Stars, Hide Your Fires
by charlottelennox

Summary

There is no pain. It should have hurt - falling into the void was meant to rip apart his body and mind - and Loki is disappointed that it does not. He deserves to be obliterated, to be shred, screaming, limb from limb. He has failed to murder the monsters of his origin, so he instead must murder himself. It is the only way to claw out the evil thing that lives beneath.

It is supposed to be quiet. The vacuum of the cosmos sucks out all sound, but Loki hears movement, hears the murmur of voices and the heavy shifting of pacing boots. If there is no pain, he should at least be suspended, weightless and falling free, but his bones feel heavy and the air around him charged with tension. Loki becomes aware that one of the voices he hears is Thor’s, and that is when it hits him with sickening clarity that he is not dead.

Post-Thor 1. Loki falls from the BiFrost, but Odin intervenes and saves him before he can fall too far and is lost. Afterward, Loki, Thor, and their parents must deal with the fallout of the events of Thor 1. Deals with mental health issues, suicidal attempt and ideation, and self-harm. Please heed these trigger warnings.

Notes

This began from a prompt filled on Tumblr which was simply "Loki wakes up in a hospital to find an angry Thor nearby," and I ended up with a whole AU. Because, apparently, that's what I do. Trigger warning/content warning for mental health issues, suicide attempt and ideation, and self-harm. Alternating POVs between Loki and Thor.

Stars, Hide Your Fires
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Character: Loki (Marvel), Thor (Marvel), Odin (Marvel), Frigga (Marvel), Eir (Marvel)
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Title comes from Macbeth, Act I, Scene 4:

_That is a step_
_On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,_
_For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires;_
_Let not light see my black and deep desires._

See the end of the work for more notes.
Part I: The Fall

Loki dangles above an abyss. He feels weightless and light, dizzy at the sheer *nothingness* that awaits him below. His fingers grip Gungnir desperately and above him, Thor’s face is twisted, contorted with anguish. *Loki,* his eyes plead, but all Loki can see is his own defeat, mirrored in the Allfather’s eye. Loki has a moment to look wildly around him, at the destruction of the bridge and the collapse of the BiFrost. The jagged edges of the shattered bridge jut out into the black. Loki dangles off the edge of the world and his heart has already fallen down into the void below.

“I could have done it, Father!” Loki cries, tearing his gaze away from the bridge. He looks up at Odin, desperation causing his voice to waver. Loki wishes to shout his intent for all of the Nine Realms to hear: that he could have succeeded, he could have proven himself a worthy son of Odin. He could have killed the monsters, saved Asgard once and for all. He is on fire, his bones alight with frenzy. He had been so close, glory and honor within his grasp - until Thor had come and snatched it away. “I could have done it for you! For all of us!”

Odin’s expression fills with a disappointment that Loki feels from the inside out. His displeasure claws inside of Loki’s limbs, rendering his soul to ash. “No, Loki,” Odin says softly, so softly - his voice is a balm but the words fall like the splintered edges still cracking off of the rainbow bridge, each bit sharper than the last.

They cut his heart into ribbons.

Loki has never felt so simultaneously frantic yet hollow. He wants to crawl out of his skin; he wants to tear his hair out and scream and scream until he has no voice left; he wants to sob and rage and *die,* Norns, please, please, put his wretched soul out of its misery, for he is *nothing.*

Thor realizes a split-second before Loki acts. “Loki, no!” he bursts out, but he is too late; Loki’s fingers open, letting go. He hears Thor’s anguished wail, sees horror flicker across Odin’s features - and then there is nothing, for he is falling to the black. *Norns, let it be swift,* he prays, and closes his eyes. It is the last thing he remembers.

Panic like Thor has never known surges through his entire body like an electric shock. He kicks wildly at his father’s iron grip around his boot, ready to dive into the abyss after Loki, only faintly
aware that the anguished screams that are throbbing in his ears are his own.

Thor feels himself wrenched backwards and he sails, weightless and tumbling, back onto the safety of the rainbow bridge. He slams into the crystalline surface so hard that he feels every bone in his body scream in protest. In a split-second, he is scrambling to his feet, diving again toward the edge of the bridge, but Odin lifts a hand and shoves him back. With his other hand, he is calling a blue-white burst of energy, which grows and expands rapidly.

