s nose twitched. “Sounds official. Thunderstruck, good to see you again.”

“And you as well,” said Thor, beaming. He hoped very much that Stark would stick with this particular nickname. He knew its origins from the original timeline, and he vastly preferred it to Point Break.

“Is leather armor as casual as you get, or is this an eternal vigilance thing?” said Stark.

“Asgardian leathers are quite comfortable, I assure you,” said Thor. “I do prefer them to cloth most of the time, though are we not to spar later?”

“I guess so,” said Stark, giving Thor a look like he couldn’t quite figure him out. Then his gaze shifted to Loki, and Thor immediately stepped closer to him, his smile widening.

“Allow me to introduce my brother, Loki Odinson, Prince of Asgard and God of Mischief.”

It was a bit more introduction than he usually offered, and based on the funny look Loki shot him, that hadn’t gone unnoticed, but he stuck out his hand to clasp forearms with Stark and Rhodes nonetheless. “Well met, Mr. Stark, Colonel Rhodes. Thor has spoken highly of you both.”

“Thanks, man,” said Rhodes.

“Heard about what went down in Harlem while your big bro was busy electrocuting us in Queens,” said Stark. Thor had to suppress a squawk of protest, knowing very well how Stark liked to goad people and that he rarely did so with any real rancor. “I’m guessing it was you who chopped that roid rage monster in half with a wormhole.”

“It seemed the expedient solution when stabbing it proved less fatal than I’d hoped,” said Loki. Thor could tell he was pleased—it must have taken Stark some effort to acquire that much information about those events. He could have jumped up and down on the spot like a child, he was so excited. His plans were working! Loki was going to be an Avenger, and the other Avengers were going to welcome him!

“Kinda flashy,” said Rhodes, “but zero casualties over that kind of distance against such a destructive opponent? That’s some impressive work.”

“I would have been satisfied with nothing less,” said Loki, with a slight nod to Rhodes.

“So can I get you guys anything?” said Stark, turning and beginning to lead the way back in the direction from which he and Rhodes had come. The rest of them followed. “Roast boar? Barrel of mead?”

“You have those?” said Loki, whom Thor knew was as tired of the Triskelion’s mess hall as he was.
“No,” said Stark, “but I’m a billionaire. I can get whatever food I want. JARVIS?”

“I’ve contacted a catering company, sir. They will be here in an hour.”

“Great. Should give us enough time to run the tests.”

The time between their arrival at the mansion and the arrival of the first decent food they’d eaten on Midgard was spent alternating between Stark’s workshop and the courtyard. Thor would strike a suit of Stark’s armor with lightning, and Stark would then assess the effects and return to the workshop for further tinkering and calibration. Within the first two tests, the suits were absorbing the electricity effectively, but Stark would clearly be satisfied with nothing less than perfection.

The technology was barely noteworthy to Loki. It might be merely centuries behind Asgard’s, rather than millennia behind like nearly everything else on this realm, but it was still obsolete and limited to what could be done without seidr. No, he was far more interested in watching Stark’s mind at work than he was in the technology itself. Stark was a man who could have sat back and lived at the height of his world’s comfort and luxury without ever lifting a finger, and yet he seemed positively hungry to dive in and perform the manual labor with his own two hands, and he was obviously a courageous warrior as well. Failure was merely an interesting problem to be solved, rather than a source of discouragement, and he was not so set in his ways as to be incapable of adapting.

Loki compared what he observed of this man with Bruce Banner, who had gained a terrible power by mistake but had no interest in using it for his own benefit. He sought instead to keep it out of the hands of those who would abuse it, and he sacrificed his own hopes and happiness to protect others from the damage he could wreak.

It was easy to understand why a more humble Thor valued Stark’s and Banner’s companionship so highly, even outside of their worth on the battlefield. This realization might have given rise to envy, except for the way Thor was so transparently keen for Loki and Stark to befriend each other. It was actually starting to be annoying, but just as the urge to stab was rising, Rhodes unwittingly intervened. “How fast can you fly using that hammer?” he asked.

“I’ve never really measured it,” said Thor, running a hand through his hair. “The only thing faster on Asgard is our father’s eight-legged stallion, Sleipnir.”

“You must be proud,” said Stark with a wry glance at Loki.

Loki’s expression flattened. This was one of the reasons Midgard was among his least favorite realms to visit. “Why, because I supposedly gave birth to him?”

Rhodes, who had just raised a glass of mead to his lips, spat a mouthful of it all over the War Machine suit. Coulson merely gave a light cough and lifted his eyebrows.

“I would not set much store by what your tales say of us, Stark,” said Thor, slapping him on the back. He managed to do it delicately enough not to knock the man on his face, but he still winced. “Our uncles presented Sleipnir to Odin when he came of age, long before he even met our mother.”

“Uh, great,” said Rhodes, having hastily wiped the mead off his suit. “So, wanna have a race?”

“Of course!” said Thor brightly.

“I’ll referee,” said Coulson, and before Loki knew it, he was alone in the workshop with Stark.
“Anything else you think you already know about me?” he asked testily. If Stark uttered so much as a word about a game of tug-of-war or a goat, he was definitely going to stab him, frail mortal or not.

“Nah, never really got into Norse mythology, but that part sticks out.” He had served himself a plate of roast boar and an assortment of greens, but was too busy tinkering with the boot of one of his suits to pay it any attention. “What does it mean to be the God of Mischief?”

Loki relaxed slightly. “Mostly it means thinking of unconventional solutions, going places and learning things I shouldn’t, and making fools of those who think too highly of themselves.”

“Sounds like a good time,” said Stark. “Hand me that ratchet?” He pointed at one of the numerous tools lying on a table closer to where Loki was standing. Loki flicked a finger and the thing shot into Stark’s hand. Stark was so focused on his task that it took a few seconds for him to realize what had just happened. Then he froze, staring at the ratchet. “Did you just—?”

“What?” said Loki innocently.

“You can move stuff with your mind?”

“When I’d rather not use my hands.”

“How? Some kind of implant or cognitive interface?”

Loki frowned at him. That sounded barbaric. “No, with magic.”

“Magic as in technology so advanced I wouldn’t understand it?” said Stark. “Don’t patronize me, man. I synthesized a new element this week.”

“Magic as in seidr,” said Loki. “True aptitude and mastery are rare, but it is an inborn ability the Aesir and many other long-lived races possess in some form, which allows us to exert our will on reality. Thor has the most powerful raw elemental seidr I’ve ever seen, but he never had the patience to learn to shape it into anything else, or perhaps it’s simply too unwieldy for it.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s great, but how does it work? You can’t just say something’s magic and that you’re born with it or you’re not. That doesn’t explain anything. What are the principles behind it? Do the laws of conservation of energy and mass apply, or are those not even universal laws at all? Is it biological, mechanical, psychosomatic? Does it have something to do with string theory? Please don’t tell me it involves midichlorians.”

Loki gaped at him. This was not the reaction he had expected. Generally, when he did magic in front of mortals, they were bewildered, impressed, and sometimes frightened. The results tended to be quite amusing. The more inquisitive, like Coulson, might be interested in seeing what else he could do. But not only had no mortal ever asked how it worked, he had never even so much as considered it in all his centuries of study, nor was he aware of anyone else who had. To the Aesir, seidr simply was. Loki knew exactly how much power he had at his disposal, how to ration it out for what he wanted to accomplish in any given situation, and how long it would take him to recover. He had learned thousands of spells and devised hundreds of his own. Seidr was as integral a part of him as his own heartbeat. And yet he had not the faintest notion of what made this wondrous power work. As far as he knew, no one in the nine realms did.

He became dimly aware that Stark was still spouting questions. Unable to answer them and unable to think through his bafflement with the noise, Loki waved his hand and focused briefly on his intended spell. His seidr responded as it always did, regardless of this intellectual upheaval, and Stark yelped as a green-gold glow enveloped him.
The earliest Pepper was able to get away from Stark Industries was mid-afternoon, but to be fair, she rarely tried to get away early. Her life had gotten so crazy lately that she might as well be at Tony’s house while he entertained a guest from another planet. Work, even in the role of CEO, was the only semi-normal thing she could hang onto.

She half-expected Tony to have thrown another party, so it came as a relief when the only extra car parked outside was one of those sleek, sturdy black SUVs with tinted windows that the SHIELD guys all seemed to love. She saw Agent Coulson standing near the edge of the cliff. She squinted. What was he doing? She hoped he hadn’t been out here for long. Tony might’ve decided to lock him out in retaliation for the house-arrest.

“I’m gonna head inside,” she said. “Can you talk to Agent Coulson and see if he needs anything?”

“Sure thing, boss,” said Happy, eyes twinkling at her in the rearview mirror. She smiled back. He still wasn’t over her being CEO, and he made a point of proudly calling her “boss” at every opportunity.

Inside, DUM-E was still picking up pieces of rubble. Pepper wondered what it had done this time to earn the dunce cap. She made her way downstairs, intrigued by the delicious smells. What kind of food had Tony ordered? She walked into the workshop and froze. Instead of Tony, Thor, and probably James, she found only one unfamiliar black-haired man in strange green and black clothes with gold trim, standing next to a table piled with food.

“Uh...JARVIS?” said Pepper nervously. Immediately, there was a loud squeaking sound, and she looked around in time to see a small animal pelting towards her. She shrieked and jumped back. It stopped in its tracks, and maybe she was losing it, but she could have sworn it looked hurt by her reaction.

“Good afternoon, Miss Potts,” said JARVIS.

“What the hell is going on?” said Pepper.

“What the hell is going on?” said Pepper.

“Mr. Odinson seems to have turned Mr. Stark into a flying squirrel.”

Chapter End Notes

Google the chapter title. Right now. Do it.

*irritatingly smug face* Okay, you can drag me all you want for that pun but I will never be sorry.

I'm not sure I'd recommend googling about Loki's game of tug-of-war with a goat, but I won't stop you. Norse Mythology is extremely weird.

I had a hard time writing Tony and Loki's conversation (which I really wanted to end with Loki turning Tony into a flying squirrel), but then it occurred to me that an elitist society with few problems, like Asgard, might not think to pursue all possible lines of inquiry about an ability they've always had, and that's why Tony was able to break Loki's brain. He's going to have some serious research to do when he gets home.
My headcanon for the difference between the magic human sorcerers use and magic like Loki's is that seidr is something you have to be born with, and it's some kind of energy supplied by the person and magnified by the the world they're on. A human sorcerer, on the other hand, has no innate power. They have to learn how to draw from and command dimensional energy, which requires them to learn the kind of theory that the Aesir have never needed to think about. This, to me, accounts for why Stephen Strange could get the better of Loki after only a couple of years at best as a sorcerer. He has far less raw power because none of it comes from himself, but his more detailed understanding of the mechanics and the governing principles at work is a serious advantage. The element of surprise didn't hurt either.

I'm almost positive there's only one chapter left until we head back to Asgard.
Pepper stared at the squirrel, her mouth falling open. She should probably be freaking out, but she found that after the madness of the last two weeks, she simply didn’t have the energy for it. She looked warily at the man standing across the room, who still hadn’t so much as glanced at her. “Are you Loki Odinson?” Tony had found out some information about Thor and his brother since the showdown at the Expo, and this man certainly wasn’t the Mr. Odinson she had already met.

He finally looked around. “What? Oh, yes.” He seemed very distracted. “And your name, good lady?”

This chivalry in the face of the squirrel sitting on the floor in front of her, tail and whiskers quivering, made everything even more surreal. “Uh. Pepper Potts. I’m the CEO of Stark Industries.”

Considering that she had no idea why Tony was now a squirrel, she decided against mentioning her personal involvement with him.

“My brother mentioned you when he told me of the battle at the Stark Expo. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“You too,” said Pepper, closing her eyes in the hopes that maybe when she opened them again, everything would make sense. It did not. “You—you turned Tony into a flying squirrel?”

“I did.”

“And...uh...why did...you do that?”

“He was talking.”

Tony the squirrel gave an indignant squeak.

“Don’t worry; the spell is harmless,” said Loki. “I’ve already explained that to him, which is why he’s no longer chattering incessantly and gnawing on my boot.”

Pepper sighed and walked forward. “You know,” she said, bending down and carefully scooping Tony up, “there are a lot of people who probably wish they could turn him into a small animal, including a few generals and at least one senator. This is just the first time he’s met someone who could actually do it.”

Pepper scratched Tony lightly behind his ears. He seemed to enjoy it, but as soon as she was close to the food table, he jumped out of her hands and landed beside the salad, from which he snatched a crouton and began munching on it. He had soon filled his cheeks with pieces of crouton, and once his paws were free, he jumped and glided over to his disassembled suit. Pepper stood next to Loki and watched Tony struggle to maneuver a small screwdriver (that was almost the full length of his body) towards something on the gauntlet of his suit.

Even after spending the last few days with the Odinsons, Coulson still would have bet on Colonel Rhodes to win the race. It was still difficult to imagine a man flying by hammer at all even though he had witnessed it, but breaking the sound barrier was something else entirely. And yet, after about ten
minutes of soaring out over the ocean, Thor beat Rhodes back to the clifftop by a full ten seconds, a huge grin on his face.

“Damn,” said Rhodes, opening his mask. “Even with the lightning boost, I still couldn’t catch you. How do you do that?”

Thor laughed. “It was a worthy contest, Rhodes, but I’ve been flying far longer than you.”

“So this is Thor?” said Mr. Hogan, who had stood beside Coulson with his hands cupped around his eyes to block out the sun as he tried to watch the race. Coulson watched Thor go through another jovial introduction that soon had Mr. Hogan looking less grumpy than the S.H.I.E.L.D agent had ever seen him. Thor was really a ridiculously easy guy to like. Coulson was glad he’d beaten Sitwell to the attaché assignment, and not just because he no longer had to babysit a billionaire pain in the ass as a result.

The four of them made their way inside the house and down to the workshop, where Coulson frowned at the sight of Miss Potts standing next to Loki. They both had their arms folded and their heads tilted to the side, staring intently at the suit Stark had been working on when everyone else left for the race.

“Hey, Pepper. What’s going on? Where’s Tony?” said Rhodes, while Mr. Hogan made straight for the food table.

Neither Miss Potts nor Loki answered, and Thor, Rhodes, Hogan, and Coulson all followed their gazes to...a squirrel that appeared to be attaching wires to a circuit board beneath the outer armor layer of a piece of the Iron Man suit. Coulson didn’t know a whole lot about rodents, but he was pretty sure they were usually more interested in chewing through wires than clipping them into place.

“What the hell?” said Hogan.

“Loki...,” said Thor. He sounded both stern and apprehensive.

“What?” said Loki. He sounded both defiant and amused.

It all clicked together, and Coulson let out a peal of laughter that made Hogan, Rhodes, and Miss Potts all jump, but he couldn’t stop. He didn’t think he’d ever laughed harder in his life. Tears streamed down his face and his ribs ached. Tony Stark was a flying squirrel. This was the best day of his life.

“I don’t get it,” said Hogan. “What’s so funny?”

“Change him back,” said Thor.

“Why?” said Loki. “I think he’s making better progress with those little paws than he would otherwise at the moment. I would hate to impede his work.”

“Wait...,” said Rhodes. “Are you saying that’s Tony?”

With a long-suffering sigh, Loki waved a hand in the squirrel’s direction. Green-gold light shone around his fingers before engulfing the small creature and growing rapidly into the shape of an adult man, and then Tony Stark was standing there amid pieces of his suit, looking exactly as he had when Coulson had left with Thor and Rhodes.

Rhodes and Hogan yelled and jumped back. Coulson, who had nearly regained his composure by that point, fell victim to a second wave of hysterical laughter. Miss Potts looked like she was trying
not to do the same.

Stark himself was glowering at Loki. “Not cool, dude. Couldn’t you see I was in the middle of something?”

“I told you,” said Loki to Thor, who rolled his eyes.

“And you’re okay?” said Miss Potts, closing the short distance between them and running her hands over his shoulders and upper arms.

“I’m fine.” He blinked hard and looked around. “Squirrel vision kinda sucks. Not gonna miss that.”

X

To Thor’s surprise and relief, Stark took Loki’s prank fairly well. Far better, in fact, than had Thor himself or any of their friends on Asgard, each of whom had fallen victim to a similar spell at various times over the centuries. Unlike them, Stark apparently found the experience too interesting to be humiliated by it, no matter how hard the son of Coul had laughed at him.

They stayed a while longer, until everyone had eaten their fill of the excellent food and drink, and when it came time to part company, they did so in good spirits.

“Don’t get too cocky about that race,” said Rhodes. “I expect a rematch the next time you’re on Earth.”

“Of course,” said Thor, grinning. “I will be happy to win again.”

“Oh, I see how it is,” said Rhodes, chuckling. “Tony, you better make me a faster suit so I can teach this guy a lesson.”

“I let you borrow a hand-me-down one time and now you expect me to make you a suit? I’ve created a monster,” said Stark. He turned to Loki. “You find out those answers about how magic works, you better come tell me.”

“I will,” said Loki. “I am glad to have met you, Anthony Stark.”

“Thanks,” said Stark. “Never thought I’d hear that from a guy who turned me into a squirrel. You gotta work on your friendly overtures.”

Loki laughed—a sound Thor had heard far too rarely of late. “You are not the first to tell me so.”

X

“You can’t be serious, Nick” said Pierce.

“Oh, I am very serious,” said Fury.

“Not only are you going to let these guys take Bruce Banner with them, you’re going to hand over one of the only other things we’ve got that we could use against hostile aliens?”

“They’ve already proven that they can wipe the floor with the best fighters Earth has, and that’s only two of them. The cube wouldn’t be enough, and they know more about it than we do. We can either give it to them and hope they make good on their promises to protect this planet, or we can hold onto it and hope that Thor was lying about it being a magnet for world-destroying alien warlords. Except that we can’t really hope he was lying, because that would mean he and Loki are the world-destroying alien warlords. It’s our only way forward, Pierce.”
“You’re taking an awful lot on faith.”

Fury gave a grim chuckle. “What else can we do when we’re dealing with gods?”

“And what does Earth get out of this except protection from a vague future threat?”

“I’m not sure we can really call it ‘vague’ after all the intel they gave us on Thanos and Malekith and their armies, and I’d think protection from very real future threats we can’t hope to defend against on our own would be worth quite a lot.”

“We still have no actual proof they didn’t just make these threats up to manipulate us. They hold all the cards.”

“For now,” said Fury. “I have something in mind that might put a few cards in our hand. How they react to it should tell us a lot.”

The morning brought with it a message for Thor and Loki from Heimdall that the Queen expected Odin to awaken by that evening. Coulson was visibly crestfallen when they told him this might be their last day on Earth for a while. He brought them to the same briefing room as before, where they found Fury waiting for them again. There was a large silver briefcase on the table in front of him.

“I’ve decided to grant your request,” said Fury. He opened the briefcase, the contents of which bathed his face with blue light. He turned it to face them, revealing the Tesseract. Even though this was the outcome Thor had hoped for, he had to fight a sudden impulse to take the thing and hurl it into the nearest star. Was he mad to want the Tesseract on Asgard, to serve as bait for Thanos like the Aether had been for Malekith? Perhaps. But mad or not, it was the right thing to do. It should be Asgard’s fight, not Earth’s.

“Thank you,” he said. “We will do everything in our power to live up to the trust you have placed in us.”

“That’s good!” said Fury with a trace of sardonic humor. “I thought you might start today.”

“How so?” said Loki— if not enthusiastically, at least politely.

“I want to send a few extra people with you. A delegation from Earth so that we can begin broadening our understanding of the universe.”

“Of course,” said Thor, smiling. “We will welcome them gladly.” He hoped Fury wouldn’t inadvertently send any Hydra agents, but they would be so outmatched by even Aesir children that they would hardly pose a threat anyway.

“How many will you send?” said Loki—if not enthusiastically, at least politely.

“On a more long-term basis, just three, but if you’ll agree to it, I’d like two SHIELD agents to be able to come and go as needed.”

“That sounds reasonable enough,” said Thor.

Fury touched a button on the table. “You can come in now.”

The conference room door opened, and Thor froze at the sight of the three people walking into the room.
“See, Darcy?” Jane hissed. “I told you they didn’t fly us all the way over here just to shoot us.”

“There’s still time,” said Darcy. “Hey Thor, Loki.”

They both nodded at her. Erik stood behind the two women, looking like he couldn’t decide whether to be eager or wary.

A heavy sort of numbness swept over Thor. This Jane, who neither knew him nor cared for him, was going to be coming to Asgard to stay for the mortal equivalent of a long-term basis?

“I spoke with Dr. Foster on the phone last night,” said Fury. “Asked if she’d like an opportunity to take her studies to a place where the subject matter is a little less theoretical.”

“I don’t want to be a burden,” said Jane, turning to Thor and Loki, “but this would be such an incredible opportunity. I mean, I never even imagined—”

“You could never be a burden,” said Thor hoarsely. He forced a smile, though he felt like he’d been stabbed in the heart. “Any of you,” he added, smiling at Darcy and Erik too.

“Good, ‘cause this is gonna be worth so much more than six credits,” said Darcy. “Lauren Harwood in my Intercultural Comms class can take that U.N. internship and shove it up—”

Erik cut her off with a nervous cough, his eyes on Fury, who only seemed amused.

“What do I need to do to send my agents to you in a couple weeks or so?”

“Call for Heimdall,” said Loki. “He will let us know, and then we or someone else will come to escort them to a Bifrost site.”

“Can’t they just stand in one of the sites we’ve already seen you use?”

“I suppose they could,” said Thor.

“It may still be easier for them if an Aesir guide accompanies them, at least the first time,” said Loki. “It is not an especially tranquil mode of travel, and as you have seen, they will need to stand in precisely the right place in order to arrive in one piece.”

The apprehension on Erik’s face was intensifying, but Jane was practically bouncing up and down with excitement.

“We’ll take the guide,” said Fury.

“If that’s all,” said Loki, “I should find Banner and see if he’s made his decision.”

X

Every time Bruce felt tempted to believe he’d only imagined meeting the actual Thor and Loki, all he had to do was look in the mirror at his unfamiliar blue-eyed, angular-featured face. It must be a face people could trust, because it hadn’t been too hard for him to land a dishwashing job at a shabby diner, even though he’d been wearing slightly ill-fitting clothing he’d stolen from an unattended hamper at a laundromat when he applied. It was also bizarre how much of a difference four inches of additional height could make to his vantage point, considering that he regularly grew several feet.

Washing dishes for hours on end gave him plenty of time to think. Wouldn’t you like to be able to stop running, at least for a little while? Stop running. Stop working shit jobs just to stay fed. Stop wondering when something would set him off. It was a mark of how bad the last few years had been...
that choosing between going on the way he had ever since the accident and letting himself be abducted by aliens didn’t really feel like much of a choice at all.

His shift ended and he went back to his water-damaged, possibly bedbug-infested motel room. It was in exactly the same condition as when he’d left that morning, which confirmed his suspicions that the custodial staff was nonexistent. He turned to hook the chain in place and turn the deadbolt. When he faced the room again, he nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Good evening, Dr. Banner,” said Loki.

“God!” Bruce yelped. “Was that necessary?”

“Probably not,” said Loki. “But it was fun. Have you decided? Will you be coming with us to Asgard or remaining...” He looked around, taking in the flickering light, the scuffed furniture, and the blotches in the wallpaper. “...Here?”

Bruce couldn’t even feel offended by Loki turning his nose up at his accommodations. They were pretty bad. He laughed. “I can’t believe I’m doing this, but what the hell. I don’t really have anything else to lose. I might as well become the first human to see another world.”

“You won’t be,” said Loki, “but that’s the spirit!”

“What?” said Bruce.

“Come along,” said Loki, brushing past him and undoing the lock and chain. “The Bifrost site isn’t far.”

Bruce opened his mouth to protest that he needed to collect his stuff, but then he remembered that the only things he had to his name were a toothbrush and a disposable razor, so he shrugged, tossed the room key on the nightstand, and followed the alien prince out into the crumbling parking lot.

Chapter End Notes

I had lots of different ideas about how Pepper would react to squirrel Tony, but I couldn't get any of them off the ground. Then it occurred to me that she might just be too tired from the events of IM2 for anything more than the John Mulaney "This might as well happen" reaction. Which ended up being the perfect fit. And yes, Loki mentally punched the air in triumph upon causing Coulson to roll around laughing. He's been hoping to get some kind of extreme reaction out of him this whole time.

Oh look, I figured out what to do with Jane, Darcy, and Erik! They will likely still be fairly minor figures in this fic, but I wasn't happy with the idea of shelving them completely when I could instead mine them for angst.

Any guesses on which two SHIELD agents will be the Asgardian liaisons? (It's probably going to be more of a cameo situation than a substantial plot thread, but who knows?)

Okay, now that the Earth field trip is over, it's time for some House of Odin Family Drama™. *cracks knuckles* This should be fun.
“So how does this, uh, Bifrost thing work?” said Banner. He looked like himself again, and he was wringing his hands together and casting glances all around. As accustomed to the Bifrost as Loki was, it was hard to imagine anyone being nervous about traveling by it. What did Banner have to fear? He wasn’t the one about to have a conversation with his parents that had resulted in his attempted suicide in another timeline. Loki had done his best to keep his thoughts on Midgard these past few days, and he had largely succeeded, but the reprieve was over. He had not the faintest idea what this terrible secret could be, and dread was pooling sickeningly in his stomach. This would be so much easier if he was the sort of man who could tolerate being aware a secret existed without knowing the secret itself.

“It’s quite simple. We stand in a certain spot, and then Heimdall will open the Bifrost to pull us to Asgard. The entire journey will take but moments.” This time, the Bifrost site was located on a patch of grass to the side of the road, about a mile from the shabby inn where Banner had been staying.

“Huh, so it’s kind of a ‘Beam me up, Scotty’ type thing?”

Loki frowned at him.

“Oh, sorry, I guess you don’t get a lot of Earth entertainment.”

“Our visits in the past were somewhat infrequent,” said Loki. “Though in my adolescence, I did rather enjoy a few of your plays.”

“What does it feel like?”

“What?” said Loki, who had been reminiscing about performing before a crowd of excitable mortals. Such a shame their lives were so short. Only a few decades in which to create before death claimed them. Loki doubted anyone on this planet remembered the brilliant playwright or any of his delightful works four centuries later.

“The Bifrost,” said Banner.

Loki could have told him plainly that the Bifrost felt exactly as it looked: an exhilarating rush across the stars. However, his own mounting anxiety was such that he did not feel particularly inclined to relieve Banner’s. In fact, he rather preferred to do the opposite. “It’s not remotely painful, at least for an Aesir. I couldn’t say what it’s like for a mortal.”

Alarm flashed over Banner’s face. Loki pretended not to notice.

Jane, Darcy, and Erik all staggered into the Observatory with Thor. Jane had seized Thor’s arm to steady herself, and he tried not to react to the thrill of electricity set off by her touch. As soon as she had regained her balance, he moved a step away from her. She appeared oblivious, as she, like her companions, was already too busy staring open-mouthed at her surroundings.

“Welcome to Asgard,” said Heimdall. His smile was more sincere than when Thor had brought Jane home with him the day before Malekith’s attack, which boded well. “Lady Sif and the Warriors
Three are coming to greet you, and they’re bringing horses enough for all of you to ride. The Queen will be coming as well.”

“You ride horses?” said Darcy.

“Of course,” said Thor. “Asgardian steeds are highly intelligent and superior to any mechanical land vehicle. We have our longships for when we must travel by sea or air.”

Erik let out an incredulous laugh, and Thor smiled. How strange it must be to find that all the stories one grew up with as a child turned out to be true in some fashion. He turned to Heimdall. “Loki and Banner?” Erik perked up at this. In the hours since Fury unveiled his plan to send the three humans to Asgard in a formal diplomatic capacity, Thor had learned that Erik was already acquainted with Banner from before. Possibly a connection from one of those PhDs. Thor hoped it would make Asgard feel a little more familiar for both of them.

“They’ve reached their Bifrost site,” said Heimdall. He turned Hofund very slightly in the plinth, and the gears of the Observatory shifted around them. Jane watched the movements, eyes alight with eager curiosity.

X

“This is the spot,” said Loki.

Sweat glistened on Banner’s forehead and he was fidgeting worse than ever. His only response was a nod.

“Would you like me to hold your hand?”

“What? No.”

“I could assume the form of Dr. Ross again.”

“I’m fine!”

“As long as you’re certain.”

“Stop trying to annoy me into forgetting that I’m about to travel to another planet inside a beam of energy powerful enough to cut me in half,” Banner snapped. “It’s not helping.”

X

Heimdall activated the Bifrost with a downward push, and the brilliant beams of energy roared out into space. “All of you, move to the side, quickly,” he said.

Thor frowned. They were hardly standing directly in the way as it was, but Heimdall was not to be gainsaid, so he ushered the three mortals as far as they could get from the Bifrost without moving towards the exit. No sooner had they done so than Loki hit the Observatory at a dead sprint as though the tails of his coat were on fire. “Help!”

The answer to Thor’s question arrived before he could ask it: the Hulk barrelled out of the Bifrost, his enraged eyes fixed on Loki. Heimdall stepped deftly to the side, allowing the green beast to pass him.

“Loki, what happened?” Thor yelled as he ran after his brother and the Hulk.

He started transforming as soon as we were caught up in it.”

“You know, Brother,” said Thor, “for someone so clever, you can be kind of an idiot sometimes.”

He took advantage of Hulk’s hesitation as he realized how foreign his surroundings were to leap up on his back and get him in a choke hold using Mjolnir.

“How else would I know I’m related to you?” Loki retorted, having now gained enough distance from the Hulk (who was roaring his displeasure and grabbing at Thor, trying to rip him off his back) to wheel around and prepare to enter the fray on his own terms. Sif, Fandral, Hogun, and Volstagg were only a hundred yards or so ahead of them on the bridge, and they had left the horses behind to come and help.

The Queen of Asgard was eager to see her sons again. She had periodically watched over them from Hlidskjalf in between attending to her many duties as regent, but such distant glimpses were not enough, intriguing as they were.

Having spent the better part of a millennium making sure her two incredibly gifted boys didn’t get themselves killed doing something foolish (easily as difficult an endeavor as ruling a kingdom), it was not entirely a surprise when the first she saw of them on the Rainbow Bridge was a large green creature tossing them, Sif, and the Warriors Three about like dolls. As she watched, Hogun and Volstagg tumbled off the bridge into the sea below. Her Einherjar guard tightened their grips on their weapons, but she merely sighed and shook her head. “Send for a longship to fish our brave warriors out of the water,” she said.

She continued to watch the scuffle. She knew from what she had observed from Hlidskjalf that the green creature was an ally, but she had never seen such an undisciplined fighting style. The longer she watched, the more he looked like...like a child. A rather large child who didn’t know his strength, who lacked the words words to convey his distress and was left to attempt to do so through destruction instead. She dismounted lightly from Gyllir and began walking, weaving her seidr into the groundwork for a spell she hadn’t used in about nine centuries. “Hold,” she said when the Einherjar made to follow her.

“Are you quite sure this brute is your friend?” grunted Fandral as he ducked one of Hulk’s fists. “He doesn’t seem to like you very much.”

“If we can just get him to calm down, he’ll return to his mortal form and I can introduce you properly,” said Thor, using Mjolnir to block a large green elbow.

“And I suppose doing battle with him is how we calm him down?” said Sif sarcastically. She was the only one Hulk had failed to strike thus far, but it was not for his lack of trying.

Thor caught sight of Darcy standing with her phone pointed at them from the threshold of the Observatory. Jane and Erik stood on either side of her, both looking horrified. In the second he had taken to look, Hulk, having swatted through simulacrum after simulacrum, finally caught the real Loki around the middle and hurled him off the bridge the same as he had done to Hogun and Volstagg.

The sight of Loki falling from the Rainbow Bridge had Thor reacting without thinking. Some part of his brain knew that he would land safely in the water like their friends, where he would be in even less danger than they thanks to his shapeshifting abilities, but that part barely registered. He
abandoned the fight without a backward glance, spinning Mjolnir and leaping after his brother. He caught him before he hit the water and flew back up to the bridge.

Loki, who had been in the middle of protesting at Thor’s manner of carrying him about, froze, eyes wide. When Thor saw what he was looking at, he did the same. Their mother was walking, completely unarmed, along the gleaming crystal towards the Hulk, who noticed this at roughly the same moment they did. After knocking Sif and Fandral off their feet, he let out an inarticulate roar and began lumbering her way. Frigga’s only reaction was to continue walking closer, her expression utterly serene. A moment later, she began to sing. Thor’s brow furrowed. It was a song he recognized dimly from his early childhood.

Far more bewildering than the sound of the familiar lullaby was Hulk’s reaction. His gait faltered and slowed, his arms lowered, and his fists unclenched, leaving him standing before the Queen of Asgard, almost docile. She smiled up at him and laid a hand over his heart. “You needn’t be frightened, little one,” she said. “You are safe here.”

Thor exchanged a disgruntled glance with Loki, who also seemed taken aback at the sight of their mother treating the one who’d been flinging her own sons about seconds before like he was a small child in need of comfort, never mind that it was actually working.

This time, when Bruce came to himself, it was to find a smiling middle-aged woman with golden curls cascading over one shoulder and a richly embroidered dress that fell to the tops of her shoes standing in front of him, pressing something into his hands.

“M-ma’am?” he said. He looked around and had to do a double-take at just about everything. The bridge of multicolored crystal, the golden city in the distance, the breathtaking evening sky that was already more full of stars than even the clearest night on Earth. This must be Asgard. Panic seized him. The entire purpose of coming here was so that he wouldn’t have to be a danger to anyone anymore, but the Other Guy had just ruined his first impression.

“You have nothing to fear, good man,” said the woman as if she had read his mind. (Had she?) “You may have wounded the pride of a few of Asgard’s finest warriors just now, my sons included, but I’m sure they will recover.” She had turned her smile to something over his shoulder, and he spun around. Thor and Loki were there, looking kinda rumpled, as well as a man and a woman in armor and two more men who were sopping wet and climbing out of a flying boat onto the glittering bridge. A little ways behind them, he saw a few more people, and he had to do yet another double-take. Erik Selvig? He hadn’t seen his colleague since before the botched experiment. What the hell was he doing here? Suddenly very conscious of the number of eyes on him as he stood there in nothing but another pair of tattered pants, he fumbled with the fabric he was holding. It was some kind of cream-colored tunic with golden embroidery like Celtic knots along the hems. He pulled it on.

“Thor, Loki?” said the woman. “Will you introduce me to your guests?”

While Hogun and Volstagg left to change into dry armor and Frigga returned to Odin’s bedside, Thor, Loki, Sif, and Fandral showed the four humans to their guest chambers in the palace, a cluster of four rooms in a corridor near the library. It took approximately five seconds for Fandral to start flirting with Darcy, who plainly had no objections whatsoever. Jane was so excited to get to the library that Erik had to remind her that they needed to eat first.
The eight of them, soon joined by Hogun and Volstagg, dined in one of the smaller banquet halls. Seeing so many of his friends together in one place lifted Thor’s spirits greatly. As they ate, he regaled them all with the tales of his and Loki’s adventures on Earth. He was careful to give Loki plenty of room to tell his side of things as well and to give him credit for what he had done. However, he couldn’t help noticing that even as Loki spoke animatedly and smiled at everyone, he barely touched his food. After their account caught back up to the present, Volstagg took over as storyteller, entertaining the humans by describing his favorite acts of heroism from centuries past. About five minutes into this, Loki slipped away from the table. Thor set down his goblet and followed.

When Thor caught up to Loki at a balcony overlooking Mother’s garden, surprise flashed briefly over the latter’s face before he could mask it, and Thor felt a pang of regret for all the times he had not gone after his brother when he went off alone from a social setting. “I made you a promise,” he said. “I mean to keep it. As soon as Father wakes, we will speak to him.”

“I never doubted you,” said Loki, picking absently at his hands. “It was a good distraction, Midgard. I didn’t have to think about what was coming. But now we’re home, and I am at once desperately curious and terribly afraid to know the secret that, in another life, was my undoing.”

“It was not only the secret,” said Thor, trying to convince himself as much as Loki. “It was everything surrounding it. Father was in the Odinsleep, Mother was tending to him, and I was banished. You were left alone, unexpectedly on the throne and unjustly suspected of placing yourself there for lust of power, with the war I started against Jotunheim to deal with. This time, none of that has happened, and you will not be alone.”

“But how could I seek my own destruction under any circumstances? Am I so weak that—”

“You are not weak,” Thor interrupted. “Or if you are, it is a weakness I share.”

“What are you talking about?” said Loki irritably, as though the very idea of Thor being weak in any way were ludicrous.

“It was not merely Thanos’s destruction I sought after he murdered you in front of me, Brother,” said Thor. “You were all I had left, and we had finally begun to repair what was broken between us, and then I was suddenly facing four thousand years alone, my family and most of my friends dead, king of a refugee people on the brink of extinction. Thrice in those two days, I stared death in the face and would have welcomed it. I clung to your body instead of seeking escape when Thanos blasted our ship to pieces around me. I took on all the power of Nidavellir to forge the weapon to kill him. After I cleaved his head from his shoulders with it, I held the Time Stone in my fist until it tore me apart. It is not by my own doing that I still live.”

Loki stared at him, looking stricken. Thor smiled. “I cannot say for certain what went through your mind in the other timeline. We never discussed it. But I think in that moment you believed there was no other way to escape what you had learned and what you thought it meant. Perhaps it was only that you were already dangling over an abyss that allowed such an idea to take hold of you. Perhaps you would have dismissed it easily standing on firm ground. I like to think so.”

A low, croaky call sounded from somewhere above them, and they looked up to see two winged silhouettes against the star-filled sky, flapping their way closer. “Father’s summons,” said Loki.

Thor reached up to grip the back of Loki’s neck. The two ravens alighted on the balustrade and looked at the princes expectantly. “Tell him we will be right there,” said Thor. Hugin bobbed his head and Munin gave another croak, and they both took flight.
The original plan was to get right to the family drama, but then I was struck by the mental image of Loki fleeing out of the Bifrost, the Hulk hot on his heels. It was too funny to pass up, especially because it provided the opportunity to have Frigga defeat the Hulk with her Mom powers, which I was already hoping to find a place for. I like to think that most of the trouble Loki got into before the events of the films happened when he was bored, because that's when his skills for reasonable, strategic planning go out the window.

Couldn't resist making Loki a Shakespeare fan in this fic too. Unfortunately, Bruce was too nervous to realize what Loki was alluding to, otherwise Loki would have explained that he was one of Shakespeare's actors (and probably the inspiration for Puck) when he was a teenager. On a related note, this might be my new favorite chapter title.

The first scene I wrote for this chapter was Thor's conversation with Loki at the end, and I don't think any other scene has been so emotional to write. It's clear enough watching Infinity War that Thor didn't care whether he lived or died, but writing about that from Thor's own perspective, and having it be what helps him understand Loki's attempted suicide, hit me really hard.
Thor and Loki made their way up to the royal apartments near the top of the palace. They didn’t exactly drag their feet, but neither did they make anything resembling haste. Every Odinsleep Thor could remember except one had ended in the same manner: with the whole family gathering together in the king’s study to prepare for the following day, when Odin would resume the throne. The study was a far less formal setting than the throne room or the council chambers. It was large and circular. Braziers alternated with bookcases all along the walls, and endless knotwork intertwined across nearly every gilded surface. Opposite the door was a wide balcony that overlooked everything from the palace steps to Heimdall’s Observatory, and on either side of the room were two spacious raised alcoves. The one on the left housed a hnefatafl table and a loom; the right, a massive desk heaped with books and loose parchment, where Odin did most of his work when he wasn’t sitting on Hlidskjalf. At the center of the room was a sunken fire pit surrounded by a carpet of furs and four heavy, lavish sofas.

At the princes’ entrance, Geri and Freki leapt up from where they had been curled on the furs and dashed over to greet them, ears perked up, tails wagging madly, and tongues lolling out. Even though Thor was now facing the most important conversation he would ever force his family to have, he couldn’t help smiling at the wolves and scratching their ears, though they soon abandoned him for Loki, who had produced out of thin air several large pieces of meat still warm from the banquet hall.

Odin and Frigga stood on the balcony, and they turned as Thor and Loki approached and stopped a couple of the wide steps below them. “Your mother tells me much has happened while I slept,” said Odin. “It must be true, for how else would the palace have acquired four mortals as guests?”

As with Heimdall, this was a better reaction than when Thor had brought Jane alone, though Odin did not sound exactly pleased—more that he was waiting to hear a very good explanation before he decided whether or not to be displeased. Perhaps mortals were only unwelcome when the Crown Prince was courting one.

“It is time for Asgard to expand its alliances,” said Thor.

“Alliances?” said Odin. “Asgard has protected Midgard for millennia. What would be the value in any closer an alliance than that when there is nothing the humans can offer us?”

“I think they may surprise us, Father,” said Loki. “One of the four we brought can match Thor in battle.”

Odin raised his eyebrows.

“I would’ve won,” Thor grumbled.

“Of course you would,” said Loki.

“I was going easy on him!”

“Boys,” said Frigga, looking amused.

“And what prompted this sudden desire for an alliance?” said Odin. “When last we spoke, Thor, you
could do little but rage and storm about repaying the Jotnar for their supposed act of war.”

“I have no quarrel with the Jotnar. I would have them for allies as well.”

Both of his parents stared at him in blank shock, and he could feel the same reaction from his brother, even though this wasn’t the first time Loki had heard him voice the idea.

“Can this be my son who speaks?” said Odin. His brow furrowed and his gaze grew more intent. “What has happened to you? You are not as you were.”

“No, I am not,” Thor agreed. “But before I tell you all, I would have you know that what I say is for the good of Asgard, the nine realms, and this family.” He lifted Mjolnir off the hook at his side and held it out to his father, handle first. “There is a spell to prevent any from wielding Mjolnir who are not worthy of it. I want you to cast it.”

“Thor,” said Frigga. She stepped forward and clasped his arm. “You do not need to prove yourself to us.”

“Thank you, Mother,” said Thor, covering her fingers with his free hand, “but I would leave no room for doubt. What I have to say will not be easy to hear.”

“Very well,” said Odin. Frigga moved to stand by Loki’s other side. Odin lifted a hand, and Mjolnir flew into his grasp. Without taking his eye from Thor, he held the hammer to his lips, and the swell of power emanating from him made all the fires in the study dim. “Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor.”

He let Mjolnir fall onto the step between them with an echoing thud, a gleaming triquetra now emblazoned on its head.

As Thor bent down and reached for the handle, he had a moment to wonder if he had just doomed himself. Since he last wielded a Mjolnir enchanted with the worthiness spell, he had helped destroy Asgard and his sister and he had failed to save his brother, Heimdall, and half of his surviving people from Thanos. He closed his hand around it and lifted. When Mjolnir came up off the floor as easily as usual, he felt a surprising tightening in his throat. His eyes fell briefly closed. He was still worthy. He hooked the hammer back on his belt and resumed his place beside Loki.

“You could not have done that five days ago,” said Odin.

“If you knew that, then why did you want to make me regent?” said Thor.

“I didn’t,” said Odin. “My misgivings were such that I put off the Odinsleep as long as I could. However, I came to hope the experience might do you more good than it would do Asgard harm, and I was reassured to know you would have had your mother and brother to intervene if you attempted anything truly foolish.”

Thor felt Loki shift next to him. He suspected that Loki had thought Odin blind to his eldest son’s faults, which was why he had resorted to such elaborate schemes to disrupt the coronation.

“Will you tell us now what has happened to you?” said Frigga.

“I will,” said Thor. “Five days ago, I held the Time Stone in my hand, and it sent me eight years into the past, to the night of my coronation.”

Frigga’s hand flew to her mouth.
“Why would you do such a thing?” said Odin. He looked astonished. “Time is not to be meddled with lightly.”

Thor shrugged. “I wasn’t trying to come back, but I had nothing left to lose. I had already watched all three of you die and Asgard blasted into rubble.” At this, Frigga clutched at Loki, who put an arm around her and murmured something reassuring in her ear. “There were perhaps two thousand Aesir left alive when I picked up the Stone.”

“Then Ragnarok is upon us,” breathed Odin. “How?”

“Ragnarok was not the problem,” said Thor. “Loki and I had no choice but to unleash Surtur in order to defeat Hela.”

“Hela?” said Frigga. She looked sharply at her husband. “When you came back from Niflheim, you told me she was dead. You promised me she would never escape to harm our sons!”

If Odin had not been fresh from the Odinsleep, Thor thought he might have collapsed where he stood. As it was, he still swayed a little and seemed to age visibly before Thor’s eyes. “It was my intent to slay her. I could not do it. For all her crimes, she is still my daughter, Frigga, and I made her what she is.”

“Then even Mother didn’t know?” said Thor. “Why did you never tell us about her? She is so strong, and we had no time to prepare.” Anger burned sudden and hot in his veins. The intensity of it surprised him. Dark clouds were even gathering outside, obscuring the stars. “Was she meant to remain locked up and forgotten forever, or have you always known that your death would release her, and didn’t care because she would no longer be your problem?”

“You know not of what you speak,” said Odin, bristling. “You haven’t seen what I have. You don’t—”

“I see with perfect clarity,” Thor interrupted, his voice near shouting now, punctuated by a flash of lightning and a crack of thunder. “What makes that easier is that my sister hasn’t yet had the chance to slash out one of my eyes!” This startled Odin enough that some of the anger left his face. “How were we supposed to stop her when you’ve pretended she doesn’t exist for our entire lives?”

“I have pretended nothing.”

“No? Then if I take Mjolnir to the throne room now and hurl it at the ceiling, I would not reveal images of an older, bloodier age beneath the paintings of a peaceful, benevolent Realm Eternal?”

“Asgard is not the same as it was then.”

“You can’t just paint over something you’re ashamed of and pretend it never happened!” said Thor, flinging out his hands.

“And I have not. The new images are as true as the old, and they show what Asgard has become. For the better part of two millennia, Asgard has rebuilt many of the civilizations it destroyed during my father’s reign and the first part of mine. We have only interfered where we were needed. We have built strong ties with former enemies—the Ljosalfar, the Dvergar, the Vanir. And we even have alliances that extend beyond Yggdrasil, where once we thought to lead our conquering armies.”

“That is all very well,” said Thor, “but how did you expect us to rule justly and well if we only knew half of our own history?”

“Can you tell me honestly that I had no reason to fear that learning the truth of Asgard’s conquest of
the nine realms might have inspired more pride and battle-lust in you than humility and compassion?”

Thor had no response to this. Shame pooled within him at the memories of his thoughtless, warmongering youth. He could not say with confidence that growing up with Hela as a cautionary tale would have done him much good.

Odin turned to face the balcony and rested his hands on it. “After Hela slaughtered the Valkyrior,” he said, “I went to Niflheim to end it once and for all, but I could not raise Gungnir against my own child. Instead, to curtail her power, I erased her from my people’s memory. There were many on Asgard who recalled the age of conquest too fondly and awaited the day when I would restore their crown princess. Without their support, she has never been able to attempt escape again.” He paused. “Perhaps it was fear, not wisdom, that led me to hide her even from you, but I hoped that if I raised you and your brother as differently as I could from how I raised Hela, it would be enough to keep you from becoming like her.”

“Is that also why you’ve never given me full access to my power?”

“Yes,” said Odin. The bald admission took Thor aback. “Power is a seductive thing, and you have more of it than most. My father raised me to believe that whoever had the most power deserved to rule over weaker creatures. It is difficult to see the evils of that reasoning when you have always always been the strongest. That is why I took steps to limit your abilities from an early age.”

“What made you see?” said Loki. All three of them looked at him. He had listened silently for several minutes, and Thor’s focus on Odin had blinded him to his brother’s reactions to everything they said. He still had his arm around Frigga, and he looked paler than usual, but it was impossible to tell what he was thinking. “Why stop conquering?”

“It was the Aesir-Vanir war,” said Frigga, glancing at Odin, who sighed heavily. “It is one thing to conquer alien realms, but it is another to turn around and conquer the very realm you came from a mere three generations ago.”

“In the beginning,” said Odin, “I believed it would be for the good of Vanaheim to come under Asgard’s rule. We were bringing our cousins into our prosperity, and they would thank us for it.” He laughed bitterly. “The Vanir disagreed, but it wasn’t until I saw Hela using the same brutal tactics against them that she had against less ambiguous enemies that my confidence in the justice of our campaign began to waver. That was also when I met Frigga.”

He smiled at her, and there was such adoration in his eye that Thor felt slightly embarrassed.

“King Fjorgynn sent her to negotiate with me, and her passionate arguments for her people built on my growing doubts until I could not pretend even to myself that Asgard was in the right. The war ended with our marriage, but Hela refused to accept it. When she realized that not only would we not be subjugating the Vanir, but we would not be moving forward with any more conquests for the foreseeable future, she tried to usurp me. She killed everyone in the palace that day. When she went for Frigga, I opened a gateway to Niflheim. There she has remained ever since. And yes, I did intend her to remain there after my death.”

Thor’s mind was reeling. All the pieces fit together, but they differed so much from what he had been taught since childhood. Common understanding of the Aesir-Vanir war was that it had been motivated mainly by disagreements over trade. Asgard had never been portrayed as blameless in his lessons, but their role had certainly been downplayed. He would need time to think about everything he had learned.

“You said you watched all three of us die,” said Frigga, her eyes on Loki. “If Odin’s death released
Hela, then was it she who—"

“No,” said Thor. Whatever remained of his anger drained away, replaced by old grief. “You were killed by a Dark Elf four years before Hela’s return.” At a noise of horrified outrage from Odin, he quickly elaborated. “I do not know whether Grandfather lied about their defeat or Malekith fooled him, but they have been lying in wait in their cloaked ships these five thousand years. They attacked when the Aether resurfaced. Loki nearly died avenging Mother, but it was the Mad Titan who killed him, mere weeks after we defeated Hela.”

Odin walked to one of the sofas around the fire and sank onto it, running his hands over his face. Geri and Freki shuffled close to his feet, making soft whimpering sounds, but he ignored them. “Is this the legacy of Buri?” he asked. “Bor’s greatest enemy still lives, the demon that slew Vili and Vé still lives, Hela’s prison will fail, and Thanos returns.” He looked up at Thor. “The Norns must have sent you back to punish me for my failures.”

Thor held Odin’s gaze. He did not want to offer his father any comfort. These were indeed grievous failings, and he had already lived through their consequences. Perhaps he was a fool, but he hated to see the man he had looked up to all his life so defeated. “Or they sent me back to a time before it was too late to stop them from destroying everything,” he said. “That is why Loki and I went to Midgard, and it is why I want to ally with the Jotnar. With the right help, we can stop these things from happening. But before we can begin any of that, there is still the other secret you kept from us.”

Odin’s eye widened. Thor looked at Loki, who was now white as a sheet. “You owe Loki the truth. If you will not tell him, I will.”

Chapter End Notes

This was a really interesting chapter to write. Considering how respectful he always is in canon, I didn't expect Thor to be so angry with Odin, and that just kind of happened as I was writing it, which was really intense. It felt a lot like Thor's version of the scene with Loki and Odin in the Vault (except with Mom and little bro standing there watching it happen, obviously).

I think when I first thought about how I would handle this scene, I pictured it happening in the throne room, but once I got here, that didn't make sense. Odin just barely woke up, and it's evening. He wouldn't be back on the throne until the next day. That gave me a bit of a problem. I couldn't picture this taking place in a bedroom or a banquet hall, really. Eventually, I came up with this study, which looks really cool in my head. And I added Geri and Freki to it, because I love that Odin has pet wolves. Their names mean "greedy" and "ravenous," which sounds pretty scary on the surface, but it could also just be an exasperated/affectionate reference to the way they're constantly begging for scraps (like how Cerberus is a really intimidating sounding name, but it really just means "spotted one," which is my favorite thing in all of Greek mythology).

All the stuff about Hela and the Aesir-Vanir war is my headcanon to fill in some of the gaps and explain how Odin went from being a ruthless tyrant to being a benevolent king. Odin is a very complicated character, and I find him endlessly fascinating.
Loki thought he had already accepted and processed the revelation that he and Thor had a psychotic sister whom they would have to deal with in the near future, but it turned out that she was only the initial loose thread that would unravel the tapestry of everything he had understood about Asgard and the line of Buri. And yet all that buried history *still* was not the secret his parents had kept from him. What could it possibly be?

“You go too far!” said Odin. His voice seemed to come from a great distance.

“Odin,” said Frigga, “He’s right. We should never have kept the truth from Loki in the first place.”

“We have done that to protect him!”

“Perhaps that made sense when he was a boy, but it has long been nothing but an excuse,” said Frigga. “He deserves to know.” She locked gazes with Odin. Eventually, he was the one who looked away.

“Thor, leave us,” he said.

This dragged Loki out of his disoriented shock, and he stared at Thor. His brother looked extremely reluctant, but was obviously going to obey. “No,” said Loki. The plea came out faint and hoarse.

Thor closed the space between them and put his hands on Loki’s shoulders. “It will be alright, Brother, but you must swear to come find me afterward.”

“I…” said Loki, leaning back and looking anywhere but at Thor.

“Swear it!” said Thor, shaking Loki a little. “Your own thoughts will be your worst enemies, and you should not be alone with them.”

Loki swallowed. “I swear.”

Thor gave him a grim smile and nodded. He glanced once at Frigga, then at Odin, and strode from the study.

“Come here, darling,” said Frigga, and she gently pulled Loki towards a sofa at a right angle to the one Odin had taken. They sat down so that she was on his left and Odin was to his right, more or less facing him.

“What did your brother tell you of this?” said Odin.

“Only that there is some terrible secret you have kept from me.”

“Is ‘terrible’ the word he used?” said Frigga, covering his hand with hers.

“No,” Loki admitted. Hoping to deflect further questions, he threw out one of his own. “Do I have some kind of dreadful illness that even Eir cannot cure?” He did not think this particularly likely. He had been ill more often as a child than Thor or any of their friends, but it had never been serious.

“What?” said Odin. “No, of course not.”
“Have you limited my power like you have Thor’s?”

“Not in the same way,” said Frigga.

“In your case, it was merely a consequence of your not knowing,” said Odin.

“Then what is it?”

Odin and Frigga exchanged a long glance. Loki had always suspected that his parents did not even need the nameless tongue to communicate privately, and it seemed especially probable now. After several seconds, Frigga squeezed his hand, but it was Odin who spoke.

“As you know, you were born at the end of the war against Jotunheim.”

“Am I about to learn that Asgard waged that war unjustly too?” said Loki, only half-joking.

“No,” said Odin. “The era of conquest disrupted many of Jotunheim’s relations with other realms and certainly contributed to the feelings of hostility between the Aesir and the Jotnar, but war only became inevitable when Laufey set his sights on Midgard.”

“What has Jotunheim or the war to do with this?” said Loki, frowning.

“Everything,” said Odin. Loki stared at his father, a horrible ominous feeling creeping over him.

“From the time we were married,” said Frigga, “we always wanted more than one child, and not just as a redundancy for the line of succession. Both of us grew up with siblings we were very close to, and we wanted the same in our household.”

“I have sometimes wondered whether Hela would have been better off with a brother or sister to love and look after from an early age,” said Odin, “but it is obviously far too late for that.”

“We had Thor halfway through the war,” said Frigga. “We never thought a younger sibling would follow so soon, but less than twenty years later, I was with child again. It seemed like a bright light that would carry Asgard into times of peace.” Even though she smiled, there was pain in her eyes as she said it. Loki could not understand it, but it made the ominous feeling intensify.

“I already know all of this,” he said slowly.

“Yes,” said Frigga, “but there is more. Much more.”

“On Jotunheim, Hugin and Munin brought me word of the child,” said Odin. “The news lifted the spirits of Asgard’s warriors, and we pressed on, gaining more and more ground with every battle. We forced the Jotnar back all the way to Utgard. As we laid siege to their capital, our spies learned of the death of Queen Farbauti, along with her unborn child. I was willing to postpone the battle to give the Jotnar time to mourn and honor their queen and royal child, but Laufey wanted none of Asgard’s pity.”

“How did Farbauti die?” said Loki. Even among the long-lived races of Yggdrasil, childbearing was not without risks, but it struck him as suspicious for a queen and her child to die on the eve of the final battle of the war. Loki was bracing himself to learn that it had been the work of an Aesir assassin acting on Odin’s orders to demoralize the Jotnar, so Odin’s answer caught him by surprise.

“According to what my spies overheard, she suffered a miscarriage and subsequently killed herself from grief.”
Now that was interesting. Not an Aesir assassin, then. “You didn’t believe it,” said Loki.

“I had my doubts. Heimdall later confirmed them. There is a curious condition among the Jotnar in which one infant in every several thousand is born months early, already fully developed and capable of surviving outside the womb. These children only ever grow to be the size of an Aesir, but they are blessed with seidr far beyond that of their larger kin.”

“Small giants?” said Loki incredulously. “I have never heard of such a thing.”

“That is because Laufey has done all in his power to eradicate them since he became king,” said Frigga. As she spoke, Odin got to his feet and began to walk along the edge of the crackling fire pit, his hands clasped behind his back and his brow deeply furrowed. “Perhaps he fears they would ally themselves with beings more their size, given the chance, or that they would use their seidr to overthrow him.”

“So what does he do, have them dropped off cliffs?” said Loki.

“Oh no, he is far too cunning for that,” said Odin, turning and pacing the other direction. “He began simply, by terming these small Jotnar ‘skamrbarn’.”

Loki grimaced. The term could be interpreted as simply “short children,” but skamr also meant “deformed” or “mutilated.”

“From there, he spent over a century sowing suspicion and mistrust. By the time Jotunheim’s religious leaders proclaimed that their gods had called for all skamrbarn to be returned to them, lest Jotunheim be struck with a curse, the people most loyal to Laufey were ready to hear it. A few of the small Jotnar succeeded in fleeing Jotunheim before they could be dragged to the temple altars. Brave Jotun mothers and fathers risked everything to send their little ones to Alfheim where they would be safe, but many were captured, accused of heresy, and executed.”

Having grown up with endless feast hall tales of the savagery and brutality of the Jotun armies, Loki was not at all surprised to learn that their king would be so vicious to the most vulnerable of his people, nor that their religious leaders would help him do it, but it was strange to think of Jotnar as capable of feeling the kind of affection for their children that would drive them to risk their own lives to protect them. “So that’s what happened to Farbauti,” said Loki contemptuously. “Her child was skamrbarn, and she killed it and herself for shame.” Had Laufey cursed Odin’s wife and child so that his enemy would suffer as he did? Was that the secret?

“No,” said Frigga, and Loki was startled to see that her eyes were full of tears. “Farbauti was a good queen and a good mother. She loved all three of her sons. She gave birth and tried to smuggle the babe out of Utgard, but she was betrayed and discovered by Laufey almost at once.”

“Laufey’s own policies had made his worst fears come true,” said Odin. “His position was already precarious because of the war he was about to lose. Had his people learned that he had produced a skamrbarn while leading them to defeat, then the very same religious doctrines he helped to write would have given them just cause to depose him.”

“Could he not simply denounce the child as a bastard and let Farbauti take the blame?”

“Such a claim would have been too easily disproven,” said Frigga. “The markings on a Jotun’s skin are hereditary. The ones on the face and body come from the mother, but the ones on the arms and legs come from the father.” Her thumb traced chevrons on the back of Loki’s hand as she spoke. “Laufey was the only surviving male of Ymir’s line old enough to father children. The newborn prince’s legitimacy would have been obvious to any Jotun who saw him.”
This information was surprising. Loki’s schooling had not included much about the Jotnar, but he had always assumed the odd lines decorating their bodies were the result of scarification, not genetics.

“He gave the baby to the servant who had betrayed Farbauti, with orders to take him to the closest temple to Asgard’s camp and dispose of him there,” said Odin, who in contrast to Frigga’s sorrow seemed to be growing quietly furious. He had stopped pacing and now gripped the edge of the fire pit tightly enough to leach the color from his fingers, and he spoke through gritted teeth. It must disgust him, as a man who could not bring himself to kill his daughter even after she committed heinous crimes, that another king could discard his infant child without a second thought. “Farbauti tried to fight him, but childbirth had weakened her, and he slew her quickly.”

“Why are we talking of Laufey and Farbauti?” said Loki. This was all very fascinating, but what was the point of it?

“Because it is important context,” said Frigga. “You will understand soon enough.”

“The battle commenced,” said Odin. He returned to the sofa and sat on the side nearest Loki and Frigga. “In my impatience to return home in time for the birth of my child, perhaps I fought more recklessly than I might have otherwise, for Laufey took my eye mere hours before I gained his surrender. But at last, the war was won. I sent the Einherjar to take the Casket of Ancient Winters so that Laufey would never be able to attack another realm, and I secured his, Helblindi’s, and Byleistir’s seals on the truce.”

He closed his eye. “I was weary. It had been a long war, and the Odinsleep was nearly upon me. I wanted a moment of peace and solitude before the return journey to Asgard and the days of feasting and celebration that would follow, so I climbed the steps of the nearest building and went inside.” He chuckled, which in itself was more baffling than anything he had said so far. “I found neither peace nor solitude. It was the temple where Laufey had sent his infant son to die, but the prince was a contrary fellow, and not inclined to obey his father’s wishes. He lay on the stone altar, little fists clenched, cries echoing in the empty hall.”

The sense of foreboding, temporarily forgotten amid the strange history lesson, was back in full force.

“I had learned of skamrbarn by then. Early in the war, I thought to employ some of the surviving adults living on Alfheim in my army, but they would not return to Jotunheim, lest they endanger their families. I knew the child had been left to die, but differences in Jotun markings are subtle, and I was not proficient at recognizing their patterns. I did not yet know who he was, or I may have broken the truce before the ink on it was dry. He was the same size as the son I would soon be holding for the first time.” There was a crack in his voice, and a soft sound from Loki’s left had him looking around to see that his mother was weeping. Geri and Freki whined and put their heads on Odin’s lap.

“When I picked the child up, I did so thinking to deliver him to Alfheim to be raised with the other small Jotnar, but then he did something remarkable. He smiled at me, and he shifted his form from Jotun to Aesir like it was as simple as drawing breath. I could hardly believe it. He was only an infant, starving, helpless, and abandoned, and instead of crying for food and comfort, he performed the kind of magic that takes most seidmenn and seidkonur centuries to master. It was as if he was seeking to impress me. As if he already trusted me to take care of him.”

As he spoke, Loki was finding the task of drawing breath progressively less simple. It was the same rare ability he prided himself on. Large as the study was, he felt as though the walls were closing in on him.
“I thought no more of Alfheim after that,” Odin went on. “I bundled him in my cloak and returned home with my armies. I have never been skilled at illusion magic, but I was able to do enough to hide him until I reached the palace. I told myself it would be very simple. The timing was perfect, after all. I would introduce the child to Frigga, and she would agree that we would raise him as our own...” His eye met Loki’s. “…as the twin to our second-born.”

Chapter End Notes

Obviously things didn't quite go according to Odin's brilliant plan. :(

Coming up with three different ways to do a "Loki learns about his true heritage" scene is interesting. I wasn't sure I'd be able to avoid recycling lines. Fortunately, I'm not settled on my precise headcanon for the circumstances of Loki's adoption. I'm very firm on three things: 1) Laufey actively tried to get rid of Loki, he did not just misplace him, 2) Odin adopted him primarily out of affection, not some strategic plan, and 3) baby Loki shape-shifted himself, it wasn't a spell Odin cast on him. But there are still plenty of variables to work with. Chiefly, what's the deal with Loki being Aesir-sized, and why has Asgard never questioned the parentage of the second prince? (Because there's no way Loki wouldn't have heard rumors about Frigga's lack of pregnancy, if such rumors existed.) I've picked different answers to these questions in each fic, and I don't think I have a preference. This option does stand out for making me cry the most, though.

Aside from those variables, there's also who's telling the story and when. I've written a version where Frigga tells Loki as a kid and a version where Odin tells Loki several decades earlier than in canon, and now we've got the Odin/Frigga tag-team at about the same time as canon. It ended up feeling like a hybrid of the other two, which makes sense.

Anyway, how do you guys think it's going compared to the canon timeline so far?
The grief coming off both Odin and Frigga was palpable. It made Loki feel alienated from them—but no, grief wasn’t to blame for that, was it? He simply was alien. He tore his gaze away from Odin’s and tried to pull his hand from Frigga’s, but she held fast. Would she still if he transformed? Would she keep clutching him even as her skin blackened with frostbite?

“It was not to be,” said Odin. His voice was rather hoarse. “Heimdall told me who the Jotun child was and why he was in that temple, but he had scarcely finished his account before he turned his eyes to the palace. I knew something was wrong. When I arrived in the royal apartments, Frigga was in labor.”

“It was so different from Thor’s birth,” said Frigga. Her voice was surprisingly steady, though tears continued to fall. “I could hardly feel the baby moving, and the pain was far greater. After hours and hours, it was finally over. Eir did all she could, but though the child was born alive, he was still slipping away from us. He wouldn’t cry or eat or open his eyes. We held him and named him, and he was gone within the hour. Then I heard a sound that tore my heart. A baby crying in the room.”

“I dispelled the illusion and explained my plan,” said Odin, “though by then I had little hope that Frigga would accept it. I was preparing myself to part with a second child in a single day, and I did not know how I would bear it. That was foolish of me. I should have learned better than to underestimate my queen.”

There was a long pause. Loki thought he might be sick. His insides roiled—but they weren’t truly his insides. This wasn’t his true form. He’d put on a mask when he was an infant and didn’t know better. His whole life had been that mask. Little wonder he had failed to guess the secret. How could he have imagined that they would allow a Frost Giant to parade about, thinking he was a prince of Asgard? It was so ludicrous that he felt a mad desire to laugh.

“Then I am the changeling child who slept in your true son’s crib and stole his life and name,” he said.

“You stole nothing,” said Odin.

“Should we have preferred an empty crib to one with you in it, just because it was meant for another?” said Frigga. “Should I not have nursed you at my breast?”

Loki had no answer to that, but it still made no sense.

“We wanted both of you,” said Odin. “When I watched you and Thor playing or training together, I often imagined the third boy who could have been there. I did not picture him in your place, nor resent you for being the survivor.”

“Baldur,” said Frigga. “That was the name of the child we lost. Your name has always been your own.”

“Why does Asgard not know of him?” said Loki.

“To be a monarch is to have one’s life constantly on display,” she said. “I could not bear the thought of thousands of people coming to see me to give their condolences. Because of you, we had a chance
to keep Baldur and our grief private, and so we did.”

“And you didn’t tell Thor?”

“How does one explain to a toddler that the younger sibling he was so eager to meet is gone, and that his new brother is someone else altogether?” said Odin. “He had no concept of death or that not all children are raised by those who bore them. When we introduced you to him, he was delighted. We chose not to jeopardize the bond the two of you formed.”

“A wonder that you trusted me to be near him at all,” said Loki.

“Oh? Should we have feared that you might murder him in his sleep?” Odin’s tone had grown very dry. “Is this an ambition you have secretly harbored all your life?”

“We were born enemies!” said Loki, incensed. “Why would you take that risk?”

“If birth was enough to determine that much, then Hela would long have been queen of nine miserable realms, and likely many more besides.”

“And as the man who taught her how to conquer worlds,” said Loki, “do you really expect me to believe that naught but compassion and generosity motivated you when you saw an infant Frost Giant with powerful seidr and decided to bring him here and name him Odinson?”

“Did I say those were my only motives?” said Odin. “Of course I thought about the implications of bringing you here, particularly once I knew who you were. Of course I considered the political benefits of keeping you. Of course I considered the uses to which I could put you. You were never going to be just a son, any more than Thor, or Baldur if he had lived. You have always known this.”

“But why?” cried Loki. He was suddenly on his feet, facing them. “You speak as though my being Jotun made no difference to you, but you had just fought a war against them!”

“We did not fight them for being Jotnar,” said Odin.

“There are many on Asgard who would,” Loki countered. “Thor most of all, before his time travel adventure.”

“And that is a fault of Asgard and myself, not a condemnation of the Jotnar. I am glad that Thor is wiser now.”

He was so calm. He had shouted at Thor, had wilted under the weight of the past he had kept hidden. He had wept for Baldur and snarled over Laufey, but now he was as stoic as when he sat on the throne. Loki wanted to scream at Odin and make him scream back. Instead, he forced himself to be just as calm. “Why would you take the unwanted wretch of your enemy into your own home?”

“We did not fight for being Jotnar,” said Odin.

“Frigga stood and cupped Loki’s face in her hands. He met her eyes unwillingly. “Laufey may not have wanted you, Loki, but you have never been unwanted. You were a child without a mother, and I was a mother who had lost her child. You rescued me from my despair. There was nothing I could do to save the child I bore. In all my life, I have never felt so powerless. But you were dying too, and I could save you.” She smiled through her tears. “My sweet boy. How could I do anything else?”

Her image blurred, and Loki realized that he was crying as well. She wrapped her arms around him. He hadn’t been aware of how rigidly he’d been carrying himself, but now he sagged against her.
“Do you think the love of a parent is something one must earn?” said Odin. The emotion in the question made Loki look around at him. He sounded afraid, and he looked like he’d been struck in the face. “Have I failed all of my children?”

These questions fell on Loki’s ears like words from the nameless tongue when he was not the audience. All his life, he’d wanted nothing as badly as to make his father proud—a desire he had apparently had since infancy. If he was not Odin’s son, not even Aesir, then that goal had never been within reach at all, and his efforts had been for nothing. So how could Odin be acting like he was the disappointment, not Loki?

Frigga guided him back to the sofa. He didn’t really want to be in the study anymore, but he didn’t fight her.

“Were you ever going to tell me if Thor hadn’t forced your hand?” he asked. He felt hollowed out and numb.

“We agreed we would tell you before we began considering betrothals or you entered into a serious courtship,” said Frigga. “I wanted to tell you centuries ago.”

“Why did you wait so long?”

“I could name you one of my heirs,” said Odin, “but I could not make my people forget thousands of years of ill feeling towards the Jotnar. You were an innocent child, not one of the soldiers who slew their fathers or brothers, but that is not what they would have seen. We wanted to shield you from their prejudice.”

That might have been comforting if he hadn’t already been an object of suspicion and distrust for his talents with seidrcraft and his determination to pursue them above any other subject. It had been easy enough for him to make friends among fellow students of magic on Alfheim and Vanaheim, but his friends on Asgard were Thor’s friends first, and if they wanted to be near Thor, they had no choice but to be near Thor’s brother.

“You were also in terrible danger,” Odin continued. “Your survival is the greatest threat to Laufey’s rule, because you are the proof of his crimes against his own people.”

“Then why not use me to finish him? If he is such a villain, why settle for a mere truce and leave him on the throne of Jotunheim?”

Odin was staring at him with the same sadness from a moment ago. “Perhaps that would have been the prudent course to take. It may even have been just. But it would have made you the target of Laufey and all who were loyal to him, and that I could not do.”

X

It was a rare thing for Thor to desire solitude, but he was only just managing to keep his emotions from spilling out into the weather, and his friends, mortal and Aesir alike, were better off without his brooding presence.

He went back to the balcony where he had stood with Loki before Hugin and Munin’s arrival. More than any other place on Asgard, Thor was glad that his mother’s garden had a second chance to escape Ragnarok. Most of his earliest memories involved playing there with Loki under Frigga’s watchful gaze. She had showed them how she cared for each species of plant and told them stories about where they came from. As they grew up, Loki spent more time there than Thor did. Thor wondered whether Loki, while pretending to be Odin, had maintained the garden. He hadn’t taken
the time to look at it before going to confront him. He supposed he would never know.

“You do not laugh as often as the Thor I remember.”

Thor smiled and looked around at Sif. “I wish I could.”

She joined him before the balustrade. “I heard the storm earlier.”

The smile faded. “I was...more upset with my father than I realized.”

“With your father?” she said. She frowned. “Did the things you lived through happen because of him?” She sounded as though she was afraid to hear the answer.

“Not entirely, and not by design.” He grimaced. “Perhaps it would be better if they had been. He hid things from me and from Loki. I think he was trying so hard to protect his sons that he forgot to trust us.”

Something flickered in her expression that Thor doubted he would have noticed before. “You don’t think Loki would deserve that trust,” he said quietly.

Her eyes widened in surprise, but she held his gaze with a mixture of shame and defiance. “If I don’t, it is not without reason.”

It was true that Sif and Loki had a long history of getting on each other’s nerves. Thor hoped he had not merely imagined that there was also genuine affection there, somewhere. “Has he ever failed you or me or our friends when we needed him? I know he plays his tricks and calls us all fools, but we were never innocent victims, and he’s saved our lives at least as often as any of us have saved his.”

“You are probably right,” she said grudgingly, “but I can never tell what he is thinking! He’s always up to something. I don’t know how it doesn’t drive you mad.”

Thor grinned. “Perhaps I simply enjoy surprises better than you. Or...have a better sense of humor?”

She punched him on the arm, looking amused against her will. “Perhaps.”

He rubbed the spot, chuckling, until she fixed him with such a serious look that he ceased all fidgeting at once. “You trust him, though?”

“Oh course I do,” he said. “He’s my brother.”

She nodded. The skepticism from before seemed to be gone, but only time would tell whether that meant he had persuaded her to abandon it or she was simply being more guarded. Putting the Avengers together from scratch might prove far easier than what he had to do at home. “Will you need us tomorrow? We are still ready to do whatever we can to help you prevent Ragnarok.”

Thor smiled his gratitude. “There is still much planning to be done, but I will send for you when we are ready to act.”

She touched his arm below where she had punched him, then turned and left the balcony. Thor watched her go until the hair on the back of his neck suddenly stood up. He raised his eyebrows and faced the gardens again. “How long have you been there, Loki?”

Loki materialized to his right. “Longer than Sif would like.”

“They told you, then?”
“They told me.”

“And...you are well?”

“I’m not going to hurl myself into space, at any rate.” He looked sideways at Thor. “You’ve been trying to soften the blow all week, haven’t you? With your talk of fighting alongside the Jotnar.”

“I also meant it. If a Jotun can grow up on Asgard without him or anyone else ever noticing he isn’t Aesir, then how different can we really be?”

“I was still never like the rest of you, as Sif so kindly illustrated.”

“Are all Jotnar bookish, sarcastic types who turn people into animals when they’re bored?” said Thor. Loki only glared at him. He grinned back. “I’m surprised you want to be like the rest of us. Wouldn’t that have been dull?”

“You’re the best of everything Asgard prizes, and it always came naturally to you. Nobody ever seems to find you dull.”

“And it went straight to my head and made me an arrogant fool who would start a war over a single insult,” said Thor. “I can’t even imagine what a horror I would have become without you to humble me every once in a while. I probably would have been Hela all over again.”

“Yes, as humble as you are now, you’ll soon have no more need of me.”

He said it lightly, but it cut into Thor like a dagger. “I don’t know.” Thor tried to match Loki’s tone. “I think I have enough of an ego to last at least another four millennia easily.”

The corner of Loki’s mouth twitched. He stared at Thor for a long moment. “It really doesn’t change anything for you, does it?”

Thor clasped the back of Loki’s neck. He couldn’t even remember the first time he’d done that. “It never did.”

Blinking rather rapidly, Loki puffed out his cheeks and let out a breath. “I haven’t just been knocked on the head and hallucinated all of this, have I?” he complained. “I mean, I’m adopted, and have four siblings I never knew about. It seems rather excessive.”

Thor started to laugh, before frowning. “Wait, four? I thought Laufey only had two other sons.”

Loki shot him a confused look. “He...does.” His eyes went very wide. “Oh.” He gave a sympathetic grimace. “They didn’t tell you about Baldur.”

Chapter End Notes

As much as I love Thor and Loki’s sibling relationship, I’m kinda sad that Baldur doesn’t exist in the MCU (and I know it’s spelled Balder in the comics, but I prefer the spelling that isn’t also a word for more hair loss, deal with it), so I decided to inflict that sadness on this fic. Yay?

Okay I don’t think I’m ever going to get tired of the dynamic between Loki and Odin. There’s all kinds of metas on tumblr and fics on here about what an abusive father Odin
was and how he deliberately pitted Thor and Loki against each other, and while I don’t think canon disproves any of that, it has only ever seemed like one possible interpretation to me. What I see, on the other hand, is two people who have been talking at cross purposes for a thousand years. Odin rewards Loki’s achievements with chuckles and nods because he views this as the secret connection he’s had with Loki since he picked him up in that temple. He saved the more open praise for Thor and Loki together because he was proud of them both AND he wanted them to be a team, and he was open in praising Thor because Thor was open in his expectation of it. Everything has been going great from Odin’s perspective. But baby Loki needed more than Odin’s smile on Jotunheim to survive, and as a boy, an adolescent, and a young man, he’s needed more than Odin’s smile to feel validated. One thing I’m sure Thor and Hela had in common was being very quick to voice displeasure or unhappiness when they were children. This made them easy for Odin to understand. But Loki would pretend to be content and bottle things up until his frustration came out in seemingly unconnected ways, and Odin never quite figured it out. Odin might also have felt that it was fine to focus on Thor as long as Frigga focused on Loki.

Anyway, the initial conversation might be over, but the angst is not.

I adore Sif and would totally cosplay as her if I had black hair (it's blonde, so I cosplay as Éowyn, Luna, and Spider-Gwen instead), but of all Thor’s friends, she is plainly the one with the biggest Loki issues. Let's see what we can do about that.
Thor felt numb as he listened to Loki’s explanation about their brother. It was different than any of the other losses he’d experienced. Each time he believed Loki had died had been a devastating blow. Arriving too late to save Frigga from the Kursed had made him feel more powerless than a mortal. Finding Odin on Earth only to lose him moments later had left him disoriented and angry. Hela had just been another foe. He regretted the position she’d forced him into, but the loss of Asgard hit him far harder than the loss of the sister who’d killed so many of his people and his friends.

He didn’t know what to feel about Baldur. Anger that he had never known about him? Shame that he had never sensed the absence? Grief for the life Baldur had never lived? Despair that he represented one more way their family would never be whole, no matter what Thor changed? He tried to reconcile this new knowledge with his memories of childhood. Had Frigga ever hidden a tear as she watched two boys playing instead of three? Had Odin? Had Thor ever noticed and asked about it, only to be told a comforting lie that he never questioned? He couldn’t remember.

“I should go to Mother,” he said after Loki fell silent. Whatever he felt, she had been grieving for over a thousand years, and he had never shared that with her. That, at least, he could fix. But he hesitated, looking at Loki.

“Go,” said Loki with a wan smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “I’ll still be here in the morning.”

Thor gritted his teeth and pulled Loki into as fierce a hug as he’d ever given him. One thing he knew already: this was the brother he could save, and no power in the universe would stop him. It took a moment for Loki to return the hug, but it nearly matched Thor’s for strength.

X

Frigga was in her weaving room. When Thor entered, she turned to smile at him from her loom, and he saw the telltale signs of recent weeping on her face. The sight was enough to burst a dam within him that he never knew he’d built. His throat constricted and his vision blurred. Neither of them said a word, but seconds later, they were in each other’s arms, and he was sobbing unrestrainedly into her hair.

X

After Thor’s departure, Loki went to his chambers in the royal apartments, but with his mind so full of everything he had learned, he didn’t even try to sleep. Instead, he sat on his windowsill, idly tossing and catching a dagger as he looked out over Asgard, not really seeing it—though that would have been difficult through the heavy sheets of rain coming down. A pressure was building in the back of his thoughts like an itch, and he would have to scratch it soon, but it couldn’t quite drive everything else aside yet. Hela. Baldur. Farbauti. Laufey.

He thought about them, and he thought about less tangible things. Everything he had ever assumed he was entitled to because of his birth was only his as the result of a heinous crime, a staggering coincidence, and a charitable impulse. It had already happened, so why did knowing about it make him feel as though he was dangling from the edge of the world? So many aspects of his life had been defined by being a son of Odin and Frigga. How much of him was real if that wasn’t true? But then, how untrue was it if the lack of shared blood meant nothing to Odin, Frigga, and Thor? Did it mean
nothing? What made the bonds of family if not blood? He could answer these questions no better than he could tell Tony Stark what made magic work.

Loki fought his curiosity as long as he could, but it was barely an hour before he was standing in front of his washroom mirror, attempting to brace himself for when the pale blue eyes looking back at him turned vivid red. This was the final lie to strip away.

Undoing the first bit of magic he ever performed should have been as simple as getting undressed, but the harder he tried, the more he felt a force pushing back. His shapeshifting abilities had never failed him, and he had never experienced anything like this. Something was blocking him from returning to his true form. He had a strong suspicion as to what it was, but the idea of confronting Odin about it was not inviting. So he thought of how he might get around the block without him.

The answer was obvious.

X

So much had happened that it was hard for Thor to believe that it hadn’t even been twelve hours since Director Fury entrusted him and Loki with the Tesseract. He felt much calmer after visiting his mother, but he still doubted he would be able to sleep if he tried, and he didn’t want to crowd Loki too much, so instead he went to see how his friends fared.

A servant informed him that Lady Sif and the Warriors Three had left the palace and Darcy had already retired to her rooms. Unsurprisingly, the scientists were all in the library. He passed Banner and Erik having an animated discussion at one of the tables, but Jane was standing beneath the miniature, slowly revolving Yggdrasil with her mouth slightly open, a stack of books clutched in her arms.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” he said. “This was always my favorite part of the library. When we were boys, Loki often teased me for staring at it and fantasizing about the adventures I would have on other worlds instead of studying the words of the books in front of me.”

“It’s incredible,” said Jane. “This whole place is incredible. I must’ve pinched myself a hundred times, and I’m still not convinced it isn’t a dream. I don’t even know where to begin with my research here.”

“You will have as much time as you like to decide,” said Thor, smiling.

Her own smile faltered as she looked at him. “Hey, um. Is there a reason you always seem sad when you’re around me?”

He laughed and grimaced. “I’m sorry to have troubled you.” He teetered briefly on the verge of telling her everything, but pulled back. It was his problem, not hers, and she was so happy here. “It isn’t you. It’s been a rather complicated week for my family. Not long ago, I learned about my father’s daughter from a previous marriage whom he imprisoned because she wants to conquer the universe, Loki’s adopted and didn’t know about it until tonight, and we just found out we had another brother who died the day he was born.”

“God, I’m sorry,” said Jane. They started walking in the direction of Banner and Erik’s table. “I found out when I was in eighth grade when we did Punnett squares and blood types in science class that my dad’s not my biological father, and my mom doesn’t even know the name of the guy who got her pregnant. That was definitely a complicated week, but yours sounds worse.”

“I think it will be alright. All the secrets are out now, so we’re on even footing.” Unlike himself and
“That’s good,” said Jane. “You know, in such a big universe, it’s a statistical impossibility that Earth is the only planet with living organisms, which is why I’ve always believed aliens existed. But I never really thought it through far enough to imagine aliens with family drama. Is it mean to say that’s reassuring?”

Thor laughed again, this time without the grimace. “I don’t think so. We have more in common than we think, no matter what worlds we come from. It’s something I wish I had realized earlier.”

Loki had been moving about the palace undetected (and many places far more distant) for centuries, so making his way to the lowest level was quite simple. Barely a quarter of an hour after leaving his chambers, he was slipping through the golden doors of the Vault. He eased them shut and dropped his cloaking spell.

“You have come sooner than I expected.”

It took him every ounce of self-control not to jump out of his skin. He was such a fool. He should have realized the absence of guards at the door had been no accident. He turned reluctantly to face Odin, who was standing beside the plinth that held the Casket of Ancient Winters. “You knew I would come.” He was tense, ready to flee back through the doors, but Odin seemed relaxed, if in a heavy, burdened sort of way.

“It must have frustrated you when you could not transform, and only two solutions would have presented themselves. I can see why the Casket would hold greater appeal than speaking with me after tonight.”

Loki did not at all like being predictable, but it was better than being suspected of having some nefarious motive. He was a Frost Giant sneaking into the Allfather’s Vault, after all. He would not have been surprised if the Destroyer had attacked the second he set foot inside. He walked slowly down the stairs and past the other relics until he was nearly level with Odin.

“You blocked me from changing back.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“One night during your first winter on Asgard, Frigga found that you had reverted to your true form in your sleep. A reaction to the cold, I suppose. Remarkable, how instinctive you have always been with your seidr. You turned Aesir again when she picked you up. We couldn’t risk it happening around anyone we didn’t trust, so I cast a spell to block that particular transformation.” He looked over at Loki for the first time. “Now that you know the truth, it has outlived its purpose. I will lift it, if you ask it of me.”

Loki wanted to ask it, and yet he didn’t. He had wanted to get the whole thing over with in secret, and while he wasn’t happy to have his powers restricted by a spell, he also wasn’t sure he liked the idea that he might revert to Jotun form inadvertently without that spell in place. “You wouldn’t think me disloyal?” he said.

“Is it disloyal to be curious about your origins, your natural appearance, how it feels?” said Odin.

Loki closed his eyes. “Perhaps not.”
Odin moved a step closer, frowning. “Why do you brace as if for a blow every time I speak? What is it you expect to hear?”

The rebuke “No, Loki.” from Thor’s memories echoed across Loki’s mind, and he saw his own hand releasing Gungnir. “I don’t know,” he said. It was true. He didn’t know any of the details surrounding that moment, and it had already been thwarted. Here he stood two full days past when that ought to have happened, still on firm ground. And yet it needled at him. How could he be sure he would not earn that rebuke again? What if that was the one thing that Thor couldn’t change?

“I do want you to lift the spell.” He said it more to break the silence than anything.

Odin nodded and clasped the back of his neck as Thor often did, then laid his right hand over Loki’s heart. Loki felt something hot beneath his skin. Odin pulled his palm back, drawing his fingers close together. The hot sensation gathered to a point before a string of golden runes emerged from the front of his surcoat where Odin had touched him. They floated out a few inches, shattered into sparks, and disappeared.

“It is done,” said Odin, releasing Loki and stepping back.

Loki waited to feel different, for his flesh to crawl as it recognized its own wrongness. Nothing happened, so he probed inside himself with his seidr. After a moment or two, he found something like a knot of magic. He had never noticed that before. It must be his spell. He gave it a tug, just to test it, but it unraveled. At once, the cool air became sweltering against his skin. He hadn’t meant to do it right here in front of Odin, and his eyes flew open in panic. He immediately had to squint against what had previously been dim light. He looked down at his hands. They were blue, with dark nails and lines that decorated the flesh and disappeared beneath his cuffs. His breaths came faster and his heart pounded. “Father?” The word escaped him without his permission, and he hated how much he sounded like a frightened child.

“I’m right here.” Two crimson eyes met one blue. Concern creased Odin’s brow. “So much fear. You don’t need it. Whatever form you take, you will always be Loki Odinson.”

The words were like a lifeline, and Loki clenched his jaw in an effort to keep his composure.

“I have learned far more about being a father by raising you than I ever did from Hela or Thor,” said Odin. “However, it seems I was still an inattentive pupil. I would like to do better. That is the other reason I came here to head you off.”

“What?” said Loki.

“The Casket,” said Odin, gesturing to the relic beside him.

Loki looked at it, intending only a brief glance, but with his new eyes, he suddenly saw so much more than a glowing blue box. It was as if it held every winter storm that had ever blown inside it. The colors were vivid and distinct, and there was sound as well, ranging from the tinkling of ice crystals to the groans of massive glaciers. Everything he had ever heard about the Jotnar, their assault on Midgard, and the war had led him to expect that there could be nothing good or even neutral about their powers over ice. When Odin had brought him and Thor to the vault as boys, he had thought the swirling lights in the Casket seemed angry and trapped. But now he could feel that power washing over him. He felt it in the markings in his skin, like tingling lines of ice. It was not savage or violent, but invigorating and peaceful. It was like encountering some unfathomably vast creature and finding that, instead of seeking to crush him between two fingers, it only wanted to hold him in its palm and keep him safe from destructive heat.
“It’s yours.”

Loki tore his gaze from the Casket to gape at Odin. “Mine?”

“It has sat in this vault for a thousand years, harming no more of Laufey’s would-be victims, but doing no good either. I think it is time that changed, particularly if there is to be a true alliance with Jotunheim.”

He patted Loki’s shoulder and began to walk back towards the exit. Loki remained rooted to the spot, completely overwhelmed.

“One more thing,” said Odin from somewhere close to the door. “Your mother made an excellent suggestion after you left the study. In the morning, if you are agreeable, I would like to send a messenger to Lord Freyr and Lady Gerd on Vanaheim to invite them to Asgard.”

Loki’s brow furrowed in confusion, and he turned to stare at him. “Why?” He had met Lord Freyr before, of course. He was Frigga’s second cousin and one of the more powerful Vanir nobles, but Lady Gerd, his Ljosalfr bride (whose beauty he never ceased to speak of), had always been something of a mystery.

“Because Lady Gerd is not from Alfheim originally. Like you, she is Jotun. I’m sure you have many questions, or you will soon. The palace library is somewhat deficient in the subject of the Jotnar, and while your mother and I and Lady Eir have learned as much about them as we could for your sake, I fear we are poor substitutes for one with first-hand experience.”

Loki was once again at a loss. When Odin had described the refugee **skamrbarn** living on Alfheim, he had pictured them as objects of pity, tolerated but not welcomed. But at least one of them had been raised to a high enough position on Alfheim to catch the eye of a Vanr lord.

It seemed he had much to learn. “Thank you,” he said. “I would like to meet her.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was harder to write than the last few because it's tricky to figure out where to go next in such a loosely planned story after such huge emotional beats. I felt kind of deflated for a few days. But I really liked the idea of pairing off the family members who didn't get to interact as much. Thor and Frigga, Loki and Odin. And also to see how differently Thor, the extrovert, handles the aftermath than Loki, the introvert. Thor seeks out his friends, whereas Loki seeks solitude.

I was surprised again by the intensity of Thor’s emotions. His scenes were the last ones I wrote, and initially I thought he’d go hug Frigga and cry a bit over what could have been with the brother he never knew. But just like his anger, he’s been sitting on a whole boatload of grief, and the Baldur reveal tipped it all over the edge. Which made me cry a lot while I was sneakily writing this at work. Heh.

I was most excited about doing sort of a reverse Vault scene for Loki and Odin, and I’m mostly happy with how it turned out. It fought me a lot and I had to rearrange some pieces. It’s so much harder to get Loki and Odin to emote than Thor and Frigga, and that makes it a lot harder for them to see how much they matter to each other. But Odin got a pretty clear idea from the last chapter that he’d screwed up, so now he’s trying to
fix it, and he’s managed to close off a few more of the avenues Loki could take towards self-loathing and isolation.

We’ll probably start getting back into the plotty stuff now. Will it be Hela, Dark Elves, or Jotunheim first?
The Vanr Lord and His Lady

Chapter Notes

Dang, I really shouldn't have complained about the previous chapter. This one was way harder to write, because I had to get the pieces moving for the next arc now that the drama and feels have died down a bit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next day was a busy one. Whatever awkwardness might have lain over the House of Odin under the circumstances could not hold against the sense of purpose and determination that united them. They had work to do.

In the council chambers, the four of them stood like the points of a compass around the console that projected a miniature Yggdrasil into the air. Unlike the one in the library, this wasn’t merely decorative, but could be manipulated and magnified. It was most often used to plan battle strategy or new trade routes. Thor relied on it extensively to illustrate as he recounted everything he knew about Malekith and Thanos. His father, mother, and brother listened intently, interrupting him only to ask for clarification at certain points. Later, there would be meetings with Odin’s council, but only after they settled on a narrative that wouldn’t cause undue alarm.

After a while, Thor noticed that his father seemed particularly focused on those two villains. He had, in fact, been the one to open the discussions on them. However, he had yet to mention their other problem. So Thor decided he would do it for him. “What are we going to do about Hela?” he asked.

All eyes turned to Odin. He didn’t return their gazes, but silently stared at a spot in Yggdrasil’s roots. Thor reached for that spot and expanded it until they could see a bleak asteroid belt that revolved around a particularly remote star.

Niflheim.

“It may be possible to strengthen her prison,” said Odin.

“And if it isn’t?” said Thor. “We wouldn’t know for certain until after your death, and if she still managed to escape, Ragnarok would be unavoidable.”

Odin closed his eye. “You’re telling me I must choose between allowing the destruction of my kingdom and murdering my only daughter.”

Thor held up his hands. “Give me a third option.”

Odin had no answer. He knew Thor was right. Thor glanced at Loki. He was looking covertly at Odin, but Thor was caught by his expression. It was the sort of look that made it hard to blame Sif for thinking that he was always up to something. He wasn’t sure that boded well.

“Let us not speak of Hela for now,” said Frigga gently. “There is time.”

“Very well,” said Thor, suddenly glad for the excuse to change the subject. “When it comes to Thanos, our first priority should be to fortify Nidavellir.” He flung up a hand to make the miniature Yggdrasil back away from Niflheim so that he could find the speck of light he wanted and expand it
instead. “If he cannot press Eitri into making that thrice-damned Gauntlet, he’ll not be able to use the Stones together even if he acquires them.”

“Agreed,” said Odin.

“Would he not simply seek an alternative?” said Loki.

“He will not wish to settle for an inferior weapon,” said Odin. His expression was grimly satisfied. “Not when his prototype Gauntlet has sat in my Vault since we last met.”

“With the Bifrost intact, will he risk an assault on Yggdrasil at all?” said Frigga.

“He has the Mind Stone already,” said Thor. “If he succeeds in finding Power and Soul, or even just one of them, he may feel confident enough to do more than wait in the shadows, even against an Asgard at full strength.”

They spent the next half hour or so discussing how they could increase the protections around Nidavellir. Then they turned to the subject of the Dokkalfar. Odin placed a hand on the console, and golden sparks swarmed up out of it to form a miniature Heimdall. He put fist to heart and bowed his helmeted head to Odin. “Heimdall,” said Odin. “Have you any news of Malekith’s ships?”

“No, my king,” he said. “I have looked all along the route from Asgard to Svartalfheim and elsewhere. There is no sign of them.”

“It was always unlikely we would find them so easily,” said Thor, trying not to feel too disappointed. “They couldn’t have remained hidden for an entire lifetime if it was as simple as looking.”

“What cloaking spell could remain so strong for five thousand years?” said Odin.

Frowning, Loki touched the console. In addition to the interactive map of Yggdrasil and communications, it was also linked to all of Asgard’s archives, dating back to the reign of Buri. Above the image of Heimdall, Loki conjured scenes from the Aesir-Dokkalfar war. It only took a moment for him to isolate Malekith’s flagship. The battle around it vanished, leaving the intangible craft revolving slowly above them, a sinister black cross with gleaming red lights.

“Of course,” said Frigga.

“What?” said Thor and Odin together.

“The Aether was in Malekith’s possession long before Bor took it. Malekith may not have achieved his final objective, but he had time to study it and use it to build a fleet of perfect stealth ships.”

“Is there no way to penetrate the illusion?” said Thor.

“Perhaps if we had the Aether,” said Heimdall.

Thor shook his head. “Even if we could find it, disturbing it would only wake the Dokkalfar and ruin our advantage.”

“What about another Infinity Stone?” said Loki. He held up a hand, and the Tesseract appeared in it, casting its vivid blue glow over them. The movements were so similar to when he’d traded it for Thor’s life on the Statesman that Thor flinched.

“If one Infinity Stone could be used to find its fellows, then Thanos would already have them all,” said Odin.
“That may not be true,” said Thor slowly. A grin was spreading over his face as an idea sparked in his mind. There was one man who could trace an Infinity Stone using another, and it wasn’t Thanos. “Perhaps he simply lacks the right PhDs.”

Thor and Loki found Banner in his new laboratory (a spacious room one level down from his sleeping quarters, which Loki had filled with everything he’d taken from Dr. Sterns). He was trailing behind Birgir Halvarson, one of the servants who oversaw guest accommodations, as the lad explained how to use the Asgardian technology. Birgir noticed the princes first, and he sprang to attention, smacking fist to heart so quickly that they could hear the thunk all the way from the door.

“Excuse us, Birgir,” said Loki. “We need to borrow your charge for a moment.”

“Yes, my prince,” he said, and he bowed to each of them and left the room.

“Nice kid,” said Banner.

“He’s seven hundred years older than you,” said Loki, amused.

Banner grimaced. “Did...uh...you guys need something?” He said it politely, but he seemed a bit nervous and reluctant.

“Yes,” said Thor, happy to be able to offer Banner a chance to prove himself powerful and useful without the Hulk. “We need your expertise.”

“My expertise?” said Banner, reluctance replaced with confusion. “I barely know how to operate your refrigeration systems.”

“Asgard’s technology is far more advanced than what you are accustomed to, yes,” said Loki, “but it relies rather heavily upon magic. In this particular case, that may be a hindrance. Birgir and others will help familiarize you with everything, and when you are comfortable—” He paused and produced the Tesseract again, then placed it into one of the gold containment fields positioned around the laboratory. “—we hope you will be able to devise a means of tracing the energy signature of an Infinity Stone for us.”

“One of the most dangerous threats against both our worlds once had access to a similar power source,” said Thor. “While they had it, they used it to build a fleet of ships that cannot be detected by any Asgardian means. We need to find them before they awaken from their stasis and attack.”

“Yeah, sure, I’ll see what I can do,” said Banner.

“We will supply whatever materials and equipment you need,” said Loki. “If you think it will be easier to use some Earth technology, perhaps Director Fury can be persuaded to supply it. And you can of course work with Drs. Selvig and Foster.”

Lord Freyr and Lady Gerd responded to Odin’s invitation at once. They had not been expecting it, but they were family, if of a distant sort, and they were undoubtedly curious.

In the evening, Loki rode out with Thor to the Observatory to greet their guests, as they usually did for visiting nobility. Thor had been just as surprised to learn that Lady Gerd was Jotun as Loki had been, but he had recovered quickly and declared his eagerness to finally meet his cousin’s wife. He spent much of the ride, once they were clear of the city and any curious ears, musing about what
advice Lady Gerd would have about improving relations with Jotunheim and how quickly Loki would learn how to use his latent Jotun abilities. Then he strayed off-topic as he imagined aloud how the two of them could combine their abilities to summon a thundersnow storm of epic proportions.

Loki let Thor prattle on, feigning irritation even though he was secretly amused. He hadn’t had much time to think about Lady Gerd since Odin voiced his intent to invite her to Asgard, but he couldn’t deny that he was nervous. The only Jotnar he had ever met were the three he had lured to the Vault to disrupt the coronation, and he hadn’t exactly enjoyed any pleasant chats with them. Towering over him in that dark, frozen place, barely clothed and hairless, their scarlet eyes alight with greed when he told them how to reach the Casket, they had seemed to match every tale he had heard as a child of dull-witted, monstrous brutes. How much of that had been him seeing what he expected to see and how much was reality? To know for sure, he would need to meet more Jotnar raised on Jotunheim, but Gerd was certainly a start.

The Bifrost activated just as they neared the Observatory, but they were still yards from the entrance and hadn’t dismounted yet when a magnificent palomino came charging out, its very young rider laughing and whooping. The boy couldn’t be more than two centuries old. The pointed tips of his ears poked out from between wild, white-blond curls. He wore a very fine tunic and coat, and a large silver pendant bounced off his chest with each stride of his horse, which ran past Heimdall and burst out onto the bridge, nearly spooking Gladr and Lettfeti.

Two more horses followed before Thor and Loki could so much as exchange bewildered glances. They veered around Heimdall and chased after the first horse.

“Fjolnir, get back here this instant!” shouted the rider in front. She greatly resembled the boy, though her pointed ears were rather longer, as was the elaborately braided hair flying behind her, and her face was flushed with mortification rather than excitement. She, too, wore a heavy silver pendant.

“This is not how we greet our hosts!”

“But it’s Asgard, Mama,” said the boy, pouting as he reined in his horse. “I’ve wanted to come here for ages.”

“That’s no excuse to forget your manners,” she said sternly. The impact of the chastisement was somewhat ruined by the fact that both Thor and her husband, a broadshouldered man with curly red hair and beard, were doubled over laughing. Even Heimdall was chuckling behind them in the Observatory.

Loki forced himself to recover from his shock at how normal she seemed—and with a child!—so that he could address her. “Lady Gerd, as you can see, we take no offense,” he said. “We well remember what it was to be young boys on an adventure.”

“Yes, it is an honor to meet you both, and to see you again, Cousin,” said Thor.

Lord Freyr grinned. “You as well,” he said. “Prince Thor, Prince Loki, allow me to introduce my beloved Gerd, and our son Fjolnir, who is very keen to be on a realm other than Vanaheim or Alfheim for the first time in his life.”

“You are the princes?” said Fjolnir, his eyes very round.

“We are,” said Thor. “And if this is your first time on Asgard, I think that calls for something special. How would you like to get a better view?”

“A better view?” he said, cocking his head.
“Yes,” said Thor. “Instead of riding all the way to Gladsheim on your horse, I could fly you there with Mjolnir.” At an apprehensive sound from Lady Gerd, he hesitated. “If your mother agrees, that is.”

Fjolnir bounced in his saddle. “Can I, Mama, please?” He stuck out his bottom lip and looked at her beseechingly with his large, innocent eyes.

“Oh, very well,” she sighed, but her hand shot out to grab Thor’s arm, and she fixed him with such a glare that he gave an audible gulp. “If he comes to any harm, Odinson, I will make you will rue the day you were born.” Behind her, Freyr was grinning—at least until she glanced over at him, at which point he hastily adopted the demeanor of a funeral attendee.

“But not to worry,” said Loki, who was more successful at keeping a straight face. “Thor has been known to carry mortals around when he flies, and even they have lived to tell the tale.”

“I’m not sure that’s helpful, Brother,” Thor muttered.

“Go before I change my mind,” said Gerd.

Fjolnir cheered and jumped down from his horse. Thor dismounted Gladr and scooped the boy up with his left arm, instructed him to hold on, then spun Mjolnir and flew off. He went at a considerably slower speed than what the hammer was capable of, but Fjolnir shrieked with laughter, and Loki, Gerd, and Freyr all watched until they were just a speck in the distance.

Chapter End Notes

Check it out, an almost functional House of Odin! I'm so proud of them, guys.

It's been the plan for a while that Bruce would be instrumental in helping find the Dark Elves, but when I thought about the logistics, I realized that it's actually canon that Bruce is capable of tracking Infinity Stones based on their gamma signature. That's what he does in Avengers. He finds the Tesseract based on its similarities to the Scepter (and, more specifically, the Mind Stone), which is something even Thanos didn't seem to be able to do. Now all Bruce has to do is take that a couple steps further and find ships that were built using the Reality Stone that have been sitting in one place for thousands of years. Tall order, maybe, but he's got better gadgets to work with here. Also, it's never stated in The Dark World that the Dark Elves built those ships using the Aether, but the lights on them are exactly the same shade of red, so it seemed like a very small logical leap given what they're capable of.

I basically came up with the idea of including Freyr and Gerd as I was writing the previous chapter, and at that point, I didn't plan on giving them a kid. But I was researching them for more ideas on how to portray them, and I found out that a historical/mythical king of Sweden around the time of Alexander the Great was, according to legend, the son of Freyr and Gerd. So hey there, adorable child Fjolnir!

Probably my favorite parts of this chapter are Thor acting like a big kid. More so than usual, I mean. The big family chat went well and Loki's okay, so he's feeling pretty happy on the whole right now.

I'm really excited to get farther into this arc, because I had a whole bunch of new ideas
for it in the last week or so, and it should be really fun, but first there will be at least one
more chapter focusing on Freyr, Gerd, and Fjolnir.
As Freyr and Gerd’s servants and belongings had arrived earlier, Thor’s departure with Fjolnir left Loki alone with them and the two riderless horses. Loki very much doubted that Thor had done this deliberately, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t take advantage of the situation. “You responded very quickly to my father’s invitation,” he observed as they rode towards the city. “I would love to know what he said to inspire such haste.”

“Simply that it was high time our families met properly,” said Freyr, “and that he feels we are uniquely positioned to advise him on strengthening the bonds between our realms.” It was the answer Loki had expected. Odin would hardly have sent a messenger to directly ask for a Jotun sorceress to come answer his adopted Jotun son’s questions about their species.

“Yes,” said Loki, “I daresay at least three realms could benefit from your visit.” He glanced casually at Gerd.

She met his gaze unflinchingly. “As such, it is long overdue, wouldn’t you agree?”

“You think it worth pursuing, then?”

“What could be more worth pursuing, Prince Loki?”

“What indeed.” He glanced at the silver pendant she wore and noticed the delicate Ljosalfar script etched into it. “That is a fine necklace. I noticed Fjolnir wears a similar one.”

“Yes,” she said, touching her fingers to it, “They contain locks of my parents’ hair. We aren’t able to see them as often as we’d like, but this way we are able to keep them with us.”

Ah, so that was how Gerd and Fjolnir achieved their Ljosalfir and half-Ljosalfir appearance. Many who lacked Loki’s talent for shapeshifting relied on bespelled objects rather than investing the time it would take to master the difficult spells on their own. A lock of hair was an essential ingredient for imitating a person’s likeness. How clever to use hair from two people. Instead of assuming the identity of an individual existing Ljosalfir, Gerd actually looked like the offspring of the couple who had adopted her, and her son shared the same visible traits, mixed with those he had gotten from Freyr. The Ljosalfar had always had a knack for such innovations. Did all the other skamrbarn wear similar trinkets, or were they only made for the ones who left Alfheim?

That evening, thousands of Aesir who lived in the city feasted at the palace, celebrating the end of another Odinsleep and honoring Asgard’s guests. Fjolnir ran between the long tables of adults with a pack of giggling boys that included Leif Volstaggson while his parents conversed politely with several nobles and council members. At the other end of the high table, the four mortals drew quite a crowd of curious people, mostly not of the nobility—with the exception of Fandral, who was again flirting with Darcy.

Feasting inevitably gave way to dancing, which lasted for hours and grew predictably raucous as the mead continued to flow. Thor remained at the high table, watching with an ache in his chest as his people and his friends enjoyed themselves, his own lighthearted mood from earlier in the day completely gone. This night could not have been more different than the way it had played out in the
original timeline, where it had been the night of Loki’s premature funeral. Whispers had flown in every direction about what had led to his death and why there was no body in the longboat, and most of the so-called mourners seemed more concerned about the destroyed Bifrost than by the loss of their prince. One man had been fool enough to suggest within Thor’s hearing that he had slain his own brother when he refused to surrender the throne. Thor had broken his jaw. He’d wanted to do far worse. He couldn’t even remember what that man looked like now, but he was likely somewhere among the dancers.

He was shaken out of these unpleasant recollections by the sight of Loki, Sif, and Volstagg approaching from the crowd.

“Come, Brother,” said Loki, “even Mother and Father are dancing. The longer you sit here like this, the more people will think you are sulking over missing out on the regency.”

“He’s right,” said Volstagg, whose second and third-youngest children were dangling off him. “You should be merry! It is a fine night, and all is well on Asgard!”

Sif cut straight to the chase by seizing Thor about the wrists and hauling him out of his seat and towards the dance floor. He let her do it, and a moment later, they were all dancing in the circle that included Volstagg’s wife, one or two of Lady Eir’s apprentice healers, and a tipsy, grinning Erik. Thor’s spirits were soon buoyed up as he clapped and followed the steps. Why should he sorrow over things that hadn’t and wouldn’t come to pass? There was so much still to do, but perhaps, one day, those eight years would feel like little more than a bad dream.

Freyr, Gerd, and Fjolnir joined the royal family for breakfast the next morning. Fjolnir insisted on sitting between Thor and Loki, who were happy to oblige him, with Odin and Frigga on either side of them across the circular table from each other, and Freyr and Gerd opposite their son.

While the adults ate, Fjolnir bombarded Thor with questions about what his hammer could do. The moment he had realized that it shared all but one letter with his own name, it had become his favorite topic of conversation. Thor indulged him, entertaining him with a few stories of enemies he had faced with Mjolnir. Loki only half listened, shooting glances at his father every few minutes. They had discussed what would happen at this meal, and the urge to leave a projection in his place and flee was strong.

“Ask him about the time he rescued your Aunt Freya from an unwanted suitor,” said Freyr.

Thor cracked a grin. “Have you never told him that tale? You were there too.”

“I thought I would save it,” said Freyr. He looked at his son. “A century or so before you were born, Freya and I went on a long hunt in the wilds south of Honir. We passed a little too near the territory of a tribe of hill giants, and Thrym, their chieftain, caught sight of her. He decided she would make him a fine wife and sent his soldiers to capture her.”

“Fortunately,” said Thor, “Loki and I were on Vanaheim to visit our cousins at the time, and we fought Thrym’s minions back easily. Unfortunately, we celebrated a little too much afterward, and Thrym succeeded in stealing my hammer.”

“The hammer you had been given less than a year prior,” Frigga muttered.

“Yes, so I could hardly go back to Asgard without it,” said Thor, “especially with Thrym using it to make even more trouble for Honir. He demanded Freya as his bride or he would destroy the entire
city.”

“What did you do?” said Fjolnir, hanging on every word.

Thor glanced at Loki, who returned his grin despite his mounting nerves. “Well, you see, after our first skirmish, Thrym became very cautious, striking the city at unexpected times, never giving us much of an opportunity to attack, and carefully concealing the locations of his camps. Loki came up with a rather devious plan to draw him out.”

“You did?” said Fjolnir.

“Well, Thrym wanted Freya, so I suggested we give her to him. Or allow him to think so. What he got instead was Thor in her wedding gown.”

Gerd choked on her drink while Thor and Freyr laughed. Frigga and Odin both looked simultaneously amused and exasperated. Fjolnir only frowned at Thor. “But you don’t look like Aunt Freya at all.”

“Does he not?” said Loki. Fjolnir turned his frown at Loki before looking back at Thor and giving a start, because in his place sat Lady Freya in a rather lovely wedding gown.

“I think that will do, Brother.” Thor’s normal voice issued from the illusion as “Freya” rolled her eyes, and Fjolnir dissolved into a fit of giggles, his parents both laughing heartily. Loki snickered into his goblet and lifted the spell.

“We prepared a magnificent wedding feast,” said Freyr. “Thrym brought most of his men along, all heavily armed, so perhaps he suspected something.”

“The wedding proceeded to the point of the exchange of weapons,” said Thor, “which put Mjolnir back in my hand. Loki dropped the illusions and I challenged Thrym to battle. If he won, he could keep Mjolnir and try his luck with Freya. He was so furious that we tricked him that I don’t know if he heard me, but he and his men attacked. We fought, and we won. I had my hammer back, Freya remained happily unmarried, and Honir was safe at last.” Thor clunked his goblet against Loki’s and drained it.

“You’re so lucky you have a brother,” said Fjolnir, looking back and forth from Thor to Loki with an envious pout.

“I certainly think so,” said Thor. Loki rolled his eyes.

“My friend Jarl back home has two brothers,” said Fjolnir, “and I met a boy yesterday with four brothers and three sisters!” That would be Leif. There were few families on Asgard as large as Volstagg and Hildegund’s. “Mama, Papa, you should have another baby so I can have a brother.”

“We’ll work on that right away,” said Freyr with a saucy smirk at his wife.

“And what if the Norns decide you should have a sister instead?” said Gerd.

Fjolnir wrinkled his nose. “Could I still play with her?”

“Of course you could,” said Freyr.

“And when she grew big enough,” said Gerd, “you could teach her to ride her horse and help her practice her spells.”
“That wouldn’t be so bad,” said Fjolnir, as though this was a great concession on his part. “But I would rather have a brother.” With that, he dug into his breakfast.

Odin and Frigga chuckled along with the boy’s parents, before Odin gestured to the servants standing around the edges of the room to leave them. Loki’s heart began to pound. The moment was nearly upon him. Freyr raised his eyebrows. “Are we discussing matters of state already?”

“Perhaps those boys from last night are nearby,” said Gerd, starting to stand. “I’m sure Fjolnir would much rather play with them than listen to such dull adult conversation.”

“He should stay,” said Loki. His mouth was very dry. He clenched his hands beneath the table to keep them from trembling. “This concerns him too, somewhat.” He looked directly at Gerd. “How old were you when you left Jotunheim?”

Her eyes went wide, and Freyr leapt to his feet so quickly that he sent his chair flying, moving to stand in front of her, eyes darting to each of them before settling fearfully on Fjolnir, who still sat between Thor and Loki.

Loki continued as if there had been no disturbance. “I learned recently that I left when I was but two days old.” Their guests froze. He could feel Fjolnir’s confused eyes on him.

“Freyr, your family is in no danger here,” said Frigga. “Please sit.”

Gerd laid a hand on her husband’s arm, and he reluctantly righted his seat and reclaimed it. “What do you mean?” she asked, looking at Loki.

Loki glanced at Odin, who nodded and raised the fingers of his right hand an inch or so, causing curtains to drop over the windows and the fires to dim, leaving the room in semi-darkness.

He reached for that knot of seidr again and tugged. The room was suddenly warm and appeared brightly lit. “Some of us don’t require the use of an enchanted pendant to hide it.”

Gerd gaped at him in utter shock, and he could feel the stares of everyone else on him too. He couldn’t help seeking Frigga’s gaze. She was beaming at him, and she reached for his hand. He didn’t have time to whip it away, but though there was a pronounced temperature difference, her skin did not burn when she touched him. Fighting back tears of relief and grateful that he was already sitting down, Loki turned to look at Thor, whose eyes traced the lines in his flesh with fascination but not the slightest hint of hostility. Had he never seen him like this in the other timeline?

“You’re like me?” said Fjolnir. The boy wore the same look of pure wonder he’d given Thor a few times. Loki nodded, unable to speak around the lump in his throat.

Fjolnir shot an imploring look at his mother. Loki looked at her too.

“You can take it off, darling,” said Gerd. She reached for the fastener to the silver chain around her neck and released it, then set the pendant on the table before her. The moment it parted company with her skin, deep, icy blue blossomed across her. Her long, pointed ears shrank until they were hidden by her hair, which turned from white-blonde to fully white, and her leaf-green eyes became scarlet. Freyr took her hand and twined his fingers through hers. His skin didn’t burn either. The flowing dress she wore left her arms bare, so Loki could see the coiling patterns in her skin—very different from the sharp angles of his own. The marks on her face were more similar, but not quite the same.

Beside Loki, Fjolnir had also removed his pendant and set it on the table. Being half-Vanr, his transformation wasn’t quite so dramatic. His curly hair also became white and his ears lost their
pointed tips, but his skin was a much paler blue and only his irises turned red. The markings on his face were identical to Gerd’s, but what little was visible of his arms and hands past the ends of his bunched-up sleeves was smooth.

“To answer your question,” said Gerd, “I was born in a remote part of Jotunheim, and my birth parents were able to hide me for several years. I have a few vague memories of them. Happy ones.”

“But it didn’t last,” said Loki.

“It couldn’t,” she said. “Eventually, the danger of keeping me with them became greater than the risk of smuggling me to Alfheim. I do not know if they still live, or if I have siblings. If I do and they were skamrbarn too, they never reached Alfheim.”

“Perhaps you will soon be in a position to find out,” said Thor.

“This is the true reason we invited you to Asgard,” said Odin. “It is not Vanaheim or Alfheim we wish to discuss, but Jotunheim.”

Chapter End Notes

What the heck, this chapter was hard to write too! It didn't really help that things got busier at work. And then I watched Crimson Peak for the first time and have become mildly obsessed (entirely aside from the appeal of another tragic Tom Hiddleston character, it's like if every single gothic novel on the reading list of my graduate class on gothic fiction were condensed into an absolute visual feast of a film). Also I've gotten over my Artist's Block a bit, so you guys might be getting a 7-page comic about toddler Thor and baby Loki being adorable soon. :D

I wish we'd gotten more Asgard between the three Thor movies, so I try to give it as much character as I can when I write big public scenes like the banquet. It seems like family is a big deal on Asgard and there aren't as many formalities dividing the different classes from each other, which is why the royal family can throw a big, boisterous feast and dance inside the palace, and there are kids running around all over the place.

As much fun as it would be to see Chris Hemsworth’s Thor in a wedding dress and trying his hardest to act like a blushing Vanr bride, realistically, unless Thrym was super blind, he wasn't going to fall for anything less than one of Loki's illusions.

Okay, I have some fun ideas about Loki's Jotun lessons with Gerd and Fjolnir, so that's probably what's coming up next.
“Alright,” said Gerd. “Show me what you know of frjosleikr.”

Loki didn’t ask what frjosleikr was. He could guess based on its similarities to words for magic and freezing that it was the Jotnar’s name for their cryokinetic abilities. He fidgeted with his hands, distracted by the texture of the lines etched into his skin. “I’ve never actually used frjosleikr before,” he said.

“Never?” said Fjolnir, shocked.

The three of them were standing in the middle of the largest bath chamber in the palace. Round pools of varying temperatures were sunk into the floor in a circle and one smaller raised basin of cool water stood at the center. Heavy curtains had been drawn over the windows so that the only light came from braziers. To an Aesir or Vanr, the room was dimly lit and comfortably warm, if extremely humid. To the two and a half Jotnar, it was bright and almost suffocatingly hot. Thor and Freyr stood near the door, backs to the wall, chatting and laughing together, Freyr idly twirling Gerd’s and Fjolnir’s pendants around a finger. Frigga had promised they would not be disturbed until she personally came to fetch them for a meal.

“Unlike you, I only just found out I’m Jotun, so I haven’t had much opportunity to practice.”

“All the same, I’d like to see what you can work out on your own before we show you anything,” said Gerd. “Instinct plays a large role in frjosleikr.”

Perhaps it wasn’t so different from seidr, then. Loki looked down at the water basin between them and imagined the contents freezing solid, then laid a hand flat over the surface and willed it to become ice.

Nothing happened. Loki frowned. He’d heard countless stories from the older Einherjar that a Frost Giant could freeze anything with a single touch, and he’d seen plenty of the frostbite scars that proved it. He’d been relieved beyond words to find that such an effect wasn’t automatic enough to make physical contact dangerous to the people he loved, but now he was getting annoyed.

“No, like this,” said Fjolnir after about a minute of nothing. He touched one finger to the surface of the water, and ice crystals spiked and swirled across it almost instantly.

“Fjolnir, let Prince Loki try,” said Gerd, laying her hands on his shoulders.

“Sorry, Prince Loki,” said Fjolnir. He withdrew his hand but bounced slightly where he stood, clearly bursting to get to the fun part.

Some of the water at the top of the basin was still liquid, so Loki tried again with that. He didn’t know what Fjolnir had done that was different, but he thought he’d seen him inhale as he touched the water. Loki did the same, breathing in slowly while trying to imagine the molecules slowing and locking into crystalline form as the heat left them. His eyes flew open. The water around his fingers had not frozen, but he was sure he’d felt it drop in temperature by at least a few degrees.

“A start,” said Gerd. “Describe your thought process.”
“I willed the heat to leave the water,” said Loki.

“And go where?” said Gerd.

Loki blinked.

“What do you know of our biology?”

Loki was surprised to feel his cheeks warm. “Very little,” he admitted. “There are some books on the subject,” which he knew because said books were currently stacked on the desk in his chambers, awaiting his perusal, “but I focused my studies elsewhere.” What he was less willing to admit was that he had never thought the Jotnar worth his time. All he’d believed he needed to know was how to defeat them if he ever met them in battle.

If Gerd was offended by his unnecessary ignorance, she hid it well. “You know Aesir biology, though?”

“Of course,” said Loki.

“Your knowledge is not entirely lacking, then,” she said with a faint smirk. “Fjolnir could not exist if we were not more similar to the other races of Yggdrasil than we are different, after all. There are, however, a number of ways in which Jotnar are unique. The most important is the source of our frjosleikr. Fjolnir could have been born without it, but he was lucky.”

She ruffled her son’s hair, a twinkle in her scarlet eyes, and he looked rather pleased with himself as he grinned up at Loki. What a marvel was the House of Freyr. Partly to spite the other timeline, Loki was striving to believe that being Jotun did not make him inherently lesser, but he doubted he would ever be able to consider himself lucky to have been born what he was.

“Heat is far too scarce to waste on Jotunheim, and life forms native to the realm have a number of adaptations in order to function at extremely low temperatures. For us, these include glands that secrete a substance to lower the freezing point of our blood, which is where we get our coloring. Other races leak their heat like sieves, but our skin traps nearly all of it inside, which is why we are so cold to the touch.”

“Then how are we not already dead of heat stroke just by standing in this room?” said Loki. If they retained all of their own body heat, it shouldn’t be possible to introduce additional heat without significant problems.

“Because of the bruni-magi,” said Gerd. Loki nearly jumped when she reached across the basin and jabbed his midriff at a point about halfway between his navel and his ribcage. “It is an organ that collects excess heat and converts it into usable energy, located between the stomach and the liver.”

“Ah,” said Loki, “then I should have been trying to draw the heat from the water inward.”

Gerd smiled. “You are clever. Yes.” She reached for the water, and did a slower, more exaggerated movement than Fjolnir had as she touched it, and Loki could see that she while she was inhaling, she was also contracting all of her abdominal muscles. More of the water froze.

Loki reached down and imitated her movements, and this time he closed his eyes and imagined drawing the heat to him with the motion. “There it is,” said Gerd. “Pull the heat in. You will be able to feel it the more you do it. Like a fire inside you.” There was a sensation not unlike drinking hot cider, except that it trickled up his arm rather than down his throat, before pooling at a spot near where Gerd had poked him.
“You did it!” cried Fjolnir excitedly. Loki opened his eyes and saw that there was indeed a thin patch of ice beneath each of his fingertips. Fjolnir leaned to the side so he could see Freyr around Loki. “Papa, Prince Loki made ice!”

“Well done,” said Freyr. “What excellent teachers my wife and son are!”

“Loki was always the better student of the two of us,” said Thor.

“You say that as though you were ever much competition,” said Loki, torn between embarrassment at being praised for so small an accomplishment and satisfaction that he had at least worked out how to do it.

“Now,” said Gerd, “we can only draw heat in up until a certain point. After that, you must release it or risk a frjosleikr fever, which can be deadly. You will know when you are close to danger.”

“How do I release it?” said Loki.

She smiled again and drew her hand up above the partially frozen water. The ice followed her motion and reshaped itself into the figure of a horse. Fjolnir had started bouncing again. Gerd splayed out her fingers and the figure disintegrated into glittering frost powder.

“So...we can digest heat and turn it into energy for magic?” That was...remarkably efficient.

Gerd nodded. “What does it feel like now?”

Loki frowned. He hadn’t realized it until she drew his attention to it, but the hot cider sensation wasn’t quite the same now. “It’s like...a coiled spring,” he said slowly. Completely different from the way seidr felt. He also noticed that he was more aware of the ice they had made, even what was left of the frost. He could see the patterns in it, and he had the sense that there was something more just out of his reach. With seidr, he could have moved the ice anywhere he wanted it to go, but he wasn’t sure what to do with the new source of energy.

“That’s frjosleikr. Most Jotnar’s bodies are able to use the energy from heat for normal biological functions, and only the excess is available for frjosleikr, but there are mutations that block the production of the enzymes that facilitate the energy conversions. The result is—”

“Skamrbarn,” Loki realized. “We only have the enzymes for frjosleikr, which accounts for our height.”

“Precisely.”

“Does the reverse ever happen?”

“It does,” said Gerd. “They are called mikillbarn.” The term connoted power and strength, not just great height, so Loki could already guess how such Jotnar were perceived. However, Gerd’s brow creased with sympathy as she spoke of them. “They are even more rare than we are, at least as adults.” She touched the water again, and as it hardened, three little ice figures rose up out of it. One was barely an inch tall, the next was about two inches, and the third was at least three inches. “Their size considerably shortens their lifespan, and they cannot leave Jotunheim at all or they would fatally overheat within hours.” The largest ice figure crumbled. “Normal Jotnar can tolerate higher temperatures for perhaps a few days before succumbing to deadly fevers.” The second figure followed the first, leaving the smallest standing alone on a thin plane of ice. “We skamrbarn can survive away from Jotunheim indefinitely as long as we don’t overexert ourselves.”

Perhaps that was why the refugee skamrbarn were safe on Alfheim—not just because they could
survive in its climate, but because larger Jotnar could not safely pursue them. It also explained why
Laufey had never been able to make another assault on Midgard. Without the Casket, his armies
would wither and die there.

“What happens when we do?” he asked. “Is it like seidr exhaustion?”

Gerd shook her head, her eyes wide. “If only it were. I would rather have seidr exhaustion for a
month than a frjosleikr fever. It is absolutely miserable. Be very careful how hard you push
yourself.”

Loki nodded. He wondered what Stark would make of this. In ten minutes, he’d gained more
technical knowledge about how Jotun magic worked than he’d learned about seidr in his entire life.
He was going to have to rectify that. The work of a scholar was never done.

“Well,” said Gerd, suddenly very businesslike. “You understand the basics now. I think another test
is in order.”

Loki concealed his alarm. “What sort of test?”

“As I said, frjosleikr is largely instinctive. What better way to test one’s instincts than to be thrown
into a situation where they are needed? There will be time to teach you the eighteen crystalline
structures of ice, how to control lattice size and texture, and how to discover the ideal shape of your
fetils svell. For now, your task is to land one snowball strike against Fjolnir.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Loki, but his words were drowned by a jubilant war-cry from Fjolnir. The
boy plunged his hand into the basin, then pulled it out a second later clutching a perfect sphere of
snow, which he pelted straight at Loki’s face.

Loki didn’t even have time for an indignant reaction. Fjolnir was giving no quarter, and Loki took
another two snowballs to the ear and shoulder before he could so much as duck behind the basin. It
was so ridiculous that he couldn’t be angry, even though Thor and Freyr were now laughing so hard
they had to hold onto each other to stay on their feet. “You treacherous little fiend,” said Loki, his
tone more complimentary than accusatory, “you knew this was going to happen, didn’t you?”

“Yep!” said Fjolnir without the faintest hint of remorse, popping up around the side of the basin and
letting fly snowballs four and five. Loki threw up a cloaking spell without thinking and sent two
simulacra in different directions to cover his retreat.

“Hey!” shouted the boy. “No seidr! We’re practicing frjosleikr only!”

Gritting his teeth, Loki uncloaked, but he didn’t need to dispel the simulacra, as Fjolnir had already
done so with more snowballs. He succeeded in dodging the next one to come his way, but his failure
to retaliate was giving his foe time to stockpile ammunition and take careful aim.

Loki threw himself to the ground in a roll past the next snowball and stuck his hand into the nearest
bath. It was far hotter than the water in the basin, and the heat shot through him with such intensity
that it left him gasping until it settled in his stomach—or his bruni-magi, he supposed. It definitely felt
like a fire now, which quickly became a buzzing tension, less reminiscent of a coiled spring than of a
hive of swarming bees. It all happened in mere seconds (during which he was struck with at least
three more snowballs). He tried to send the writhing energy back into the ice to make one of his own.
The ice did change shape, but only into an irregular lump, still made of solid ice. He scowled. How
in the Nine was he supposed to do this while under constant assault? It wasn’t that the snowballs hurt
—they didn’t even feel colder than his skin—but he couldn’t concentrate at all with them constantly
raining down.
When Frigga opened the door of the bath chamber to invite her sons and cousins to the midday meal, the sudden chill stole her breath away.

“Ahahaha, I am the Snow King!” a young voice roared. “All princes of Asgard and lords of Vanaheim shall tremble before me!”

It took a few seconds for Frigga’s eyes to adjust, and when they did, it was difficult not to burst out laughing. There was very little liquid water left in any of the baths, and it looked like the room had been hit by a blizzard. Fjolnir stood atop a battlement of snow on the far side of the chamber, tall pyramids of snowballs stacked on either side of him. Thor and Freyr crouched behind a much less impressive wall of snow not far from the door. They were both completely soaked, and when they turned to look at her, their grinning faces were bright pink from the cold. Gerd sat primly on a chair made of ice, completely untouched by the fearsome battle.

Frigga took a few more steps forward, and Loki came into view where he was lying sprawled out at the bottom of the nearest bath, breathing hard, caked in snow and partially buried in pieces of ice in various lumpy shapes. He looked sullenly up at her. He had been struck by so many snowballs that they had freed his hair from its usual slick confines, leaving it sticking out in the kind of untamed curls he had not allowed since he was old enough to dress himself. Now was probably not the time for another attempt to persuade him that they were very handsome curls.

“How go the lessons?” she asked.

“Poorly.”

Chapter End Notes

So...can you tell I was a biochemistry major before I switched to English? :D

Okay, I didn't really expect ALL of the extensive headcanons I painstakingly came up with about Jotun biology to come out in the dialogue this chapter, but I clearly underestimated how nerdy Loki and Gerd are. Whoops. Hope you found it interesting. I took some inspiration for the idea of the bruni-magi (which translates to heat-stomach from Old Norse) from AtLA, when Uncle Iroh explains that the stomach is the sea of chi. I decided to give the Jotnar a more literal version of that. A stomach that digests heat. That would be a pretty remarkable thing, because usually heat is the byproduct of chemical reactions and ends up as wasted energy.

Fjolnir is a fearsome snow warrior and I love him. If it wasn't clear from what Frigga found when she arrived, Thor and Freyr couldn't resist joining in the fight once there was enough snow for them to use. They are wonderful childish dorks sometimes. Or all the time. (Freyr and Gerd are meant to be in their species’ equivalent to their mid-thirties, while Thor and Loki are in their early twenties.)

Once again, my estimations of my own fic's pacing were off, but this time I'm almost positive we've only got one more chapter with prominent roles for the House of Freyr until the next arc kicks off properly. This stuff about Loki’s Jotun lessons is all sort of a transition between two arcs, so it isn't always as fun to write, but this chapter gave me a lot of cool ideas to use in what's coming next, so I'm psyched.
Oh! I almost forgot! I totally did finish that 7-page comic about little Thor and Loki. It's over here: http://taaroko.tumblr.com/post/183535078491/made-a-comic-out-of-a-headcanon-i-have-about-thor
One of the first things Thor had done after learning to fly with Mjolnir was to satisfy his own curiosity about what was on the underside of Asgard. He had been shown many images of it by his tutors as he sat through lesson after lesson on how King Buri had built the realm and how it differed from natural planets, but he still wanted to see it for himself. He had flown out to the edge and past it, then down and back through the curtains of falling water to the great mountains of crystal that rose many times higher than Gladsheim. Gravity was much weaker on that side, but it was strong enough for several more tenacious plant species to cling to the crevices between rocks, and he saw a few birds making their nests amid the coiled roots and branches.

While Banner, Jane, and Erik studied the Tesseract in hopes of making a device that could locate the Dokkalfar army and Loki continued his frjosleikr lessons with Gerd and Fjolnir, Thor made the trip to the underside of the world again, this time for a different reason. Instead of gazing mesmerized at the dazzling crystal formations, he looked down past Asgard into the star-speckled blackness of space.

No matter how carefully he looked, however, he could not find what he sought. The maelstrom of a portal that had brought him, Banner, and the Valkyrie to Asgard should have been easily visible from here, and yet it did not seem to be there. How could that be?

Disgruntled, he flew back topside and made for the Observatory.

“Did you enjoy the view?” said Heimdall as he stepped inside.

“Not as much as I would have if I’d found what I was looking for.”

Heimdall raised an eyebrow.

“You haven’t noticed a portal leading to Sakaar from Asgard, have you?” Thor asked.

“No.”

“It’s massive. You can’t miss it if it’s there.”

“Then it is not.”

Thor deflated.

“What business would take you to a world so far beyond Yggdrasil’s branches?”

“Nothing urgent,” said Thor. “Just a friend I was hoping to meet a little sooner this time around.”

Heimdall inclined his head. “If a portal appears, I will be sure to inform you, but such things do not generally form on their own.”

“Thank you, Heimdall.” Thor left for the palace, disappointed. With his brother and many of his friends so occupied with important tasks to which he could offer no help, he had been entertaining a half-formed notion of flying through that portal, finding the Valkyrie and perhaps Korg and the other pit fighters who had so nobly died defending the Statesman during Thanos’s raid, and bringing them...
back to Asgard. With Mjolnir in hand and knowledge of Sakaar’s portals, he had imagined such a trip might take him no longer than a day or two. But if the portal he wanted to use wasn’t even there… Sakaar was about as far away from Asgard as any known system—well beyond the limits of the Bifrost’s reach. Traveling that far with the Tesseract would be a simple thing, but he didn’t want to remove it from Asgard now that it was here.

It would be difficult to justify a trip to Sakaar if there wasn’t an easy way to get there, but he supposed he would have to resign himself to waiting. Valkyrie wasn’t going to drink herself to death within the next eight years, but he hated the idea of leaving her in that miserable drunken stupor any longer than he had to.

When he reached the suite of chambers that had become the laboratory of the human scientists, he found the three of them explaining what looked like a schematic to Vidar, one of Asgard’s foremost engineers. He had initially been skeptical about working with mortals, but he would do whatever the security of the realm required without complaint. It likely also helped that the humans no longer looked so out of place, as they all wore Asgardian clothing and had grown less awkward in their new surroundings over the last few days.

Vidar straightened and put fist to heart at the sight of Thor, and Banner, Jane, and Erik all smiled at him. “Hey, how’s it going?” said Banner.

“Very well,” said Thor. “And for you?”

“I’m still not used to being free to make whatever I can think of without having to write pages of grant proposals before I can start working and making do with a limited budget when one finally gets accepted,” said Erik.

“We’ve drawn up some designs we can start working on,” said Jane. Here, she nodded at Vidar. “But...we might have a problem.”

“What’s that?” said Thor.

“You want us to track down something that was made with an Infinity Stone over five thousand years ago, but the only thing we have to give us an idea of the type of energy signature we’re looking for is a different Infinity Stone that we’ve never studied,” said Banner.

“We can look for anything with a matching signature,” said Erik, “and Asgardian technology will make it simple to extend our search by light-years more than what we could do with Earth technology, but if the stones are different, it won’t be much better than flying into space at random and hoping we happen to bump into the ships.”

Thor frowned. “Is there nothing Asgard can provide to solve this problem?”

Vidar shook his head. “I can help them build whatever they design, my prince, but finding the Dokkalfar fleet is already beyond our capabilities.”

“We get that it’s too dangerous to do anything with the other Stone until after you deal with these Dark Elf guys,” said Jane, “but maybe if we had something that was made using it?”

“If the Stone itself has been missing for five millennia, that might be pretty hard to find,” said Banner.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” said Thor. “Would an entire battlefield of downed Dokkalfar ships suffice?” They all stared at him, so he elaborated. “Svartalfheim is a dead world; the ships that fell haven’t been touched since the war, and they’re exactly like the ones we’re looking for.”
A grin broke out over Jane’s face. “That—yeah, I think that would do it,” she said.

“Great!” said Thor. “Anything else?”

“If we could see how an Infinity Stone interacts with a device made using its power, that might also help us refine our search,” said Erik.

“I don’t see why you can’t have both. The Tesseract can be used to travel anywhere in the universe. Surely you can use it to create such a device. Perhaps one we might use to travel beyond the reach of the Bifrost.”

“So...you want us to just casually design a transporter with unlimited range, just to use as a control group for playing intergalactic hide-and-seek?” said Banner.

“Why, is that unreasonable?” said Thor blandly. It was moments like this that he best understood Loki’s love of mischief. The play of indignation, bewilderment, and defiance on all three scientists’ faces was quite amusing to watch.

The following day, Thor, Sif, the Warriors Three, and a small company of Einherjar accompanied Jane, Erik, and Banner to Svartalfheim. Only one of the humans really needed to come and help identify the materials they needed, but they all jumped at the chance to visit another world, so Thor couldn’t deny them. Thor had of course invited Loki too, but he preferred to continue his training with Gerd and Fjolnir over fetching scraps of Dokkalfar technology. As Loki had spurned many an invitation over the centuries and then seemed distant and resentful when Thor accepted it and left without him, Thor asked a few more times to make sure he really meant it, until Loki lost all patience and slammed his chamber door in Thor’s face.

Thor did not particularly like having to go back to Svartalfheim, but he concealed this as best he could—a feat made easier by the knowledge that his mother and brother were both safe and well on Asgard. They flew into the Bifrost on two small longships, and emerged in the barren black wastes of the Dokkalfar’s realm.

“This place used to be habitable?” said Banner, staring at the landscape.

“It was before my grandfather finished with it,” said Thor grimly.

“You mean the war ruined the whole planet?”

“No more than the Dokkalfar deserved.”

Banner raised his eyebrows. “They’re that bad, huh? And you’re looking to find what’s left of them and kill them too?”

Thor noticed his tone and scowled at him. “How else would you deal with a people that wants to extinguish all life in the cosmos but themselves?” The very idea of offering mercy to those who had killed his mother, nearly killed Loki, and brought so much destruction upon Asgard made him bristle. They would do it all again if they had the chance, and he would not allow it.

Banner lifted his hands. “Hey, I’m sure you know more about it than I do, and if that’s their goal, then maybe you don’t have a choice. It’s just that when I left Earth, I didn’t think I was going to be helping you commit genocide.”

Thor’s own words rang in his ears. You can’t kill an entire race! But the comparison was absurd. It
wasn’t the same as turning the Bifrost on Jotunheim. The Dokkalfar would carry out Malekith’s plans. Thor had already lived through it. They were guilty. ...So why did the prospect leave him with a sick feeling in his stomach?

Moments later, they crested a hill and were suddenly overlooking the largest battlefield Thor had ever seen. The ground was littered with Dokkalfar skeletons still clad in their armor and eerie white masks, and the shattered remnants of at least a dozen ships just like Malekith’s rose across the land like small mountains. There were traces here and there of Bor’s army—golden weapons and pieces of broken armor scattered amongst the bodies—but Bor would have seen to it that none of Asgard’s fallen remained. They had surely all been given warrior’s funerals back home.

Thor saw Jane shiver slightly on the other longboat at the sight. His fellow Aesir and Hogun all regarded the battlefield with fierce eyes and clenched jaws. Undoubtedly they were imagining the battle itself, and remembering the stories of this war and how Malekith had smashed his own ships atop the fighters in his final attempt to crush Bor’s forces.

The party flew to the nearest of the downed ships. The hull had been shredded when it collided with the planet’s surface, so it was easy for them to make their way inside. The Aesir helped the mortals navigate the treacherous terrain, while they in turn pointed out items and bits of ruined machinery they thought could prove useful. Before two hours had passed, they declared that they had all they needed.

No one objected to heading back to Asgard. It had not been a very enjoyable trip.

X

For an entire fortnight now, Loki had continued to lose snowball fights against Fjolnir every morning. The only progress he was making in frjosleikr (as Gerd refused to volunteer any further instruction until he cleared this absurd hurdle, and he wasn’t going to ask) was that he was now much better at controlling the shape of the pieces of ice he made. Nothing he had tried so far made the slightest impact on its actual consistency, though, and he would never land a snowball strike on the boy if he couldn’t make snow in the first place. However, each defeat only made him more single-minded. He was sure there was plenty going on with the mortals’ efforts to locate Malekith’s army and other preparations based on Thor’s information, but his focus was entirely on mastering these abilities.

“Fjolnir won again?” said Thor as Loki stalked past him in the corridor on the way back to his chambers.

Loki glared at him, which didn’t stop him from falling into step at his side. “Choose your words with care, Brother. You missed out on being the target of a thousand years of ice-themed tricks, and I am perfectly willing to make up for them all in one go.”

Thor grinned. “I’m sure you would, but don’t you need to work out how to do it first?”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “I know enough already to freeze you in your bathwater, put ice beneath your foot on the training grounds, or turn your ale solid.” Being able to do those things when they were children would have been perfectly just repayment for the many times Thor’s uncontrolled static discharge had left Loki’s hair a frizzy mess.

Thor raised his hands in surrender, though he was still grinning.

They walked in silence for a few seconds, before Loki burst out, “I can’t work out what I’m doing wrong! I’ve tried everything I can think of, and I’ve read all the books Asgard has about the Jotnar,
but none of them has anything useful to say about frjosleikr. The closest was a series of diagrams of different fetils svell and discussions on which were most effective in different combat styles, but nothing at all about making snow.” He’d attempted it numerous times in the privacy of his chambers, hoping to take advantage of the absence of snowballs flying at him every other second, but to no effect.

“Perhaps you’re overthinking it,” said Thor with a shrug.

“You would say that,” said Loki with an exaggerated roll of his eyes. “Overthinking things and seidr are what I do best. They tend to go together, which is precisely why you never made much headway studying it.”

“This isn’t seidr, though,” said Thor, not doing Loki the satisfaction of rising to his insults. “Maybe being so good at that is making this harder, because you automatically approach it like a fully trained seidmadr.”

Loki grimaced. The last two weeks had been humiliating enough; he didn’t want Thor to be right on top of that. But if he was being fair, Loki had to admit that Thor’s elemental abilities were certainly closer to being like frjosleikr than the subtle ways he used his own seidr. He might have a point.

“How do you control storms?”

“I don’t always,” said Thor. “Sometimes they just react to me. Strong emotions feed them. Mjolnir acts as a focus.”

Before Loki could reply, Munin came flapping towards them with a low croak.

“A summons?” said Thor. “Now?”

“Something must have happened,” said Loki. They exchanged a tense glance and jogged after the raven, who led them to the council chambers. Odin was there, conversing with the golden image of Heimdall. Odin spared them a glance and gestured them closer.

“Repeat your news, Gatekeeper,” he said.

“I have found the Mad Titan,” said Heimdall. Thor went rigid at Loki’s side, and he could feel the electricity crackling within him. “He lurks near the very edge of my sight. I have been watching him for the last few days. All is as Thor described. He has the Mind Stone, a number of powerful lieutenants, and vast armies at his command. An hour ago, he dispatched two of those lieutenants with one of his largest ships.”

“What is their destination?” said Odin. “Asgard?”

“Nidavellir?” said Loki.

“Midgard?” said Thor.

“No. Yggdrasil’s defenses must still be enough to deter them, for they pursue other goals. The ship can hold an army, but it is empty.”

“Then they are not bound for war?” said Odin.

“For the moment, they only seek to prepare for it,” said Heimdall. “They mean to return with yet another army for their master, and they have set their course for Sakaar.”
So last summer when I did my post-Infinity War rewatch marathon (I am currently on my pre-Endgame rewatch marathon), when I was watching Guardians of the Galaxy, I noticed that Ronan's creepy grayish, nightmare-faced troops are referred to as Sakaarans. And yet we never saw any of those guys actually on Sakaar. Perhaps because they'd already been recruited. :D

This chapter was a beast. So much technical stuff to figure out. My breakthrough came when I realized that having pieces of Dark Elf technology that was made using the Aether would be really useful, and then I was finally able to write the rest of it.

The reason the big portal to Sakaar isn't there is that I headcanon that it was created when Thor smashed the Bifrost. So it doesn't exist in this timeline because that never happened.

Now it's time for the arc I was so excited to get to. Hopefully Endgame is awesome and satisfying and doesn't leave me a despondent wreck with no will to write.
Two weeks and two days from when Thor had disappeared with Dr. Foster, Dr. Selvig, and an undergrad poli-sci student in a pillar of rainbow light about two miles outside of D.C., the second pillar of light appeared on the same patch of grass, burning away what had regrown and sending up alerts all through the Triskelion. The light soon faded and out stepped a lone man with a sword on his belt, dressed in leather armor similar to Thor’s, though he wasn’t nearly as huge as Thor and had auburn hair.

The pair of agents stationed at the Bifrost site stood ramrod straight to greet him, the picture of professionalism (the surveillance footage would show that, up until thirty seconds ago, they had been slouching in their chairs, sipping coffees and listening to a football game on the radio).

The man from Asgard turned to face them and inclined his head. “I am Geir Gunnarson, Huskarl of the third company of the Einherjar,” he announced, “here on behalf of Prince Thor and Prince Loki to escort two agents of the SHIELD of Midgard to Asgard, as requested by Director Fury. Are you the agents in question?”

“No,” said one of them, “but we’ll let HQ know you’re here.”

“Very good.”

“X

“This is an opportunity we cannot waste,” said Thor. “Please? Perhaps a few days away from Asgard and a decent fight will help you come back to your frjosleikr lessons with a new approach.”

“There’s no need to beg,” said Loki. “I’m aware that we can hardly waste a chance to deprive Thanos of an army and two of his most powerful minions, and I can hardly stay here to be pelted by snowballs while you muck it all up on your own.”

“Excellent!” said Thor. “Then you will come with me after I meet with the SHIELD agents Fury is sending?”

“You mean today? Then the transporters are ready to use?” said Loki, surprised.

“That’s what Banner said at breakfast,” said Thor.

Loki gave an aggrieved sigh. “The mortals have worked out how to do instantaneous intergalactic travel and I still can’t make so much as a bloody snowflake.”

“X

This being potentially the most important reconnaissance mission in the history of the planet and them being the top two field operatives of SHIELD, Natasha and Clint were the obvious choices to liaise with Asgard. Within an hour of Geir’s arrival, they were accompanying him back to the Bifrost site, dressed casually and carrying no visible weapons.

“So how does this work?” said Clint as they stepped into the pattern of charred grass.
“We simply stand here and the Bifrost will do the rest,” said Geir. A smile cracked through his stoic warrior’s facade, making him look much less like a space Viking and much more like the kind of guy you’d find at a neighborhood barbecue. “I think you will enjoy it. It is quite a memorable experience. Are you ready?”

“As we’ll ever be,” said Natasha. Clint wrapped an arm around her shoulders. She allowed it and clung to him in a way that suggested she was more nervous than she was. The idea was to be underestimated, but they were going to another planet. Maybe she really was this nervous.

Geir looked skyward. “Heimdall,” he called.

The clouds overhead began to swirl, and then that column of light came blasting down. Clint’s grip on Natasha tightened as they were pulled off the ground. The earth fell away, and before she knew what was happening, she was rushing past stars, planets, asteroid fields, and nebulae almost faster than she could process what she was seeing.

“I wish Laura and the kids could see this,” Clint breathed.

“You’ll have quite the story for them,” said Natasha.

Seconds later, they stumbled after Geir into a circular chamber, at the center of which stood easily the most majestic man Natasha had ever seen, his hands on the hilt of a sword set into some kind of console. His elaborate golden armor and helmet should have seemed silly, but they didn’t, and it was a little too easy to play the part of swooning girl trying to hide her reaction to a man. She swallowed hard.

“Agents Barton and Romanoff of SHIELD, welcome to Asgard,” he said, fixing them with gleaming eyes as golden as his armor.

“Thanks,” said Clint, shooting Natasha a teasing glance and giving her a slight nudge.

She broke eye contact with the man, presumably Heimdall, and nodded.

“Come with me,” said Geir. “I’ll take you to the palace. That is where your scientists are staying.”

In the end, it was impossible to do anything but play the part of gawking tourist. Asgard was stunning, and there was so much to look at. How long had this place been here, and Earth had only had a vague idea of it in one culture’s mythology?

They rode a flying longboat from the Bifrost Observatory into the city. As fascinating as the architecture was, Natasha was most interested in watching the people they passed, who increased in number the farther they went into the city. Asgard seemed to be a cheerful place with a lot of energy. Craftsmen called out their wares and prices, children wound their way between adults, horses, and vendor stalls, giggling and waving practice weapons or playing games, and she heard multiple bursts of full-bellied laughter from groups of shoppers. Once, the sound of shattering ceramics had her whip around to face a building that seemed to be some kind of restaurant, but it was only followed by more laughter. Most of the open squares either had musicians and dancers or what looked like casual sword fighting tournaments, surrounded by rings of delighted onlookers. No one looked sick, underfed, or dirty, but they also didn’t look snobbish or arrogant, and the city itself was in pristine condition. It appeared that whatever Thor and Loki’s family did to run this place, they were doing a good job.

The whole trip from the Observatory to the towering golden palace took about an hour (she estimated that the entire planetoid was at most a thousand kilometers across), and then they were
disembarking and Geir was leading them through the biggest doors Natasha had ever seen. They had barely stepped inside when there was a delighted shout.

“I didn’t know you would be the ones Director Fury would send!” It was Thor, and despite the fact that he and Natasha had only met briefly at the Triskelion when he tried to invite her to Stark’s mansion for some reason, he reached for her as well as Clint and pulled them into a hug.

“Damn, is he always like this?” Natasha gasped.

“Yep,” wheezed Clint.

Thor set them back down and beamed at them, his hands still on their shoulders. “It is so good to have you on Asgard. How do you like it so far?”

Natasha smiled back automatically. She was having a hard time with the idea that someone with as much power as Thor could be this genuine. For all she knew, it was a species thing, and what she’d seen on the way over certainly supported that idea. It shouldn’t take too long to be sure. “It’s beautiful, and your people seem pretty happy.”

“Yeah,” said Clint. “We had to wrestle Coulson to get the assignment.”

“The Son of Coul is welcome on Asgard whenever he would like to come,” said Thor. “He was a great help to my brother and me during our visit to Earth, and we would gladly return the favor.” He looked over at Geir, who clapped his right fist over his heart and gave a partial bow. Thor nodded back. “Thank you, Geir. Was that your first time on Midgard?”

“It was, my prince. Will you need me to escort more mortals in future?”

“Very likely, when I can’t do it myself. I will send for you when it is time for Barton and Romanoff to return.”

“Yes, my prince.”

He bowed again and withdrew, and Thor turned back to Natasha and Clint. “You’ve come just in time. Jane, Erik, and Dr. Banner have made great progress on their work. The short-range tests of their transporters have been successful, and they want to move on to long-range tests to see how much farther they have to go on the tracker to locate the Dokkalfar fleet.”

“What about the other one,” said Clint. “Thanos?”

Thor’s eager smile hardened into something more like a snarl. “He lacks the Dokkalfar’s cloaking technology, and we’ve already located him. His base of operations is too well fortified to attack directly, but he’s just sent two of his minions to a remote world with little support. We believe their mission is to deliver him another amy, and we mean to thwart them in it.”

Natasha frowned slightly as she and Clint followed Thor to a staircase and up a few levels, while Thor described Sakaar and what he intended to do there. If Thanos was an old enemy of his father’s from before he was born, then why was he acting like this was so personal for him? She’d read everything Thor and Loki had given Fury on Thanos and the Dokkalfar. Thanos’s habit of invading planets and slaughtering half of their occupants because of some extremely backwards ideas about cosmic balance and resource availability was horrifying. It was definitely worth fighting a war, but to really hate someone, you had to know them better than having a general understanding of their military strategy and ideology. Was Thor just that gung-ho about war, or was there something else going on here?
It took Jane Foster about half an hour to explain the devices she, Selvig, Banner, and an Asgardian engineer had made. The transporters, of which there were two, looked like something out of an H.G. Wells book, if Wells had possessed an intense interest in Norse iconography. Perched atop five spindly legs was a sleek golden cylinder about four feet tall. A third of its height was taken up by a clear chamber full of a swirling, gleaming blue substance. Numerous handles protruded from the sides and there was a dial on the top with four concentric rings and a holographic projection display.

The other device was much less impressive in appearance. It looked like a fancy, oversized geiger counter with a long golden antenna sticking out of the top. It, too, had dials and a holographic display.

Natasha was not a stupid woman, but she felt like one beside Dr. Foster, listening to her explanation of how the devices were meant to work. The only other people who didn’t seem to be following much of what she said were Clint and the poli-sci intern. Even Thor and his band of warrior friends looked more impressed than confused, but Loki was the only one actively asking questions and pointing out potential problems.

The gist, Natasha thought, was that if you wanted to teleport somewhere in the universe, you twisted the rings around the top to set your destination, then grabbed onto one of the handles and held on for dear life. The tracker thing was presumably capable of tracing energy signatures across space, which was the main point of having two transporters. The computing power that must be packed into these small devices to be able to calculate such precise locations across such vast distances had to be insane.

“The transporters are fuelled by the Tesseract,” said Dr. Banner. “A little of that will get you pretty far, but it won’t last forever. If we’re talking different galaxies, I don’t think you’ll get more than two uses out of it a pop.”

“How do you know it’ll work?” said Clint.

“We’ve already tested it on Asgard,” said Dr. Selvig. “We sent it from one end of the palace to the other, first by itself, then with a small passenger one of the guards found digging up a flowerbed in the garden.” He indicated a cage on the table across the room, which contained a creature that resembled an oversized raccoon, except that it had longer ears. “We’ve had him under observation since yesterday, and there don’t seem to be any ill effects, so Bruce and Vidar tried it about an hour ago.”

“Then it’s safe for both mortals and Aesir to use,” said Thor. “Marvelous. Why don’t we try a destination a little farther afield?”

“Right now?” said Loki. “You want to go right now?”

“Why not?” said Thor. He looked at the scientists. “Loki and I can take the first one, and then you can use the tracker and send Sif, Fandral, Hogan, and Volstagg after us.”

The four Asgardians in question stood up straighter and touched their weapons.

“When we all come back, you’ll know it all works, and we can see to the Dokkalfar,” Thor went on. He looked at Natasha and Clint, his grin returning. “Want to come?”

“What, use a prototype device to travel to a remote planet run by a crazy guy to help you take down two of this genocidal warlord’s lieutenants?” said Clint.
“Yes, I think having a couple of expert spies along will be a significant advantage,” said Thor. Natasha noticed that while Loki seemed satisfied by this, the other warriors looked a little incredulous.

“Sounds like fun,” said Clint.

Natasha gave both of them a flat look. She hadn’t decided yet whether this was better or worse than working undercover at Stark Industries, but Thor looked so damn happy about the idea of the two of them coming along. “Our assignment specifically said to gather any intel we can on our big upcoming threats,” she said reluctantly. “It shouldn’t be too hard to justify making it home a little later than planned.”

“If you’re sure about this,” said Selvig.

Natasha, Clint, Thor, and Loki each stepped up to one of the handles on the first transporter. Thor twisted the dials on top, bringing up a hologram of a small planet, then poked a spot near what looked like a massive city of skyscrapers. “Ready?” he asked. It was as ridiculous a question now as when Geir had asked it, but Natasha and Clint both nodded.

All together, they twisted the handles ninety degrees counter-clockwise. Webs of golden light shot out of the center console and enveloped them, and then there was a blast of blue energy, a sensation like they were spinning very fast, and the laboratory disappeared from view.

Sif watched the princes and the mortal spies vanish using the transporter, and she had to admit that she had underestimated the scientists.

“Can the tracker see where they’ve gone?” said Volstagg.

“Let’s find out,” said Jane Foster, touching the dials on the device in question. “It’s picking up a few different signals. It looks like there’s some back on Earth, which makes sense. Oh, here we go, this is the strongest one besides the Tesseract, and it’s well outside Yggdrasil.” She walked up to the second transporter and entered the coordinates into it. “Okay, you’re all set.”

Sif and the Warriors Three did the same as the others had. Traveling this way felt very different than traveling by Bifrost, and Sif already knew which one she preferred, but the unpleasant spinning sensation was over quickly, and they found themselves standing amid long, purple grass under a reddish sky. Not too far away was a cluster of huts decorated in vibrant colors, and a few children with green skin and pointed ears chased each other around until an adult voice within the nearest hut called out to them, and they walked, slump-shouldered, back inside. It was a pleasant sight, but Thor and Loki were conspicuously absent.

“Er, have we come to the right place?” said Fandral.

Sif frowned and looked back at the transporter’s console. She prodded one of the dials, and it brought up the destination Jane Foster had entered. It wasn’t a planet she was familiar with, so she couldn’t say.

“Sif, Fandral,” said Hogun, his tone sharp and his hand on Hridgandr. Beside him, Volstagg was drawing his axe. They spun around, reaching for their swords. Something was flying towards them at great speed. Something that was giving off nearly blinding golden light.
Please don’t talk about Endgame in the comments. Not everyone has seen it yet. I have, and my fear that it would sap my will to write appears to have been unfounded. I’m actually even more determined to work on this fic than I was before I saw it. :) 

I also saw Captain Marvel for the second time last Monday, and it *may* have inspired part of this chapter. The first time I saw it, I liked it okay but felt like the final battle should’ve been harder to win. On the rewatch, I realized that, in terms of plot structure, the final battle is more of a victory lap. The climax already happened. So that fixed my biggest problem with it.

Natasha's reaction to Heimdall is pretty much my reaction to Heimdall. He's ridiculously attractive.

My original plan was to have Fitzsimmons be the SHIELD agents who got sent to Asgard, but in planning out the Sakaar arc, I realized that I needed Clint and Nat more. In any case, we’re finally in the Sakaar arc and I am SO HAPPY. Been looking forward to it for months, and I think I finally have all the plotty things sorted out for it.
Sif and the Warriors Three scarcely had time to arrange themselves in an arc in front of the transporter, weapons raised, before the blaze of white-gold light resolved itself into a blonde woman a couple inches shorter than Sif. Sif would’ve thought her a mortal if not for the incredible aura of power around her. And the fact that she was floating about a foot off the ground. Her suit looked vaguely Kree, but no Kree would ever wear those colors. She touched down a few yards in front of them, expression fierce. “Who are you and how did you find this place?”

“We are Lady Sif and the Warriors Three of Asgard,” said Sif. “We’re here to provide reinforcements to our princes, who should have arrived just moments ago.”

“Princes?” said the woman. “There aren’t any princes here.”

“But this is where the signal led us!” Hogun protested.

“What signal?”

“That is privileged information, good lady,” said Volstagg. “We do not have leave from the throne of Asgard to divulge it.”

“Yeah, well you showed up armed on the planet I was pretty sure was remote enough that the people I’m protecting would be safe from discovery or attack, so I kinda need to know why or we’re gonna have a problem.” She raised a fist, which ignited into a whirl of white-gold light.

“Eheh, no, we mean no harm,” said Fandral, lowering his sword and pushing Sif’s down a few inches. “You are quite sure, though, that no princes went past here recently? Both tall, one huge and blond and carrying a large warhammer, the other dark and more wiry, quite skilled with magic? They would be dressed in armor similar to our own.”

“Nope,” she said, folding her arms. “Haven’t seen anyone like that.”

The four of them wilted a bit and exchanged confused and disappointed looks. “Where could they be, then?” said Sif.

“Did the signal take us to the wrong place?” said Hogun.

“It certainly doesn’t appear to be covered in refuse, as Thor described,” said Sif.

“You still haven’t told me what this signal is,” said the woman.

Sif shot her a calculating look. “You are a defender of the weak?”

“I do what I can.” She had a bit of a satisfied smirk on her lips. It spoke of understatement, not deception.

“Perhaps we could…,” said Volstagg. They all exchanged another glance, then nodded and put away their weapons.

“The Midgardian scientists Bruce Banner, Erik Selvig, and Jane Foster used the Tesseract and materials provided by Asgard to create transporters that could take us across the universe,” said Sif.
“Prince Thor and Prince Loki used the first one, along with Agents Barton and Romanoff of SHIELD, and we tried to pinpoint the energy signature of their device so we could follow, to test whether such a tracking endeavor would be successful.”

“Yes, and it would appear to be an extraordinary failure,” said Fandral.

The woman was staring at them, confusion replacing hostility. “The Tesseract? You guys had access to the Tesseract? And you’re working with Earth scientists and SHIELD agents. Does Fury know about this?”

“Yes,” said Hogun.

“Wasn’t that the name of the leader of SHIELD?” said Sif.

“I do believe it was,” said Volstagg. “Yes, the princes spoke of working with him while they were on Midgard.”

For the first time since they encountered her, the woman smiled. “Okay, I think I know how you ended up here,” she said, her posture loosening.

“Really?” said Fandral.

“Yeah, if you’re tracking stuff made with the Tesseract.”

“There’s something like that here?” said Sif.

“You’re looking at her.” The woman grinned, and more of that white-gold light rippled over her. “Carol Danvers. Pleased to meet you.”

They all (except Hogun) smiled back at her. “Well met, indeed,” said Volstagg with a gallant bow. “I am Volstagg. My companions are Fandral and Hogun, and the Lady Sif has already introduced herself.”

“The mortal scientists will be pleased to know their tracker works,” said Sif. “But we must return. The princes are expecting us to be right behind them, and Thor said Sakaar could be a very dangerous world.”

“I hope we will have the honor of your company again one day,” said Fandral. He swept a bow before Carol Danvers and took her hand. When he tried to drop a kiss on the back, there was a slight surge of energy and a zapping sound, and he drew back quickly with a laugh, his goateed smoking a little.

“Maybe you will,” she said.

“Fare thee well until then,” said Volstagg, “and may the good people under your protection remain happy and prosperous!”

Her smile widened. The light engulfed her again and she took to the sky.

After watching her go for a few seconds, they gathered back around the transporter and Hogun entered in Asgard’s coordinates. Sif noticed that the fuel chamber was now barely more than half full. Bruce Banner hadn’t been wrong about how long it would last. They twisted the handles, and their surroundings spun away from them.
About ten minutes after the second transporter vanished, the laboratory was flooded with blue light again and then Sif and the Warriors Three were back.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, what happened?” said Bruce, trying not to let his alarm get the better of him. “It didn’t work?”

“Oh, it worked,” said Fandral.

“We followed the wrong signal,” said Sif. “It took us to a distant planet, but not the one Thor, Loki, and the SHIELD agents went to.”

“How did that happen?” said Jane with a deep frown. She fiddled with the tracker. “The destination definitely matched that signal.”

“Well, the coordinates you entered did lead to something made with the Tesseract, but that something was a young woman with powerful abilities, not the first transporter,” said Volstagg.

“She seemed pleasant enough,” said Fandral.

“Hey!” said Darcy.

“Not that pleasant,” he added quickly.

Darcy gave a haughty nod.

“Oh,” said Jane. “Okay, well we’ll just try a different signal this time. There’s only one more that’s showing up on the tracker, so it should be the right one.”

“First we’ll have to refuel,” said Erik, already at work preparing to extract more energy from the Tesseract. “It’ll be about an hour before the transporter will be ready again.”

“Excellent,” said Volstagg. “That leaves time for lunch.” And he strode from the lab in search of food.

“I could go for some lunch, too,” said Darcy with a pointed glance at Fandral.

“Allow me to accompany you,” he said, offering his arm. They exited at a slightly faster pace than Volstagg had.

“I think I should come with you guys,” said Bruce. “In case something goes wrong with the transporter.”

“Are you certain?” said Hogun.

“Sakaar isn’t likely to be a relaxing experience,” said Sif.

Bruce shrugged. “In that case, you might need me even more.”

X

Sakaar looked pretty much the same as Thor remembered it. Perhaps the trash heaps were slightly smaller. He turned and searched the horizon for the Devil’s Anus, but its absence was even more obvious on this end than Asgard’s.

“Okay, of the two planets I’ve seen today, I already know which one is my favorite,” said Barton, watching a few of the ships flying in the distance.
“Yeah,” said Romanoff, coughing and covering her nose. “Is this entire place made of garbage?”

“Very possibly,” said Thor.

“Lovely,” said Loki. He waved his hands over the transporter, which vanished.

“Whoa, what was that?” said Barton.

“We can hardly leave a piece of prototype technology like that lying about,” said Loki. “It’ll be safe in my dimensional pocket until we need it for the return trip.”

“That’s handy,” said Romanoff.

“Coulson said the same,” said Loki, looking pleased.

Barton stared around, frowning. “Uh...weren’t your friends supposed to be coming right after us?”

“Yes,” said Loki. “Even if the tracker doesn’t work, which I must admit I doubt after the success of the transporter, Heimdall could direct them to us. It shouldn’t be much longer.”

Thor turned on the spot, an awful sinking feeling in his stomach. “I’m such a fool.”

“True,” said Loki, “but why, specifically?”

“Time moves differently on Sakaar. I forgot. I don’t think we should wait here for them.”

“What do you mean time moves differently?” said Barton sharply.

Thor looked at him, knowing precisely why he would be so alarmed by this news, but not free to acknowledge it. “Weeks on Sakaar are mere moments on other worlds, and yet you could stay here for thousands of years and never age a day.”

“So...even if they left right after we did, it’s going to be a while before they show up here?”

“Most likely,” said Thor. “I don’t think the ratio of Sakaaran time to outside time is constant.” Which was how Hela had been able to reduce Asgard’s entire population to what would fit on the Statesman in a period that had felt like two days for him and not quite a month for Loki.

“Then we should head for the city now,” said Loki.

“Yes,” said Thor, still kicking himself. It wasn’t especially reassuring to think that however much time they might lose to Sakaar, it couldn’t be more than a couple years. For a mortal who was a husband and father, even a single year was already far too long to be away from home, and Thor might have just cost his friend that because of his thoughtless haste to spend time together. The alternative, that time would move faster here than elsewhere, wasn’t necessarily better, as it meant that they wouldn’t have any backup against Thanos’s lieutenants and whatever the Grandmaster felt like doing. At least...not any backup that wasn’t local. “Just, whatever you do, don’t let anyone stick a little metal disk on you.”

They got about a hundred paces closer to the city when a rickety ship landed directly in their path. “Here we go,” said Thor irritably. He’d expected this kind of interruption.

“Who are these guys?” said Romanoff.

“Scavengers,” said Thor.
“What do they want?” said Barton.

“To eat us.”

“Oh.” He could hear them drawing their weapons and getting into fighting stances, and Loki was doing the same.

Masked aliens piled out of the ship, well over a dozen of them in a variety of species.

Thor raised Mjolnir. “Let us pass, and we will have no quarrel with you,” he said.

“Let us pass and we will have no quarrel with you,” one of them repeated in a singsong voice. The rest of them laughed.

“You’re not going anywhere, food,” said the one in the middle, whose mask was red with odd tufts coming off the side. “That’s a nice hammer. I think I’ll keep it.” He raised what Thor recognized as an electric net launcher. He had no intention of letting him use it.

“You want the hammer?” he said with a smile. “Here!” He threw it at the creature. It shattered the net launcher on impact and drove its wielder back with enough force to bowl over several of his comrades. The rest roared battle cries and attacked.

The Grandmaster was having quite an enjoyable morning in his palace. He had his favorite drink next to him, his new keyboard before him, a fresh coat of paint on his nails, he was having an exceptionally good hair day, and even though yesterday’s arena event had been a little lackluster, the party that followed had mostly made up for it.

A couple hundred people milled about in the grand hall, all dancing enthusiastically to his musical stylings (or else), including a few dozen of the prisoners with jobs, as a nice treat for them. He was halfway through a particularly good solo when the crowd parted to reveal his important guests. He grimaced. He hadn’t expected them to be so ugly. One was super skinny and had sickly, wrinkly skin, no nose, and terrible hair, and the other was some kind of massive, scaly lizard thing.

Wrinkles spoke first. “The Great Titan s—”

The Grandmaster held up a finger and played his next chord. Wrinkles’s eyes flashed and Scales let out a growl. The Grandmaster continued to play his solo, amused by their impatience. They clearly needed this reminder that he didn’t answer to their big purple overlord, he was just interested in the guy’s units. He added a few flourishes just to annoy them more. By the time he played the final glissando, a full ten minutes had elapsed since their arrival.

“As I was saying,” said Wrinkles, his lip curling, “the Great Titan sends his respects to the Grandmaster of Sakaar.”

“Ooh, I like respects,” said the Grandmaster. “Can’t spend them, though, and I’m hoping to add another tower to my palace.”

“Ten thousand units per soldier, as per the agreement.”

“I don’t know. Fifteen thousand would be a lot more respectful. And, uh, I’d like your friend here to do a few rounds in my arena.” He looked at the towering lizard thing. “How about it, Scales? You’d give us quite a show.”
“We are not here for your entertain—” Wrinkles began in cold outrage, but Topaz came striding past him without giving him so much as a glance and interrupted.

“Boss, there’s been a disturbance in the trash fields to the east of the city.”

“A disturbance?”

“Yes, this was just a few minutes ago.” She pulled out a security pad and tapped the screen. It cast a silent hologram into the space between them and their guests. At first, it was just an image of garbage heaps, but then there was a brilliant flash of blue light, which faded to reveal four people standing around a weird-looking device. The black-haired one waved his hands and made the device disappear. Topaz slid her fingers along the screen, so the scene sped along at quadruple speed for a bit. She let it play normally again, and a gang of scavengers landed their ship and accosted the newcomers. The Grandmaster watched, intrigued, as the four of them took down their numerous opponents. The muscular blond used a big hammer and blasts of lightning to fight, and the pretty black-haired one kept vanishing and conjuring duplicates. The shorter blond and the redhead defeated at least two scavengers apiece, but they didn’t appear to be anything special.

“If these trespassers are going to be a problem for you,” said Wrinkles, his tone silky smooth, “we will gladly take them off your hands. Would you like us to transfer you the fifteen thousand units per head right now? And how many times would you like Cull Obsidian to battle in your arena?”

There was obvious greed and eagerness in Wrinkles’s eyes, and Scales showed no sign of objecting. The Grandmaster knew when he was being scammed out of a good deal. He and his brother had that in common. “So generous all of a sudden,” he said. “But there’s no need for you to go to so much trouble. You’ll get your army, and I’ll have my guys take care of the trespassers. They look like they might be even better in my arena than Scales, so you’re off the hook for that.”

“Perhaps we can come to a compromise,” said Wrinkles, spreading his bony hands.

“I’m listening,” said the Grandmaster slowly.

“We will assist you in capturing them. You keep the large blond and the two smaller ones, and we’ll take the mage. Cull will fight for you three times, and we’ll add another thousand units per head.”

The Grandmaster took a sip of his drink and stroked his chin. “I think we’re in business.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay I was really nervous about writing the Grandmaster because I’ve never written such a weird character before. I did not need to worry. It came out super easily. It was awesome.

In case it wasn't clear, "Wrinkles" is Ebony Maw, and the reason he and Cull are so eager to get their hands on our heroes is because they recognized the power source of the transporter from that blue flash. They know they're looking at people with access to an Infinity Stone.

It's never stated in Ragnarok, but the only way Hela's massacre of what seems like >90% of Asgard's people makes sense to me is if the Asgard plotline took a couple years. Which would also account for how long Heimdall's hair is. He probably needs
about four years to get it that long, and only two of those years are accounted for, assuming he only started growing it out after "Odin" fired him, which probably wasn't immediately after TDW. So there, I fixed it. Also, what the Grandmaster says about his own age makes me think time doesn't really touch you on Sakaar, which also explains how Valkyrie, who should be at least a thousand years older than Thor and Loki, looks younger than them.

Also, when I said not to discuss Endgame in the comments, that didn't mean I wanted people to send me private messages about how much they hated it. I quite enjoyed the movie and have very few complaints, so you're in the wrong place if you want someone to rant about it with you.
Natasha pulled a pair of handguns from her hidden underarm holsters and took aim. She wouldn’t normally be in favor of fighting over a dozen opponents out in the open with only three allies, but Thor and Loki weren’t fazed and Clint seemed confident enough in them that she went along with it too.

By about the five second mark after the fighting began, Natasha wholeheartedly agreed with Clint. Both Asgardians hit like semi trucks, and that was before you counted what Thor could do with the hammer and lightning and what Loki could do with daggers and deception, or how flawlessly they worked together. This left SHIELD’s top field agents just a few strays to clean up on the flanks, which felt more like a courtesy than a necessity. The fight was made even easier when several of the scavengers screamed something incomprehensible and bolted away between trash heaps as soon as it became clear that the tide was not going to turn in their favor.

It was over in under a minute, with zero injuries to their team. Natasha picked up and examined a blaster gun thing that had narrowly missed blowing a hole through her shoulder before she shot its wielder between the eyes. It was surprisingly light for something so bulky and powerful. Clint, having already retrieved two of his arrows, was now doing the same with a similar weapon. She watched in amusement as the struggle between his longtime preference for bows and a boyish excitement over real-life science fiction weaponry played out across his brows and jaw. In the end, he unclipped a holster from the dead scavenger, strapped it on, and stuck the blaster in it, then shot her a defensive look before she could make a comment. She laughed.

“How thoughtful,” said Thor, dropping his hammer back onto his belt. (Neither he nor Loki seemed the least bit interested in the scavengers’ weapons, and Loki’s daggers were suddenly nowhere in sight.) “They left us their ride.” He led the way to the small, bright orange ship their attackers had flown in on. It looked like it had once been a large dumpster, and the inside did nothing to change that impression. Thor kicked aside a few bits of trash on the way to the controls, and Natasha looked for the least contaminated piece of railing to hold onto.

“What language were those guys speaking?” said Clint.

“I believe I heard at least three or four between them,” said Loki. He tapped a panel beside the door, which made it shut behind them, while Thor found the right buttons and levers to power up the ship and get it into the air. Then Loki frowned at Clint and Natasha and groaned. “Oh, damn.”

“What?” said Natasha.

Loki shot a flat glare at his brother, who looked over his shoulder with a sheepish smile.

“They don’t know Allspeak and they don’t have translators,” said Loki, arms folded. “They fight well for mortals, but exactly how are they supposed to offer their services as expert spies if they can’t understand any of the written or spoken languages they’ll encounter?”

Clint raised his eyebrows at her at the remark about their mortal fighting prowess, but this definitely sounded like a problem. “Translators?” she said. “Are those something we can pick up around here?”
“Why yes, what an excellent idea,” said Loki, eyes still on Thor. “Did you happen to bring any local currency so that we can buy a couple of translator implants?”

Thor grimaced. That was a no, then. Loki briefly pressed thumb and forefinger to his temples. “Did you, in fact, make any preparations for coming here at all?”

“Well there wasn’t exactly time,” Thor protested, waving an arm at the approaching city. “We only have the one shot to stop Thanos getting an army from Sakaar, and we had to take it.”

“And we’re off to a marvelous start,” said Loki.

“Wait, these translators are implants?” said Clint nervously. Natasha didn’t particularly like the sound of that either.

“They’re nothing to worry about,” said Thor, turning from the controls to give them a reassuring smile. “Nearly everyone who travels between planets has them. They’re not as good as Allspeak, but most species aren’t capable of learning it anyway.”

Natasha was not reassured. “We should’ve let Coulson have the assignment,” she muttered.

“Okay, so we get these translators, and then what’s the plan?” said Clint. “Stopping a world-destroying warlord from getting an army is a few orders of magnitude above the kind of missions we’re used to.”

“Oh, of course,” said Thor. “First, we find out where Thanos’s minions landed their ship.”

“Yeah,” said Clint.

“Then we learn whatever details we can about their intentions for the army.”

“Yeah…”

“And then we destroy them and their ship, and possibly the army.” He beamed at them. They did not reciprocate.

“That’s not a plan,” said Natasha. “That’s a list of objectives.”

“We were kinda hoping for more details,” said Clint. “The kind of enemies we’re dealing with, rendezvous points if we lose contact, maps, schematics, exit strategies…?”

“We can work those out as we go,” said Thor. “Where’s your sense of adventure?” Loki wasn’t the only one glaring at him now.

Over the next few minutes, more and more buildings popped up amid the fields of piled garbage they passed, their size and quality gradually improving, even if the smell never changed. Not long after they reached the city proper, Thor found a relatively secluded alley and landed the stolen ship. The four of them disembarked into a shabby but busy market square. Natasha was really looking forward to going noseblind soon, but it definitely hadn’t happened yet.

“So, did you have a solution to the currency problem,” said Thor, “or did you only bring it up to point out my short-sightedness?”

Loki rolled his eyes and waved his hand. Even though it wasn’t the most impressive display she’d seen of his magic, Natasha couldn’t help staring when something small, like a thick, clear credit card, appeared in his palm. He tossed it to Thor.
“What’s that?” said Clint.

“What’s that?” said Clint.

“An access pad to the House of Odin’s account in the banking system of the Nova Empire, with whom Asgard is friendly,” said Loki. “We aren’t, strictly speaking, in the Nova Empire at the moment, but in what little time Thor gave me to research our destination, I found that a large number of Sakaar’s portals lead to Nova systems, so there’s a fair chance they’ll accept their money.”

“Good thinking,” said Thor.

“I hope you know that if it wasn’t for me, you’d have starved to death on some uninhabitable rock thousands of lightyears from home before you reached your fifth century,” said Loki.

Thor grinned and threw an arm around his shoulders. “Yes, and if it wasn’t for me, you’d have barricaded yourself in the library and been crushed by a pile of books.”

“Shut up,” said Loki, shrugging him off. “That wasn’t a guarantee that it’ll work. I say we try it out in a mead hall before you look for translators. Perhaps we’ll learn where that ship is while we’re at it.”

They didn’t have to go far to find this planet’s equivalent of a bar; there was one at the other end of the square. Natasha kept her eyes on their destination with only a few glances around at the crowd of aliens gathered around vendors and shuffling past them. This seedy market couldn’t have been more different from the cheerful bustle she’d seen on Asgard. Its sheer variety was making her realize just how big the universe was, and how small her life seemed in comparison.

The bar, like the street, contained a variety of alien species. It was illuminated with neon-looking tubes, and every surface was encrusted in dark grime. Natasha noticed Thor scrutinizing the faces of all the patrons. After a few seconds, a delighted smile lit up his features, and he began swatting in the general direction of Loki’s shoulder. “It’s her! She’s here! I can’t believe we found her so soon!”

“What?” said Loki, batting the hand away. “Who?” He, Clint, and Natasha all frowned in the direction Thor was pointing. A dark-skinned woman in black leather armor and a blue cape was leaning against the bar, accepting a large bottle of amber liquid from the alien behind it (who was bright green and had tentacles instead of arms).

“Who is sh—” Loki began, but he cut off mid-word. The woman had turned around to take her drink back to her table, giving them a clear view of her. Natasha glanced up at Loki and saw that he was frozen in place, staring at her with wide eyes. She looked back at the woman. She had a pretty face, a good figure, and a lot of lean muscle, but her entire demeanor screamed “Do Not Approach.” In the few seconds Natasha watched, three people in the crowded bar nearly walked across her path, saw her, and immediately backpedaled and crammed themselves out of the way. When Natasha looked at Loki again, he was still staring at her with a dazed expression like he’d been clubbed over the head, a tinge of pink now flaring across his pale cheeks.

All the SHIELD agent could do was stifle a snort and hope that an unexpected crush wouldn’t be enough to rob the God of Mischief of his tactical prowess.

Thor looked first surprised, then amused when he noticed Loki’s reaction to the woman, but he said nothing about it. Instead, he strode over to the bar, where Natasha could hear him saying something that included “your finest ales” to the tentacled bartender, whose reply consisted of incomprehensible guttural sounds and shrieks. Thor swiped the Nova access pad against something she couldn’t quite see, then returned with two bottles of electric blue drink. He pressed them both into Loki’s hands, which snapped him out of his distracted daze.
“They do take Nova units,” said Thor. “I paid the A’askavarian enough to keep the drinks coming for a couple hours. Hopefully that’ll be enough. Go see if you can convince her to join our team while I get Barton and Romanoff’s translators.”


“Don’t worry, Brother!” said Thor, clapping him on the back. “You’ll do fine. Oh, and if you spot a big Kronan named Korg around here somewhere, recruit him too.” And he led Clint and Natasha from the bar before Loki could object.

X

Mortified and bewildered, Loki struggled to compose himself. The woman sitting across the room was beautiful, yes, but she was far from the most beautiful he’d ever seen, so how could the mere sight of her have such an effect on him that even the mortals had noticed?

Now that he’d had a moment, he was able to place where he’d seen her before. She had been one of the dead bodies in Thor’s nightmare when Loki broke into his mind before the visit to Midgard. But she hadn’t been wearing these plain black leathers then. No, she’d been dressed in the armor of a Valkyrie. Perhaps that was why he’d reacted to her like a simpleton. Like all children raised on Asgard, he had hero-worshipped the Valkyrior (not as much as Thor, but that might not have been possible), but they had all fallen in battle when he was a baby, so he never expected to actually meet one. He was going to stab Thor right in the ribs when they met back up. How could he do this to him?

Without warning, she looked straight at him. Her gaze traveled down his body and back up, and she raised an eyebrow. It was hard to tell if that look was appreciative or disdainful, but either way, his insides gave a lurch and his face burned. He would likely be better off turning tail and following Thor, but his feet had other ideas and moved him towards her table. When he got within arm’s reach, she tugged one of the bottles from him and popped the cork with her thumb. “I wasn’t sure you’d ever actually come over here,” she said, clinking the bottle against the one he still held and putting it to her lips.

“Tolerate the company,” said Loki, far more stiffly than he would have liked. Her bottle was already half-empty. “I can tolerate a lot if it means free drinks,” she said, then pinned him with a surprisingly sharp gaze. “Even being chatted up by a son of Odin.”

Whatever thin veneer of cool charm Loki had been attempting to pull together vanished. He took a swig from his drink in an effort to regain it, but the stuff was so vile that he nearly choked instead. His surroundings weren’t helping either, as everything around him was filthy. “What gave it away?” he said through a slight cough.

She gave him a look like he was being obtuse—not the sort of look he often found himself on the receiving end of, but he supposed he and Thor hadn’t exactly done anything to obscure their identities. They were both wearing armor that incorporated metal discs to represent Bor and Buri, an honor granted to precious few outside the royal family.

She finished her bottle and called for another, which arrived shortly, while Loki sat there in increasingly excruciating silence. Occasional sips from his drink didn’t help, as it continued to taste revolting. That she had recognized him as a son of Odin right away should have made this easier, not harder. It should have been a relief that his position was so obvious to someone who had fought in the Aesir-Jotnar war—particularly someone who hadn’t already spent centuries calling him Prince. But could he really flirt with a Valkyrie when she didn’t know what he was?
Maybe he could have if he wasn’t actually attracted to her.

It took about half an hour to locate the upgrades shop the barman had recommended. Barton and Romanoff stuck close behind Thor as they climbed out of the scavengers’ ship again and headed towards it. This part of the city was cleaner (though no one would call it clean) and the people walking through the street wore higher quality clothing. Most of them were headed in the same direction. The shop Thor was after was in between a food vendor selling a number of items that were still wriggling and a shop that appeared to be full of arena souvenirs, with everything from banners to masks to toy versions of various warriors. The upgrade shop had a flashing sign above the open doorway that advertised prosthetic limbs compatible with over two hundred species, cybernetic enhancements, and more.

The inside put Thor in mind of a dragon’s hoard. Gadgets and circuitry were piled wherever they would fit, leaving only narrow paths to walk through. The three of them squeezed their way along one of these until they reached a counter at the back, but there were no signs of life. “Hello?” Thor called. “Is Urizen Ul’var here? We’d like to purchase a pair of translators.”

The door behind the counter opened and an alien stepped out. He was humanoid except for very avian features and a thick mane of beetle-green feathers where a human would have had hair. Thor was pretty sure he was Shi’ar, but he’d never actually seen one up close before. “I am Urizen,” he said. “I wasn’t expecting customers today. I thought everyone would be on their way to the arena. Two translators, eh?” He touched the side of his head and a pair of goggles came down over his eyes, magnifying them and giving him an even more bird-like appearance. He scrutinized Barton and Romanoff, who were staring blankly at him. Romanoff offered a feeble smile. “Hmm. Were their old translators damaged?”

“They’ve never had them,” said Thor. “They’re from Earth. This is their first day off-world.”

“Never had translators?” said Ul’var incredulously.

“Is that going to be a problem?” said Thor.

“Not...exactly,” said Ul’var.

“Perhaps we should find someone else to help us,” said Thor.

Ul’var raised his feathery eyebrows. “It wouldn’t make a difference. They’re adults. Their brains are fully developed. I’m not saying the translators won’t work, but the adjustment period isn’t going to be pleasant for them. I just want to make that clear, because all sales are final.”

“What’s he saying?” said Romanoff.

Thor smiled at her and Barton. “Oh, just that the translators might take some getting used to,” he said. His voice came out a little higher pitched than usual. “But it’s like I said before. There’s nothing to worry about!”

Barton and Romanoff exchanged nervous looks.

Topaz was in a bad mood. Being in a bad mood was more or less her default, but today especially. She was a creature of structure and routine. Both were already incredibly scarce commodities on Sakaar, but the boss’s pompous guests had disrupted what little she had managed to keep in place.
Now, she had to oversee the promotion of the big stupid frog guy’s arena fights and alert all the scrappers about the trespassers, since the trash field security feed lost them once they entered the city. She’d offloaded the former task as quickly as she could (marketing was not her forte), but the latter was proving annoying enough on its own.

The scrappers tended to demand regular payment if you treated them like proper staff, even when they went weeks without bringing in any new slaves or tech, so the Grandmaster kept them on a looser leash than he did the guards and his enforcers. The only trouble with that was it made wrangling them for a particular task complicated. Only a quarter of them responded to her message within the first hour, but most of those were scattered across territory well outside the city. There were only a couple nearby, and they were useless. She scanned through the list, looking for someone good who was close enough to start tracking the trespassers down today. When she saw the number of the one who was, she ground her teeth.

Scrapper 142.

Topaz hated Scrapper 142. She spent nearly all of her time drowning herself in booze (which, surprise surprise, was exactly what she was doing now, based on her location) and sleeping it off, but the tiny sliver in which she actually bothered to do her job was somehow enough that the Grandmaster was always happy to see her. Nobody got special treatment like that, and she wasn’t even grateful! Well, at least Topaz had an excuse to insult her to her face, since she hadn’t bothered to accept her assignment.

Topaz scowled as she entered the bar. Being the Grandmaster’s second-in-command usually meant she didn’t have to come to places this dirty. She spotted Scrapper 142 across the room. Then her mouth fell open in disbelief. The man sitting at the table with her was none other than the mage they were looking for! The big blond warrior and the two less impressive fighters were nowhere in sight, but that was definitely him, and instead of bringing him in, Scrapper 142 was fraternizing with him.

Behavior like this was completely unacceptable. But as she watched them sitting there, her outrage drained away. What she had on her hands was an opportunity, and she wasn’t going to waste it. She walked up to the bar with a broad smirk on her face. “You!” she barked at the bartender. When he turned and saw who she was, his eyes widened in alarm, and then he immediately abandoned the customer he was helping and hurried over to her.

“Yeah, that’s right,” she thought, sneering. “What can I do for you?” he asked.

“You can add something special to the drinks you’re sending to Scrapper 142’s table.” She passed him a container of purple capsules. “Maximum dose.”

“Of course,” he said. “Right away.”

“Have you seen the three people that guy was with? They all look like they might be Xandarian. Two blonds and a redhead. Really weird clothes.”

“One of the blonds asked me where to get translators for the other two, and I told him to try Urizen Ul’var’s upgrade shop.”

It looked like Topaz wouldn’t need the scrappers after all. Her mood was rapidly improving. She nodded curtly at him and left the bar. Once she was outside, she pulled up the contact for the boss’s guests on her wrist display. After a few seconds, a small hologram of the scodey one with no nose popped up. “Hey, Egssy Mop,” she said.

He scowled at her. “My name is Ebony Maw, you insolent—”
“Yeah, whatever,” said Topaz. “I’ve got your special cargo.” His haughty indignation changed instantly to surprise and eagerness—not that it was easy to tell with a face like his. “Should be ready to pick up in a few minutes. Take the woman too, or she might make trouble later.” She sent him the bar’s coordinates and closed the message before he could start spewing more hot air about how great his leader was.

Chapter End Notes

The movies tend to handwave all the language barriers that should exist in an intergalactic story, and I don’t really have an issue with that, but I’m not going to ignore that stuff in my fics. We can assume Allspeak takes care of it for the Asgardians, and we know characters like the Guardians and Carol have those translator things. I think the only time the movies actually got lazy was in Infinity War, when Tony, Peter, and Stephen were able to talk to Mantis, Drax, and Nebula (and then Tony and Nebula in Endgame), even though I can’t think of a way translators would be any use to the person listening. I get that there wasn’t room to deal with it in those movies, though. But what I’m going off of is that the only people we ever actually saw Bruce/Hulk talking to in Ragnarok were Valkyrie, Thor, and Loki, so for all we know, he was never able to understand a word anyone else was saying on Sakaar. Which really wouldn’t have been a problem for the Hulk anyway.

Okay, Loki and Valkyrie. Maybe this is going to change in the Loki series, but even though the fandom tends to ship Loki with anyone and everyone, and even though Tom Hiddleston is ridiculously attractive, until the third time I saw Ragnarok, I probably would’ve said MCU Loki was asexual. Possibly as the result of not living as his actual species and growing up thinking of his own species as monsters. None of his interactions with other characters in any of the movies seem flirty to me (or, if they do, they certainly aren’t sincere), and he never seems to be attracted to anyone. I would’ve been happy to leave things there and write him that way in all my fics, but...well, the way he reacts to Valkyrie in this chapter is basically exactly how I reacted the third time I saw Ragnarok and it got to Loki and Valkyrie’s knife fight. Somehow it slipped past me the first two times, but that was hot. I ship it, and some of the stuff from Tessa and Tom’s interviews only made the idea more intriguing. So the way I’m interpreting this is that, when it comes to romance, Loki is a lot like Mr. Darcy. He rarely likes anyone. When he does, it comes on very much against his will and he has no idea how to deal with it. Also, whatever might’ve happened offscreen in the weeks before Thor arrived on Sakaar*, this is different because we’re dealing with a much less scarred and jaded Loki.

*My theory about Loki’s adventures on Sakaar before Thor showed up is that he was kind of a mess because he believed Thor was dead and Hela would easily conquer Asgard. Maybe he had a crush on Valkyrie when he saw her, but he had to focus on winning the Grandmaster’s favor and trust. It’s pretty clear based on the way they interact that the Grandmaster wanted to get some alone time with Loki, but I’m convinced that Loki was playing hard to get to keep the Grandmaster interested, but never intended to let it go anywhere (hence casually mentioning a plan to assassinate him when he visits Thor). He looks nervous and uncomfortable in all of those scenes, and he sits as far away from the Grandmaster as he can on that couch.

I greatly enjoyed writing Topaz. I love how unimpressed she and the Grandmaster are
by Ebony Maw. It's so much fun.
Communication

Chapter Notes

I wanted to get this chapter done way earlier, but the AP reading came around again, so I’ve been in Florida grading a thousand hand-written essays about things that are overrated, and it kind of fried my creativity. Then I went to Universal, where I missed the opening of the new Harry Potter ride by two measly days, but it was still a really good time. (Never EVER do Shrek 4-D, incidentally. It is extremely irritating and not worth doing even if there’s no wait at all.) But here the chapter is now! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Clint didn’t like the look of the instrument in the alien shop owner’s hands at all. It was a lot like a gun, but more high tech—same as everything was around here—and with a very pointy end. The lunch he’d eaten two planets ago churned in his stomach as he watched Ul’var load the instrument with a small object that resembled an Earth computer chip, except that Earth computer chips weren’t normally covered in tiny, wiggling tentacles.

He’d volunteered to go first. He wasn’t going to take that back, but he wasn’t thrilled about it either. He tried to think positive by imagining all the kung fu movies he wouldn’t need subtitles for anymore, and that Nat would never be able to mess with him by deliberately mistranslating Russian for him again. It didn’t really help.

Ul’var patted a spot on the back of his own neck near the base of his skull, raised the instrument, and gestured for Clint to turn around. Clint looked at Thor, who nodded, that obviously fake smile still on his face. Thor might just be the worst liar Clint had ever met, but he complied anyway. Even if Thor was lying about how pleasant this experience was going to be, Clint’s gut was still telling him that Thor was a good guy. Maybe it was stupid to trust his gut about a Viking prince from space just because it had been right about a redheaded Russian assassin, but if it was wrong this time, they were all screwed anyway, so it didn’t really matter.

He turned to face the front of the shop, meeting Nat’s eyes. She had her arms folded and her anxiety on his behalf was showing through. He gave her a cocky half-smile, and she scowled. He forced himself not to tense up when he felt the alien’s talon-like fingertips prodding beneath his hairline, followed by the chilly nose of the metal instrument.

“Ready?” said Thor.

“I guess,” said Clint.

There was a click, a hiss, and a sharp sting—not much worse than a tetanus booster. He realized that he had shut his eyes and clenched his fists at the last second, and he relaxed, blinking at Thor and at Nat. “Hey, that wasn’t so bad.” Nat let out a surprised laugh. He lifted a hand to touch the spot where the translator had been injected, but before his fingers could reach it, hot tendrils of pain spread outward from that spot and then abruptly exploded through his skull, whiting out his vision and making his ears ring so loudly that he couldn’t hear anything else. He staggered and fell to his knees, a scream tearing its way from his throat.

Thor and Nat were there on either side of him in an instant. He was barely aware of them. He’d had
migraines before, but this was worse. He clutched at his head and groaned. It was like there was something crawling around inside it. The pain combined with Sakaar’s overpowering smell of garbage was too much. His insides heaved. He only noticed that Ul’var had come around the counter and pressed an empty container close to his face when everything he’d eaten that day came back up and landed in it instead of all over the floor.

The pain continued to crash over him in waves, but after the first few, he realized that each one was slightly less intense than the last. The white-out had receded and the ringing had lessened, but he couldn’t have said how long it took. He remained huddled on the floor, hands on his head, dimly conscious of Thor speaking loudly to the shop owner, whose replies seemed irritated. Natasha was still next to him, her hands on his arm, shaking him. Her words eventually penetrated the haze of pain.

“Clint! Clint! Are you okay?” He couldn’t remember her ever sounding this unnerved.

“Getting there, I think,” he panted. He screwed up his eyes again. “Ugh, this thing packs a wallop.”

“Работает?” she said. Clint frowned at her, and she looked even more worried. “You couldn’t understand that? It doesn’t work?”

Clint squinted at Thor and the shopkeeper, whose argument hadn’t ended. On the contrary, Thor looked like he was about to toss the guy through one of the piles of gadgets. When Clint tried to focus on the indignant trilling noises coming out of Ul’var’s beak-like mouth, the pain spiked sharply. He recoiled, clapping his hands to his head again. “Not yet, if it’s gonna.”

“Hey!” Nat said loudly. Thor and the shopkeeper fell silent and looked around. “How long until we know if this thing even works?”

Clint’s head was still splitting, but the next stream of trilling sounds Ul’var made in reply suddenly changed to perfectly clear English. “—tried to explain to your large, rude friend, it takes a little while for the programming to sync up with the language centers of the brain,” he said.

It was bizarre. The words Clint heard didn’t match up with the alien’s mouth movements at all, but the voice was the same. Like his brain had switched audio tracks and he was watching a high-quality dub of real life. He let out an incredulous laugh.

“What?” said Nat.

“I understood him!” He couldn’t keep being too thrilled about it, though, because fresh waves of agony were still coming in time with his pulse. He thought he could feel those tentacle things on the implant squirming at the base of his skull and it nearly sent him heaving again.

“How about this?” said Nat. Her mouth movements didn’t match up either, but what he heard was English. Maybe it was because she was speaking Russian instead of whatever Ul’var spoke, but it sent up another flare of pain.

“Yeah, got that too,” said Clint.

“What about this?” said Thor. “Can you understand what I’m saying too?” He was doing that thing people sometimes did when trying to communicate with a foreign speaker, where they spoke extra loud and slow, with wide eyes and exaggerated hand gestures, somehow thinking it would help. The dubbing effect made it extra weird.

“Okay, yeah, it works!” said Clint. “Now stop testing languages on me.”
Thor laughed in delight and pounded the shopkeeper on the shoulder, which knocked him into that pile of gadgets anyway.

“How much longer am I gonna have this migraine?”

“I couldn’t say,” said Ul’var, picking himself up again with a glare at Thor and an anxious glance at his merchandise. “I can give you a discount on something you can take for it, though. It might not do anything about the pain, but it’ll definitely take your mind off it for a few hours.”

“No, no,” said Thor quickly. “We don’t need any mind-altering substances. Just being on this planet is bad enough already.”

“You still wanna do this, Nat?” said Clint.

“Yeah, it’ll be fine,” she said, a hint of shrillness in her voice. “Maybe Thor can just hit me on the head with his hammer first, and then I can skip this part.”

Clint gave a groaning laugh. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

"You need to drink more,” said the Valkyrie. “Are you always this stiff?”

Loki took another swig of the vile drink. “Would you believe that they call me Silvertongue back home?”

“At this point, no.” She was about halfway through the second bottle now.

After another moment in which she continued drinking while Loki tried not to look directly at her, he forced himself to speak again. “May I have the honor of your name?” He suppressed a grimace. What was he doing, addressing her like a courtier when she was a seasoned, elite warrior? She didn’t appear to notice, however.

“Scrapper 142,” she said flatly.

“That’s a name?” he asked. Wonderful. First he addresses her as the wrong station, now he insults her. Silvertongue, indeed.

“Does the job well enough,” she said. She showed no hint of curiosity to learn his own name, but then, she probably already knew that too. Unless she was a deserter from the Aesir-Jotnar war, she’d likely been part of the honor guard at the palace when Prince Loki was first presented to Asgard as an infant.

The very thought made him want to shrivel up and sink through the floor. He must look like such a child to her. This realization did nothing to help with his hormones.

“So,” she said, clearly losing patience with his abysmal display of conversational skills. “I know what I’m doing in the armpit of the universe, but what brings a couple of princes out here?”

With a quick glance around, Loki opted to switch to the nameless tongue. A couple of the patrons at the table nearest theirs winced and touched the backs of their skulls, where their translators would be located. “We heard the Mad Titan was buying an army from the ruler of Sakaar. We’d prefer it if that transaction failed.”

Her eyes widened before she smoothed her expression back to prickly indifference. “I thought
Asgard couldn’t be bothered to deal with Thanos again as long as he keeps well clear of the nine realms.” She used the nameless tongue as well, which surprised him a little. She would’ve needed to be highly ranked in the Valkyrior to earn that kind of clearance. Very highly ranked.

“Asgard’s past leniency was obviously unwise, as powerful as he has grown. We mean to correct that oversight.”

“Thanos has torn through dozens of worlds with the armies he already has, and the ones that put up a fight barely slowed him down. You have two pampered royals and a couple of—what, Xandarians?—to succeed where they failed? Bit overconfident, aren’t you?”

“They’re Midgardians, actually,” said Loki, choosing not to dignify the “pampered royals” remark with a response.

She snorted into her second bottle. “Well, in that case, I’m sure Thanos will be quaking in his indestructible boots.”

“It’s not him we’re after just yet. For now, we’re only dealing with the lieutenants he sent here.”

“Good luck with that.” Bottle number three wasn’t coming quickly enough, so she grabbed his instead.

“Our luck would be better if we had the help of a Valkyrie.”

She set his now-empty bottle down rather hard, her gaze becoming colder than a Jotunheim winter. “It looks like your luck is gonna stay shit, then.”

Indignation did far more to loosen his tongue than the alcohol had so far. “Thirty seconds ago, you scorned Asgard for not bothering to do anything about Thanos, and now you would spurn an opportunity to be part of the effort to oppose him?”

Two new bottles were set in front of them. They both ripped the tops off and took swigs without breaking eye contact.

“I haven’t fought for Asgard in over a thousand years, and I’m not looking for a reason to start back up again,” she said. “We’re not in Yggdrasil, and on Sakaar, I’m a scrapper, not a Valkyrie.”

“I wasn’t aware that oaths of loyalty to the throne of Asgard were conditional upon the swearer’s proximity to it.”

“Looks like there are a lot of things you’re not aware of, your highness.”

“So you’re a deserter,” said Loki, his lip curling. “When did your honor fail you? Was it before or after the rest of the Valkyrior fell on Niflheim?”

She was on her feet in an instant, and he only just managed to catch the blade of her dagger against one of his before she could press it to his throat. “If having honor means remaining loyal to the throne of Asgard even after everyone I ever cared about was slaughtered in a battle the Allfather knew we had no chance of winning, then I have no use for it,” she snarled. “Odin’s never given a shit about me being alive out here before now, so I don’t need his boys suddenly showing up and demanding—” She broke off and staggered a little on her feet. As she did so, Loki felt a wave of numbness sweeping over him. Both their gazes snapped to the bottles sitting on the table.

“Oh, damn,” she said.
The hairs on the back of Loki’s neck stood up. Even with his senses dulled, he could feel the surge of nearby magic, and then the entire outer wall of the dingy building was abruptly torn free with an ear-splitting shriek of metal. Many of the other patrons screamed and began running in every direction, while a flat-faced gray alien Loki recognized from Thor’s memories stepped into the gaping hole.

X

To Thor and Barton’s relief, Romanoff didn’t have nearly as much difficulty adjusting to the translator implant. Ul’var suggested that it had something to do with her being younger and bilingual, so the language center of her brain was much more flexible. As Thor was paying for the two implants, they heard a distant swell of noise.

“Hmm. Battle must be over,” said Ul’var. “You three’ll want to hurry off to wherever you’re headed if you don’t want to get caught in the rush.”

“Of course,” said Thor. They turned and carefully wended their way back towards the exit.

“What battle?” said Romanoff, wincing and rubbing her ear.

“The Grandmaster keeps the people here entertained by forcing slaves to fight to the death in his arena,” said Thor.

“What, like gladiators?” said Barton.

“Yeah,” said Thor.

“Whoa, this is so weird,” said Romanoff, looking around at the shop signs as they reached the street. Barton followed her gaze and blinked rapidly.

“What?” said Thor.

“It all still looks like alien symbols, but I know what it says in English,” said Barton. He turned to Romanoff. “Is it Russian for you?”

“No...wait,” she said, frowning. “I think it depends which language I’m thinking in. It’s English right now, and…” She blinked and shook her head. “Now it’s Russian.”

Thor grinned, delighted that they’d found such an excellent solution for this problem. “Very good,” he said. “We should head back to the mead hall.” The sound of people departing the arena was getting louder, and the overhead traffic of flying crafts was growing thicker, most of it moving outward from the heart of the city.

Thor expected it to be difficult to get any information about the arrangement between the Grandmaster and Thanos’s minions, but clearly he had underestimated the former’s vanity. They were barely halfway across the street when a massive hologram of the Grandmaster popped up, towering over all but the tallest buildings, and his voice began to issue from what sounded like every direction.

“People of Sakaar, let’s give it up for our guests, Ebony Maw and Cull Obsidian. I like to call them Wrinkles and Scales.” He started clapping, and the hologram panned over to one familiar and very irritated-looking alien Thor recognized from the battle on the Statesman. The Grandmaster’s voice protested, just as loud as before. “No, why are you showing him? Look at his face! Do you want to start a riot?” It blurred back to focus on the Grandmaster himself, who adjusted his collar and gave a
big smile. “Well, that was Scales, anyway. Not sure where Wrinkles went, but they’ll be sponsoring the new tower for my palace. I know you all couldn’t be happier about this project, and I want to help you feel like a part of it, even if you aren’t part of the army I’m selling to them. I’ve drawn up a few different options for tower designs, and I’m taking a poll! Whichever one you like best has a good chance of being the version you’ll soon be building for me. So make sure to stop by a directory console to cast your vote, and look out for Scales as the main event in this week’s tournament! You’ve already gotten a taste of what he can do this evening, so come back to the arena for the next battle ready for more.”

The hologram winked out, leaving the city much dimmer than it had been and a stunned silence in its wake.

“Is that clown for real?” said Barton. Hearing alien tongues didn’t seem to be paining him as much as at first. A good sign.

“Unfortunately,” said Thor.

“And the big guy it showed is one of the guys we’re looking for,” said Romanoff.

“He is,” he confirmed.

“Looks like the arena might be a good place to get some of the intel we need to take them down,” said Barton.

“You may be right.”

It wasn’t until they had gotten within yards of their stolen ship that Thor realized what was odd about the sounds of the approaching crowd. Namely, that they had started to sound less like the unorganized movements of thousands of people going to separate destinations and a lot more like marching. The street was too winding and full of archways and protruding shopfronts to see very far in any direction. However, when he looked up, he saw a familiar ship—one he had briefly believed to be responsible for shooting the Valkyrie out of the sky during the escape to Asgard. It was flying straight towards them, and its guns were swiveling around.

“Get down!” he shouted, tackling Barton and Romanoff before they could reach the ship, which exploded when the enemy ship fired on it seconds later.

Chapter End Notes

*dramatic chord* Two-pronged cliffhanger! My specialty. :D So we've got Thor and two very headache-y SHIELD agents versus Topaz and a bunch of goons in one part of the city, and a slightly drugged Loki and Valkyrie versus Ebony Maw in another. Fun times!

I've really enjoying working out exactly what the translator implants do, and all that stuff was pretty easy to write. Loki totally bombing at flirting with Valkyrie was much harder, but I'm very happy with the result.

More Grandmaster! Man I love writing him. He's hilarious.

So it's super trippy that Chris Hemsworth played "Hurt" while in his Endgame Thor
costume. "Hurt" is where I got the title of this fic. Am I psychic?

The Russian thing Natasha asks Clint just means "Is it working?" (if my Google translate serves, anyway).
Loki and the Valkyrie stood their ground as the alien approached, his narrowed eyes fixed on them, a satisfied sneer on his lips. Loki gritted his teeth and tried to shrug off the disorienting, slowing effects of the drug. He suspected that the substance had been intended for less hardy beings than Aesir and Jotnar, but even so, facing an enemy sorcerer with dulled wits was not unlike fighting an expert swordsman with only a blunted practice sword.

“Who the Hel are you?” said the Valkyrie. Being half-drunk and drugged only seemed to have made her angrier. Loki was grateful that she now had a target for it other than him. The alien’s eyes focused on her, and Loki didn’t waste the divide in his attention. It took a lot more effort than usual, but he left a projection in his place and cloaked himself, then began picking his way around the rubble and overturned tables and chairs.

“I am Ebony Maw, the right hand of the Great Titan Thanos,” the alien replied. He had a reedy voice and enunciated his words precisely, and he carried himself with the smug confidence you’d expect to see from a man who had just torn the outer wall off a building with the flick of a finger. All of this would have been enough to make Loki loathe him even if he hadn’t already known who he was and who he worked for. “I will give you a choice, mage.” He fixed his gaze on Loki’s projection. “You have an opportunity seldom granted.”

“Just what opportunity would that be?” the projection asked.

“You have access to something the Great Titan desires. You will help him acquire it.”

“Will I? I thought you said you were giving me a choice. You see, I don’t feel particularly obliged to do favors for someone who so rudely interrupted my drink with the lady. It was going so well.” Loki saw the Valkyrie shoot the projection an annoyed glare, and he smirked.

“Your petty affections are meaningless in the face of my master’s glorious design for this universe,” said Maw. Beneath his cloaking spell, Loki raised his daggers. He was nearly behind Maw now, and closing in. “You can either become a part of it willingly or be crushed beneath it. That is your choice. One way or the other, you will serve his purpose.”

“I decline,” said Loki, dispersing the projection and lunging forward to cut right through Maw’s spine.

The heavy cables dangling from what was left of the wall flew up and wrapped themselves around Loki’s wrist, halting his motion a mere inch before the tip of his dagger reached the back of Maw’s tunic. Maw rounded on him. “You insult me with your paltry tricks,” he said, leaving one hand pointed towards the Valkyrie. He lifted his fingers, and the ground at her feet began ripping itself apart.

Loki forced the cables off him with a surge of seidr and fell back. He split two simulacra off him and went left while they went center and right, but before he could feint an attack or make another real one, Maw’s head jerked to the side and a line of blood appeared on his cheek, and a dagger went flying past. He turned to snarl at the Valkyrie, who had deftly sidestepped the crumbling flooring beneath her. Loki shot her a roguish grin, but then he had to duck when the second dagger she threw came straight at him.
“Really?!?” he said, so deeply affronted that he sacrificed some of his attention for dodging and stopping Maw’s next salvo to gape at her.

“What?” she retorted, vaulting over a wall of pavement that hurtled her way and unsheathing a sword he recognized as a Dragonfang. “Just because I’m fighting this pompous, craggy asshole now doesn’t mean I forgot where we left off.”

X

This wasn’t good. Thor had no doubt that he could have handled the attacking ship and the approaching soldiers on his own, but Romanoff and Barton were still adjusting to the translator implants and in poor condition for battle. He kicked a large chunk of their destroyed ship into the air and clubbed it towards Topaz’s craft with Mjolnir. It collided with it slightly off-center, sending it careening behind a building, but that would give them only a moment’s reprieve. “Are you well enough to defend yourselves from the ground forces?” he called over the sounds of marching soldiers.

“Depends how much better they are than those scavenger guys,” said Barton, taking cover and aiming his blaster towards where the soldiers were likely to appear first.

Romanoff took up a position beside him, aiming her own blaster the other way, which left Thor to defend the area in front and above. “Why are these guys attacking us?” she said.

“Yeah, you don’t have a bounty on your head on this planet that you forgot to mention, do you?” said Barton.

“Or maybe the scavengers were some important guy’s buddies?” suggested Romanoff.

“Not that I know of,” said Thor. “But the ship belongs to the Grandmaster’s second-in-command.”

“Then this isn’t an accident,” said Barton.

He was right. Somehow, the Grandmaster had gotten wind of them, and he’d sent his underlings after them. For Thor, this realization was followed swiftly by a second, which sparked off equal measures of anger and fear inside him: if the Grandmaster was coming after the three of them, then he must also be targeting Loki, and Ebony Maw’s absence from that projection moments ago was suddenly much more worrying. “We have to get back to the mead hall.”

The soldiers came into view at both ends of the street and began firing their weapons.

X

Ebony Maw was using telekinesis on a level that Loki had never seen. He continued to deflect his and the Valkyrie’s attacks with apparent ease using the materials around him. He made solid masonry and metal support beams come apart with the effort it took most people to flick lint off their clothing, reshaped pieces of it into pointed missiles, and sent it whistling through the air straight for them. It hardly mattered how many simulacra Loki created, because Maw had more than enough projectiles to spare for each.

Loki’s current strategy was to keep his real body cloaked continuously while making a projection into a likely-seeming target—speaking through it, using seidr shields to defend it from attacks, and throwing conjured daggers from it, while simulacra continued to peel off it. So far, it seemed to be working. Maw didn’t target the spot where Loki was really standing, even as he continued to lob rubble at the Valkyrie and all the copies. However, he also hadn’t taken another hit since the Valkyrie cut his cheek. At this rate, the two of them would need to be extraordinarily lucky to defeat
him, but Loki’s body felt heavier with every passing moment, and by the looks of the Valkyrie’s
dodges and sword slashes, she was in the same boat. It wouldn’t be long before the drug rendered
them completely incapable of fighting.

The smart thing to do now would be to leave his distraction in place and flee to somewhere he could
focus his seidr on burning the drug out of his system. But that would mean leaving the Valkyrie to
Maw. Maybe he should. Pretty or not, she’d made her opinion of him fairly clear when she threw
that knife at him. He owed her nothing. He took a few steps towards the street. He could slip down
there and make his way towards Thor and the mortals. Perhaps they could come back for her
together. He could even insist on it so that Thor wouldn’t be angry with him for abandoning her, and
if he collected one of her daggers on the way out, he might be able to use it for a tracking spell to
help locate her—and, by extension, Maw’s ship, which they needed to find anyway.

He looked back. The Valkyrie’s skin shone with sweat from the effort of fighting the drug as well as
Maw, and she was jumping from one hurtling boulder to the next, trying to reach him. She made a
mighty leap, Dragonfang driving towards Maw’s throat, but she failed to notice the coil of metal cord
rising up towards one of her feet. It caught her and yanked her out of the air so violently that the
sword flew out of her hand, and she was left dangling in front of Maw by the ankle, hair and cape
hanging down.

Loki could feel his control of his seidr slipping. His projection was too weak to front any attacks to
help her now, and the simulacra had all been dispelled by Maw. His distraction was nearly spent, and
he was still far too close to the scene. If he didn’t run now, he would lose his chance.

“You fight well,” Maw told the Valkyrie, who was still struggling to get free. “A warrior such as you
would be a fine addition to my master’s ranks. He does prefer to start them off when they are young
and malleable, but he has made exceptions when it suited him.”

“If you take me to that purple shithead, I’ll stick my sword through his eye,” she said, and spat in his
face.

“In that case,” said Maw coolly, wiping the spit off with a disdainful grimace, “you should rejoice to
know that you will become a child of Thanos in death.” He curled his fingers and the Dragonfang
floated up off the ground where it had fallen. When he angled his hand, it sped towards her chest like
an arrow.

“No!” Loki snarled, gathering up every last bit of seidr he could muster even as the edges of his
vision began to fog, then forcing it out towards the airborne sword. The deadly weapon spun off-
course and embedded itself six inches deep into the wall of the ruined establishment behind her.

The Valkyrie stared at him with wide eyes. He met them briefly before focusing on Maw, who
turned around at a leisurely pace, a smile stretching his fleshy, gray lips. “There you are, mage.” He
raised his bony hands again. Loki fought to remain upright and lifted his daggers in front of him once
more.

X

The Sakaaran soldiers were indeed superior fighters to the scavengers, though not by much. Topaz in
her ship was by far their greatest concern, wreaking havoc on the vendor stalls they’d been using for
cover with every pass. She’d learned not to linger, though, after what Thor had done to the vessel the
first time. Thor very much wanted to launch himself into the sky to bring her down for good, but he
couldn’t leave Barton and Romanoff alone for that long. They were succeeding in keeping the
soldiers from advancing on either side for now with just their two blasters, and Thor had taken down
several that came in from the front. It wouldn’t last. More were coming by the minute.
“How about some lightning?” said Barton over the sounds of blaster fire.

“I’m just waiting for them to line up for me,” said Thor, watching Topaz’s ship coming back around. Dark clouds were gathering overhead, responding to the energy building within him and in Mjolnir. The score or so of soldiers coming from the front were right beneath her flight path. He stepped out to make himself a better target. “Come on, you bastards,” he growled. Topaz swooped down, the soldiers charged, and Thor smirked. With a roar, he pointed Mjolnir skyward, and a blinding flash of lightning blasted from him to the clouds, then arced back down, lighting up the ship on the way and flinging the cluster of soldiers off their feet.

This time, the ship burst into flames and crashed into the neighboring building. Even if Topaz survived that, her ship was certainly no longer a problem. He hurled Mjolnir at one of the two soldiers still standing in front of him, who was taking aim. It crushed the chest plate of the creature’s armor, then curved around and hit his fellow on the way back to Thor’s hand. There didn’t appear to be any more on this group’s tail. “Come on!” Thor shouted at Barton and Romanoff. They laid down a suppressive volley to keep the two groups on the sides from giving immediate chase (though after the lightning, they didn’t seem particularly keen to try it) and followed Thor into the new path he’d opened up.

Thor maintained the storm overhead and gave it enough of a push that the sky opened. Rain came pouring down so hard that they were soaked in seconds. They couldn’t see more than a few yards in any direction, but the soldiers would have a hard time following them now.

They ran for a few streets, then ducked under an awning.

“Are they chasing us?” Romanoff panted.

“I don’t see them,” said Barton.

“Heimdall!” Thor called, desperate for news of his brother.

There was no answering voice.

“Heimdall, can you hear me?” he tried again, louder this time. Still no response. “Why doesn’t he answer?”

“If time moves differently here than on Asgard, maybe we’re going too slow or fast right now for him to be able to communicate,” said Romanoff over the pounding rain.

“Yeah, and if your friends still aren’t here, that probably means we’re the ones going faster,” said Barton.

Thor’s fear ratcheted up several notches. They were likely right. He must’ve caught Heimdall during a stable window in which the two timestreams lined up when he communicated with him from Sakaar before. He shot one frustrated glance skyward before turning to face the street they needed to take next. “We should keep moving.”

Nothing accosted them as they made their way through the city back the way they’d come. Before long, they were able to merge into the crowd of people returning from the arena, none of whom took any particular notice of them as they hurried to get out of the rain. They gradually grew more confident that they had succeeded in losing their pursuers. It took a frustratingly long time traveling on foot, but flying would surely get them spotted, and another fight could delay them even more.

Nearly an hour later, they were finally approaching the right part of the city, and Thor tried not to think too hard about the way the civilian traffic was considerably lighter than before and the people
coming from the direction they were headed looked nervous and frightened. They rounded a corner onto the shabby market square, and Thor’s stomach plummeted. The entire area was almost completely deserted, and in the place where the outer wall of the mead hall had stood was now a gaping, ragged hole, and the street and building were both piled with rubble.

There was no sign of Loki.

Chapter End Notes

*evil laughter* We're getting into why I was so psyched for the Sakaar arc now. :D

Okay, credit to my lovely reviewers: the original plan was just to have Loki and Valkyrie get drugged, pass out, and wake up as Ebony Maw's prisoners, but after the feedback on recent chapters, I realized what a terrible plan that was and that it didn't do them justice at all. The drug certainly made things more difficult, but I hope they managed to put up a respectable fight here. Topaz, on the other hand, definitely bit off more than she could chew going after Thor with just one ship and a few dozen soldiers.

There probably aren't a lot of Loki pairings in which he gets to be the sweet one and the other person is the cynical jerk (comparatively, at least). I think that might be my favorite thing about Loki/Valkyrie.
“Loki!” Thor roared, sprinting towards the last place he’d seen his brother. The establishment was completely in ruins, sparks and water dripping down from where the wall had been torn away, with no signs of life inside. But maybe Loki was still here somewhere beneath a cloaking spell. Or maybe he’d ended up underneath the piles of rubble. Thor began frantically throwing aside chunks of metal and concrete twice his size, still shouting his brother’s name. He found nothing underneath the first pile. Or the second. Or the third.

“Hey, Thor!” Thor spun around to face Barton, his hope rising. However, it plummeted again when he saw that Barton was only pointing at one of the walls that remained standing. There was a blue-bladed sword sticking out of it. “Wasn’t that the sword that warrior lady was carrying?”

It was, without question, the Valkyrie’s Dragonfang. She wouldn’t have left that behind if she’d had a choice.

“And what about this?” said Romanoff. She picked up a dwarf-forged dagger with a gold and black hilt from the ground.

“Loki’s,” said Thor. Part of his mind was still scrabbling for a positive explanation to all this, and the only one it could come up with was that Loki had been wildly successful in his wooing of the Valkyrie, and things had gotten very out of hand. But knowing Loki as well as he did and having spent a few weeks in the Valkyrie’s company, that possibility seemed extremely remote. More likely, they would’ve ended up at each other’s throats, and even then, this destruction would not have been their doing.

A groaning sound came from behind the bar. All three of them rushed over, and Barton and Romanoff helped Thor clear away smaller pieces of debris that had half-buried the A’askavarian barman. “Are you alright?” said Thor. Thick yellow liquid oozed from several scrapes in his skin, his clothing was torn, and the tentacles that took the place of a right arm were a vibrantly bruised riot of different shades of green.

“M-my bar!” he whimpered, staring around at the destruction. Not so badly wounded that he couldn’t care about that, then.

“What happened here?” said Barton.

“Some kind of wizard attacked the place,” he said. “Everyone ran, but I got trapped back here when he started throwing pieces of the building around.”

“What did the wizard look like?” said Romanoff.

“I don’t—tall, gray skin, lots of wrinkles, no nose, wearing some kind of tunic?”

“Ebony Maw,” said Thor, his lip curling. “What of the man who came in here with us? And the woman I opened the drink tab for?”

“I didn’t see,” he said. He squirmed, avoiding Thor’s gaze.

“Want to try that again?” said Romanoff.
“What do you want from me?” he whined. “I’ve lost everything!”


The A’askavarian whimpered and squirmed fruitlessly against Thor’s grip. “Ow! I didn’t have a choice, okay? When Topaz gives you an order, you follow it if you want to keep your freedom. Let me go!”

“What did she want?” said Barton.

“She asked if I knew where you three had gone, and then she gave me something to put in your brother and Scraper 142’s drinks and left.”

Thor’s grip tightened. The alien’s face was steadily turning a deeper green. “Why?” he barked. “How did she even know about us?”

“How the hell should I know?” he rasped.

“What happened to Loki and the woman?” said Romanoff.

“They fought the wrinkly wizard guy,” he said. Thor felt his slimy throat contract in a gulp beneath his hand. “They lost, and he took them away. But I’m pretty sure they’re still alive.” Blue-white threads of electricity burst out of Thor’s skin. He dropped the A’askavarian before his hold could either crush or electrocute him, and he staggered back. He tried to draw slow, deep breaths, but his control was gone and the energy of his wild seidr would not be restrained. The storm outside broke loose. The sky itself seemed to crack apart with lightning every other second, rain became hail, and the wind picked up until it howled through the city, sweeping away small to medium pieces of trash and rubble.

Ebony Maw had Loki. He had Loki and he was going to take him to Thanos, and then every horror Thor had sworn to spare his little brother from this time would happen anyway.

X

The Grandmaster was less pleased with how today was shaping up than he’d been with the way it had begun. Scales was one of the best fighters he’d had in his arena, sure, but he had zero sense of showmanship. He was so quick about bashing in the heads of his opponents that most of the audience had barely had time to see what had happened before it was over. The death of the previous reigning champion, which should have sent the stadium up in screams of outrage and delight, was instead met with nothing but hesitant, confused applause that died away quickly. Scales hadn’t even gotten any blood on him! Meanwhile, Topaz had gotten her ship destroyed and a platoon of guards killed trying to capture the big blond guy, and she had nothing to show for it except a broken leg and a burned arm. To cap things off, he couldn’t remember having such horrible weather on Sakaar in the entire time he’d been here.

If Wrinkles wasn’t striding towards his throne right now, looking like his day had been much better, the Grandmaster would’ve been trying to salvage the evening with an impromptu party in his ship. He shooed away a couple of attendants and frowned at him, savoring another sip of his drink, not adjusting his relaxed position in his throne.

“Grandmaster,” said Wrinkles, inclining his head, “thanks to the information of your subordinate, I have succeeded in capturing my quarry. I attempted to inform the Great Titan, but Sakaar’s temporal
flux is making communications off-world impossible, so I would like to return to him at once.”

“Uh-huh,” said the Grandmaster. “That wasn’t our deal.”

“The units for the soldiers have been transferred to your accounts, and Cull can remain behind to complete his battles in your arena,” said Wrinkles calmly, but there was a vein twitching in that ugly gray forehead. He obviously wanted to use his normal methods of persuasion against him. The Grandmaster hoped he would. It would be funny, and it might improve his evening. “I will return for him and the army after I have delivered the mage to Thanos.”

The Grandmaster went to sip more of his drink, but it was empty. He raised the glass in the direction of the nearest attendant, who took it and scurried to get him another. “I thought you guys were supposed to be all about balance,” he said. “You offered to help my guards capture the other intruders, and, uh, now you want to skedaddle with yours while the other three are still running around? If you want the army, you’re going to stay here until it’s all finished. I’m not offering an installment plan here.”

Maw’s eyes narrowed, and for a tantalizing moment, the Grandmaster thought he might really cut loose against him, but in the end he only inclined his head with a movement so stiff it was a wonder it didn’t snap his spine. “You have a reputation for always getting what you want, Grandmaster. It is not undeserved.” He withdrew, flexing his long-fingered hands.

The Grandmaster sighed, accepting his new drink from the returning attendant. Maybe there was still time for a party.

X

“Heimdall told you they came on one big ship,” Romanoff added, “and I bet their communications off-world are getting as screwed up by the time difference as yours, so it’s not like they can call another ride.”

The knot of fear and despair in Thor’s chest loosened a little, and it became easier to temper the storm. “Come on,” he said. “I know a place we can go.”

X

Loki came to and immediately regretted it. His skull was splitting from the blow Maw had knocked him out with and the fading effects of the drug, and his stomach felt like it was trying to crawl up his throat and escape out his mouth. He blinked his eyes open and found that he was in an irregularly shaped room, chained by his wrists to the ceiling a few feet above with barely enough slack for his toes to touch the floor. He saw the Valkyrie chained nearby, also coming out of her drugged sleep.
She looked pale under her dark skin and one side of her face was caked with dried blood. He doubted he looked any better.

“Oh, you’re still alive,” he observed. He used the nameless tongue, in case anyone else was listening. “I’m glad my intervention wasn’t for nothing.”

She scowled at him. “You’re the reason I’m in this mess in the first place,” she said, using the nameless tongue too. “He was after you, not me.”

Loki returned the scowl. “How was I supposed to know Ebony Maw would show up and attack two hours after I set foot on Sakaar? It isn’t as though my brother and I broadcasted our plans. I don’t even know why he was after me!” At this point in time, Thanos and his minions shouldn’t even know Loki existed, let alone that he would be on a world so far outside Yggdrasil.

“The Grandmaster has surveillance everywhere so that he can get first access to anything interesting that turns up out of the portals,” she said. “One of his cameras must’ve spotted you coming in.”

And they had arrived out of thin air in a flash of Tesseract-blue light, just when the Grandmaster was negotiating with Maw. Loki groaned. Was there anything left that could go wrong with this mission at this point? He looked around their cell. Heimdall had only described the size and weaponry of the vessel bearing Thanos’s lieutenants to Sakaar, but that information wasn’t particularly useful now that Loki was inside it. Every surface was formed of the same glistening black material that pulsed with blue and orange lights. Wherever a light appeared in the walls, floor, or ceiling, it illuminated odd structures beneath the surface. They ran with fluids of various colors, and they resembled branching veins more than pipes. It was almost as if the ship was organic. Loki noticed that fresh waves of nausea rolled through him with each pulse of those eerie lights. The sickly energy it was giving off exactly matched the tenor of Maw’s telekinetic powers, and his magic and Loki’s seidr apparently did not mix well.

Loki gritted his teeth and wrenched at his chains. They creaked but didn’t break. He hadn’t really expected them to, but typically the best way to get out of shackles was to become something that didn’t have hands. However, the instant he began calling on his seidr to transform into a serpent, his insides rebelled violently and his focus evaporated. He fell limp against the chains for a few moments, panting and fighting back the urge to throw up.

Right. No magic, unless he wanted to tear himself apart. Fantastic. Back to brute force, then. He heaved against the shackles again—not to break them this time, but instead to flip himself upside down like a trapeze artist. He caught one of the chains between his feet and pulled into a crouching position to give himself additional slack. From there, he was able to pit his full strength against the metal cuffs, and thereby made short work of them. Once the second one gave way, he flipped back down, landing cat-like on the floor. The impact sent out a ripple of that sickly light and another corresponding wave of nausea.

He would’ve liked to have curled up in a ball until the sensation passed, but he stood upright and turned to help the Valkyrie out of her chains too. However, two loud metallic snaps sounded out, and he found her free, massaging her wrists and looking bored. Of course.

“Heimdall?” he called. “Can you hear me?”

There was no reply. Well, it had been worth a try. At least that meant the ship was likely still on the planet. Did Thor know what had happened yet? Was he still trying to secure translators for the mortals, or were they all on the ship too, trapped in more of these doorless cells?

“He’s still the Gatekeeper?”
Loki faced the Valkyrie again. She was watching him with her arms folded.

“He is,” he said, brushing past her on the way to the nearest wall. He ran his hands over the strange material, face twisting in a grimace. It was unpleasantly warm and moist, which would’ve made it feel like flesh if it wasn’t far too hard. “Are you going just going to stand there, or are you going to help me look for a way out?”

“You really think Maw would’ve left us alone in here if it was that easy to escape?”

“Judging from those chains, he already underestimated our strength once.”

“Yeah, and that’s why you’re freely using your magic tricks to get us out of here.”

Loki scowled at her again. “Maybe if you’d actually helped me against him instead of trying to fight both of us, he never would’ve been able to get us on his ship in the first place!”

“I don’t help anyone,” she said, as though he’d been an idiot for expecting any kind of cooperation against an obviously stronger foe.

“Ah, yes, how could I forget that I’m speaking with someone who knows no loyalty to king or realm?”

“I don’t owe Asgard a bloody thing.”

“Except your life, just now.” He’d gone about halfway around the cell. The wall was completely seamless even as it curved and bent, and there were no gaps in the vein-like structures beneath it.

“Considering you’re the reason I’m in this mess in the first place,” she said, “that’s already a wash, and besides, I didn’t ask you to save me.”

“You may have abandoned your oaths,” said Loki, “but I haven’t.” It was the duty of the Allfather, and the royal family by extension, to protect the people of Asgard, and she was still one of them whether she liked it or not.

“Oaths,” she scoffed. “That wasn’t about oaths, it was about you wanting to get in my pants.”

Loki’s scowl became a smirk, even though by now he’d been all the way around the room and still failed to discover an exit. Perhaps a door simply grew into place when Maw needed one, and if that was the case, it likely only responded to his own commands. “Must the two be mutually exclusive?”

She laughed. It sounded more incredulous than mirthful. “Is this approach one that normally works for you?”

Given that he could count on one hand the number of times he’d been inclined to have an approach at all, he didn’t really want to answer that. To make matters worse, her proving to be one of the most aggravating people he’d ever met had done nothing so far to diminish her appeal. All he could think of doing was to be equally aggravating. Pulling his best imitation of Fandral’s most rakish smile, he said, “I’m a prince. If I didn’t actively work to thin the crowd, I’d never get anything done.”

Her eyebrows drew together and upward, and she turned her back to him.

Chapter End Notes
Angry protective Thor is my favorite Thor. He's not really Clint and Nat's favorite Thor, though.

Okay so I decided not to use one of the ships we've seen in canon as Ebony Maw's ship in the fic. This takes place a few years earlier, and I imagine Thanos has a fairly rapid turnover rate of ships with all the wars he wages on different planets. I wanted the ship to be as creepy as Maw is, so I came up with this idea of it being almost alive, pulsing with its own energy that triggers basically a bad allergic reaction in seidr users.

Still, the setting was the easiest part of Loki and Valkyrie's scene to figure out. I went through probably four or five drafts of that scene. At first, Loki took a lot longer to notice her, but that just felt weird, and I played with the conversation and rearranged things a lot until I finally got it where I wanted it. It honestly would've been helpful if Ebony Maw had just gotten back already, but there never seemed to be a good place for him to butt in, so now we all get to be in suspense about what's going to happen to them for another chapter.
Ebony Maw swept through the grand, absurdly designed corridors of the Grandmaster’s palace towards the hangar where his ship sat. Not being able to bring his discovery to his master at once grated at him. He had laid waste to countless misguided fools who thought to oppose Thanos, he had found exceptional tools to be shaped for his glorious purposes—Corvus, Proxima, and Cull, for instance—and he had brokered deals with powers such as the Grandmaster that could not be directly opposed (for the time being). Every task Thanos had ever set him, he had completed to perfection. For his devotion and his success, he had been granted power and privilege none of the Great Titan’s other servants or children enjoyed.

And now he was delayed.

 Granted, Thanos had only sent him and Cull to Sakaar for the army, which would still arrive on schedule, assuming their calculations of the temporal flux had been accurate. He could not be disappointed over something he was ignorant of. And if Ebony Maw couldn’t deliver the mage to Thanos yet, he could at least prepare him for that moment. He would need to be broken of his defiance before he could be made useful.

He stepped onto the ship and opened his mouth to draw in a deep breath. Not even the palace was entirely free of this planet’s stench, but the ship had its own air supply and had remained untainted. Better than the air was the sense of the ship itself. The energy it carried within its walls was as invigorating as a good meal. He would forever be grateful to Thanos for letting him build it.

Maw collected his tools and strode to the prison corridor. Before he entered it, he pulled up the security logs and played back some of the footage from inside the cell. The mage and the warrior were awake and free of their chains. He had expected as much. He tried to listen to their conversation, but all he heard was strings of nonsense syllables, and his translator let out a burst of shrill feedback as it failed to make any of it coherent. He quickly muted the recording. Very well; let them enjoy their coded language. He would simply get the information he wanted directly.

He touched his hand to the wall, which pulsed brighter and thinned like a parting membrane to create a doorway. Both of the prisoners within shifted instantly into a combat stance. Ebony Maw lifted a finger, and a dozen surgical needles shot towards them, along with the empty chains dangling from the ceiling.

X

It didn’t take long for Natasha’s prediction about their pursuers to come true. She had to pull Thor and Clint into an alley about ten minutes after they left the destroyed bar, when a pair of soldiers matching the ones who’d tried to pen them in outside the upgrade shop appeared a little way up their street. What was more, they kept stopping people in the crowd and showing them high-resolution holograms that looked like footage from their earlier fight.

They were going to get made in about two seconds looking the way they did. She pointed this problem out to the guys. Luckily, they were in the middle of a market, so it wasn’t hard to disappear. Within minutes, she and Clint had found enough chalky body paint and brightly colored cloth to thoroughly alter their appearances. As finishing touches, Natasha pinned her loose curls up to match one of the bizarre hairstyles she’d seen multiple times in the street, and Thor wrapped his hammer so
that it looked like an innocent parcel tied to his belt.

Disguises in place, Natasha walked with Clint a short distance behind Thor, allowing plenty of room for other people to get between them. Sticking too closely together as a trio could be as much of a giveaway as anything else, but the crown prince of Asgard was so tall that his shoulder-length blond hair was easy to follow through the crowd even when he was wearing the same crazy colors as the locals. The next time they saw guards, they were able to walk right past them without drawing so much as a glance.

Thor didn’t say where he was leading them, but his clear familiarity with parts of the city crystallized the doubts that had begun nagging at her from his initial bear hug at the palace on Asgard. Judging from the silent glances Clint kept shooting her as they followed him, he was thinking the same thing.

They walked for over an hour (passing two more pairs of guards en route) before Thor turned to face them and jerked his head at one of the taller nearby buildings. He went inside, and after a few moments, they casually followed.

Futuristic garbage planet aesthetic aside, the skyscraper they entered looked a lot like a high-rise apartment complex. “Right,” said Thor when they caught up to him in the empty, litter-smattered hallway beyond the doors, “I think it’s on the 137th floor.” They got on an elevator, and even though it wasn’t much different from the ones at the Triskelion, Natasha felt very exposed going up the side of a building in a glass box on a planet where the crazy tyrannical overlord was already sending his goons after them.

They reached the target floor, where there were only a few pieces of trash lying around beneath walls that zigzagged with green and white shapes. Thor confidently led the way down corridors and around corners until they came up to a window overlooking the city and trash fields beyond. He didn’t so much as glance out of it, but began fiddling with a panel by the door next to it instead. It flashed red with a very negative-sounding beep. He poked at it some more, and it did it again. He grunted in frustration, and electricity zapped from his hand into the panel. It made a much less healthy series of beeps this time and a thin trail of white smoke leaked out of the top. Apparently it did the trick, though, because the door shot open. Thor laughed and looked inside, then nodded in satisfaction and walked in.

“What is this, a safe house?” said Clint, looking around the room. Natasha had been right: it was an apartment, sparsely furnished and not particularly tidy. There were a lot of empty bottles lying around, some piled up magazines or books, dirty clothes here and there, and a distinct lack of personal touches. At least it had a view, or what passed for one on Sakaar.

“It should be safe enough,” said Thor. “These are the living quarters of the woman from the mead hall.”

“And you know her,” said Natasha.

“She’s the last Valkyrie of Asgard, yes,” he said. He shed the cloth portions of his disguise and walked over to what looked like a kitchen, where he started rummaging through cupboards.

“Has she been stationed here?” said Clint.

“No, I think she fell through a portal or something a few hundred years ago after a battle,” said Thor.

Clint glanced at Natasha again. She nodded and stepped forward. “Thor, we need to have a conversation.”
“Yes, of course,” said Thor with forced cheerfulness. “We’ll have some food and then we’ll discuss how we’re going to rescue my brother and the Valkyrie!” He brandished containers of something that was probably edible.

“Not that,” she said. He frowned at her, looking far more like an oversized puppy than he had any right to after what she’d seen him do. In some ways, this conversation would probably have been easier to have with Loki. Someone as shrewd as him would be less likely to get his feelings hurt from what was going to start out sounding like an accusation. “Look, we believe you that your interests are aligned with Earth’s—you’ve proven that. And we believe that you value our well-being,” she gestured at herself and Clint, “but it’s pretty clear there’s a lot you aren’t telling us.”

“Yeah, and that needs to change,” said Clint. “We wouldn’t have come here if we weren’t willing to help you, but you’re dragging us into some insane shit here. We’ve been to two different planets today, been attacked twice, and let an alien bird man shoot tentacle chips into our necks. We can’t keep doing this on faith for someone we just met.”

Thor’s face fell, and it was suddenly easy to believe that he was really over a thousand years old. He gave a weary, rueful chuckle and set down the food containers in favor of a bottle of deep amber liquid. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that you worked it out. Stark and Banner were often lauded as the geniuses of the team, but there was little that ever escaped your notice.”

Natasha and Clint frowned. “Stark and Banner?” said Clint.

“Neither of them is exactly a team player,” said Natasha slowly, but she was more interested in Thor’s use of the past tense, and the wistful familiarity in his voice. As far as she knew, Tony Stark and Bruce Banner might have both met Thor, but they’d never met each other, let alone worked together.

“Stark, Banner, the two of you, Captain Rogers, and I,” said Thor. “We made up the original six Avengers. Earth’s mightiest heroes. We fought side by side against many threats to your world, and you grew as dear to me as my shield-sister and brothers on Asgard.”

“Okay...are we forgetting something?” said Clint.

“Not exactly,” said Thor. He pulled the top off the bottle and drank a few mouthfuls. “I’ve just gone back into the past to before the Avengers existed, and now I’m the only one who remembers.”

Clint’s mouth fell open and Natasha sank unsteadily onto the low sofa. She felt like her brain had jammed. It was impossible, wasn’t it? Even though her definition of the word “impossible” had undergone a radical adjustment over the last few weeks. And yet it perfectly explained Thor’s knowledge of Sakaar, his behavior around them, and his intense hatred of seemingly remote villains like Thanos and his followers.

She struggled for a detail to latch onto to begin making sense of it. “Captain Rogers?” she settled on after a few seconds. “As in Steven Grant Rogers, popularly styled Captain America, the sole subject of Project Rebirth, who went down in a plane somewhere in the Arctic after taking down a rogue Nazi research division known as Hydra in 1945 and was never recovered?”

“He’s still alive,” said Thor, his eyes crinkling fondly. “If things happen the same way, SHIELD should find him in the ice sometime in the next few months, and if not, I’m sure Heimdall can help us locate him.” His expression turned grave. “As to Hydra, I’m afraid it is far from defeated.”
Loki couldn’t move. The chains from the ceiling were coiled so tightly around him that he was losing feeling in his arms, and crystalline needles the size of swords hovered a hair’s breadth from his skin at the points of several major arteries, trapping him against the back wall of the cell. The Valkyrie had taken one through the forearm when she tried to beat them away, before the chains reached her. Even pinned to the wall’s uneven surface like an insect, with several more of the needles poised to inflict additional wounds, she glowered at Ebony Maw with no sign of pain or fear. Maw, however, had not acknowledged her for a second.

“You can make this much easier for yourself if you cooperate, mage,” he said. “My master will learn everything you know about the Space Stone one way or the other. He always rewards those who serve him, and he never fails to punish those who don’t.”

“I’m terribly sorry for the inconvenience,” said Loki in his most polite diplomat voice, “but again I must decline.”

Maw’s eyes narrowed. Several of the needles rotated in the air without moving closer. “The only one who will be harmed by your obstinacy is you.”

“I’m well aware of that,” said Loki with a courteous nod. The needles didn’t prevent it. “You see, I simply couldn’t bear the humiliation of voluntarily working for a man so willfully stupid as to believe that ending half of all sentient life would be beneficial. If he were doing it for something sensible such as revenge or spite, we might be able to have a conversation. As it is…”

Maw seemed unperturbed. No doubt he’d heard every argument against Thanos’s asinine plan and was thoroughly immune to them all. “Few are capable of comprehending the Great Titan’s brilliance,” he said. “They do not understand that great progress requires great sacrifice.”

“Do your noble platitudes give you comfort in the absence of facts and logic to support your position?” said Loki. “Did they make it easier for you to watch him slaughter half of your people?”

Maw’s smile sent a chill down Loki’s spine. “The only day more glorious than when he came to my planet will be the day he fulfills his final destiny,” he said. “Most of Thanos’s followers require a great deal of persuasion to see the truth, but I am one of the few who sought him out. I begged him to bring his salvation to my world. He is generous and merciful, and he did as I asked, with my eager help.” He gestured at the ship around them. “My kin live on in a far more useful form now. No other population has been granted such an honor.”

“You used them as raw materials to build this ship,” Loki realized, unable to conceal his horror.

“What the Hel?” said the Valkyrie from his right, glancing around at the pulsing lights in the walls with a sickened expression.

“An experimental design,” said Maw. “One we will likely not use again. Few species are suited for it, and even those who are have limited application.”

“You’re insane,” said Loki. He dispensed with the politeness, putting as much contempt into his voice as he could. “The whole lot of you are insane.”

“On the contrary,” said Maw. “We are the only sane ones in a mad universe. In time, you will see.” All at once, the needles drove into Loki’s flesh. He screamed, and somewhere beneath the blinding explosion of agony, it occurred to him that they had been aiming not for arteries but for the major nerve clusters that ran alongside them. None of them missed their targets.
“How can we be sure what you’re telling us is real?” said Natasha. Night had fallen outside, and the lamp and kitchen lights cast a fluorescent glow over the room. Thor was sitting on the small chair opposite her, now holding an empty bottle, and Clint was pacing in front of the window that took up the entire front wall of the apartment.

Natasha didn’t doubt Thor’s story, not really, but things would be a lot less complicated if it wasn’t true. Half of SHIELD’s operatives were really Hydra double-agents? And they’d been working for decades without detection, twisting world events to generate widespread fear and increase their control? It shook the foundation of everything good she’d believed she managed to build for herself after Clint brought her over to their side. Hell, a lot of the information she and Clint were gathering on this mission now could do serious damage if Hydra got a hold of it. They were supposed to debrief with Sitwell when they got back. She wished she could be sure that the drinks on this planet wouldn’t kill her.

“If I wanted to do you harm, I would hardly need to lie to you first,” said Thor gently. Natasha could easily give him that one. “But I’m happy to give you whatever proof you need.” He considered a moment, then looked at Clint. “There was a time when we all needed shelter from our enemies, somewhere ‘off the grid,’ as your people say. You brought us to your family’s farm.” Clint froze in his tracks, his entire body rigid. “You introduced us to the lady Laura and your children.” Thor ran his fingers through his hair, looking sheepish. “I stepped on a toy house. I tried to nudge the pieces out of sight, but Rogers caught me.”

Natasha couldn’t help a brief chuckle at the image, and Thor smiled at her.

“The only way I’d tell you about them is if I trusted you completely,” said Clint.

“You did,” said Thor. He looked like the absence of that trust was causing him physical pain, and his expression became even more earnest, somehow. “Barton, if this quest takes you away from your family for any great length of time, I swear to you now that I will do whatever you ask of me to make it up to you and to them. I was foolish to invite you both to Sakaar. I should have remembered how time moves here, but I was so eager to rebuild the bonds we formed as the Avengers that I wasn’t thinking.”

“Why time travel at all if the Avengers defeated all of those threats?” said Clint. “Why would you want to do it all again and risk making it worse?”

“Coming back in time was more accident than plan,” said Thor. “I’m probably lucky to have survived it. I thought it was my second chance, because Earth might have done well in those years with us to protect it, but the same was not true of Asgard. By the time I beheaded Thanos, I had already lost my world, every member of my family, most of my friends, and all but a handful of my people. I was an arrogant boy who had everything, and I took it all for granted.” His eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“That’s why you’re so afraid of Thanos getting his hands on Loki, isn’t it?” said Natasha. “It happened before.”

“My brother never spoke of it much, but Thanos unmade him. He took him when he was hurt and vulnerable and twisted him into someone I barely recognized. Just when he was getting back to himself and we had truly become brothers again, Thanos killed him in front of me. When I realized I had come back to before any of it happened, I swore I would spare him that future, but if my recklessness lands him in Thanos’s clutches again, and the Valkyrie along with him….” His voice broke and the tears came spilling down his cheeks. He looked at them pleadingly. “Protecting my little brother was the first responsibility I was ever given.”
Natasha looked at Clint. She was raised to be a weapon. She had never had a childhood, let alone a family with siblings, and she had allowed the Red Room to rob her of a chance at any future family that would share her blood. With the exception of the Bartons, Fury, and maybe Coulson, she always put layers of false faces between herself and anyone else, so it was difficult to imagine what that kind of loss and survivor’s guilt would be like, but simply being in the same room with Thor was enough to feel it. The poor guy had been through hell.

“We’ll get your brother back,” said Clint.

Natasha nodded. “Tell us everything you can remember about Sakaar,” she said. “The smallest details might be something we can use to our advantage.”

Thor stared at them, and then an enormous, grateful smile split his face.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, normally it's the Brodinsons feels that make me cry when I'm writing this fic, but this time it was Brodinsons feels AND Thor missing the friendships he had with the Avengers. Sometimes, being the only one from the future can be super lonely. Also, this is a big week for Clint and Nat.

Oh man it was satisfying for someone as articulate as Loki to finally get an opportunity to drag Thanos a bit for his dumb plan. I ended up writing several different lines for him while I was drafting the scene, but I really liked the idea of him being less concerned with the heinousness of Thanos's plan than how freaking stupid it is, so that one became the winner.

I've been going to a jujitsu dojo since March, and that's where I learned about major nerves next to arteries. I'm not sure if it applies in every case, but they're definitely there next to the carotid, femoral, and brachial arteries, and it is not fun when someone jabs an elbow into them. I figured Maw with his "microsurgery needles" would know all about that kind of thing and how to take advantage of it.

I should probably stop trying to make Maw even creepier than he already is in canon. Hopefully that was the only Maw PoV scene.
Ebony Maw barely spared a glance for Scrapper 142 in the hours he spent in the cell. She might’ve called the prince a “pampered royal,” but she knew that his martial education would have been second to none, and that it would have included training on resisting torture. It would take more than one session to break him. Still, maintaining her apathy towards the idiot prince who had saved her life when he should have run got harder the longer Maw used those crystal needles on him.

Today wasn’t the first day she’d seen Prince Loki Odinson. That had been over a thousand years ago, the day the Allfather and Allmother had presented him to Asgard. The entire corps of Valkyrior and Einherjar had taken turns swearing their lives and swords to the second prince. The accompanying celebration lasted for weeks, mingling with revelry over a war finally won.

She’d been so proud to be a Valkyrie of Asgard back then. It had been her dream since she was old enough to understand what it meant, and even when it took her mother to Valhalla, her determination only grew. Not only did she succeed, but she became the youngest commander in the history of the Valkyrior. She proved she deserved it by leading a charge against a Kree incursion in her first decade at her post. Her victory inspired many songs, and an entire gyle of particularly strong ale was brewed in barrels made from the materials salvaged from the wrecked Asgardian ships. She distinguished herself even more in the Aesir-Jotnar war, instrumental both in driving the Frost Giants from Midgard and in capturing Utgard.

Because of her rank, she had been one of the first in the procession to come before Hlíðskjálfr, where Odin sat, a new golden patch over the eye Laufey had taken and a squirming blond toddler on his knee. Queen Frigga had stood at his side, holding a gold-wrapped bundle with a curly tuft of black hair peeking out. The commander of the Second Wing of the Valkyrior had knelt before that bundle and put fist to heart, and she’d grinned at the awestruck expression on the older prince’s round face. “She’s a Valkyrie, Pabbi,” he’d stage-whispered into Odin’s ear, his pronunciation still clumsy. Odin had solemnly agreed, Frigga had laughed, and the bundle had made happy gurgling sounds. Asgard’s future had never seemed brighter.

That day felt like a memory from someone else’s life now. It had been one of the last before it all went wrong. Unbeknownst to her or any of them in that moment, those two little princes had already become the catalysts for a rebellion that would cost her everything before it was crushed. Apparently one prince wasn’t enough of a threat for the Hela loyalists to act on, but when the second came along, it put to rest any lingering hopes that Odin might one day restore the bloodthirsty crown princess. The victorious festivities had been the perfect cover for a plot to assassinate the tiny usurpers in their cribs and open a shadow gate to Niflheim.

And now that they were grown, those princes showed up on Sakaar and turned her life upside down again. She shouldn’t want anything to do with Loki or his brother, but part of her was curious to see exactly what her shield-sisters had died to protect.

Maw’s needles didn’t do anything to Loki’s armor or even his skin; they seemed to simply have skipped past them and gone straight for the deep tissues. As torture methods went, this one was certainly tidy. At a few of the especially terrible moments, Scrapper 142 made an involuntary move in Loki’s direction, only for the needles hovering sentry around her to force her back and her chains to tighten. By the time Maw left them there, visibly irritated at Loki’s lack of cooperation, Loki was slumped on the floor, twitching and trembling all over.
The needles departed with Maw, and when the wall sealed behind him, the chains fell into coils on the floor. Scrapper 142 went to Loki’s side and crouched down. He gave her a pained shadow of his earlier smirk. She raised an eyebrow. “Is this your new bid for my affections, your highness?” she asked.

“Of course,” he said. It came out half a groan. He struggled to push himself into a sitting position, and it looked like it cost him the rest of his strength to manage it. “You should be ready to swoon by now, after watching me scream and writhe on Maw’s skewers.”

“Oh, very nearly,” she said, grimacing. “But I think I liked it better when you were insulting me.”

“Well, in that case, you’re a dreadful oathbreaker and you’ll come to a bad end.”

She laughed. “Shut up and hold still.” She ran her thumbs to spots along the nerves Maw had targeted in Loki’s arms. Like the vast majority of the Aesir, she’d never been able to use her seidr for much besides standard combat enhancement, so healing magic had always been beyond her abilities, but she’d learned a number of effective mundane techniques for reducing pain. Granted, she hadn’t employed those techniques since the Aesir-Jotnar war, and trying them when she was this rusty could easily do him more harm than good.

He let out a surprised breath and the trembling in his fingers eased. She moved systematically through the rest of the major nerves.

“Behold my unparalleled powers of seduction,” he said dryly. “You can’t keep your hands off me.”

She applied slightly more force to the femoral nerve than was necessary. He let out a yelp. Just because he was pretty and had a voice that could melt butter didn’t mean he could get away with comments like that.

X

Clint, Nat, and Thor left the Valkyrie’s apartment early the next morning. Their first order of business was gearing up for the tasks ahead of them. It turned out that futuristic alien appliance shops were an absolute goldmine for espionage and surveillance, so that part was easy. Soon, they all wore interface bracers on their wrists—pretty much the Sakaaran equivalent of smartphones, by the looks of many of the other people walking around.

Thanks to the Grandmaster’s plan to add another tower to his palace, the blueprints of the entire building were currently available to the public. They downloaded them onto their bracers, then spent some time studying them in the form of a scale holographic model, with Thor pointing out the areas he had been to, before they split up.

Clint pulled up his map, which showed three glowing yellow pinpricks moving along a network of blue lines. The central one was his own position, and the other two marked the locations of Nat’s and Thor’s bracers. They could use them to call each other up (which involved tiny, live holographic projections instead of just voices) if they needed to share information before the rendez-vous.

The flow of foot traffic in and out of the palace was steady, just as Thor had said. The Grandmaster’s life was one never-ending party, so guests were constantly coming and going, and even though there were at least a dozen fully armored guards standing amid the crowd, there didn’t seem to be much in the way of security checkpoints to make sure the guests were who they said they were. So either the Grandmaster was the least paranoid tyrant Clint had ever heard of, or he was so powerful that no amount of public access to his home bothered him.
Finding the army bound for Thanos was simple once he was inside the palace. The main building overlooked a vast paved square with the least amount of trash he’d seen anywhere outside so far. At least ten thousand humanoid creatures stood in ordered rows, all wearing strange armor that looked like it was made of porous stone. Clint quickly found a good position to observe them that kept him out of sight of the guards. Some of the soldiers had their masks off, and he instantly regretted trying out his space binoculars on them. Their faces were gaping, oily crevices with bone jutting out along the jaws and cheeks, and four-part mandibles that moved in very unsettling ways when they talked.

The massive, solid figure of Cull Obsidian stomped between the rows of soldiers, evidently checking the quality of his boss’s merchandise. He was even bigger than the Hulk and it looked like his temper was nearly as bad. Most of the soldiers passed muster, but one of them must’ve looked at him the wrong way, because he lifted him off his feet by the throat and tossed him against a wall thirty yards away. He struck with enough force that he left a large, tar-black spatter on it when he fell to the ground.

Luckier soldiers than that one were filing out of the square in a line. Clint marked the spot on his map and looked for all the routes to it. Navigating started to get trickier as he left the lavish party areas behind, but he’d been doing this kind of thing for his entire adult life. Doing it on another planet wasn’t as different as he might have thought.

All of this was gonna make a hell of a bedtime story for Cooper and Lila.

X

Natasha was very proud of the cover identity she’d crafted for herself with the seemingly infinite funds of the House of Odin’s Nova account. Her hair was up in a looping, gravity-defying twist, she’d brushed gold paint in a crescent shape over her eyes and nose, and she wore a dress in eye-watering shades of purple and bronze. It was an ensemble that made her feel like she should be stepping onto a catwalk at a particularly eccentric fashion show, but here at the Grandmaster’s palace, it struck the perfect balance of being weird enough to fit in but not so weird that she drew much attention, positive or negative.

Affecting an air of upper-class ennui, she picked up a drink off a table and held it as she wended her way between other psychedelic outfits towards the throne room, nodding her head slightly to the synth-heavy music.

There seemed to be three categories of people present: wealthy partiers, slaves (well-dressed but grim-faced people with those metal disks on their necks), and guards armored head to toe in turquoise plate. The conversations she overheard in passing all sounded about as shallow as you’d expect. A lot of “You have to tell me where you bought your suit” and “Oh, that necklace is stunning!” and “Where did you go to get that bioluminescent hair?”

X

The soldiers led Clint right to Maw and Cull’s ship in the massive hangar bay. The ship was bigger than anything he’d ever seen on Earth, including SHIELD’s new helicarrier. It was also stranger than any Earth vessel. Its vast, bulbous nose and long, thin fins made it resemble a giant, metallic sea monster.

From his perch at the juncture of two support beams for a bridge, he had a clear view of everything happening around the ship. Based on the number of soldiers he’d seen in the square, it would take more than a day to load them all, which fit the schedule he, Nat, and Thor had estimated. A tall, slender alien emerged from the ship, and Cull Obsidian left the soldiers and walked over to him. Clint pressed a couple of buttons on his space binoculars, and the translated voices of Thanos’s
lieutenants sounded in his earpiece, as clearly as if they were standing beside him.

“All in order with the troops?” said Ebony Maw.

“Most of them,” growled Cull Obsidian. “The prisoners?”

“Uncooperative. But that can be remedied, even if it takes the Mind Stone to do it.”

X

The throne room would have been unmistakable even without the map in her bracer to guide Natasha to it. The architecture might be unlike anything she’d ever seen, but it all leaned towards a single focal point. She kept moving closer until she could see the man from the giant hologram announcement the previous day. He was conferring with a stocky, grumpy-looking woman whose movements were stiff and pained. He looked very indignant about something. Natasha glided past them and loosely attached herself to a cluster of tittering ladies nearby.

“You told Wrinkles he could take Scrapper 142?” said the Grandmaster. “What is this, an abduct two for one special? Why would you do that, Topaz? You know she’s my favorite!”

“She was fraternizing with the mage when she should’ve been doing her job and capturing him,” said the woman mulishly. Natasha wondered what it was about her that made the implant give her English dub a Maori accent.

“Well of course she was. Who wouldn’t? Lean, tall, and those cheekbones. That’s no reason to hand her over. Now I can’t get her back unless I make him a concession, and then he’ll get all smug.”

“Sorry, boss. It won’t happen again.”

“Well that’s obvious! I only had one Scrapper 142. You’ll just have to be the one to explain that to my brother the next time he visits.”

X

Thor spent the morning walking around various markets near the center of the city. He checked Barton’s and Romanoff’s indicators on his bracer every few minutes, hoping that they were having better success than he was. None of the first hundred or so people he approached had been able to help him.

As that number ticked closer to two hundred, he started to wonder if this part of the plan was too much of a stretch. It relied on variables he had no way to be sure of.

He kept walking with no particular destination in mind. The moment he stepped into the shadow of the arena, a familiar voice reached his ears. He grinned and quickened his pace. Finally.

Korg the Kronan was standing in the middle of the street, gesticulating with a rocky hand that contained a crumpled pamphlet. “The Grandmaster is oppressing us! These battles in the arena are just a distraction. They’re obedience disks for our minds! The time for us to rise up is now!”

A few of the people going past him paused in mild interest, but most were giving him a wide berth. “Can I have one of those pamphlets?” said a pink-skinned Krylorian.

“Oh, yes,” said Korg brightly. “Only I don’t have very many of them, so could you give it back when you’re done?”
The girl made a face and walked away. Korg’s shoulders slumped a little.

“Hello,” said Thor.

“Hey, man,” said Korg, turning to face him. “My name is Korg.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Korg,” said Thor, reaching out to clasp forearms with him. “I’m Thor, son of Odin.”

“I don’t know an Odin,” said Korg, politely apologetic, “but would you be interested in learning about the ways your personal rights and dignity are being crushed in the Grandmaster’s fist?”

“You aren’t worried you’ll be arrested for talking about this right in the open?” said Thor, glancing around the street. There were at least two guards within view of Korg, but they weren’t facing his way.

Korg shrugged. “They haven’t stopped me so far, but that’s their first mistake.” He glanced at one of the guards and raised his voice for the second part. The guard didn’t turn around, and after a few hopeful seconds, he slumped again.

“How many of those pamphlets do you have?” said Thor.

“Oh, I think I have five or six le—” He turned to the small table next to him, which was empty. “No, wait, just this one now.” He tried to smooth out the one he’d been holding. “Funds are a little tight, you know?”

Thor held up the Nova access pad. “I could help with that if you like.”

Chapter End Notes

Ragnarok is pretty scant on the details about what went down with Hela in the past, and I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about how to fill in all the blanks and establish a rough timeline for all the events we know about. Odin already talked about some of it in the big family discussion chapters, and now here’s some more from Valkyrie's side of things. I don't know how long Hela was imprisoned before the big escape attempt happened, but it makes sense to me that she only could have done it with some help from Asgard. And it also makes sense to me that celebrations over new heirs to the throne would galvanize some action, even if things had been quiet for a while. If Hela's supporters tried to assassinate little Thor and Loki at the same time they tried to free Hela, then it would explain what Odin was doing before he made it to Niflheim too late to prevent the slaughter of the Valkyrior.

Ebony Maw, the Other, and the rest of Thanos's minions had a whole year to break Loki in canon. Master torturer or not, there isn't a lot Maw can do in one day, especially when he has other items on his agenda and this Loki isn’t an agonized existential wreck who just tried to kill himself. I don’t think I’ve ever enjoyed writing flirting more than this contentious banter Loki and Valkyrie are doing. Oh, and that thing Valkyrie does to relieve the pain in Loki's nerves? It's a real thing. It's the flipside of the jujitsu nerve strikes I based Maw's torture on.

It's also fun to write Clint and Nat actually getting to do spy stuff. Not a lot of
opportunities for that in canon's big Avengers operations.

Hi, Korg! :D I was worried it'd be hard to write his dialogue, but much like the Grandmaster, it mostly wrote itself by the time I got to it. Yay!
Topaz scowled as she limped through the streets surrounding the arena. The big lizard’s second battle would take place in an hour, and people were flooding to the center of the city for it. She checked her bracer for updates from her subordinates, but there had still been no sign of her three targets. After how easy it had been to capture the mage, this should have been over by now.

She tried to scan the faces of the crowd, but that task was soon made more difficult by folded pieces of paper raining down everywhere from passing drones. She picked one of them up with her uninjured hand. The thing was brightly colored, its brief message written in large lettering:

SAKAAR IS ABOUT TO CHANGE

Do whatever you have to do to be at the arena tomorrow.

Even if you normally stay home in protest of our barbaric farce of a culture, you don’t want to miss this one.

Beyond those sentences, there wasn’t anything else to it. Her scowl deepened. What was this nonsense? The Grandmaster hadn’t ordered these, and there wasn’t anything special going on the next day in the arena that she knew of, except that the big lizard and Eggsy Mop would finally be leaving after the third battle. She looked around and saw that nearly everyone in sight was reading a pamphlet. They seemed not so much confused and annoyed by them, but intrigued and excited.

Whatever this was about, it couldn’t be good. She barked orders at two of the nearest guards, then headed back to the palace to talk to the boss.

X

Maw’s second visit to the cell was much the same as the first. Loki found a perverse satisfaction in denying him the information he so desperately wanted, even as his entire body screamed in pain. With every searing slice from a crystal needle, he imagined a new form of hideous revenge he could inflict upon Maw. The different scenarios were well into the triple digits now.

It was a hollow comfort. As long as they were on this ship, he was powerless. He’d tried twice more in Maw’s absence to use his seidr. It would require only a tiny amount to conjure the transporter from his dimensional pocket, and then he and the Valkyrie could vanish a thousand lightyears away. But it was no good. The mere attempt had nearly made him black out. The Valkyrie’s attempts to punch through the wall where Maw’s door appeared had also failed. Their best hope was that Thor would manage to rescue them, but for all they knew, he and the mortals had been captured too.

“If you insist on remaining uncooperative,” said Maw, “perhaps I will bring Cull Obsidian in to crush your limbs.”

“Giving up already, are you?” Loki taunted. “And it only took two days. Mortal beings are so impatient.”
“It’s pretty pathetic,” snickered the Valkyrie.

“Your resistance is pointless,” said Maw through gritted teeth. He twisted one of his hands and the needles stabbing into Loki rotated excruciatingly. “Tomorrow we leave for Sanctuary, and if you do not answer to me, you will answer to Thanos.”

“Then there’s really nothing more to say here, is there?” said Loki.

“Perhaps not, but your pain is an end in itself.”

---

Thor made his way along the stands in the arena to where Barton’s and Romanoff’s indicators were blinking on his bracer. The place was filling up quickly as the battle approached, and nobody paid him much attention. He was taller and broader than the vast majority of the people he passed (if they weren’t from a larger species), but his familiarity with the place combined with the rough fabric draped over his armor and the paint on his face (lines of blue which he had deliberately drawn to imitate Loki’s Jotun markings) made him look like an innocuous local.

He almost didn’t recognize Barton and Romanoff. Barton was wearing the turquoise plate of the Grandmaster’s guards and Romanoff looked like one of the fluttery waifs decorating his parties. If Thor didn’t know them well, he never would have guessed they were Midgardians. He felt a swell of pride in his friends’ abilities, as well as gratitude for their willingness to help him. He was asking so much of them.

He took the empty seat on their right. A preliminary bout was already underway on the arena floor. Two teams of seven, mostly comprised of species he’d never seen before, were fighting. They all looked terrified. One actually tried to run back to the entrance to the pits, but he fell to the ground in spasms as someone activated his obedience disk. The crowd howled and jeered as he was trampled.

“What have you found out?” said Thor, keeping his eyes on the grim scene before him.

“The Grandmaster’s after us because he wants us—or you, at least—in the arena,” said Romanoff. “There must’ve been surveillance on the spot where we arrived. Topaz got lucky and found Loki right away, but the Grandmaster’s pretty pissed that Maw took the Valkyrie along with him.”

“Will he try to get her back?” said Thor.

“He doesn’t want to give Maw any leverage.”

“Then they’re only allies of convenience. Good.”

“I got the access codes,” said Barton. “There are four pairs of guards posted along our route. Everything’s pretty spread out, so if they call for backup, it’ll take a few minutes for more to show up.”

“What about Maw’s ship?”

“Thing’s huge, but it doesn’t look like it’s designed to deploy foot soldiers quickly. They’re marching them onto it two-by-two.”

“Is the distraction going to be big enough to draw them all out?” said Romanoff.

“By morning, everyone in the city will know to come to the arena tomorrow night,” said Thor. “The guards alone won’t be enough to quell any unrest breaking out in that kind of crowd. They’ll have to
“Call in the army.”

“Is there any way this doesn’t turn into a bloodbath?” said Barton.

“Likely not,” said Thor. “But a smaller one than if the army is able to be used for its intended purpose.”

“Maw also mentioned uncooperative prisoners,” said Barton. “He said they might have to use the Mind Stone to change that.”

Thor barely succeeded at tamping down his rage at the thought. It wouldn’t do to start another storm right now. “Then Thanos does already have it.” That confirmed some of what he had suspected about Loki’s time in the Titan’s clutches. He had a window one day wide to make sure it didn’t happen again.

“Are we sure the army will come?” said Romanoff. “What’s to stop Maw from cutting and running?”

“Thanos is willing to treat fairly with the Grandmaster rather than destroy him and take what he wants by force,” said Thor. “That could only be because he knows he can’t destroy him—or that it would cost him too much to do it.”

“So Maw can’t leave early without making a dangerous enemy for his boss,” said Barton.

“He’s also arrogant and fanatically devoted,” said Thor, his lip curling. “He won’t run after the insult I’m going to give him.”

Down in the arena, only one wounded alien was left standing. He put on a half-hearted show of triumph. The crowd roared, and he hobbled back to the pit.

The Grandmaster’s voice blared out over the stands. “Let’s hear it for our brave victor!” Cheers and applause surged for another minute or so before he spoke again. “And now it’s time for tonight’s main event. You saw what he can do last night. How long are his new challengers going to last? Give it up for our guest, Scales himself, Cull Obsidian!”

By his forced tone, it didn’t sound like the Grandmaster really believed this was going to be a spectacle worthy of being a main event, but the crowd cheered loudly anyway.

Cull Obsidian came lumbering into view. He looked exactly as Thor remembered from the Statesman. Huge, strong, mean, and stupid. He wore the same studded leather armor and carried the same massive chain-hammer. Many of the Aesir who died on the ship had fallen to that weapon—most of them women and children.

“In the opposite corner tonight, we have the Broodling Brothers!” Five creatures that looked more like enormous wasps than anything emerged onto the arena floor. Only two of them had wings, but all of their movements were exactly in sync with each other. Cull bared his teeth and ran a hand along his weapon’s blade. “They might not be pretty, but their telepathic link allows them to work together more effectively than any other team we see in the arena. What do you think—does Scales have enough raw strength to exterminate the bug squad?”

As it turned out, he did. The Broodlings’ psychic link didn’t just enable them to coordinate their attacks; it clearly also had the significant disadvantage of sharing the pain of their wounds. On their first charge, Cull dodged two and sliced cleanly through the wings of one of the third. They all shrieked in unison and the other winged Broodling dropped out of the air. Before any of them could recover, Cull used his weapon to crush the skull of the nearest one. It only took him a few more
seconds to do the same to the other four.

The crowd’s reaction to the rapid victory was mixed. Most were startled that it was over so quickly, and a few people were already getting up to leave. The Grandmaster’s voice sounded out again, now clearly frustrated. “Well, it looks like Scales was a lot more than the Broodling Brothers could handle. But don’t head for the exits just yet. We’re going to give him a little more to do.”

The door through which the Broodlings had entered the arena opened again, and a group of guards led out a couple dozen people whose hands were bound with shackles. “Each of the people in chains has been sentenced to death for grave crimes against me and against Sakaar. Normally my guards would take care of them, but as an extra treat for all of you, we’re going to have a little public execution elimination round. The last one standing might just earn a pardon.”

This tactic was enough to recapture the interest of most of the crowd. Beside Thor, Romanoff looked like she might be sick.

“Are you still sure about this plan?” said Barton, eyes on the remains of the Broodling Brothers.

“I’m sure,” said Thor, watching Cull run down the first pair of prisoners. “You have everything you need to do your part?”

Though they both clearly had misgivings, they nodded.

X

Loki emerged from a haze of pain to find the Valkyrie working on his pressure points again. Maw and his needles were gone, and her callused fingers felt marvelous. “Why are you helping me?” he mumbled.

She shrugged. “Nothing else to do in here.”

“Should hate me.”

“What makes you think I don’t? I hate everyone.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

She raised her eyebrows at him. He made an effort and caught one of her hands in his. She went very still but didn’t pull away.

“If hatred was all there was inside you, why would you do such a kindness for the fool who got you into this situation?” She wouldn’t meet his eyes. He continued. “I think the only person you hate is yourself, and you hold yourself away from everyone else because you don’t think you deserve anything good.”

“Norns, I’m too sober for this.”

“Am I wrong?”

She closed her eyes. “If you’re so sure I’m more than just a bitter asshole, then why do you think I should hate you?”

“You don’t know what I am.”

“A smartass prince who can’t help mouthing off even when he’s being tortured?”
He laughed, then instantly regretted it when it agitated about thirty separate wounds. He should tell her. Letting her touch him to ease his pain when she thought he was Aesir was a serious betrayal. How many Jotnar had she slain in the war? How glad had she been to do it? What would she think of someone like Freyr, who married a Jotun and had a halfbreed child with her? There couldn’t be many Aesir who wouldn’t think it an abomination.

“Brunnhilde,” she said.

“What?” said Loki, pulling himself out of his grim thoughts.

“You asked my name. When I was on Asgard, I was Brunnhilde Sigursdottir.”

“Brunnhilde,” he repeated, smiling. “I suppose I don’t need to tell you mine.”

She smirked. “That won’t be necessary, Prince Loki.”

He cringed. Then he’d been right; she’d seen him as a baby. How mortifying.

“What did you end up being the god of?” she asked.

“I thought that would be obvious by now,” he said. If he were stronger, he would’ve struck a dramatic pose with his hands spread wide, but he settled for a dramatic pause instead. “Be awed, for you are in the presence of none other than the God of Mischief.”

She laughed. It sounded much lighter than it had before, though still not entirely without wryness. “It suits you.”

X

Thor marched confidently from the arena to the palace. Except for the face paint, he had dispensed with his disguise. Mjolnir swung openly at his hip, and he smiled broadly at anyone who looked at him. By the time he reached the large doors, he had attracted at least five pairs of guards and a gaggle of curious civilians. His boldness seemed to confuse the guards, because they trailed awkwardly in his wake rather than trying to stop him.

“Hello,” he said to the guards at the door. “I come seeking an audience with the Grandmaster of Sakaar. I hear he’s been looking for me.”

They stared at him in bewildered silence. One of them eventually snapped out of it and tapped his bracer. “Uh, boss, that big blond guy just showed up. He wants to talk to you. Should we throw him in the holding cells or just shoot him?”

“No, no, this is the most exciting thing to happen all day!” said the Grandmaster’s voice. “Bring him to the throne room.”

He and the rest of the guards did, though they kept their weapons loosely pointed at him the entire way. The throne room was just how Thor remembered it, except that he wasn’t strapped to a chair. The Grandmaster came into view, sitting on his throne in a relaxed posture, sipping at a drink. Topaz stood behind him, and she was glaring over his shoulder at Thor, clenching her jaw so hard that her teeth were in danger of shattering.

“Well my face is red,” said the Grandmaster. “I’ve had my guards running around trying to arrest you, but you were just trying to come to me!” He looked Thor up and down like a collector at an auction. “I love it.” He waved his hand in a circular motion. “The hair, the cape, the hammer. Whole thing. So tell me a little about yourself. What brings you to our neck of the universe?”
“I am Thor, Son of Odin, God of Thunder, and Crown Prince of Asgard. My home is a realm of warriors, and over the centuries, my brother and I have traveled across galaxies in search of good battles. There seemed no better place to test our mettle next than in your arena, but we were accosted by a band of savages before we could present ourselves to you, and then my brother was taken.”

“Wow,” said the Grandmaster. “I’m not used to my fighters being volunteers. This is interesting territory. How attached are you to this brother? Would you still want to battle if someone happened to have recently traded him away?”

“If he is a prisoner, then Asgard will have to go to war with his captors,” said Thor, trying his best to imitate Loki’s negotiating style instead of getting angry. “There will be no time for mock battles in an arena.”

“Hmm,” said the Grandmaster. “To tell you the truth, I feel like I didn’t get a very good deal when I traded your brother for three nights of Scales in my arena. He’s all business in there, and he’s putting the spectators to sleep. And he and Wrinkles were no help at all when it came to tracking you down, and they took my favorite scrapper in a terrible mix-up.” Topaz snorted. The Grandmaster pointedly ignored her.

“Perhaps you dealt with the wrong people,” Thor suggested.

“And you’re the right people?” The Grandmaster stroked his chin. “I like your moxie, Lord of Thunder. How about this? I need a final challenger to go up against Scales. He’ll tear apart any pit fighter I throw at him, and there’s only so much value in watching him execute prisoners. But you might last a little longer.”

“What’s your proposal?” said Thor.

“If he beats you, then he and Wrinkles are square with me. If you somehow manage to win and give us all a good enough show, you get your brother back as the prize.”

“You can guarantee that even though you don’t have him?” said Thor.

“No ship leaves Sakaar unless I let it,” said the Grandmaster.

“Very well,” said Thor. “Agreed.” He stuck out his hand, and the Grandmaster shook it. “I’ll give you a fight Sakaar will never forget.”

A smile spread over the Grandmaster’s face. “Yeah?” He laughed and clapped his hands, glancing over at Topaz. “That’s what I like to hear! I should get volunteer fighters more often. This is gonna be good.”

“It’s a trick,” said Topaz. Her face had gone a deep reddish-purple, which made sense; the guy who’d set her ship on fire yesterday was now buddying up with her boss right in front of her. “This has something to do with all those papers that rained down earlier.”

Thor smiled blandly when the Grandmaster turned a questioning look on him. “I thought I’d do a little advertising. If I’m battling for sport, I want the biggest crowd possible.”

Chapter End Notes

Forgot to mention in last chapter’s notes that when Valkyrie was reminiscing about
battling the Kree, that was a reference to Thor's line in Age of Ultron about the ale "aged for a thousand years in barrels built from the wreckage of Brunnhilde's fleet." I see no reason for this not to be the same Brunnhilde. :)

The Broodlings are a type of alien from Marvel comics. I just googled until I found a species that would make good cannon fodder for Cull Obsidian. Giant sentient wasps that operate as a hive mind seemed like the perfect fit.

I don't think Brunnhilde ever gets a last name in the comics, so I decided to make her the daughter of Sigurd. I don't think the timeline works for him to be *the* Sigurd, legendary dragon-slaying hero of Bor's reign, but I imagine the name would be pretty popular thanks to that guy.

Things are really heating up now! I'm so excited for what's next, you guys!
Kashmir

Chapter Notes

I wanted to get this chapter done weeks ago, but things have been kinda hectic. A couple of big, tedious, unexpected projects popped up at work. Those finally got back down to a manageable level this week. Also, a month and a half ago, my brother sold me his Switch, and I've spent over 260 hours (most of which should have been for sleeping) playing Breath of the Wild. I freaking love that game, but several days ago, I finished beating it to my 100% completionist satisfaction. So now I once again have time to write. I'm sort of glad I was delayed, though, because the downtime actually gave me a couple of awesome ideas for how to execute one of the current plot threads.

The title is in reference to the Led Zeppelin song, which I highly recommend using as the soundtrack to this chapter. It's perfect.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Thor waited for the arena doors to open. His hair was long, his armor was all of Asgardian make and untainted by paint, Mjolnir hung whole at his hip, no obedience disk itched into his neck, and he was here as the Grandmaster's “guest” rather than his captive, but somehow it all felt much the same as when he had waited to fight the mystery champion.

He was perfectly confident that he would defeat Cull Obsidian. He was going to enjoy that part. It was the other part of the plan that had him a little nervous, because it relied on his ability to successfully do something he had never attempted before. Oh, he had tested it with Barton, Romanoff, and Korg to be sure that it was even possible, and it had worked with them, but there was a very wide gulf between that and addressing a massive crowd of strangers comprised of innumerable species.

Loki could have done it effortlessly. He always found the best words to say, and with his illusions and projections, no one would realize what he was up to until it was too late. Pity the lines of blue paint didn’t actually make Thor more like his brother.

If he failed, then no matter how his battle with Cull went, things were about to get incredibly difficult for him and his friends, not to mention everything they had set out to accomplish on Sakaar.

X

Natasha strode into the palace at a brisk pace. She’d memorized the route so that she could walk it like someone who’d done so a thousand times. By lucky coincidence, she was about the same size as the Valkyrie, so she’d borrowed some of her clothes (surprisingly, the leather and metal armor was about as comfortable as her SHIELD tactical gear, if less form-fitting, and it had a staggering number of convenient places to stash a small weapon) and done her hair, makeup, and face paint to match. No one at the party the day before would connect the giggling debutante to the surly scrapper she had become, and neither persona resembled the holograms of the woman the Grandmaster wanted captured.

Clint stumbled behind her, hands stuck out in front of him in high-tech magnetic cuffs synced to her bracer, a gag over his mouth, and a metal disk on his neck. His reconnaissance gadgets were all in a
satchel over Natasha’s shoulder, along with their newest acquisition from Urizen Ul’var’s shop, none of which would seem strange for a scrapper to have on her. Clint’s clothing consisted of a white shirt, open black vest, sturdy navy blue trousers, boots, and a belt with an empty holster. Natasha was pointedly not commenting on his choice of wardrobe. For now. But she’d worked out how to record video on her bracer and would absolutely be sharing it with Laura when they got back to Earth.

Apparently scrappers bringing in new slaves were extremely commonplace, because the guards barely looked up from their bracers (which seemed to be displaying what was going on in the arena) as Natasha led Clint past them. If that display was live, then Thor’s fight hadn’t started yet. That was good. They didn’t have a very wide window to operate in.

X

Ebony Maw took his seat in the Grandmaster’s box. He had no more interest in this than Cull Obsidian’s first two arena battles, but he wanted to be present so that they could leave this planet the instant the fight concluded and their obligations were ended. He watched the Grandmaster with narrowed eyes. The man seemed irritatingly gleeful about something. It was difficult to be sure because he was always irritating, but he kept shooting glances at Maw as though looking forward to his reaction.

The stadium, Maw noticed, was packed to the brim with aliens of every description. The sight made his lip curl. Such a glut of life. It infested even a remote, undesirable world like Sakaar with its disease. This planet’s very existence was proof that his master’s solution was sorely needed. Maw would soon bring him one step closer to that solution. He shivered in anticipation. It didn’t matter how stubborn the mage insisted on being now.

The Grandmaster stood up and waved at one of the attendants, who pressed a few things on his bracer. The arena was suddenly illuminated by a hologram that stood twice as tall as the highest row of seats. “Wow! Look at this crowd. I should probably have them stop letting more people in, but I’m kinda curious how much weight these stands can take. Now, who’s excited about tonight? Let’s get a round of applause for the warm-up act.”

He led the clapping as a few battered fighters hobbled out of the arena while the corpses were dragged out by soldiers. “They sure tried their best.” At this point, he became considerably more animated. “Next up, for our main event, we have Scales back for his last ever battle in this arena.” More applause. He let it go on only a few seconds before cutting it off with his next words. “But what’s this? A surprise volunteer in the opposite corner?”

A rumble of interest ran through the audience. Ebony Maw frowned and peered out at the arena. Cull was waiting near the center for his opponent to emerge, his weapon braced against his shoulder. The only one who had ever defeated Cull in battle was Thanos himself. The idea of anyone lesser challenging him voluntarily was ludicrous, particularly if they’d already seen him fight.

“Ladies, gentlemen, reptiloids, fishoids, walking treeoids, and superintelligent shades of the color blue, I give you...the Lord of Thunder.”

And into the far end of the arena walked none other than the blond warrior who had arrived on Sakaar alongside the troublesome mage. The crowd cheered. Ebony Maw stared, then rounded on the Grandmaster, who ignored him. “He tells me that not only is he royalty, but a warrior with centuries of battle experience,” he continued, “and as you all know, he’s gonna need it. Before we start, he’s requested a chance to introduce himself. So, uh, Lord of Thunder, these are probably your last words; you’d better make ‘em count.”
The hologram vanished, and the warrior walked forward. Cull shifted his weight, impatient over the delay, but he had enough restraint to follow the procedure the Grandmaster had laid out.

“People of Sakaar!” the warrior boomed. The arena’s acoustics were such that everyone in the stands would be able to hear him easily. “I am Thor, the God of Thunder, Crown Prince of Asgard, Son of Odin—”

“What?” Maw hissed. He was one of the few in Thanos’s inner circle who knew of the war against Asgard. Thanos, in his wisdom and humility, readily admitted that he had used the wrong strategy against Odin. He had underestimated the power of filial loyalty, a weapon he had taken care to add to his own arsenal many times over in the two millennia or so since.

—and I am here to reclaim my brother from this creature and his comrade.”

“WHAT?!”

“Oh,” said the Grandmaster, as though he had only just realized Maw was there. “I might’ve forgotten to fill you in on this part. Yeah, you came up short on your end of our bargain, so if he wins, I’ll need you to return Scrapper 142 and the pretty mage.”

The edges of Maw’s vision began to pulse with rage. He prided himself on being calm and collected in even the most taxing circumstances, but he was discovering that even his patience had its limits. After spending all his waking time over the last two and a half days split between playing at cordiality with this absurd man and failing to wrest any useful information out of the mage, he was a hair’s breadth from snapping.

“He will not win,” Maw ground out.

“Then you agree to the new terms,” said the Grandmaster, beaming. “Wonderful.”

The pulsing intensified. It would be so very easy to send every sharp object in this room flying at and through the Grandmaster. But he must control himself. Cull would fell Thor as easily as he had felled the others, and then they could leave this insufferable planet with their diplomatic ties intact. Yes, perhaps this was a positive development. In addition to the army, he could return with the head of one child of Odin and another captured and in possession of knowledge of the Space Stone. It would be their most triumphant return yet.

Maw had been so distracted by the warrior’s identity and the Grandmaster’s double-dealing that he only now noticed the behavior of the audience. Thor had continued speaking, and one in seven or eight people—with a much heavier concentration among the guards and people in finer clothing—was wincing at every syllable and grumbling in confusion, while the rest sat in wide-eyed silence. Maw focused on Thor with a frown. The sounds he was making were utterly incomprehensible, and his translator gave an unpleasant jolt under his skull. It was just like when he had tried to listen to his prisoners’ conversation with each other.

Beside him, the Grandmaster’s smile had fallen a little. He didn’t appear to be in any pain from a translator malfunction, but his eyes roved around the crowd too. The two of them only had a few seconds to be puzzled and troubled by this before Thor faced the box again. “I thank you for your accommodation, Grandmaster.”

“Oh, you came up short on your end of our bargain, so if he wins, I’ll need you to return Scrapper 142 and the pretty mage.”

“No, I—”

The pulsing intensified. It would be so very easy to send every sharp object in this room flying at and through the Grandmaster. But he must control himself. Cull would fell Thor as easily as he had felled the others, and then they could leave this insufferable planet with their diplomatic ties intact. Yes, perhaps this was a positive development. In addition to the army, he could return with the head of one child of Odin and another captured and in possession of knowledge of the Space Stone. It would be their most triumphant return yet.

Maw had been so distracted by the warrior’s identity and the Grandmaster’s double-dealing that he only now noticed the behavior of the audience. Thor had continued speaking, and one in seven or eight people—with a much heavier concentration among the guards and people in finer clothing—was wincing at every syllable and grumbling in confusion, while the rest sat in wide-eyed silence. Maw focused on Thor with a frown. The sounds he was making were utterly incomprehensible, and his translator gave an unpleasant jolt under his skull. It was just like when he had tried to listen to his prisoners’ conversation with each other.

Beside him, the Grandmaster’s smile had fallen a little. He didn’t appear to be in any pain from a translator malfunction, but his eyes roved around the crowd too. The two of them only had a few seconds to be puzzled and troubled by this before Thor faced the box again. “I thank you for your accommodation, Grandmaster.”

“No, I—”

The crowd was slow to react, but the cheer that built up as Thor and Cull faced each other was easily
the loudest one yet. A foreign sensation settled over Maw’s mind. It took him a moment to realize what it was: uncertainty.

Natasha and Clint worked their way to the heart of the palace’s lower floor. After several long corridors and a few guard posts, their destination finally lay in sight ahead of them. Another pair of guards stood in front of an open doorway, behind which they could see glimpses of an elaborate network of electronics.

They made it half a step past the guards before two spears swung down to block them from entering the mainframe chamber. “Where do you think you’re going?” said the one on the left.

Natasha rolled her eyes and pulled out an obedience disk remote she’d taken from the Valkyrie’s apartment. “My remote stopped working.” She clicked it, pointing at the disk on Clint’s neck. He scowled through his gag, but nothing else happened. “They sent me here for the repairs.”

The guards withdrew their spears. “Olivox, company!” said the one on the right. Natasha gave her bracer a jerk, snapping the cuffs forward and nearly making Clint faceplant before following her inside. The guards snickered.

A very lizard-looking alien, presumably Olivox, came into view around one of the glowing towers she assumed was a server. It was a little taller than Clint and had yellow, slit-pupilled eyes that flicked back and forth between them. “Mammals,” it said with disdain, a forked tongue flashing. Natasha had no idea what its native language sounded like, but the translator added an extra hiss to the “s.” “Try not to get hair or skin on anything. There’s a lot of delicate circuitry in here.”

Thor still wasn’t sure how effective his speech had been. It was obvious, at least, that none of the Grandmaster’s henchmen had understood a word, because they hadn’t made a move to shut him up, capture, or kill him. The rest of the crowd had been quiet, but that could be for all sorts of reasons. He put the matter aside, his eyes on Cull Obsidian. If they hadn’t made up their minds already, the fight would have to persuade them.

Cull was practically foaming at the mouth with anticipation and bloodlust by the time the Grandmaster finally signaled for the fight to begin. He surged forward, weapon raised. He brought it crashing down towards Thor, but Thor was ready for it. He threw Mjolnir straight up at the last moment, propelling himself clear and landing behind Cull. The crowd, which had been halfway into a groan, expecting another quick victory for Cull, sputtered out a gasp of shock. Before Cull could adjust to his opponent’s unexpected flight, Thor threw the hammer. It was deliberately only a glancing blow, and it chipped one of the horn ridges on top of Cull’s head before flying back to Thor’s hand.

Cull felt the damage with his free hand and rounded on Thor with a furious snarl.

Thor gave him a cheeky grin. “Sorry about that,” he said. “I could even things up if you like.” This got a ripple of surprised laughter from the crowd.

Cull charged him again. This time his initial attack was a feint. He started in the same way he had the first time, but then curved his weapon around to swing upward, the head coming loose from the handle on a long chain. Thor should probably feel insulted that Cull thought he was stupid enough to use the exact same dodge as the first time. He leapt and rolled to the side instead and hurled Mjolnir again. It hit the opposite horn, chipping off a slightly bigger piece.
“Whoops!” said Thor. “I think I just made it worse. Do you want me to fix it, or were you planning to actually start the fight?”

The laughter was getting louder, and the Grandmaster had joined in. “I’ll crush you like the insects they sent yesterday, little man,” Cull growled.

“He speaks!” Thor crowed. “I was starting to think you nothing but Thanos’s dumb beast. It was a shame; banter is never as fun when it’s one-sided.”

Thor wasn’t normally one for this much banter himself—particularly in a battle as personal as this. True, Cull’s victims on the Statesman were all alive and well in this timeline, but that didn’t change what Thor had watched him do to them, and it certainly didn’t change that he was one of Loki’s captors now. But the Grandmaster wanted a show, and Barton and Romanoff needed as much time as he could give them.

X

Natasha tossed Olivox the obedience remote. “Piece of shit remote couldn’t handle my last job. Had to drag the merchandise all the way here without it.” She jerked her thumb at Clint. “If that happens again, we’re gonna have a problem.”

The lizard creature looked deeply offended but not surprised. It raised the remote to its eyes and frowned, then walked with a sinuous, bobbing gait over to a flat surface and pulled out a handful of tools. In five seconds, it had the remote open, revealing its blackened, electricity-scarred inner workings. It gave her a disgusted look. “What did you do, throw it into your ship’s reactor?”

No, just let a God of Thunder play with it for a few seconds. “Can you fix it?” she said.

“There’s nothing left to fix. It’s completely fried.”

“So get me a new one.”

Olivox glared some more, its pupils even narrower than before. “You scrappers are all a bunch of assholes, you know that?” It bustled off out of sight. Natasha glanced back at the guards. They were facing the corridor. She pulled Ul’var’s merchandise out of her satchel and stuck it to the underside of the workbench, then returned to her previous position in time for the lizard to reappear, holding a shiny new obedience remote.

“Ruin another one and I’m reporting you to Topaz.”

“Thanks,” said Natasha, slipping the new remote into its slot in her armor. She turned to go, giving Clint’s cuffs another tug.

“What, you’re not even going to test it?” said Olivox.

Natasha gave him a scornful look. “Here? We’re five minutes from the pens. Why incapacitate him now when he can just walk himself there? I’ll test it once he’s inside.”

Olivox looked annoyed, but didn’t protest, and the two of them walked back out between the guards, down the corridor, and around the corner.

X

“I love a game of cat and mouse as much as the next all-powerful planetary overlord, but I think it’s time for some action,” said the Grandmaster. The crowd roared its agreement. Thor’s battle with Cull
so far had mostly consisted of dodging Cull’s attacks and provoking him as much as possible with irritating taps from Mjolnir. The crowd had enjoyed watching Cull’s humiliating inability to keep up with him despite his size advantage and his versatile weapon, and the strategy had been highly instructive as to Cull’s fighting style, but Thor had known it would only work for so long, and it was clearly time to change things up.

Cull, now nearly out of his mind with rage, came barrelling at him again. This time, Thor met him head on. A spray of sparks flew at the clash of steel against uru, and Cull’s momentum drove Thor back several yards. Cull twisted something on the handle of the enormous chain-hammer, and a claw attachment shot out and seized Thor by the right leg. With a triumphant roar, Cull spun and swung with all his might, sending Thor tumbling through the air. He smashed into the far wall of the arena hard enough to leave a dent in it. The crowd made a sound of disappointment that quickly turned to relief when Thor got back to his feet. The Hulk could throw harder than that.

Cull pressed his advantage, running for Thor at a full sprint. Halfway to him, he twisted his weapon’s handle again, switching it back into its long, bladed form. He threw it like a spear. Thor moved to the side just before it slammed into the Thor-shaped dent. Pain lanced through him. He took a second to look down. The blade had sheared right through the dwarf-forged scales on his arm and sliced a full two inches through skin and muscle. That one second was enough for Cull to close the remaining distance, and he came down on top of Thor with both fists swinging.

Barton and Romanoff needed to hurry.
That nasty cut is as close as I am willing to come to what happens to Thor's arm in the comics. (Partly because it's horrifying, but also because it seems redundant to have TWO left arm amputees running around.)

Ended up doing Maw's perspective again. Still creepy. I do not like getting in his head.

Originally, Clint and Nat's strategy was so much more boring and a poor use of their skillsets. A few days ago, I remembered that Tessa and Scarlett are about the same height (Tessa is only an inch taller), and that gave me the idea to have Nat pose as a scrapper while Clint poses as a freshly caught slave so they can get to where they're going. Any guesses who Clint's trying to look like? :D

The only problem I had with the idea of Nat dressing up in Brunnhilde's spare armor is that I had a hard time picturing them as anything but awkward outfit twins. So I dug up a picture of some of the unused concept art for Brunnhilde's costume and drew Nat in it. After that, I had to draw her in her Grandmaster party guest disguise too, for comparison. I hope you like them! The party dress is based on an image I found after googling "weird fashion show dresses." It was by far the least weird one.
Natasha forced Clint around the corner, down two more corridors, and into an elevator that took
them to the sub-levels. Even without the map, it would’ve been easy to tell they were near the slave
pens. The closer they got, the stronger the smells of sweat and blood (and probably several different
alien versions of the same) became, all layered on top of the ever-present garbage smell.

Only when they were almost to the place where the fighters were kept did she drop the act. She
tapped the screen of her bracer and Clint’s cuffs popped open. With a wince, he scratched around the
disk on his neck and tugged his gag free. “You had way too much fun doing that,” he complained,
massaging his jaw.

“I’m not the one using a Star Wars character as my cover identity,” said Natasha, passing him his
blaster and gadgets from her satchel.

“You can’t expect me to pass up an opportunity like this,” he said defensively, holsters the blaster
and strapping on his bracer. “Cooper would never forgive me.”

That was probably true. Clint’s boy had gotten a toy lightsaber for his seventh birthday two months
ago and still never went anywhere without it.

“Okay, time to see if Urizen is as good at sabotage equipment as he is at translators,” said Natasha.
She pulled up the activation screen and shot Clint a slightly nervous look.

“He sounded pretty confident that it would do the job.”

“Yeah, but it seems like the kind of thing that he should get in a lot of trouble for selling if it actually
does what it’s supposed to.”

“That’s why we didn’t tell him what we’re using it for, and probably why he didn’t ask.”

Natasha smirked and nodded. She took a deep breath, then punched the activation button.

There was a rumble from overhead and the floor shook.

X

As Cull’s fists pummelled him into the ground, Thor reflected that it had been, perhaps, unwise to
goad him into such a rage. There were other ways to make a fight last.

He used his position on the ground to kick out at the nearer of Cull’s legs, which buckled out from
under him. Ears ringing, body aching, and right arm covered in blood, Thor jumped somewhat
ungracefully back to his feet and stuck his hand out for Mjolnir. Cull, too, reached for his weapon,
which was still embedded in the arena wall. At the last moment, Thor jerked his hand out of the way
so that Mjolnir caught Cull full in the stomach. He folded around it, the breath whooshing out of him
and his weapon falling out of his fingers.

Thor summoned the hammer again and closed in, but Cull made a great swipe at the ground, flinging
dust and dirt into Thor’s eyes. Thor recoiled and Cull was able to seize his weapon. They fought in
close quarters for a few moments, kicking up even more dust. Thor could scarcely hear the crowd
over the blood pounding in his ears. He jumped to avoid the low sweep of Cull’s hammer, bringing him high enough to clock Cull across the jaw. Cull went sprawling into the dirt, and Thor decided it was time to take ranged attacks out of his opponent’s arsenal.

He spun Mjolnir and hurled himself skyward. As he had hoped, Cull gave his weapon’s handle a twist and unleashed the chain grapple feature again. Thor waited until the last moment, then swung his hammer and smacked the claw end out of his path. Before Cull could retract it, Thor unsheathed the Dragonfang strapped to his back and brought it down in a great arc. It cut through the chain as if it was made of butter, and Thor let out a laugh on the way back to the ground, the severed claw attachment thudding down behind him. He hoped the Valkyrie would forgive him for borrowing her sword. He’d always wanted to try one in a battle.

The Grandmaster was on the edge of his seat. This was some of the best entertainment he’d had in his arena since its debut. It was good that the Lord of Thunder seemed to be enjoying himself, because this would not be his last battle. Things were really looking up. He had his fat payout from the big purple guy, a new champion, and soon he would have Scrapper 142 back, along with an intriguing new plaything. After all, he’d only promised to retrieve the Lord of Thunder’s brother from Wrinkles for him, not to let either of them go. Letting them stay together in his service was better than anyone else got. Who could ask for more?

“Hey, boss,” came Topaz’s voice from the console beside him.

“Not now!” said the Grandmaster impatiently, watching the Lord of Thunder walk off yet another full strength punch from Scales and retaliate with that magic hammer.

“There’s been an explosion in the control room. We’ve lost our surveillance and I’m getting reports from guards all over the city that the obedience disks have failed.”

“What?” said the Grandmaster, very unhappy to have to pay attention to what she was saying. “Well do something about it! Get the prisoners with jobs rounded up until we can fix it!”

“Right away.”

He was going to have to have words with her about her testy attitude lately. But later. After the fight.

“Shit, I thought that thing was an EMP!” said Clint. He had to shout to be heard over the alarms blaring through the halls, but as apprehensive as he was about how the Grandmaster’s legion of guards were going to react to this, they did at least know it had worked. Two seconds after the explosion, the obedience disk had detached from his neck and clinked to the floor. He hadn’t bothered to pick it up. That thing was freaking creepy.

“All Urizen said was that it would take out any tech in a twenty-foot radius,” Nat yelled back. “He didn’t say how.”

They held their blasters at the ready and ran for the entrance to the pens. The guards at the doors were too busy shouting for the slaves inside to pipe down to see them coming.

The small portion of the screen on Thor’s bracer that was still intact flared green. A grin spread over his face. He was probably going to need to spend some time in Eir’s healing room when they made it
back to Asgard, but Barton and Romanoff had completed Phase 1, which meant this battle was about to end.

Cull was charging for him again. He closed his eyes.

X

Gladsheim, Three Mornings Ago

“I think we should act on this as quickly as possible, Father,” said Thor. “These lieutenants will not long be separated from their master, and we cannot allow Thanos to gain the strength of another army.”

“Agreed,” said Odin.

“I spent time on Sakaar in the other timeline,” Thor argued. “We will have the advan—” He broke off, blinking. Odin’s words registering belatedly. Loki raised his eyebrows at Thor and smirked from across the glimmering projection of Yggdrasil. “Wait, you agree?”

“Of course. This intelligence will not hold its value for long. We should not let the opportunity go to waste.” Odin eyed Thor, the corner of his mouth twitching. “Did you think I would object?”

“I—well,” Thor spluttered, “it is only that Asgard hasn’t moved against Thanos since you expelled him from Yggdrasil’s borders.”

“Yes, and for all this time, it seemed an effective strategy. Three of the six prizes he seeks are inside those borders and beyond his reach. In light of your experiences, I regret not taking a more offensive position against him sooner.” He raised his hands to both princes’ shoulders and gripped tightly, and his voice became low and dangerous. “I will not allow him another opportunity to take one of my children from me.”

“Another?” said Loki sharply.

Odin’s jaw clenched. “Hela,” he said. “He tried to win her to his side. What better partner for his foul schemes than the Goddess of Death?”

“Tried?” said Thor, more surprised than ever. “Then she refused him?”

“Hela was and is every inch the ruthless conquerer I was in my youth,” said Odin, walking around to the other side of the glowing console, hands clasped behind his back. “While she cared little for the suffering of other peoples when it was to Asgard’s benefit, this realm has never had as fierce a defender as its Crown Princess before the Aesir-Vanir war. Where Thanos erred was in expecting her to help him enact his plan against Asgard itself.”

“Hela killed well over half of Asgard’s people by her own hand!” said Thor, almost shouting. “Why should she care if Thanos wants to do the same?” The very idea of his genocidal sister actually living up to her responsibilities as royalty in the past rankled. Why then and not now?

“Asgard loved and respected her then,” said Loki, eyes on their father, watching his reactions. “When she returned, it was to a people who had forgotten her and stood between her and her goals. She would have considered it treason.”

“Yes,” said Odin. For a moment, he looked incredibly ancient and full of regret. He had shown his sorrow over Hela before, but this was the first time Thor recognized in him a father who missed his little girl. “Thanos stood no chance against Asgard with Hela leading our armies at my side.”
That calculating look was back on Loki’s face. Thor made an effort to control his anger before it could start affecting the weather. His father and brother had not witnessed the slaughter wrought by Hela, as he had. They had not lived for weeks on a ship filled with the grieving survivors of her wrath. What did it matter if Hela had fought Thanos in the past when she had practically handed Asgard over to him two thousand years later? Why could Father still not admit that the only way to protect their people was to destroy her, and why did Loki keep acting as though he wanted to find a different solution?

Thor breathed slowly through his nose. Losing his temper now would accomplish nothing, and he still had a request to make of Father that he would surely deny if he failed to prove that he was capable of mastering himself.

“That as with the Crown Princess before,” said Loki, “if we begin with strong, swift action led by the Crown Prince, half the work of persuading the people that this is a worthy war will already be done.”

“True,” said Odin. “It may also smooth our path to an alliance with Jotunheim.”

“Common enemies are quite useful that way,” said Loki.

With that, the discussion returned to the topic of Thanos’s lieutenants, and Thor repeated the information he had given them before. Based on Heimdall’s descriptions, they would be dealing with Ebony Maw and Cull Obsidian if they went to Sakaar. Away from Thanos’s side, they shouldn’t be too difficult to defeat, but Thor would be a fool to go after them as he was now.

They concluded their business with the intent to discover how quickly they could reach Sakaar and whether it would require Odin to draw upon his stores of dark energy. Remembering what a toll that took on Odin to transport only Thor as short a distance as from Asgard to Midgard, Thor would see if the transporters Jane, Erik, and Banner were building could serve instead.

At a significant look from him, Loki departed the council chambers, leaving him alone with Odin.

“The evening we spoke to Loki about his heritage, he asked me to remove the enchantment I placed on him as a baby to prevent him returning to his native form under his own power. Am I right in thinking you wish to make a similar request of me now?”

Thor swallowed. “Yes, Father. I hope you will believe that I do not seek greater power for my own glory.”

“You lifted the hammer, did you not?” said Odin with a bit of a smile. “What reason have I to doubt?”

Thor’s throat tightened. Mjolnir or not, he wasn’t sure he deserved such praise.

Odin laid a wizened but still strong hand over Thor’s heart, and tendrils of golden seidr began to swirl around his fingers. “You carry a heavy burden, my son. I fear I am only adding to it now, but you give me cause to hope that for all the sins of my line, Asgard’s doom is not assured.”

Thor’s eyes flew open. His vision flashed blue-white and lightning surged up unrestrained from within him. He drew back his fist and slammed it forward with all his strength. Cull had built up too much momentum to change course, but the blaze of light forced him to turn his head to shield his eyes. His blade missed Thor by a full two feet, and Thor’s fist landed directly in the center of his chest. There was a clap of thunder and Cull tumbled backwards head over heels, landing in a
twitching heap halfway across the arena, a faint line of smoke trailing from him.

X

The Grandmaster let out a delighted laugh while Ebony Maw watched in horror as Cull steadily lost ground to the man who had inexplicably transformed from an irritatingly skilled opponent into lightning incarnate. Bolts of the stuff arced off his skin and spilled from his eyes as he bore down on Thanos’s strongest enforcer. The wild roaring of the crowd, loud as it had become, was lost to the rolling peals of thunder from a storm that had not been there moments ago.

Maw had been arrogant. Thanos himself had not triumphed over Odin and his daughter. Why had he been so quick to assume that a single servant of Thanos could best another of the pretender god’s children unassisted? Even Maw might have had difficulty with the brother if he hadn’t been drugged for easy retrieval.

He would have to warn Thanos of this resurgent threat, and he would have to personally answer for the loss of Cull Obsidian. Whatever his master deemed a just punishment for this failure, he would submit to without complaint.

“Hey Wrinkles,” said the Grandmaster with undisguised glee. “Looks like it’s about time for you to pay up. It would be rude to keep my new champion waiting for his prize.”

Maw snapped. The spears of all the guards in their box freed themselves from their owners’ grips and flew straight at the Grandmaster, piercing him from four different angles.

For a moment, time seemed to freeze. Horror and regret over his loss of control warred with satisfaction and spite in Maw’s breast.

“Wow, someone’s a sore loser,” said the Grandmaster. He looked down at his wounds and pouted. “And I had this outfit made special for tonight.” He gave Maw a reproachful look and started pulling the spears free of his body one by one and tossing them back to their owners. There wasn’t a drop of blood on any of them, and nothing but smooth skin was visible through the fresh holes in his clothing. What was more, the guards made no move against Maw, only watched him with narrowed eyes, waiting for orders. They recognized an enemy, but not a threat.

Maw hadn’t questioned why Thanos was willing to meet the Grandmaster’s terms to acquire the Sakaaran army rather than simply making Sakaar his next target and taking it by force, but perhaps he should have. He had made another terrible error. He fell to his knees. “Forgive me. You are right, of course. We did not capture the warrior or his companions as we agreed, and we are in your debt. You must collect it as you see fit.”

“Ooh, that’s nice,” said the Grandmaster, looking amused. Maw’s entire being seethed with loathing. How could a creature so petty and so ruled by whims of the moment be this powerful? It was wrong. “I’m not really into forgiveness, though. You owe me a new fancy outfit.”

“Of course,” said Maw, his brain working frantically. “I will bring you the mage and the Scrapper at once.” A desperate plan began to form, but it could work. It had to. “With your leave, I will deliver them directly to the arena from my ship.”

Chapter End Notes
Don't worry, we'll get back to Loki PoV stuff next time.

I've been looking forward to Maw losing it and attacking the Grandmaster. He didn't demonstrate any unusual abilities in canon, but there's no way he'd stay in charge on Sakaar for long if he didn't have something good up his sleeve. (I'm not going by the comics with him. That would be a little OP for my purposes.)

Originally, the flashback with Odin was only going to be about him unblocking Thor's powers, but I realized that was a really good place to introduce some details of the Odin vs. Thanos conflict and complicate Hela a bit. A couple of astute readers picked up on the "filial loyalty" hint last chapter. :)

Natasha and Clint stepped over the bodies of the guards they’d just taken out with their blasters and opened the doors to the first pen. Inside, they found a large room that curved out of view in both directions around a wide circular center wall. Several aliens—none the same species—stood clustered just through the doorway. Their eyes traveled from the two humans to the fallen guards and back.

“We’re here to free you,” said Clint.

“But...you’re a scrapper.” The speaker was about twice as tall as them and had three heads.

“It’s just a disguise,” said Natasha. “We’re the ones who took care of your obedience disks.”

Clint pointed at the spot on his neck where he could still feel the welt left by his own obedience disk. “Come on,” he said. “More guards are probably on their way.”

They raised no further objections, and the three-headed guy and the next-largest alien picked up the fallen guards’ blasters before following them. They went from door to door as quickly as they could. Soon, they were at the head of a crowd of over two hundred pit fighters. Six more guards had shown up, but the two armed aliens took them down with cool efficiency, and then there were eight armed aliens. The first two joined Natasha and Clint at the front while the other six guarded the rear.

Whether it was gratitude, lack of any other ideas, or being accustomed to following orders to stay alive, the whole crowd stuck close to them. Each encounter with palace guards put more weapons in their hands. Natasha and Clint led the way to the hangar. They needed to find Maw’s ship and cripple it so it couldn’t leave the planet.

Brunnhilde had been pacing the cell for what seemed like hours. Loki would probably be doing the same if he were capable of standing for any length of time. The nauseating aura of the ship was so overpowering that he couldn’t so much as use his seidr passively to speed up his healing process, so his wounds from both torture sessions still stabbed at him with every movement. All that was already bad enough, but he was also exhausted, hungry, and dirty.

Without warning, the ship lurched around them. Loki’s heart leapt. Had Thor and the mortals worked out a rescue plan after all? Were they coming for them? He hadn’t doubted that they would try, but succeeding was another matter.

“I think we’ve lifted off,” said Brunnhilde, staring around at the walls. Loki had been trying not to look at that sickly pulsing light too much, as it did nothing to help settle his stomach, but he immediately saw what had caught her attention. The lights pulsed brighter and faster now, the liquid
rushed more rapidly through those vein-like structures, and the floor vibrated beneath him.

The brief surge of hope died. She was right. Even if Thor was trying to get to them, it wouldn’t matter. They’d be far beyond his reach in moments. He looked at her and narrowed his eyes. She had stopped pacing, and her posture was much more relaxed. “You seem calm for someone about to be delivered to the most dangerous madman in the universe,” he observed.

She shrugged, not looking at him. “It’ll be a change of scenery.”

He held his gaze on her. “You never did say what you’re doing on Sakaar.”

“No,” she said, shooting him an icy glare. “I didn’t.”

He didn’t push further, but the mystery she presented served as a helpful distraction from his condition...and the thought of what awaited them at their destination.

---

Clint and Nat reached the hangar with their small army of increasingly armed freed slaves, but when they got there, the massive, sea monster-looking ship was gone. Clint’s stomach dropped. Had he just failed to keep his promise to Thor that they would get his brother back?

Another group of guards came running their way—this time about a dozen. Clint led the charge on them. It lasted less than half a minute. The slaves didn’t hesitate to loot the bodies. While they did, Clint pulled Nat to the side and tapped a few things on his bracer. A small hologram of Korg flickered into existence above his wrist. One helpful thing about these bracers was that they were very good at eliminating ambient noise. Only a hint of the raucous shouting around Korg came through when he spoke. Also, judging from the brilliant light illuminating his face every other second, Thor’s battle was going well.

“Hey, man. It’s too bad you couldn’t be out here for Thor’s speech. I haven’t cried that hard since Mum introduced me to her boyfriend. And now he’s actually winning against the big lizard guy! How’s it going on your side of things?”

“We took out the mainframe and freed all the fighters,” said Clint.

“Oh, wow!” said Korg, looking delighted. “When I let you guys take the lead on my revolution campaign, I mostly expected this would all be a symbolic gesture that would inspire future rebels to take action while we perished in the Grandmaster’s cells or the arena, but you’re actually a lot better at this than I thought!”

“Thanks,” said Nat flatly.

“Yeah, well don’t get too excited just yet,” said Clint. “Phase 1 went off without a hitch, but we’re here in the hangar now and Ebony Maw’s ship is gone.”

Korg’s rocky eyebrows curved briefly into surprise and dismay, but then he seemed to get distracted by something above the arena. “Er...what does the ship look like?”

Clint tapped a couple more things and sent Korg one of the images he’d taken of it when he was here doing recon.

“It’s out here,” said Korg. “It’s nearly over the arena.”

“We’ll get there as soon as we can,” said Nat.
Topaz wasn’t often unhappy to be proven right, but this was one of those times. She knew it was a bad idea to let that thunder guy have a go in the arena, especially when they still hadn’t tracked down the man and woman he had with him. This chaos was their fault, somehow, and the boss had just let it happen. She’d better get a pay rise for cleaning up this mess.

Based on the locations of the posts where guards no longer responded, the slaves had moved from the pens to the hangar. If they’d been hoping to commandeer a ride off-world there, though, they’d been foiled, because now they appeared to be heading for the arena. She sent out a blanket order to all remaining guards in the palace to get to the south corridor immediately.

“So, uh, Lord of Thunder,” said the enormous hologram of the Grandmaster, “these are probably your last words; you’d better make ’em count.”

With that, the hologram disappeared, and Thor felt the weight of tens of thousands of eyes settle on him. He spotted Korg in one of the lower rows (the people behind him were crossly standing up and leaning to the side in an attempt to see around him). The Kronan gave him a wave and a double thumbs up. Had less been riding on his performance, Thor would gladly have returned the gesture.

“People of Sakaar!” he boomed. “I am Thor, the God of Thunder, Crown Prince of Asgard, Son of Odin.” He pointed at Cull Obsidian with Mjolnir. “And I am here to reclaim my brother from this creature and his comrade.”

He took a deep breath, focused on the way he wanted to narrow his audience, said a brief prayer to the Allfathers that this would work, switched to the nameless tongue, and spoke from the heart.

“Now, this part is for everyone here who isn’t happy to be under the Grandmaster’s rule.”

Cull still fought, even though the battle was clearly Thor’s. The crowd’s steady chant of “THUNDER! THUNDER!” rang through the arena, while the real thing continued to rumble overhead.

Cull swung what was left of the bladed version of his chain-hammer. Thor batted it aside with a hand engulfed in lightning, pressing steadily forward. He threw Mjolnir at Cull’s right knee, and he could just hear the sound of shattering bone through the shouts and the storm. Cull let out a bellow of pain, his leg crumpling out from under him, and he went down hard. He tried to swing his sword again, but this time, Thor struck his wrist instead of the weapon itself. More bone shattered, and the chain-hammer fell to the ground.

Thor could see that the vast majority of the crowd was still watching him raptly as he spoke, while the remainder seemed to be fighting sudden headaches. He could have laughed in relief. It was working.

“If you can understand my words now, then you know this isn’t what you want. You struggle to survive, to keep your families safe, to avoid the notice of the Grandmaster and his guards. You live in fear that someone will slap an obedience disk on you and make you a slave, or that the Grandmaster will decide your existence offends him. It may have happened already to someone you love. My brother and I had barely been on Sakaar two hours when he was taken, though he had
Thor seized Cull around the neck, dragging his face up so that he could look into his eyes. The trails of lightning still coming off him left burns wherever they connected with Cull’s scaly hide, though there wasn’t much left at this point that wasn’t already burned.

“Your victory here...is meaningless,” Cull rasped. “You cannot stop Thanos. He will correct the universe, and...your brother will help him do it.”

Thor swung Mjolnir a final time, bringing it down on Cull’s head. Cull’s huge limbs flailed for a second, then went limp. Thor glowered down at the corpse of his foe. “I’ve already stopped Thanos once,” he told it. “I’ll do it again.”

He stepped back and looked up at the crowd, which had gone so silent that it seemed to be holding its collective breath.

“Look around you. You think they have more power than you, but you’re wrong. Look how many of you there are. Look how few of them. They can be fought, and I’m going to prove it to you.”

He pointed Mjolnir at the increasingly restless Cull Obsidian. “This creature, the Grandmaster’s honored guest, works for the Mad Titan, Thanos. I know some of you here are from worlds he has already left in ruin. That devastation is only the beginning. He wants to wipe out half of the population of the universe, and yet the Grandmaster is happy to sell him an army and bring him closer to that goal. I didn’t come to this arena to fight for a tyrant’s amusement. I came to fight for life, freedom, and all we hold dear. Today, I offer you a choice. Will you let this continue, or will you fight?”

“I ask again,” said Thor, raising Mjolnir high and turning to look at every section of the stands. “People of Sakaar. WILL. YOU. FIGHT?”

The Grandmaster slowly got to his feet, frowning down at his new champion, who had briefly spouted gibberish again after dealing the killing blow. His eyes darted to the crowd. At first, it just looked like they were cheering, but as he watched, three of his patrolling guards were suddenly swept under a tide of civilians. The longer he looked, the clearer it was. His eyes widened. They were rebelling. It started with a brave few but quickly spread as the hesitant grew emboldened.

“Hey Wrinkles,” he said, looking up at the ship looming into view above the arena. “I, uh, have an idea how you can make it up to me for that embarrassing assassination attempt just now.”

“Of course, Grandmaster.”

Guards poured into the south corridor, which was the only route the slaves could possibly take to get from the palace to the arena. Topaz had counted over a hundred of them, all armed with spears or blasters. She spread them out as much as she could and set them to cover every access point in groups of no fewer than four.
“Remember that you’re aiming to incapacitate, not kill,” she called as she marched past them. “The
Grandmaster doesn’t want his valuable merchandise damaged. Anyone who puts a slave
permanently out of commission may find himself replacing him in the arena. Understood?”

Movement at the edges of Thor’s vision made him look skyward. Ebony Maw’s ship was there,
lying low over the arena. It was large and close enough to obscure much of the storm from view.

“Loki,” said Thor. He spun Mjolnir, preparing to take flight. He would smash through that
entire ship until he found his brother. However, before he could throw himself into the air, beams of
light shot from the ship onto every part of the stands and the arena floor. From those beams, armed
Sakaaran soldiers came stalking out.

The hologram of the Grandmaster filled the open space in the middle of the arena again. “One last
little assignment for you soldiers before Wrinkles takes you home with him: remind my lovely
citizens who’s in charge here. And bring me the Lord of Thunder.”

More soldiers spilled from the deployment beams every second. All those people Thor had riled up
to rebellion wouldn’t stand a chance. He could already hear screams coming from multiple places in
the stands. Instead of taking flight, he slammed Mjolnir down, creating a rippling shockwave of earth
that threw dozens of the nearest soldiers off their feet. That bought him enough time to target the ship
itself with his lightning, aiming at the sources of the deployment beams. He was able to hit eight or
nine of them before more soldiers closed in around him, but dozens remained.

Chapter End Notes

I realized after writing Thor's stuff that I'd pretty much written him a hybrid
Maximus/Leonidas moment with his speech, based on the way he introduces himself (to
the shock of a villain who hadn't recognized him before) and his call to arms. I decided
to just go with it. Though I might've changed the number of freed slave fighters to be
something other than 300 once I noticed the similarities.

If Loki had been the one to give the revolution speech, he could have used his illusions
to create a second version of himself giving a very sycophantic speech for the
Grandmaster and all of his followers to hear while the unhappy people heard the real
thing. Thor just got lucky that the Grandmaster was too busy dealing with Maw to pay
enough attention to him to figure out what he was trying to do.

This is really pushing the limits of what the nameless tongue can do. The rules I made
up for it are that the spoken version can be directed to anyone within earshot who you
can clearly define as your audience, but the written version requires you to know
specific names. Which is why Thor couldn't do this as a pamphlet campaign.
Reinforcements

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was hard to be certain on this miserable ship, but Loki didn’t think they’d left the planet yet. There was no explanation for such a delay if everything was going according to Maw’s plans. Being stuck here with no information was almost as bad as the pain and the inability to use seidr. He felt the restless need to do something. Anything.

All that liquid running through the walls intrigued him. It couldn’t just be there for decoration—not if it was even in the brig. Should something disrupt the flow—a significant quantity of the liquid freezing solid, for instance—perhaps the ship wouldn’t be able to leave Sakaar. At least, not as quickly. Very carefully, not wanting to trigger another bout of dry heaving, he prodded inside himself for that simple knot of seidr that held together his Aesir form. He’d had the thought a few times since waking up in this cell that pulling that knot loose would not actually use any seidr. He would be undoing a spell, not casting one.

The idea became more tempting every time, but still, he hesitated, glancing at Brunnhilde. What good would it really do to freeze the contents of the ship’s veins? It wouldn’t change the fact that he was shut up in a doorless room with a Valkyrie who might well try to kill him herself. Even if she didn’t, she would surely be horrified that she’d wasted her kindness on a monster. Why should that bother him so much at a time like this? She would hardly be the first person to mistrust and dislike him.

Brunnhilde frowned, looking up at the ceiling. “There it is again,” she said. “Is that...?”

He shook himself out of his gloomy thoughts and listened too. A grin stole over his face. “Thunder.”

Perhaps there was no need for him to reveal his true form after all.

The arena had descended into complete chaos, which the Grandmaster had purposely exacerbated by raising the battle floor itself back up until it was level with the lowest row of stands. He was watching the proceedings like it was all a great show, but Maw was waiting for the right moment. He’d sent very specific orders to one of the battalions of Sakaaran soldiers when he called for the ship to come to the arena.

A volley of blaster fire swept across the glass front of the Grandmaster’s box. Alone, it wouldn’t have been enough to shatter it, but Maw discreetly twisted his fingers, pushing at the points that were struck hard enough to finish the job. Glass flew in every direction. The guards in the box recoiled and shielded their faces, but Maw moved forward. Without the glass to impede it, a beam from the ship fell directly on him. He heard the Grandmaster’s cry of indignation and orders to the guards, but they came too late. He was on his way back to the ship.

Thor was doing all he could to keep the worst of the battle from falling on the Sakaaran people. He had already lost count of all the soldiers he had felled, but it was well into triple digits. It wasn’t enough, even when he kept pausing to aim for the deployment beams.

A new beam appeared, aiming directly for the Grandmaster’s box, and he saw Ebony Maw floating
up inside it, his eyes on the ship. He wasn’t even going to fight along side his bought soldiers? Such a display of rank cowardice filled Thor with rage. He bellowed a war cry and changed the target of his lightning. A blinding blue bolt seared through the beam. He had hit his mark, though not directly. Ebony Maw snarled down at him, his left side covered in burns. He made no move to come after Thor, however, and within a few more seconds he had vanished inside the ship.

Thor wanted nothing but to throw himself into the air after Maw, but he couldn’t abandon the people in the arena to a battle he had brought down on them. The nearest three dozen or so soldiers were the first to feel his frustration when another massive pillar of lightning burst from him.

Loki listened to the rolls and peals of the distant thunder harder than he had ever listened to anything in his life. A few tremors had gone through the ship, and he knew he hadn’t imagined those. Lightning strikes. Not enough to bring down such a large craft, but perhaps Thor was aiming for its weapons? At one point, there was a particularly loud thunderclap that must have come from right outside. Whatever Thor was doing out there, as long as it continued, they had a real chance of getting out of this.

Without warning, the cell door melted into existence, revealing Ebony Maw, flanked by six armed and armored soldiers with ash-gray skin and gaping, four-part mandibles in place of mouths. Maw looked livid, and a good portion of his left side was covered in fresh burns that still sizzled and smoked.

“"I see the God of Thunder sends his regards,” Loki sneered, delighted.

It wasn’t clear whether Maw had even registered the taunt. “"If your own suffering isn’t enough to loosen your tongue,” he said, “"then perhaps something else will.” He sounded utterly wild with hatred, no trace of his old calm smugness in his tone. The change was a chilling one and did not bode well. Maw raised his right hand—only his right hand—and chains shot forward, wrapped painfully tightly about Loki’s and Brunnhilde’s hands, and dragged them out of the cell with such force that they fell into the waiting soldiers, four of whom promptly seized them by the upper arms.

The soldiers themselves weren’t especially intimidating, but Loki wasn’t about to try his luck against the blaster pointed at his face. Brunnhilde offered no resistance either, even though she was in far better condition to fight.

Loki barely managed to keep his feet under him at the pace they were going, but he was more interested in observing his surroundings. As he’d suspected, the veins in the walls, ceiling, and floor weren’t limited to the cell. They continued everywhere he looked, and they appeared to increase in size the farther they went up the corridor, which was more round than square. He couldn’t imagine how this ship had been created or how many corpses of Maw’s kinsmen had gone into it. It was almost like they had been merged together to create a new organism, complete with circulatory system.

The farther they went, the more it felt like being inside an ancient behemoth, no longer truly alive but perversely forced to continue imitating life through machinery and Maw’s twisted brand of magic. The corridor they were in abruptly opened wide onto a cavernous chamber. They entered it near the top, at a network of catwalks that imitated a spinal column, with wide, sweeping arches stretching around the belly and down to the distant floor. The whole thing was swarming with armed soldiers who jostled amongst each other for access to deployment platforms. Loki noticed that several platforms were dark. Destroyed by Thor’s assault, he hoped.

Maw led the way to a small outcrop on the nearest catwalk and onto a lift shaped like an oversized
chariot, and then they were hurtling across the vast hold at break-neck speeds along the spinal column. The sight of that writhing army below was horrifying.

The farther they went, the more intense the pulsing lights became, until they strained the eyes and washed everything out in alternating blue and orange. Loki’s nausea worsened proportionately with it and a headache throbbed in time with it. Even Brunnhilde was growing pale and sweaty and beginning to sag a little in her captors’ grip. She probably didn’t have much aptitude for using seidr, but regardless of aptitude, seidr was a part of every member of the major races of Yggdrasil, mortals excluded. It wasn’t especially comforting to know that the ship affected them both this way. What would it do to Thor if he came aboard?

By the time the lift reached the far platform, Loki was straining involuntarily against the soldiers holding him, desperate to get farther away from the source of that grotesque energy. His struggle accomplished nothing except to earn him a few blows to the head from the butts of their blasters.

Topaz’s strategy for subduing and recapturing the escaped fighters was a good one. Or, it would have been, had she not been operating under faulty assumptions. She had assumed that their detour to the hangar had been so they could board a ship and get off-world before anyone could stop them. She had assumed that the revolution was the primary goal of the day. She had no idea that the instigators were much more interested in Ebony Maw, Cull Obsidian, and the army they had purchased than the political situation of Sakaar—or that they had bought a few illicit items with the explosive capability to ground a large ship.

She had also assumed they would only be armed with spears and blasters.

The disorganized mob of sparsely armed fighters she was expecting never came. Just at the point when she was considering sending out a couple teams to scout for the fighters and make sure they were still heading the way she expected, an arrow came flying from somewhere high above any of the entry points she had prepared for and struck one of the guards at the front directly in the eye. Before he could even hit the ground, another arrow found its mark in another eye socket.

All the guards who saw went into a panic, trying to find the source of the projectiles. Arrows three and four didn’t hit anyone, but they weren’t meant to. They flashed with red lights where they landed, then burst in clouds of thick gray smoke that blocked their view of nearly the entire south corridor, making it impossible to search for the archer.

Topaz coughed and shouted for order. She never regained it. The next objects to fall on the floor amid more than a hundred guards were small and round. She had a split second to realize what they were, and then they exploded.

The bridge of Maw’s ship was like the interior of an enormous brain. The entire floor pulsed with the brightest light yet, and growing out of it, in place of any of the usual types of control banks or consoles Loki had seen, there were only towering, irregular structures with spindly nodes spreading from them like branches. They interlocked with each other overhead and merged seamlessly into the ceiling and walls. The glowing veins ran through them as well.

All but one of these neuron-like structures was presently being manned by other members of Ebony Maw’s species. They had each sunk their arms to the elbows into the two lowest nodes of their respective stations. At Maw’s arrival with his two prisoners, they glanced away from their screens and looked around. Loki noticed that their eyes gleamed with what appeared to be starry blue
cataracts. They returned to their work with mechanical efficiency, no trace of Maw’s passion to further his master’s will in their movements.

“Why have you brought us here?” said Brunnhilde, lightly shoving the soldier on her right. The one with a blaster trained on her tightened his grip on it. “Aren’t you going to tell us the point of dragging us all the way across the ship?”

Maw’s eyes flashed in their direction. “I would have thought that was clear.” He sunk his undamaged right arm into a node of the unoccupied station. An enormous viewscreen appeared in the open space behind it. It displayed a chaotic battle taking place inside an arena. Loki spotted Thor at once. It looked like he was the only competent warrior on his side of the fighting, though a young Kronan near him certainly seemed to be doing his best.

“Your father may have defeated my master millennia ago, mage, but the position has changed. You will now bear witness to what happens to those who oppose Thanos.”

Thor was now fighting back-to-back with Korg. This younger version of his Kronan friend, while as enthusiastic about revolution as his older self, had clearly seen very few battles before now and was only having so much success against the soldiers because their weapons could do little more than leave scorch marks on solid stone. Thor was still grateful for his help. With Korg at his back, he didn’t need to worry about guarding it, but they were still only two fighters in a sea of soldiers that continued to grow. His right arm was starting to feel stiff from the deep cut Cull had given him and he doubted his lightning would last against the rest of the soldiers who still hadn’t reached the arena.

He was seriously considering flying to the ship—his absence, however brief, would be devastating to the people on the ground, but maybe he could stop the flood of soldiers raining down on them and it would be better in the long run. He hadn’t fully made up his mind when two things happened at almost the same time.

The gates where fighters normally entered the arena exploded outward, and a flood of armored aliens of every description poured out, Barton and Romanoff leading the charge and yelling at the top of their lungs. Across the arena, directly beneath the hovering ship, there was a sudden burst of fiery blue light that stretched across several yards. When it faded, Sif, Fandral, Hogun, and Volstagg were there, standing around the second transporter along with Bruce Banner.

It took the first four about a second to take in the madness into which they’d arrived and identify the enemy force. They drew their weapons and plunged into the fray, only Hogun remaining to guard the device that brought them there. Banner stood frozen in bewilderment beside him for about two seconds more, until blaster fire struck him on the shoulder. The soldier responsible was crushed by enormous green fists before he could do so much as get off another shot.

With the arrival of such excellent reinforcements on both sides of the field, Thor redoubled his own attacks. He could feel the joy of battle that always came from fighting alongside his friends. Together, they were more than a match for one army of Sakaarans.

“We expected a battle, but we never thought you’d find us one so quickly!” Volstagg cried merrily, cutting down soldiers left and right with the great battle axe Brandrheid Undrsigr. “Well done, my friend!”

“Tonight we feast in Asgard or in Valhalla!” Sif shouted, her face full of the same fierce joy now coursing through Thor.
“Oh, surely Asgard,” said Fandral. “It is a fine battle indeed, but you give our foes too much credit.”

“I see your mortals there,” said Volstagg, nodding towards Barton and Romanoff, “but where is Loki? Working on some clever scheme somewhere out of sight, is he?” He spoke with perfect confidence, not at all worried; as good as Loki was at getting himself into trouble, he was usually even better at getting back out of it.

“If only he were,” said Thor. He jerked his head up at the ship. “He has been a prisoner on Maw’s ship for the better part of three days.” Their faces all twisted in alarm. “Now that you’re here, I finally have a path to reach him.”

“Of course!” said Sif. “We will clear your way.”

“Certainly!” said Volstagg. Then, confused, he added, “Three days?”

A blinking red circle closed around Prince Thor on the viewscreen and symbols raced across the bottom with readouts of the (short) time the ship’s weapons would take before they could fire. The target could only be Thor; even if Brunnhilde didn’t vaguely remember what he looked like as an adult from her brief glimpse at the bar, no one else would be fighting with that hammer and in that armor.

Her heart dropped. She had watched Loki stupidly fight against the effects of a drug to protect her, she’d watched him withstand torture twice without losing his sense of humor, and she’d watched him go from fastidiously put together to bedraggled and wan while he tried to wait patiently for his brother to come for him.

She did not want to watch him watch his brother die, yet she couldn’t see how it would be avoided. They were well and truly trapped, bound by Maw’s telekinetically controlled chains, surrounded by armed soldiers, and aboard a ship that made them sicker the longer they were on it. Why did she have to be sober for this? Being drunk wouldn’t make their situation better, but it would be easier not to care.

It wasn’t until she saw her breath come out in a puff of sparkling condensation that she realized the temperature on the bridge was dropping.

Chapter End Notes

I had to rewrite a good chunk of this chapter because I hadn't planned out enough of the inside of Maw's ship when I started and I kept getting stuck. So I took a step back and looked up lists of classic sci-fi spaceships and scrolled through artwork of all kinds of sea monsters. The spaceship that caught my attention was Moya from Farscape. I've never seen the show, but the ship is sort of half creature, half machine. That was pretty much exactly what I was going for, except that the organic components of Maw's ship are a horrific amalgamation of tens of thousands of corpses instead of one majestic creature.

Maw's crew! I figured a ship like that couldn't be piloted by just one person, but I've had a hard time thinking of who would be the grunt workers in Thanos's army. Who are the cooks? The janitors? He wouldn't waste capable fighters on those roles, and I can't
imagine a lot of people being excited to do it, particularly if they're from planets Thanos has "saved." That's why the crew members on the bridge have weird eyes. Where have we seen eyes like that in canon?

Sif+W3 (and Bruce) have finally caught up to the Sakaar timestream! Whee! This is the first time I've written any of them in a battle situation (unless you count their ill-fated struggle with the Hulk when the mortals first came to Asgard), and they're kind of adorable. I'd planned from the start for their arrival to turn the tables on the ground battle, but I wasn't expecting it to make Thor so happy. It made me smile writing it.

The updates have been coming so fast lately because the next chapter contains the scene that I've played in my head about a thousand times over the last few months. The end of this chapter should give you a hint about what it might be. I'm so freaking excited.
Chapter Notes

I drew another thing! I was so happy with the design I came up with for the bridge of Maw's ship that I did a very awful scribbled sketch of it for you guys, and then I did an even worse coloring job and made it into a gif so you could see what the pulsing lights and veins are like. (I pretty much never draw settings. Just people. I spent longer on each drawing of Nat than I did on this.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Brunnhilde glanced around for the source of the sudden chill, and a flash of color in the corner of her eye drew her gaze back to the prince. He glared at Ebony Maw with fists and teeth clenched and murder in his eyes—which had turned blood-red. Then, like ice forming over the surface of a lake, lines appeared, intersected, and deepened in his skin, and royal blue bloomed from them and spread until there wasn’t a trace of fair porcelain left.

The Sakaaran soldiers didn’t immediately react. Their species was colorblind, so the changes to Loki’s appearance would barely be noticeable to them, but Brunnhilde was gaping at him in utter disbelief. A prince of Asgard...was a Frost Giant? How could that be?

She watched a layer of ice form and thicken around his hands. Icicles spiked outward from it, driving through the links of the chain binding him. At the same moment the metal shattered, the two soldiers holding his arms let out twin screeches of pain and recoiled. She didn’t need to see their hands to know how badly frostbitten they had become. Ebony Maw and the other four guards all looked around at their yells.
Maw did a double-take at Loki’s transformation before snapping at the soldiers, “Control him, you worthless fools!” It seemed he needed his hands for his telekinesis, but the right was so badly damaged that he couldn’t even use it to interface with the ship and the left was still elbow-deep in the node of the weapons system. He could either subdue Loki himself or continue locking in his attack against Thor, but not both.

Loki didn’t fight like any Frost Giant Brunnhilde had ever seen or battled. Frankly, he looked like someone who’d never used ice as a weapon before. The Jotnar she’d fought would be embarrassed if they could see him. He flailed his ice-encrusted hands at the two frostbitten soldiers like clubs, then held them up to shield himself from blaster fire. It sort of worked, but the plasma quickly disintegrated the ice.

She could have stood by and done nothing while one of her princes (or maybe an imposter) fought against time and at least seven-to-one odds to save the other. Whether she was on Sakaar or being carted off to Thanos didn’t particularly matter to her. She was a prisoner either way, and at least with Thanos she had a chance of picking a fight that would put her out of her misery.

But when the soldier who’d been aiming a blaster at her since they were taken from the cell turned to Loki, she moved without thinking. She wrenched her arms free of the other two soldiers’ grips with ease. Then, before they could react, she ducked backward, grabbed each around the head, and smashed their skulls together. She vaulted their collapsing bodies and kicked the third soldier in the face, catching his blaster on the way to the ground. He never had a chance to fire it.

Heedless of whether or not any soldiers remained (and two of his three did), Loki had turned his complete focus on Maw. Brunnhilde dealt with the soldiers herself (honestly, what did Maw take them for if he thought six would be enough?), then turned the stolen blaster on the other members of Maw’s species. They all watched the fight with those eerie blue eyes, making no move to interfere.

“You think altering your form will help you, mage?” Maw hissed, but he was looking awfully sweaty for how cold the room was getting. The counter on the viewscreen showed that it would take the weapons another twenty seconds to fire.

Frost crackled over the floor with every step Loki took towards Maw. “Yes,” he said simply. He appeared to take an exaggerated breath, and the temperature dropped even more, enough to raise gooseflesh on Brunnhilde’s arms.

“You fool!” said Maw, “This is no victory. You only doom yourself by fighting Thanos! To fight against the Titan is to fight on the side of chaos and desolation!”

Brunnhilde looked back to Loki. He was not impressed by Maw’s words. “A pity your people didn’t see you for the threat you were before it was too late,” he said, baring his teeth. “That was their mistake. Yours was threatening my brother.”

He lunged for Maw’s throat with both hands. Maw’s back arched and a strangled scream came fought its way free. Brunnhilde didn’t understand what was happening at first. She couldn’t see frostbite spreading from the place Loki touched, and he wasn’t freezing solid either. But then, slowly, Maw’s long tunic began bulging out in numerous places. In another second, spikes of glistening, maroonish ice tore through the material—the same color as what had leaked out from the single cut she had managed to give him before he captured them. She noticed that their locations were very deliberate: each blood icicle protruded from a spot where he had used a crystal needle on Loki.

It didn’t stop there. Loki screamed with rage or pain (or likely both) as icicles burst out of the veins running through Maw’s console. The targeting screen flickered, distorted, and vanished. He didn’t
move, and the chill swept along the upper branches and across to where they tangled with those of the other consoles. Strange, resonant cracking sounds filled the air, and icicles punched through their surfaces too. Every viewscreen went dark. The other pilots shouted in surprise and pulled their arms free to escape the encroaching chill.

Even though Maw had gone as limp as he could while propped up by the console and so much of his own frozen blood and was clearly dead, the frost continued to spread, now sweeping across the ceiling and floor. Loki was still screaming, and his skin had become strangely luminous, his hair floating up as though caught in a wind. Brunnhilde had never seen that happen to a Jotun before, but she was willing to bet it wasn’t a good thing. “Loki!” she shouted. “It’s over! You have to stop!” She moved towards him, casting half a glance at Maw’s kinsmen in case they harbored their own thoughts of revenge. Most were clutching their heads and groaning, but two were hugging each other tightly and weeping. They were not a threat. Loki, however, didn’t seem to have heard her at all.

She was trying to decide whether it was worth the risk of frostbite to attempt to shake him out of it when there was a loud grinding sound and the floor lurched beneath their feet.

X

All at once, the dozens of remaining deployment beams winked out. The hundred or more soldiers who had been en route to the ground were left to plummet towards it in a deadly free fall. Thor looked up at the ship and saw that it was no longer hovering stationary over the arena. It had begun to fall, the nose tipping down, giving it a slight northward trajectory. The arena floor wasn’t the best place from which to judge its path, but it was high enough up that he didn’t think the rebelling civilians were in danger. The fates of the people aboard, on the other hand, were less certain.

Trusting in his friends to manage the battle without him, Thor spun Mjolnir and took to the air, flying as fast as he could to reach the ship. He didn’t want to waste any time scouring it for Loki, so, based on the arrivals of his friends from Asgard, he tested a hunch. “Heimdall?” he called, the turbulent air whistling past him. “Can you hear me?”

“Your days have appeared to me as moments, my prince, but I hear you,” came the Gatekeeper’s voice.

“Thank the Norns,” Thor laughed. “Do you see my brother?”

“It is difficult to be certain that what little I can see of Sakaar is the present moment, but Maw has him on the bridge. It is located at the fore of the uppermost level, above the power core.”

“He won’t have him for long,” Thor growled.

“Be cautious. Prince Loki has not fared well aboard that ship. It is not a hospitable place for any Aesir or Jotun to be. I regret that I did not perceive this before you set out on your quest.”

“Your information was invaluable, Heimdall. We could not have known Thanos would buy this army otherwise.”

“Still, I have no desire to inform my king that one of his sons was captured following a path I laid, let alone both.”

“Tell Loki I’m coming for him.”

Landing on the hull was difficult with the ship gathering speed in its descent, but Thor caught hold of one of the fins and swung Mjolnir. The hammer crunched against the black outer material. The texture was unpleasantly reminiscent of a beetle’s carapace. It took three more blows to punch
through. A yellowish substance oozed around the hole as Thor worked at widening it. Finally, it was large enough for him to leap inside.

X

Sif watched the ship crash through a box at the top level of the stands with a grinding screech even louder than the thunder of the storm. Rubble rained down on the rows below, but it could have been far worse.

Fandral had paused too, and she knew he shared her concern. Whether or not Loki was an easy person to be friends with, he was their prince and an important part of their lives, and they, like all warriors of Asgard, had sworn to defend him. They could not leave Thor to do it alone. Who knew how many soldiers remained on that ship?

“Go!” cried Volstagg from her left. “Hogun and I and our fine green friend should have no trouble cleaning this up without you.”

An instant’s survey of the battlefield showed that he was correct. Hogun stood with Hridgandhr in the midst of a circle of corpses around the transporter, and Volstagg had cut a swath through a large cluster that tried to gang up on him. Banner had done easily the most damage to the enemy army, clearing half of the arena on his own, undaunted no matter how many blasters fired in his direction. Meanwhile, the rabble of all sorts of aliens led by the mortal spies had largely moved up into the stands to flush more soldiers away from the vulnerable civilians and towards the arena floor. She would not have thought that they would be so eager to join an honest battle, but they were doing a great credit to their realm. Thor’s high opinion of them was plainly well deserved.

“What’s the quickest way we can get there?” she asked Fandral.

“Perhaps with some assistance,” he said. “Banner!” he shouted jovially, turning to face the rampaging green creature. “Be a good chap and help us up to the ship, won’t you?” He pointed up at it with Fimbuldraugur.

Sif wasn’t at all sure this was wise. For all that Banner had contributed to the battle, it was difficult to tell whether he recognized friend from foe. There was no time to debate the point, however. Banner changed direction and barrelled towards them, roaring unintelligibly. She resisted the urge to raise her sword and buckler with difficulty and braced herself. Enormous green hands shot out and seized her and Fandral about their waists, and then they were hurtling through the air towards the ship.

They crested their arc a good fifty feet above it and came down with somewhat jarring force. She was going to give Fandral a great number of bruises in their next bout at the training yard, but it certainly had been faster than climbing to the top of the stadium on foot.

The ship had done far more damage to the building behind the arena than to the arena itself, and it angled downward into the wreckage. What they could see of it appeared mostly intact, though the bottom half may have been less fortunate. There was no sign of Thor on the outside, so they would just have to make their own way to the princes.

X

Loki couldn’t remember deciding to freeze the entire bridge instead of stopping once the weapons system had shut down. All the heat rushing into him was like an inferno that only fed his rage until he seemed to be made of nothing else. Even when it went from invigorating to agonizing, it didn’t occur to him to stop.
When he came to his senses, his body was mostly numb, which was an improvement. The glow from the floor was dull enough to be almost tolerable to his Jotun eyes, and it slanted strangely. He lifted his head a little. The entire bridge was askew. How odd. Maw’s lightning-burned, skewered, and frozen corpse was in front of him. It looked like it would’ve toppled over if it hadn’t still been attached to to the weapons console.

“My prince, can you hear me?”

“Heimdall?” Loki mumbled. “I tried...to reach you before.”

“My apologies. The flow of time can be treacherous. Prince Thor wished me to tell you that he’s coming for you.”

Loki giggled feebly, and he could feel tears on his face. “It worked, then.”

“Norns, I thought you were dead.”

Loki turned towards the voice and found Brunnhilde approaching him, a blaster in hand. She wasn’t pointing it at him, though. Behind her, Maw’s kinsmen sat in a huddle on the slanted floor near one of the consoles. The blue was gone from their eyes, which followed Brunnhilde anxiously. They all had long, thin limbs, but one had proportions so gawky that Loki thought he must be an adolescent. Scattered nearby were the corpses of the six soldiers. She must have been the one who killed them.

“Apparently not,” he said. He watched her warily. “You don’t seem keen to change that.”

“Why would I?” she said, crouching down beside him.

He stared at her. Was she mad? “I’ve deceived you,” he said. Surely that was obvious. “I let you think I was Aesir.”

She snorted. “Yeah, and if we’d already shagged, I’d have kicked your ass over it. What’s your point?”

His cheeks burned at the implications of “already.” “So there are advantages to being rubbish at flirting. Who could have known?”

Her expression was very odd, like she was torn between her curiosity and her desire to maintain a cool veneer of unruffled apathy. Curiosity won. “Does Odin know?”

“Of course he does,” said Loki. The heat wasn’t leaving his face. On the contrary, it felt like it was spreading and getting worse, and he was starting to think it had nothing to do with embarrassment. “I’m the one who didn’t, until about a fortnight ago.”

She rolled her eyes. “That sounds about right. Can you stand? I’d give you a hand up, but I’d rather keep the skin on it.”

By the Nine, but she was wonderful, even if she was mad to still be here at his side. “I won’t burn you, Brunnhilde.”

Her brow furrowed. “But…”

He smirked. “Haven’t met many Jotnar outside of a battle, have you?” It was really getting quite bad now. The numbness was being swept aside by that burning heat. It wasn’t the temperature of the ship—the bridge itself was still covered in ice. It was him. He’d forgotten Gerd’s warnings not to push himself too hard.
Brunnhilde reached for his hand. She was tentative at first, just one fingertip brushing against the side of his thumb. When there proved to be no danger, she slid her fingers through his and held them. Her eyes locked with his. If he was about to experience his first frjosleikr fever, which he strongly suspected he was and which might well kill him, then he wanted to do something very stupid first. Miraculously, he was fairly certain she would let him. He mustered his strength to sit up and close the distance between them.

“Loki! Loki, where are you?”

She jumped and looked around, dropping his hand. Loki swore in a resigned sort of way and fell back to the floor. He loved his brother dearly and in no way regretted what saving his life could cost him (not even a little bit), but sometimes the oaf had the worst timing.

Chapter End Notes

I decided you guys deserved a break from cliffhangers and ended this one on a funny note. :) No Loki/Valkyrie kisses yet. (And probably not for a while. Sorry, Loki.)

Protective Loki is just as awesome to write as protective Thor, but the logistics of Loki using his frost powers and how Brunnhilde would participate in the fight were kind of a nightmare to sort out. That's why I had to go back and properly design the ship first. It helped immensely.

I can't remember exactly when it occurred to me to send everyone to Sakaar, but this chapter has been in my head ever since I worked out the Jotun biology stuff. I wanted to put Loki in a position where he needed to use frjosleikr and trigger a frjosleikr fever. This was perfect on pretty much every level.

Brodinsons reunion coming up next!
Unlike Asgardian vessels, Maw’s ship was completely enclosed and had no exterior light. The corridors felt more like underground tunnels than anything, winding and irregular, and the whole place had an oppressive, sickly air to it. Thor felt the effects of battle much more strongly here than he had outside. This must be what Heimdall had meant about it not being a good place for Aesir or Jotnar to be. He was sure he was headed in the right general direction, at least, because he had punched his way through to the topmost level and was moving downhill towards the front of the ship.

“Thor!”

He turned to see Sif and Fandral jogging towards him. Good. The more they had against Maw and his soldiers, the better. They fell into step at either side of him. “Heimdall said Ebony Maw has Loki on the bridge. I think it’s this way, but this ship is so strange.”

“It feels as though there’s a curse upon it,” said Fandral.

“Have you met with any soldiers yet?” said Sif.

“No,” said Thor. “They would have been awaiting deployment in the lower levels, though, so perhaps they didn’t survive the crash.”

“Does the tunnel seem to be getting larger to you?” said Fandral, frowning at the walls.

Thor looked at them. “No, but those veins in it are.” They let off a dull, steady glow, which was the only lighting Thor had seen in the ship so far. But perhaps they were what carried power through the ship. Which meant the bigger they got, the closer they were getting to the bridge. He picked up the pace.

X

“You said Loki has been here nearly three days?” said Fandral. In terms of sheer ambiance, he couldn’t remember a place he’d enjoyed being less.

“Yes, Ebony Maw captured him shortly after we arrived, before we even knew we were a target. Heimdall couldn’t see clearly enough to say what he has suffered on this ship, but Maw is one of Thanos’s top experts in torture.”

Fandral exchanged an outraged look with Sif. Thor had explained something of the threat Thanos posed to them on Asgard, and all Aesir youth were taught of the war in which Odin had forced the Titan to permanently retreat beyond Yggdrasil’s borders, but a prince they had spent their entire lives with being captured and tortured by Thanos’s man made it far more personal.

Sif’s glower turned to a puzzled frown. “Is it...getting colder?”

Thor immediately straightened like a hound catching a scent and broke into a run. “Loki! Loki, where are you?” he called.

Fandral and Sif ran after him. Fandral didn’t know why colder air would make Thor so sure they
were getting close, and he also didn’t know that it was wise to announce their location in this way, but he would fight whatever foes they found regardless.

The temperature continued to drop until they could see their breath on the air. They rounded a corner and all nearly slipped on the slanted, frozen floor as they came upon a vast room like none Fandral had ever seen. Dull light from below illuminated a network of tree-like structures that were ruptured in numerous places by large, multicolored icicles.

Thor ignored the bizarre sight entirely, giving a shout and dashing forward. Fandral looked where he was running and saw something that made no sense. At the center of the room were three people. One was a gray-skinned alien who appeared to have been fatally impaled from the inside by over a dozen maroon daggers. One was a dark-skinned woman a few inches shorter than Sif, dressed in plain black leathers. The third, whom she was helping to his feet, was a Frost Giant. How had he gotten here, so far away from Jotunheim, and what was he doing wearing Loki’s armor? ...Or with loose-curling black hair that came to his chin, like Loki had?

Fandral’s hand went to Fimbuldraugr’s hilt. Thor was unlikely to need help in this fight, but if one Jotun could freeze this entire chamber alone, he could be more dangerous than he looked. And yet, when Thor reached him, he made no move to call Mjolnir to his hand. Instead, he threw his arms around the Frost Giant in what was unmistakably one of his bear-like hugs, momentarily lifting him off his feet. Fandral stared in astonishment. It was one thing to talk of an alliance with Jotunheim, surely, and another thing to embrace one of those creatures like a dear friend.

The Frost Giant protested the hug even as he returned the gesture, and he did so in a very familiar voice. Fandral’s stomach began to sink.

“Two days of torture, and now you subject me to this?”

“I was so afraid you would be in Thanos’s clutches before I could stop it,” said Thor, squeezing tighter. “But now I have slain Cull Obsidian and you Ebony Maw. Well done, Brother.”

“Brother,” Fandral repeated.

“Wha—Loki?!?” said Sif, astonished.

“Oh, right,” said Thor. Seemingly unwilling to let go of Loki, he kept one hand at the back of his neck and the other at his shoulder as he turned to face them. “Loki’s adopted.”

Loki was having a hard time focusing on his surroundings now. It was like peering through a heat haze. The heat flooding through the rest of him was getting particularly nasty at all the spots where Maw had used his needles, and an odd pressure was building under his skin. Under any other circumstances, he would have cared a lot more that his two oldest friends on Asgard had just found out about his true heritage by accident, but it was hard enough work staying coherent and bearing his ailments with dignity, and he simply didn’t have the energy to spare.

“What did Maw do to you?” said Thor, holding Loki at arm’s length. He sounded relieved, proud, and worried all at once. “You look terrible.”

Thor’s face swam before him, but Loki could make out the blue lines painted on it. While they were smeared here and there and marred with blood on one cheek, the intended pattern was clear. “You’re one to talk,” he muttered. Was it the fever making his voice sound so hoarse all of a sudden or was it something else? “What’ve you done to your face?”
“What’s wrong with my face?”

Loki raised his eyebrows and dragged his gaze pointedly around the blue lines. Sif and Fandral had drifted closer. They looked confused and uncomfortable. He ignored them.

“Oh, this?” said Thor, wiping his temple. Some of the paint came off onto his fingertips. “I needed a disguise, and this was the first thing I thought of.”

Thor noticed Brunnhilde standing near him, and he beamed at her. “Hello,” he said. He let go of Loki, who barely managed not to topple over, and reached for the buckle of a bandolier. “I borrowed this during the battle.” He slid it free and held it out to her. On it was the sword Loki had barely stopped Maw from killing her with. She took it, frowning.

“Also my friends and I have been using your quarters as our hideout ever since you were captured,” Thor added.

“You what?”

“Is that a Dragonfang ?!” said Sif, staring at the sword. Then she looked at the Valkyrie. The shock of Loki’s heritage was clearly nothing to what she had just realized. Loki was a little worried Sif might actually burst from excitement. If he and Thor had grown up hero-worshipping the Valkyrior, they’d been nothing compared to Sif. She had carried around a toy winged horse everywhere as a little girl, dressed up her dolls in armor and used them to play out imaginary battles, hung the walls of her chambers with tapestries depicting all the Valkyrior’s greatest victories, had often been caught concealing books about them inside the books they’d been assigned by their tutors, visited their memorialized aeries roughly once a year, lamented with tiresome frequency that the corps hadn’t been reformed, and taught herself as much as she could of their fighting style from archived battle records. “By the Norns, you’re...you’re Commander Brunnhilde Sigursdottir of the Second Wing!”

“Wait, you’re that Valkyrie?” Thor blurted. His total shock amused Loki. Apparently however much time he’d spent with her the first time around hadn’t been enough for him to learn that she was one of the most legendary leaders of the already legendary force.

Their surprise was enough to catch Fandral’s attention too. He gave Brunnhilde the sort of look that had marked the beginning of the end of more than one of Loki’s rare infatuations.

“I’m not the commander of anything anymore,” said Brunnhilde, looking at the three of them like they were irritating children. (Well, considering their comparative ages, that was fairly accurate.)

X

While Sif struggled to maintain her dignity in the presence of one of her greatest lifelong sources of inspiration and said source of inspiration scowled and muttered that she needed a drink, Thor’s attention turned to the huddle of aliens by one of the consoles. “Who are they?”

“The other pilots,” said Loki. “I don’t believe they were helping Maw willingly.”

“Of course we weren’t!” said the youngest-looking of them. One of the older ones put a hand on his shoulder, clearly unsure they should be drawing attention to themselves.

“Maw brought Thanos to their planet,” said Loki. “He sought him out.”

“What?!” said Thor, outraged. He thought of the destruction of the refugee ship. He couldn’t even imagine deliberately bringing that down upon his own people. He turned to face the bedraggled little group. “Any enemy of Thanos is a friend of Asgard. You are welcome to come with us if you have
nowhere else to go."

“You think you can fight Thanos?” said one of them in a hushed voice. “Are you insane?”

“I just defeated Cull Obsidian in single combat, and my brother defeated Ebony Maw even after days of torture and privation. I think we can end Thanos,” said Thor. “And the more people who stand with us against him, the easier it will be.”

The adolescent shot to his feet. One by one, the rest joined him. They still looked afraid, but their jaws were set. The eldest of them stepped forward. “I am Neris,” he said. He pointed around at the others. “These are Tidra, Osri, Salke, Rijal, and Halu. I do not know if you can do what you say, but I will help if I can.”

Thor gave him a grave, approving nod. “Let’s go, then.”

They had barely gone five paces when Loki swayed on his feet. Thor rushed back to his side. The Valkyrie—Brunnhilde—did the same on his other side, and they caught him before he could hit the floor. Loki sagged against their supporting arms, his head down and his chest heaving.

“Loki!” said Thor. “What’s wrong?”

“Frjosleikr fever,” Loki grunted. “I was reckless.”

A wave of dread crashed over Thor. “But Gerd said those—!”

“Yes, and now I know why,” said Loki. His voice was getting shriller. He groaned and convulsed. Thor looked at his brother’s face and saw that something odd was happening to the ancestral lines in it. They had taken on a silvery texture. After staring at them in confusion for a moment, he realized that the silver substance was thin trails of steam drifting up from under Loki’s skin. He wasn’t the only one who noticed.

“Loki...why is your face boiling?” said Brunnhilde.

“It’s not just my face,” said Loki, gritting his teeth. “Allfathers,” he whimpered, “I think I’m dying.”

Loki was not the sort to exaggerate his condition—in fact, growing up, he’d had a bad habit of using illusions to make himself look perfectly healthy until, like now, he was at the point of physical collapse.

“The Hel you are!” said Thor. “Come on!” They tripled their pace. Thor remained on watch for any sign of Sakaaran soldiers, as did Sif and Fandral, but they met no one all the way back to the hole he’d made in the hull.

Korg looked over the arena, very pleased with the revolution’s beginning. His strange new friends had gotten the people on board, overwhelmed the army of soldiers until they surrendered, and even dropped a giant spaceship on the Grandmaster’s box and palace. Now the fighters were rounding up the surviving soldiers and grouping them together, anyone with medical knowledge was roving around tending to wounds, and the overall atmosphere was one of nervous excitement and possibility. They’d been a little worried about the big green angry guy at first, but a minute or so after the soldiers surrendered, he’d turned into a much smaller pink guy who just looked really harmless and confused. That made sense, considering that he couldn’t understand anything anyone but Thor’s friends said to him.

Thor reappeared at the top of the arena at the tail end of the crashed ship after about a half an hour.
One or two at a time, he used his magic flying hammer to bring the people with him—several raggedy people who looked like that Wrinkles guy and a black-haired man who looked like a blue popsicle that had been dropped on hot pavement—back down to the arena floor. A particularly notorious scrapper who was somehow also in the group and Thor’s two armored friends simply jumped down on their own.

Korg waved and went to join Thor, since it would be rude to make him carry the blue popsicle man across the arena to him. (For some reason, the two guys in armor who had stayed in the arena seemed very surprised and upset by the sight of the blue popsicle man.) “Hey, Thor,” said Korg. “Thanks for all the help.”

“I’m glad we could rid Sakaar of its tyrant, but my brother is ill and we must return to Asgard immediately,” said Thor. “Will you be alright here? Our transporters don’t have room to bring everyone, but perhaps you could come by ship or we could come back for you.”

“You’re very generous,” said Korg apologetically, “but from what you’ve said, it sounds like this Asgard place is a hereditary monarchy, and becoming royal subjects who probably have fewer rights than native citizens would be more of a lateral move than a positive one. Sure, things might be tough on Sakaar for a while. There’ll be a power vacuum without the Grandmaster in charge, but with quick enough action, we can get a working anarcho-syndicalist commune together, grounded in the shared experience of our past oppression and our victory here. It might need a few tweaks as we get settled in, but I’m confident we can give it a good go, at least.”

“As long as you’re sure,” said Thor. It could be hard to read the expressions of fleshy people sometimes, but Korg suspected he was trying not to laugh at him. He didn’t mind. It’d be a waste of breath to try and explain the problems with monarchies to a prince, anyway. Hopefully all of Thor’s descendents would defy probability and be lovely, competent people, and their citizens would never have to live under an imperialist despot.

X

It looked like Brunnhilde was going to remain stuck on Sakaar. Thor was acting like it was a given that she would leave with them. She hadn’t bothered to correct him. Any deliberate attempt she made to leave this planet would have consequences. Whether the Grandmaster was in power or not, it didn’t matter. A little thing like a ship falling on top of him would only be a brief inconvenience. He’d get out eventually, and he’d look for her.

But she could at least make sure Loki made it onto their transport alright. She ought to give Thor a good hard smack around the head with the pommel of her sword for showing up ten seconds too early, not to mention making himself at home at her flat.

Where was their transport, anyway?

X

Natasha had never been in a full-blown battle before, but this one seemed to have gone pretty well. They had achieved their original objectives of taking out Thanos’s lieutenants and their army, and they’d also pulled off a one-day revolution to unseat a global dictator, rescued Loki (who was apparently an entirely different species from Thor, a fact that seemed to be making Thor’s other friends very uncomfortable), and acquired several valuable intelligence assets for future campaigns against Thanos. And she and Clint would bring back quite a haul of alien technology for Fitzsimmons to play with over in R&D, assuming they could keep it out of Hydra’s hands. Not bad for three days’ work.
“Right, Korg says Sakaar will be fine,” said Thor. “We shouldn’t waste any more time. Loki?”

Loki gritted his teeth and flailed one blue, lined hand. There was a green-gold glimmer and the transporter materialized. Between the two of them, they had enough handles to take fourteen back to Asgard. Thor, Hogun, Volstagg, and four of the aliens like Maw gathered around one, while Natasha, Clint, Dr. Banner, Fandral, Sif, Loki, and the Valkyrie surrounded the other. The two remaining aliens had volunteered to stay on Sakaar. They wanted to take Maw’s ship apart and properly honor those whose bodies had been used to make it.

Sif took it upon herself to set the dials to bring them back to the palace on Asgard. The Valkyrie paid her and the device no attention. She was still holding Loki on his feet, but her eyes had found Natasha. “You’re one of the mortals running around with the princes,” she said, looking Natasha over with a distinctly appreciative eye. “Staying at my place and wearing my armor? I don’t usually let a girl get away with either of those things before she’s at least bought me a few drinks, let alone both.”

Natasha heard Clint cough next to her. She smirked without acknowledging him. It looked like Loki’s competitive field might be a little broader than she’d thought. “Yeah, sorry...crashing at your place was Thor’s idea.”

“How did he know where it was?”

“That’s a long story.”

“And the armor?”

“I used it to get into the palace to blow up the mainframe.”

“Not bad.”

“Alright, is everyone ready?” Thor called from his group around the other transporter.

“We’re ready,” said Clint.

“Ready for what?” said the Valkyrie.

Natasha’s gaze was caught by a movement on the other side of the transporter. She thought she’d seen Fandral move his hand towards the rings that set the destination, but by the time she was looking properly, he was merely clutching the handle.

Loki heaved and slapped the Valkyrie’s hand onto a handle before seizing one himself.

“Now!” Thor shouted. They all turned their handles, a gold field shot out to blanket them, and Sakaar spun out from under their feet.

When new surroundings materialized a moment later (complete with blessedly clean-smelling air), there was no sign of the other transporter and they were not inside the palace. It was definitely still Asgard, but they were standing in the middle of a bustling square.

Several people shouted in alarm and a horse about to walk where they had appeared gave a shrill whinny and reared onto its hind legs.

The Valkyrie dropped the handle like it had burned her and stared around in horror. “No, no, no,” she said. “What did you do?” But her reaction was soon drowned by screams and cries of alarm from the Asgardian people.
“Frost Giant!”

“How did it get here?”

“There’s a Frost Giant on Asgard!”

Chapter End Notes

Welp, the cat’s out of the bag. Getting to this point was another reason I was so happy about the Sakaar arc. Now there are consequences! Whee!

No one can convince me that Sif was anything but the BIGGEST, most embarrassing Valkyrie superfan growing up. That’s going to be fun.

Not 100% happy with this chapter, but that’s mostly because there were too many characters in each scene, and a lot of them were having interesting reactions to things that I couldn’t write because it would get repetitive or way too long. Going to Korg’s PoV helped a lot, because he is very silly and isn’t bothered by things anyone else is bothered by.

There is something more than meets the eye to Brunnhilde’s reluctance to leave Sakaar. Looking forward to getting into that stuff.
Barely an hour after Sif, the Warriors Three, and Dr. Banner vanished from the lab, there was another, larger blaze of blue light, and Thor, Hogun, Volstagg, and four gray-skinned, noseless aliens in ragged clothing materialized around one of the transporters. Jane and Erik, who’d been intently studying the tracking device, jumped and almost fell over.

“Hey guys,” said Darcy, looking up from an illuminated book on the history of the nine realms. There wasn’t a lot she could do as Jane’s intern in a place like this, so she’d been spending most of her time (particularly when Fandral wasn’t available to show her around Asgard and make out with her behind pillars) reading about alien history and politics. She was pretty confident she’d be able to persuade her advisor that she deserved a lot more than six credits for this gig. Her professors would kill to get their hands on these books.

“That was fast,” said Jane, before wrinkling her nose. “Why do you smell like dumpster?”

“Sakaar is covered in garbage,” said Thor.

“Aye, I should go wash or I won’t be able to stomach my supper,” said Volstagg, looking down at himself. “Assuming Hildegund even lets me back in the house.” With that, he left the room.

“So everything worked?” said Erik.

“It did,” said Thor. He looked around, frowning. “Where’s the other transporter? We activated them at the same time.”

“Both of the signals left Sakaar,” said Jane. She twisted one of the knobs on the tracker, and a small hologram of Asgard shimmered into view above it. One blue light blinked inside the eastern wing of Gladsheim, where they were, but the other was a few miles to the south, in the middle of a major market square Darcy recognized from one of Fandral’s tours.

“How did they end up all the way over there?” said Erik.

Thor didn’t seem interested in the answer to that question. He growled something in a language Darcy didn’t recognize and said, “Hogun, go alert Lady Eir that Loki needs her. And get my parents if you can, and Lady Gerd.”

“Of course,” said Hogun, but Thor was already dashing for the open balcony and throwing himself over the edge, Myuh-myuh raised high. Hogun ran out the other direction, leaving Darcy, Jane, and Erik alone with the four aliens.

The two groups stared at each other for a few seconds.

“‘Sup?” said Darcy.

X

The two weeks Bruce had spent on Asgard had been some of the most relaxing and interesting of his life. Everything around him was a stunning feat of architecture or craftsmanship, incorporating technology he had never imagined and magic he had never believed possible. The resources at his
fingertips here were incredible, and he didn’t have to work alone or hide himself away. So far, he’d
gotten to know just about everyone who worked in the palace library, the team of royal tailors and
armorers (all of whom had been very excited by the opportunity to design clothing for someone who
could change size so dramatically, and who would be happy to know that their efforts were not
wasted), and several of the palace servants.

His only complaint was a minor one: the Asgardians were so unafraid and unwary of the Other Guy
that he actually had to fend off multiple enthusiastic invitations to spar at the training grounds on a
daily basis. He understood that they were game for a challenge, and he was intrigued by the idea of
the Hulk in a friendly sparring match, but he’d rather they let him come to them when he was ready
to risk it. His overall impression of these people was that they were cheerful, helpful, and welcoming.
He didn’t know if they were that way with everyone or if guests of the royal family were given
special treatment, but they were so earnest that he suspected it was the former.

The way they reacted to the sight of Loki, therefore, came as a surprise. After a few initial screams
and shouts and a scramble to get farther away, a hush fell over the square, and everyone was staring
at the prince. Maybe the outright panic had stopped because of how visibly sick and injured he was.
He obviously wasn’t going to lunge at anyone and attack. Bruce wouldn’t pretend he hadn’t been
shocked when he first saw Loki’s blue skin and ruby-red eyes on Sakaar, but in that coliseum full of
so many different species, he was hardly the strangest sight there. Apparently that wasn’t the case on
Asgard.

Bruce exchanged worried looks with the two SHIELD agents, the only other humans in the square.
He looked at Thor’s friends. Fandral was avoiding meeting anyone’s gaze, and Sif was the opposite,
looking from Loki to various members of the crowd and back. She looked like she was undergoing
an intense inner struggle. The final member of their party, the black woman in leather armor, was still
the only thing keeping Loki from collapsing to the ground, but that seemed more automatic than
anything, because her eyes were unfocused and she was extremely tense. Bruce wasn’t sure she’d
even noticed what was happening with the people around them.

X

Whispers began to rustle through the square, and they quickly grew loud enough for Sif to hear.

“Was there a battle?”

“Is this about what happened at the coronation?”

“Did they try another attack?”

“They may be monsters, but surely they aren’t that foolish.”

One young woman who stood partially concealed by her father’s broad torso piped up, “Lady Sif, is
the Frost Giant your prisoner?”

Sif could feel the weight of every eye in the square upon her as she stared at the girl, then at Loki.
The sight of him was so familiar, yet so terribly strange. She thought of the stories she’d grown up
on. The stories of the war, of what the Jotnar had done to the defenseless mortals, of their dark,
inhospitable world, of their fearsome scarlet eyes, frozen skin, and towering height. To think that
she’d been training and fighting alongside one of them since childhood—that she’d trusted him with
her and her friends’ lives. With Thor’s life.

...But Thor knew. Thor knew that Loki was one of them, and he counted him no less his brother for
it. He had run to embrace him despite his Jotun form. He had praised him for using his powers over
ice to destroy one of their enemies. He had eagerly brought Loki with him to Midgard and Sakaar, treasuring his counsel and help over anyone else’s, and Loki had gone to such extremes in proving Thor right in doing so as to put his own life in danger.

Thor loved Loki, Jotun or not.

Well. That made things very simple.

Sif moved to Loki’s side. The commander still supported him on his left, so Sif drew his limp right arm over her shoulders, suppressing an instinctive flinch when she initially made contact with his skin. “He is no prisoner,” she said loudly. “He is our prince. He and his brother have just returned victorious from a dangerous mission for Asgard and he is unwell. We must get him to Lady Eir’s healing room.”

The crowd reacted with more murmurs, shock, and confusion. Maybe even a little anger. However, Sif’s words (and the additional support for Loki’s weight) seemed to pierce through the commander’s preoccupation. “Oy!” she barked. “You heard her. Clear out of the way and someone send for a longboat!”

It was the first time the people in the crowd had a reason to pay attention to her in particular, and within seconds, Sif could hear at least three voices hissing, “Is that a Dragonfang? Is she a Valkyrie?” This new, exciting possibility helped to break the tension. The people made way for Sif and the commander to carry Loki in the direction of the palace, though they pressed close and craned their necks for a good view of both the Frost Giant and the possible Valkyrie. Fandral picked up the transporter and followed, and the three mortals brought up the rear.

At such close quarters, Loki’s suffering was plain. He winced or groaned feebly at every movement that jarred him and seemed blind and deaf to all that went on around him. His feet trailed on the ground, with him only able to make the most cursory of gestures towards taking his own steps. And all the while, those trails of steam continued to trickle from the markings in his skin—skin that was warm enough to the touch to be worrying for one of the Aesir, let alone a Jotun.

Witnessing him in this state was more distressing than Sif would have expected. Loki should be supplying witty, biting commentary to everything being said or talking circles around them all or finding someone to play one of his tricks on whether they deserved it or not. For him to be rendered so silent and helpless was like the sun suddenly changing its course and moving backwards across the sky. But Eir would sort him out. Yes. He’d be back to his usual infuriating self in no time.

Loki didn’t have to wait for a longboat. They had just gained the upper street when a moving shape appeared above the rooftops in the distance. A few seconds later, Thor dropped down on the cobblestones in front of them. “What went wrong?” he asked, while reaching for his brother. “Our transporter took us straight to the palace. Why did yours bring you here?”

“I don’t know,” said Sif. “I set the destination to Gladsheim.”

“I can take a look at it,” said Banner. “It might just need to be recalibrated after each long trip.”

“Thank you,” said Thor, and he flew off with Loki at top speed.

The longboat arrived shortly thereafter, and they all climbed in. “To the palace, with haste,” Sif told the youthful helmsman.

“Aye, my lady,” he said.

“Do you think Loki’s going to be okay?” said Barton, taking a seat between Romanoff and Banner.
“He looked pretty bad.”

“Eir is the finest healer in Yggdrasil,” said Fandral. “If anyone can help him, she can.”

Sif turned to the Valkyrie. “Commander, you were with him on that ship, weren’t you? You know what they did to him.”

“I already told you, I’m no commander,” she said, scowling. She turned her back firmly to them, facing the approaching palace with arms folded. “Look, if what I know will help, I’ll talk to the healers. But I’m not some long lost heroine of Asgard, so don’t treat me like one.”

Sif wanted to protest. Brunnhilde Sigursdottir was absolutely a heroine of Asgard! A Valkyrie returned to them after a thousand years? It was cause for celebration on a grand scale! Sif had so many questions for her, and she was desperate to see her in battle. Her imagination ran wild. She could picture herself training under Brunnhilde and, if she could prove herself worthy of it, becoming the first in a new generation of Valkyrior. It was what she’d wished for as long as she could remember, only now there was an actual, living Valkyrie standing before her. What had once been nothing but wistful fancy was now possible, and she would give anything she owned to make it reality.

“What kept you hidden away on a place like Sakaar, my lady?” said Fandral.

“That’s my business,” she said, and Sif had never heard a woman (besides maybe herself) be so curt with Fandral the Dashing. “And I’m even less a lady than a commander. Find a different tree to bark up.”

Romanoff erupted in a brief coughing fit, and Sif had to hide a smile of her own at Fandral’s flabbergasted expression.

X

Thor flew into the healing room directly through one of its high, vaulted windows. Hogun had been good to his word, as always. Eir, Frigga, and Gerd, as well as several of Eir’s apprentice healers, were rushing about in preparation for the patient’s arrival.

Frigga was the first to spot them. “Oh, Loki!” she cried, dropping an armful of linens onto a table and running to them. She lifted Loki’s face in her hands. “What happened to him? Hogun could not give us details, and neither could Heimdall.”

“They saw us coming,” said Thor, guilt and shame gnawing at him. “I rushed us in without a real plan and gave Ebony Maw the perfect window to capture him.” They followed Eir’s gestures towards a large copper basin full of ice water, besides which Gerd stood in her Ljosalfr disguise. “I did all I could to get him back safely, but Maw had him for days, and he tortured him. Loki was able to fight back in the end. He thinks that’s what caused this fever.”

Eir waved a hand over Loki, vanishing his armor in a flash of red-gold seidr and leaving him in nothing but his smallclothes. His body was covered in evenly spaced circular bruises that turned his blue skin a much darker, more purplish color. The markings on his face and hands continued all the way up his arms, across his torso, and down his legs, and the steam was coming out there too.

“Into the basin with him, quickly,” said Gerd. Thor helped his mother lower Loki into the water. Loki’s eyes shot open when he hit the surface and he let out a gasp. Thor and Frigga both called out his name automatically, but he didn’t respond. He went limp again as he sank up to his chin in the water, and his eyes rolled back.
“Where is Father?” said Thor, still watching Loki.

“He was in the middle of a Council meeting,” said Frigga. “I don’t know when he’ll be able to get away.”

“Why is all that steam coming out of him?”

“He overloaded his system with heat,” said Gerd. “His body is designed to draw it in, hold it, and use it—not let it back out. It’s trying to do that now, but he’s essentially being cooked from the inside.”

Frigga made a sound like a sob, covering her mouth with one hand and running the fingers of the other through Loki’s disheveled hair.

“We need to get his temperature back down as quickly as possible, and then we can assess how much healing he’ll have to do,” Gerd went on. “The saltwater ice bath will help, and he should only eat frozen things and rehydrate with solid ice until he’s out of danger. Did you see what he was using his frjosleikr on?”

“The bridge of a large spaceship, it looked like,” said Thor. “He brought the whole thing out of the sky.”

Gerd’s mouth fell open.

“How much danger is he in?” said Frigga, tears now shining in her eyes.

“I-it’s hard to say, your majesty.” Gerd looked pale, even by Alfar standards. “I’ve seen it go either way from this stage, and permanent damage is a possibility.”

The door to the healing room flew open. They all looked around. Odin stood framed in the doorway, and he was holding the Casket of Ancient Winters in his hands. “Will this help?”

Chapter End Notes

At first I was sort of at a loss for how to approach this chapter. The crowd scene was another one with way too many characters having interesting reactions to things, and I actually went through each of the six major characters who aren’t currently super out of it from fever to figure out who should have the initial PoV. In the end, Bruce worked best. Nat and Clint are very perceptive, yes, but they were only on Asgard for a couple hours before Thor whisked them away to Sakaar, while Bruce has been there for weeks. He has the best outsider view on how jarring their attitude towards the Jotnar is compared to the way they are about most other things. Brunnhilde and Fandral have their own issues I’ll be dealing with later, and I didn't want to hone in on Sif right away.

Darcy's perspective was another one that I picked after lots of bouncing around looking for the best one to do. I should've figured it out sooner. She's fantastic.

I've been looking forward to dealing with Loki's heritage on a broader scale for a long time. This is the first of my fics where the secret gets beyond the House of Odin. I don't have super specific plans for how it's going to play out, but I think I've gotten my head around how each of the major characters will react. Which brings me to Sif. I have
always adored Sif, but I didn't want to just make her the good guy in this situation because I like her. I thought about this a lot. In canon, she's the most hostile and outspoken against Loki, but that's because it looked like Loki was trying to steal Thor's position as crown prince and was maybe plotting with Asgard's enemies to do it. I wish she would've given him more benefit of the doubt (and she *really* doesn't understand Loki if she interprets his attitude towards Thor as jealousy for his position rather than the way everyone treats him), but it makes sense. The core of Sif's character, for better or worse, is her absolute loyalty to Thor. In this situation, the clearest way for her to be loyal to Thor was to join him on Team Loki, regardless of her legitimate grievances with him and her less legitimate bigotry against his species.
Revisionism

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The past fortnight had brought many surprises and given Gerd much to consider. In the decades that followed the Aesir-Jotnar war, the people of Alfheim had waited nervously, wondering if the thousands of refugee *skamrbarn* they had helped escape persecution on Jotunheim and welcomed into their homes and families would make them a target of Asgard’s desire for vengeance. The towering, faceless Jotun soldiers who dragged Gerd from her adoptive parents’ home in her childhood nightmares were replaced in her early adolescence by gold-armored Einherjar.

When nothing ever happened and Asgard had remained Alfheim’s ally, the terrifying visions gradually faded, but their specter had continued to hover over her. They had made her and Freyr’s courtship somewhat difficult in the beginning, for even though he was one of the Vanir, he was in the extended family of Asgard’s queen. Gerd had humored him for the first year or so, but his sweet charm and sunny demeanor were increasingly difficult to resist. She knew she was in very great danger of falling in love with him, so she tried to frighten him away with the truth of her species. She’d told him what she was, and he had defied all her expectations by claiming not to care and trying to kiss her. Unable to accept it, she flung her shapeshifting pendant in his face, giving him a good look at what she really was, then jumped on her horse and fled.

She hadn’t gotten as far as the edge of her parents’ land before he caught up to her. With a gentleness she would never forget, he wiped away her tears and made her a promise.

“My lady, whether you be Gerd of Alfheim or of Jotunheim, my heart is yours now and forever. If Yggdrasil is truly not safe for us, I will forsake my lands and title and take you somewhere you can wear your own skin freely.” Then he tilted his head and smiled that big, earnest smile that made his nose scrunch up like a schoolboy’s. “I hear good things about the Nova Empire.”

She still couldn’t fathom what she had done to deserve such a good man, but she had known right then that she would never let him go. They were wed before the end of the month, and he’d hadn’t given her the smallest reason to doubt him in centuries of marriage.

They had not needed to flee Yggdrasil. Vanaheim proved surprisingly tolerant. She wore her pendant whenever she wasn’t at home as a precaution, but the people living under Freyr’s charge had welcomed her and the improved trade access with Alfheim that she brought them. Freyr made sure she was able to visit her parents regularly, and they had gone on multiple trips to faraway realms where nobody knew or cared about the reputation of Jotunheim.

As happy as she was with Freyr, Gerd had worried about what life would be like for any children they had. Marriages between Ljosalfar and Jotnar were common enough that their offspring cheekily styled themselves the Frjosalfar or ice elves, but as far as she knew, mixing Vanr and Jotun blood had never been done before. Miraculously, Fjolnir’s childhood had been blissfully free of worries about prejudice and the whims of more powerful realms. Some of that was, no doubt, a consequence of his having inherited Freyr’s irresistibly cheerful disposition. He had his Vanir friends on Vanaheim and Ljosalfar, Jotnar, and Frjosalfar friends on Alfheim. He saw the whole thing as a great game, wearing his pendant outside their manor, having a secret that only his family knew. She dreaded the day it stopped being fun for him.

When Odin’s invitation came and included Gerd and Fjolnir, Freyr had been reluctant. Asgard was
one place he had never taken her, and certainly not their son. However, Gerd had thought it best to obey quickly so that they could leave quickly. Between Asgard’s Gatekeeper and the throne Hlidskjalf, Odin was able to see much more than the other realms liked, but there had been no indication so far that he was aware of her origins.

That first morning in the royal breakfast room, when Loki asked her about Jotunheim, she’d thought all her old nightmares were about to come true, and that she and Fjolnir would soon be locked in the dungeons, perhaps to be used as symbols for a campaign against Alfheim. Instead, she was let into a bewildering secret: of all people, Odin Borson had adopted a skamrbarn child, just like her parents had. Not only were she and Fjolnir safe on Asgard, they had the privilege of giving the second prince instruction on his Jotun nature and abilities. It was extraordinary, and it hadn’t occurred to her for a second to refuse (even if there may have been a certain amount of bitterness in the way she had designed her instruction).

The time she’d spent with Loki and his family had left her with a far pleasanter view of the four most powerful people in the realms, yet even after weeks of this, she still would never have imagined that she would witness the Allfather bringing out his terrible weregild from the war to treat a frjosleikr fever. Loki was too far gone to recognize any of them or move on his own, so to keep his hands wrapped around the handles of the Casket, Ódin and Frigga had to crouch on either side of the copper basin hold his fingers in place.

The power of the Casket was palpable even before it made contact with his skin. Its icy blue light radiated a sense of rightness, of home so strong that Gerd wanted to weep. Images of her birth parents swirled in her mind’s eye, their large, kind faces coming into far sharper focus than she’d been able to picture for a long time. The room grew refreshingly cold, and she felt the magic holding her Ljosalfr form together weakening. She fought the impulse to throw her pendant aside and soak it in. There were too many unfamiliar Aesir eyes here.

X

The day the most powerful military force in the galaxy discovered one of its princes had secretly been adopted from an enemy world was an exciting day for Earth to send two of its best spies to the interplanetary stage. Between Sakaar and the politics of Asgard, Natasha’s report for this mission was going to be her longest by far.

Their flying longboat took a few minutes to reach the palace. The young man steering it brought it up next to the final set of steps leading to the high golden doors. Fandral gallantly offered a hand to Natasha to help her disembark. She accepted with a smile. She knew exactly who her target would be if she ever needed more information than Asgard was willing to share openly. Based on his come-on to the Valkyrie and the way he interacted with Dr. Foster’s intern, he would be an almost insultingly easy mark. Thor’s attitude and his heartfelt trust in herself and Clint might mean she’d never have to go there, but it was a good redundancy.

Sif led the way inside, the Valkyrie following with obvious reluctance.

“Shall we go to the laboratory?” said Fandral, addressing Dr. Banner and tapping the transporter with a finger.

“That can wait, can’t it?” said Dr. Banner a little uncertainly. “Shouldn’t we go see how Loki’s doing first?”

“Yes, of course,” said Sif. “Don’t you want to come and wish Loki well?”

“You know what Eir is like,” said Fandral. His tone was casual but his posture was stiff. “If we bring
too much extra traffic into her healing hall, she’ll toss us out on our ears hard enough that we’ll have to go right back in for treatment.”

“Then we will simply do our best not to be underfoot,” said Sif. “Eir should hear the comm—er, Brunnhilde’s account of what happened to him as soon as possible, in any case.” She was clearly uncomfortable addressing the other woman by anything less than her military title.

They didn’t go up the sweeping staircases that curved high into a double helix above them, but instead stepped onto a circular platform that sat between the bottom stairs. It was about fifteen meters across and had a thin, raised pedestal in the center. Sif poked at something on this pedestal, and a golden net made of the same patterns in the burn marks left by the Bifrost and the protective barrier that enclosed them when they used the transporters shot up around the edges of the platform, fading out at a point about three times their height. The platform began to move upward. So Asgard did have elevators. That was a relief, considering the size of the palace.

Clint stretched out a hand and carefully touched one finger to the golden barrier. It flared a little brighter and remained inflexible, but did nothing to him.

“Okay so what’s the deal with Loki?” said Dr. Banner, who must already be used to this kind of technology after the time he’d spent here. “Why were all those people out there freaking out about him? What’s a Frost Giant? Aren’t you guys used to seeing all kinds of aliens?”

Fandral looked at him in surprise. “Do your people not remember?” he said. “It was barely over a thousand years ago that the Jotnar invaded your realm.”

“Whoa, what?” said Clint, tearing his gaze away from the landings they were passing and the glimpses they were getting of the different levels. “Earth was invaded by an alien species?”

“Yes, the Frost Giants opened portals to your subarctic region.” said Sif. “Their bid to conquer the realm was brief and ill-fated. This all happened before Fandral or I were born, but you should hear the veterans of the war talk about what the Jotnar did to the mortals in their path before Asgard could intervene.”

She shot a glance at Brunnhilde, as though hopeful she would launch into one of her own war stories. Brunnhilde, however, showed no interest in the conversation at all. She was watching floor after floor of fabulous architecture pass them by as though the sight of it all made her ill. Natasha got the feeling that Thor and Loki maybe should have asked her if she wanted to come back to Asgard before bringing her along.

“Odin led the charge of the Einherjar and Valkyrior,” Sif continued. The platform slowed after about the seventh level and came to a halt at another landing. The golden field parted in front of it, and they stepped off into a long, vaulted corridor with more pillars and intricate gold knotwork in the smooth black floor. “They forced the Jotnar back to Jotunheim within the first two years, but once the battle was on the Jotnar’s frozen turf it became much more treacherous, and the war continued another thirty-nine years before we had King Laufey’s surrender.”

“Yet barely a year after the truce was signed, a ‘rogue’ faction of Jotnar launched an attack upon Asgard itself,” said Fandral. His tone suggested he had strong doubts that there had been anything rogue about them. “That one attack cost us more dearly than the entire war. Einherjar who were just settling in to enjoy the peace they fought for were slaughtered at their homes. Noble houses were destroyed. Even members of the Allfather’s Council were slain, my uncle included. The only reason the invasion couldn’t do even worse damage was the sacrifice of the Valkyrior. They gave their lives to end the invasion before it could get even worse. Well, all but one, it seems.”
“Damn, that’s got to be rough,” said Clint, looking at Brunnhilde with grim sympathy.

Brunnhilde realized that everyone else was looking at her and tried to piece together what they’d been saying. It was no good. Her mind had been too focused on the fact that she could encounter the Allfather at any moment, and she didn’t know what she would do when that happened. Scream at him, lunge at him with her Dragonfang, or simply wait for him to order her executed...they all had their merits. She frowned irritably. “What did you just say?”

“We were telling the mortals of the war with Jotunheim,” said the blond dandy. He looked very somber and respectful. “And...how the Valkyrior fell defending Asgard from an attempted Jotun invasion after the truce was signed.”

“What?” said Brunnhilde, freezing in her tracks. She barely felt it when the dark-haired mortal walked right into her. “We didn’t fall to any bloody Frost Giants. What the Hel are you talking about?”

The two young warriors looked stunned. “But...everyone older than us saw it happen,” said the black-haired woman. “There’s even a memorial statue at the aeries of a Valkyrie and a Jotun trading mortal wounds.”

Brunnhilde stared at her. For a few bewildering seconds, she thought the whole realm must’ve gone mad, but then reality sank in. Her hands balled into fists so tight that her nails cut into her palms. Odin. He couldn’t just take the shame of his people knowing that their beloved Valkyrior had fallen in battle against his own daughter, or that he had failed to prevent it. No, it was much more convenient to blame the nearest enemy instead. Had Hela’s loyalists even been punished, or had they, like everyone else, simply had their minds altered to suit this narrative? She didn’t know how a child adopted from Jotunheim factored into all this. Maybe Odin didn’t really consider him an heir, and he was simply a hostage to keep Laufey quiet about the slander.

She said nothing else to the others for the rest of the walk to the healing hall, unconcerned that her glower had cast an awkward pall over the group. Everything was just the same as the last time she’d been here. She’d expected it to be different. How could it not be, after what had happened? But of course it hadn’t changed. Odin hadn’t allowed it to.

If she were one of the Einherjar’s berserkers, she might’ve gone on a rampage right then and there, but the Valkyrior had prided themselves on their control. It wasn’t self-preservation that stopped her. She hadn’t cared about that since that day on Niflheim. Whether leaving Sakaar caught up to her or she met her fate here on Asgard, she was going to give that old bastard a taste of what justice was like when not defined by him first.

Thor watched Loki anxiously. He didn’t know anything about how Jotun illnesses or the Casket of Ancient Winters worked, but surely this couldn’t hurt, at least. A few seconds after his parents clasped Loki’s hands to its handles, they both winced. If the healing room was getting this cold so quickly, then maybe direct contact with Loki’s skin was dangerous right now. They didn’t let go. Gold light began to shine from their fingers, and their expressions smoothed back to steely determination. The steam drifting from Loki’s markings thinned, then stopped entirely. The water in the basin began to rise higher, which seemed strange at first, until Thor realized that it was merely expanding in a kind of reverse avalanche as it froze into slush.

At the point when it began to spill over the rim, Loki groaned and opened his eyes. “Mother?
Father?” he said. His words were slurred and sluggish. “Where’m I? Whass going on?”

“You’re home, darling,” said Frigga, squeezing his hand. “You’re home and you’re safe.”

“Try to rest,” said Odin. “It seems you’ve squeezed quite an exhausting few days out of the hour since I last saw you.”

Loki gave a faint nod. His eyes fell closed again, but this time it was in a peaceful sort of way. Thor let out a slow breath. His brother was going to be alright.

“Prince Thor!”

Thor jumped and looked around at Eir, whose attention was no longer exclusively for Loki. “What?” he said. He felt vaguely like he was a little boy again, being scolded for doing something dangerous.

“What have you done to your arm?” she demanded.

He looked down at it. It was covered in dried, crusted blood and still bleeding from the deep gash in it. “Oh,” he said. “Got cut. I won, though.”

Eir waved one her apprentices closer and together they marched him over to a cot and forced him to sit so they could get better access to his wound. Within moments, they had vanished the scale mail all the way from shoulder plates to bracer, cleaned his arm, smeared a stinging purple cream over the cut, sealed it shut with strands of seidr, and bandaged it. All the while, Eir muttered a familiar tirade about what Asgard would come to with princes who had such little regard for their own safety. He could see his mother fighting back laughter, and even Odin raised an eyebrow at him as if to say that the healer had a point.

The door opened, and Sif, Fandral, Brunnhilde, Romanoff, Barton, and Banner all filed inside. The humans recoiled a bit from the unexpected cold, while Sif and Fandral immediately put fist to heart (Fandral a little awkwardly, as he was still carrying the transporter), bowed their heads, and murmured, “Your majesties.”

Frigga gave them a nod to dispel the formalities, and they straightened. Brunnhilde, though, didn’t move a muscle to acknowledge the presence of her king and queen. Thor hoped no one else had noticed.

“How fares the prince?” said Sif. She made a funny face when she saw Loki, who now looked like he’d fallen asleep in the middle of a snowdrift, only his hands and head poking out of it. Thor had to admit it was an amusing sight.

“Thanks to our king’s quick thinking, he may already be out of danger,” said Eir. She shot a questioning glance at Gerd, who nodded.

Sif looked relieved. She smiled at Thor, who smiled back. He hadn’t expected such a show of solidarity from her after their last conversation about Loki, but he was very glad of it.

“How fares the prince?” said Sif. She made a funny face when she saw Loki, who now looked like he’d fallen asleep in the middle of a snowdrift, only his hands and head poking out of it. Thor had to admit it was an amusing sight.

“Thanks to our king’s quick thinking, he may already be out of danger,” said Eir. She shot a questioning glance at Gerd, who nodded.

Sif looked relieved. She smiled at Thor, who smiled back. He hadn’t expected such a show of solidarity from her after their last conversation about Loki, but he was very glad of it.

“Lady Eir, I was captured by Thanos’s man alongside Prince Loki, and we were held in the same cell.” said Brunnhilde. “I can tell you what I know of his condition.”

Odin went very still at the sound of her voice and turned slowly to meet her gaze. The atmosphere in the room shifted. Even the humans seemed to feel it, for they all made uncomfortable movements and looked at each other. It was impossible for Thor to tell what his father was thinking, but Brunnhilde looked both sober and quietly furious. From his experience, that was not a good combination.
“Y-yes,” said Eir with a nervous glance at Odin. “The more information we have about what happened to him, the easier our job will be.”

Odin stood, leaving the Casket to rest atop the newly formed mound of slush, with Frigga still supporting Loki’s hand on the other handle. “Thor, come,” he said. “I would hear your part of what happened on Sakaar. Loki can tell me the rest when he is well. Lady Sif, Fandral, escort the mortals to the laboratory.”

“Yes, Allfather,” they said in unison, putting fist to heart and bowing again. Romanoff, Barton, and Banner went with them, casting questioning glances back at Thor. He tried to look reassuring.

“Commander,” said Odin when they were gone.

“Allfather.”

There was a pause in which nobody in the room breathed.

“Come to the throne room in an hour,” said Odin. “I believe there is much for us to discuss.”

Brunnhilde gave a jerky nod.

As Thor accompanied his father from the healing hall, he wondered if maybe bringing the last Valkyrie home to an Asgard still under Odin’s rule had been a bad idea.

Chapter End Notes

I did not expect that writing a PoV scene for my sort-of OC Gerd was going to have me tearing up, but it totally did. Getting into her head at the beginning of the chapter seemed like an effective way to set the stage for delving into more political stuff.

If you think about it (and I have, a lot), for Odin to erase Hela from his people's memories, he'd have needed to make satisfactory cover stories for big things she was involved in, like the mass slaughter of the realm's most elite warriors. Maybe he could have invented an entirely unknown villain to pin that on, but the option that creates the fewest tricky variables is to take the people Asgard already doesn't like because of the war they just fought against them and blame them for it. Just, in a way that doesn't immediately restart the war.

Now, if it seems weird that Thor and Loki have never made any comments about the implications of this cover story in the entire fic, it's because this idea only occurred to me when I was writing this chapter. I'm not too annoyed with myself, though, because it kind of works. Thor already processed the Hela reveal before he came back in time, and he did it on a ship of the Asgardians who managed to escape a far worse slaughter than when she killed the Valkyrior. Also, Odin was already dead. I don't think it would have occurred to Thor to think about this stuff. Even Brunnhilde probably didn't see much point in bringing it up. And this timeline's Loki has been dealing with much more personal problems. Odin and Frigga didn't volunteer this information when Thor was wringing truth out of them because he didn't ask. But get a Valkyrie in the same room with Odin and it's going to come out.

These characters are taking me to some really interesting places. I can't believe I started
out thinking I wouldn't be able to come up with anything worth writing in this timeline beyond that first chapter.

A note on a writing detail I feel disproportionately proud of: Natasha is Russian. As such, she thinks in metric, which is why she mentally measured the elevator platform in meters. (I'm also very proud of that elevator. It looks so cool in my head, and I hope you guys can picture it. That's definitely something I can't do justice by attempting to draw it.)

I realized like a day after I posted the previous chapter that I'd missed the perfect opportunity to use "Get Help" as a chapter title. *facepalm* Oh well. Maybe there'll be another chance for that.
“And he did this for hours at a time, twice?” said Eir, appalled.

“Yes,” said Brunnhilde. Brief glances in the direction of the queen indicated that the other woman would have gladly torn Ebony Maw limb from limb had he still lived. “There was no blood, but Prince Loki had no strength afterward and could barely move, and the ship…” She trailed off with an involuntary shudder. “It felt wrong. I don’t have any talent for seidr myself and being on board was bad enough for me. He was trying not to show it, but I think it was much worse for him, particularly when he tried to do magic. We were also never fed the entire time we were Maw’s prisoners.”

“When did the prince use his frjosleikr?” said the blonde elf. “His ice powers, that is,” she elaborated.

“Maw dragged us out of the brig so that he could force Loki to watch him use the ship’s weapons against Thor down on the ground. Loki must’ve thought there was a chance that the ship wouldn’t affect his Jotun abilities the way it did his seidr. He transformed and attacked. His form was awkward, but it got the job done. Maw didn’t have a chance to fire off so much as a single shot, and the ice crippled the ship’s power source.”

Frigga bent and kissed Loki’s forehead and continued stroking his hair, her eyes shining with pride. Brunnhilde had to concede that the queen, at least, was sincere in considering him her child, but maybe that was a given for the Goddess of Motherhood. She was less willing to grant the same to Odin, despite the affecting scene she’d witnessed upon arriving at the healing room. Frigga caught her gaze before she could look away. “Were you only an observer in all this, my dear?” she said.

Brunnhilde shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “I took out the Sakaaran soldiers Maw had with him on the bridge. Their attention was on Loki, but they never had the chance to attack.”

There was a knowing look in Frigga’s eye that made Brunnhilde’s stomach squirm. The way she felt about Loki— if she felt anything about Loki, which she was trying not to dwell on—was private, and there was no point examining it further in light of the confrontation about to take place in the throne room.

“Thank you,” said Frigga, inclining her head. “You have Asgard’s gratitude for the life of its prince, and you have a mother’s gratitude for having her son safely returned to her.”

A rustle from the windowsill closest to Loki drew Brunnhilde’s gaze, and she caught a glimpse of black tail feathers before the bird could fly completely out of sight. “Yeah, well,” she said, the squirming feeling intensifying. “He saved my life first.”

After she had answered Eir, Frigga, and the elf lady’s questions to their satisfaction, she turned to go. One of the apprentice healers took the opportunity to hurry up to her and politely but firmly hint that she should take the remainder of the time given her by the king to wash up and make herself presentable. A palace servant joined in and suggested she check the palace armory to see if they had something more suitable for her to wear for an audience with the Allfather.

She brushed them both off, but as soon as she was sure she was out of their line of sight, she did
head for the armory.

Her first instinct had been to force Scrapper 142 upon Asgard, complete with the powerful aroma of Sakaar (not that she’d been able to smell it for several centuries), and watch them all squirm to see how far one of their own could fall. She’d changed her mind. If Odin wanted to put her on trial, perhaps for desertion as Loki had suggested, then he would have to pronounce his sentence upon Commander Brunnhilde Sigursdottir of the Second Wing.

X

“So quick to praise your friends,” said Odin when Thor paused for breath after a thorough explanation of the crucial reconnaissance Barton and Romanoff had done to make their final operation on Sakaar possible. “The Thor of a month ago would have done little but boast of his own achievements. Are you so changed, or were you merely a bystander to the mortals’ endeavors?”

Thor grimaced, both at the memory of his arrogant younger self and at the several ways he had proven more of a hindrance than a help on Sakaar. “I was a fool,” he said. “If it hadn’t been for Loki and my friends—and the second transporter catching up to us when we needed reinforcements most—I doubt I could have salvaged our quest from my own mistakes. I placed too much value in my previous experiences on Sakaar. I gave no thought to the resources we might need or how we would acquire them, it didn’t occur to me that the strange flow of time on Sakaar could impact our plans, and I forgot that the people of Earth have no magic or technology that permits easy communication with speakers of foreign tongues.”

“Your humility and recognition of your own errors do you great credit, my boy,” said Odin, laying a hand on Thor’s shoulder. “These are qualities a wise king needs, but that does not mean your triumphs should count for nothing. Come, you already told us in the healing room that you won the battle that gave you that wound. Tell me more.”

Thor described the plans they’d made with Korg, the rousing speech he made to the people using the nameless tongue, and the way he took as long as he could in the battle to give Barton and Romanoff enough time to free the slaves. Then he spoke about the full-blown battle, Maw’s ship falling from the sky, and retrieving Loki, the Valkyrie, and Maw’s kinsmen from it.

“I’ll arrange for quarters for our new guests,” said Odin. “It seems Maw forced them into quite the harrowing ordeal. We’ll let them settle in before questioning them about Thanos.”

“Agreed,” said Thor. He teetered on the verge of keeping his thoughts to himself, but he had to ask the question that had been eating at him since this discussion began. “Why did you call Brunnhilde to the throne room?”

“How else am I to proceed when one of my top military officers returns after being presumed dead for a millennium?” said Odin. He then firmly changed the subject before Thor could ask anything else. “Now, this victory should be marked with a feast. We’ll open the palace to the public, of course. I still need to discuss Thanos with the Council before bringing the matter to the people, but I do think this will be the perfect occasion to formalize our closer ties to Midgard.”

“Wha—really?” said Thor.

“I was skeptical before, but Agents Barton and Romanoff have displayed remarkable resourcefulness, intelligence, and adaptability that more than offset their mortal limitations, just as the band of scientists have brought fresh perspective and ingenuity in their work with our smiths and engineers. With minds and talents like these at its disposal, it will not be long before Midgard finds its own way out of isolation. Asgard should not miss this opportunity to be the hand that guides it
It was possible that his father was imagining that hand to be less friendly and more controlling, but Thor still considered it an improvement over his dismissive attitude during the Convergence.

“Now go clean yourself up,” said Odin, giving Thor’s shoulder a slap. “You smell worse than a bilgesnipe den at high summer.”

Brunnhilde walked into the throne room in full Valkyrie armor, her hair braided in Valkyrie battle style, her Dragonfang sheathed on her back. It was almost like the last thousand years had been a dream, and she was merely off to the Council chambers to discuss strategy for defending Vanaheim from raiders.

She expected to find guards waiting at the door and standing by every column when she reached the throne room. She expected to be made to hand over her weapons. However, no one greeted her at the high doors, and when she stepped inside, her footsteps echoed across a deserted hall.

At first, she thought nothing had changed here either, but that wasn’t entirely true.

When she glanced up at the ceiling, she saw that the painting of Odin and Frigga’s wedding was now a family portrait that included their adult sons. The figures in the celebration scenes had also changed to include the four who’d been on Sakaar for the battle. The only ones that were the same were Gladsheim and the Bifrost, Odin with his arms encompassing nine spheres that represented the nine realms, and the one that had only been freshly painted the last time she was here: Odin and Laufey signing the truce to end the Aesir-Jotnar war.

She walked to the bottom of the golden stairs leading to Hlidskjalf, where Odin sat, Gungnir in hand. His attention was on the raven perched on the left armrest, whose feathers he was affectionately stroking. It croaked and took flight when she came to a halt. Odin followed its progress for a moment before finally looking at her.

She didn’t bow. It was the third time she had failed to do so, but still he made no comment about it.

“What, no audience for my trial?” she said.

“You think this is a trial?”

She shrugged. “Aren’t I a deserter? An oathbreaker?”

“At first glance, perhaps, though I have it on good authority that you saved my son’s life on Sakaar.”

Damn nosy birds. “That wasn’t about an oath,” she muttered gruffly. She didn’t need him starting up with that too. This was exactly why she always tried not to meet the parents of anyone she fancied.

“Even so, if I had let you and your shield-sisters do the same a thousand years ago, they would likely still be here.”

Brunnhilde stared at him, incredulous. He was admitting it?

He offered a thin, wry smile. “No, your ears do not deceive you, Brunnhilde Sigursdottir. You see, it is not you who has much to answer for this day. Speak your mind.”
“You would not like what’s in my mind.”

“A king who can only hear that which pleases him is a fool.”

Brunnhilde’s eyes flared. He could spout a proverb like that with a straight face when he was the reason his own people had pleasant lies for memories?

She wanted to lunge at him where he sat, press her Dragonfang into his throat, and scream at him. “And what if speaking wouldn’t be enough?” she said.

“Perhaps that is what I deserve,” said Odin.

The armor and the hair felt like such a lie all of a sudden. She might look the part of a respected commander of the Valkyrior again, but she wasn’t. That woman could have come down upon Odin in righteous fury, but her fallen sisters couldn’t have had a worse representative in the person she’d become—a person who would sell weaker, innocent beings into slavery just to keep the liquor flowing. To keep the Grandmaster happy enough that he didn’t decide to trade his brother’s “gift” for a different one.

She never would have become that person if it hadn’t been for Odin, but it didn’t change the fact that she had.

“Why did you send us there?” she asked.

The years might not have touched her on Sakaar, but they had taken more than their usual toll on the Allfather. He seemed to crumple in on himself. “That order,” he said, “was the gravest tactical error of my entire reign.”

“If you know that, then why did you give it?” The question had tormented her in the early years, before she had drowned it in alcohol. Now she found that it was still there, and surprisingly strong. Images from that battle, which she had kept buried for so long, were trying to creep up on her now. They’d thought they were prepared. They’d known what Hela could do, but she was alone and limited to battling on foot. They could surround her by air as well as on the ground. Brunnhilde forced the memories back down. She didn’t want to watch them die again. “We didn’t stand a chance against Hela, so why did you send us to fight her? Clearly you were capable of defeating her, if you’re still here and she’s not. Why didn’t you fight with us?”

Her chest heaved and angry tears blurred her view of Odin. She brushed them impatiently aside. She wanted to see his face.

“I stayed on Asgard,” said Odin, “because Hela’s supporters had already killed one of my sons, and they weren’t going to stop there.”

Brunnhilde’s next accusing question died on her lips.

Odin swallowed. He looked like he was in terrible pain, and she was too shocked to be glad over it. “They infiltrated the ranks of our trusted servants during the war with Jotunheim. They poisoned him gradually while Frigga was still pregnant.”

“Then…,” she began slowly. “Then there was another child.” She had wondered how Thor seemed to only have one younger sibling when all of Asgard had known of Frigga’s second pregnancy and celebrated the prospect of the coming prince or princess as the war drew to a close. Loki was obviously a full-blooded Jotun, so, she reasoned, either the entire pregnancy had been a ruse, or...

Odin’s features creased with an old grief. “It was cleverly done,” he said. “They used the extract of a
rare strain of mistletoe. Barely an inconvenience to an adult, untraceable if administered in small enough doses. Frigga never realized anything was amiss until the birth. Even Eir believed our little Baldur died of natural causes.

“You didn’t tell anyone,” Brunnhilde realized. “You just pretended that baby was Loki all along, which would have made the conspirators think their plan had failed.”

He nodded. “They were much more reckless on their second attempt. They might have succeeded had Frigga not gone to the nursery in the middle of the night and found the traitorous servant there, holding a dagger.”

“You didn’t know who else might be an operative for Hela,” said Brunnhilde hollowly. “You stayed behind to protect your sons.” She’d known about the assassination attempt on the princes, of course. Everyone had. But they’d assumed that was the first and only attempt. When the Hela loyalists moved into the open, it all happened so fast that she had never known where it started.

“Yes,” said Odin. “There were palace guards involved as well, and high-ranking Einherjar who once fought under Hela’s command. They attacked the royal quarters with as much force as they guarded the sorcerers opening the shadow gate.”

“You could have set us to protect your family,” said Brunnhilde, her anger flaring up again. “We would have fought to the death to keep them safe, and it actually would have meant something!”

“I know,” said Odin. He looked older than ever. “The Valkyrior opposed Hela’s vision for Asgard before I did, when speaking out against her was dangerous. It was never a question of your loyalty—or your capabilities. I simply miscalculated. I thought I severed Hela from the power of my line when I exiled her to Niflheim, but I underestimated how much of that power comes from the support of the people, not merely Asgard as a physical place. With those people in open rebellion, her power was at its peak.”

Then Odin had not coldly and knowingly sent them to their deaths. A piece of the betrayal and resentment she had carried with her all this time splintered off and fell away, but there was still the lie he had told to smooth all of this over. And she realized something else, too. “She’s still alive, isn’t she? After all that, you still didn’t kill her.”

“I meant to. If she’d had any part in Baldur’s death or the assassination attempt on Thor and Loki, I may have gone through with it.”

“So instead you made everyone forget about her.”

“In one move, I broke her power and wiped away the unrest on Asgard. All for the price of setting up her supporters as martyrs alongside your sisters and vilifying my new son’s already defeated kin.”

There was a bitter taste in Brunnhilde’s mouth. “Was it worth it?”

“To avoid civil war and prevent Hela’s escape?” said Odin. “Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve really been enjoying all the reviews from readers connecting the dots of upcoming story elements. Some of the hints I’ve been dropping have been pretty small or it's been
a while since they came up, but you guys are so sharp. I love it. And some of you also have cool ideas for things I hadn't really thought about, which give me all kinds of inspiration.

I do not envy Odin at all. He's been in some tight corners (arguably of his own making, but still) with not a lot of great ways out, and now the chickens are heading back to the roost.

Writing this chapter was really interesting. This was kind of the reverse of how it went writing Thor's confrontation with Odin, in which I thought he'd be calm but he ended up shouting and causing a thunderstorm. I went into this loosely planning for Brunnhilde to get so angry that she'd be actively contemplating regicide. I even thought it might be cool if she lunged at him, only for it to turn out that Frigga had been lurking nearby under a veil and she would leap out to defend him, but when I was working on that scene, Brunnhilde just never got worked up to that point. I think the key element is her self-loathing. It's a quality I think Odin shares to a certain degree, so there's an odd camaraderie to their interactions. She understands him better than she wants to, and finding out why things happened the way they did doesn't really make things better. It's easier to have a malicious villain to blame, but Odin's just a flawed man trying to do right by his family and kingdom.

When I first wrote the chapters where Frigga and Odin told Loki the truth about his heritage, I had no plans for baby Baldur's death to be the result of foul play, but it fit so perfectly into the goals and methods of the Hela loyalists that I had to do it. This is another thing Frigga and Odin didn't feel the need to mention, because it wasn't directly connected to the matter of how Loki came to be part of the family and they had no idea about the Hela loyalists' involvement until a while after Baldur died.

We'll get back to some fall-out of the Loki situation soon.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!