It has been only seconds, but it feels like hours. Each thump of Thor’s heart is a solid, agonizingly slow beat that sounds very loud against the silence that otherwise envelops him. He can hear his own ragged breathing; time seems to stand completely still. He rocks back on his haunches, frozen in place as Odin’s magic explodes into a blinding white light. Thor flinches, bringing his arm up to shield his eyes -

And then Loki crashes onto the bridge beside him, the heavy sound more joyous to Thor’s ears than anything he’s ever heard in his life.

“Loki!” Thor scrambles over to his brother; he realizes that he is sobbing, only noticing because his brother’s name is broken on his lips. Loki is unconscious, but Thor gathers his pliant body up into his arms anyway, speaking as if his brother can hear him. “You idiot, you absolute idiot,” he says, his breath hitching. Anger wells up inside of him, battling grief for a place at the forefront. He wants to hit Loki, wants to shake him, wants to pummel him until Loki’s inexplicable madness has shattered away and Thor’s true brother remains.

Thor holds onto Loki so tightly it must hurt, but Loki does not stir.

“It is a calming spell,” Odin says, and Thor looks up at him. His father’s face is gray and exhausted, roused from the Odinsleep too soon, called by the chaos erupting between the two princes. “It was necessary to pull him back. He will sleep for some time.”

“Will he be all right?” Thor asks, his voice too small to have truly come from him. “Will he get better?”

“I do not know.” Odin lets out a sigh. For a moment, he looks as if he wants to say more, but he simply presses his lips into a thin line and turns away. “Come,” he says. “Your brother requires the infirmary.”

Obediently, Thor struggles to his feet, holding Loki firmly against his heart.

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Not dead, he thinks, and with a gasp he lurches forward, eyes snapping open. Must get away, not dead, can’t be here, not dead. Immediately, Eir is by his side, her warm, familiar hands easing him back down again. “Shh, my prince,” she soothes, and Loki can feel her seiðr flowing over him,
lulling him into a sense of calm that he wants to protest against. He struggles only for a moment and then sinks into the bed, his head growing heavy as some of the tension slides out of his limbs. “Shhh.”

Loki’s eyelids want to close, but he resists against it. He looks up at Eir, whose grandmotherly face is furrowed in worry. There is something else there, something unreadable that makes Loki’s stomach twist. She is looking at him as if he is a stranger, he realizes, not as someone who has known him for his entire life. “Eir?” he hears himself ask, and his voice trembles.

Eir smooths a hand over his forehead and then steps back. She turns, murmuring something that Loki cannot hear, and then she moves away as Thor’s face comes into Loki’s vision. Loki flinches away from the anger that darkens Thor’s blue eyes and sets his mouth in a hard line. “Loki,” Thor says, and his voice rumbles like the thunder that follows in his most furious battle-lightning.

Loki tries to make his face impassive. He looks away from Thor, down at his hands, as the memory of Thor’s grief-stricken face flashes through his mind. Loki let go, he remembers he let go. Not dead, his heart throbs, not dead, not dead, not FAIR, not dead.

“I quite imagined,” he says as he finds his voice and manages to adopt an unaffected tone, “that Helheim would spare me your wretched presence. Unfortunately, that does not seem to be the case.”

Thor’s face grows harder. “You are not in Helheim,” he snaps, and shoves Loki’s shoulder. Not hard enough to hurt, but enough to jostle Loki and he scowls as he straightens himself again, bitterness twisting his mouth.

“Must you accost me? I am injured,” he retorts, though he is not entirely sure what his injuries are. He still feels no pain and, as far as he can see, he is not broken or bruised.

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” Thor says, “save for your mind. I cannot even guess at the madness that has brought you to hate me so - but, Loki, you let go. You let go.” Thor draws in a breath and then shoves Loki again, this time so hard that Loki would have gone tumbling off the bed had Thor not reached back out and caught him again. “How dare you?” he demands, fingers grasping at Loki’s collar.

This close, Loki sees for the first time how Thor’s eyes are swollen, how they shine with tears still yet unshed. It causes Loki’s throat to tighten and the instinct to grasp Thor even closer washes over him, as natural as breathing.

Loki resists it. He yanks himself free of Thor’s grip. “I would rather let go a thousand times,” he snarls, “than spend another second here with you. My only regret is that I appear to have failed.”

“You can thank Father for that,” Thor replies. At once, it seems the anger drains from him as he rubs a hand over his face. The anger drains until only anguish remains as he gazes at Loki. “Why?” he asks, and his voice is suddenly small, like a child. “What have I done to grieve you so? I don’t understand, Loki.”

Thor will never understand. Loki cannot even begin to explain it to him. Not dead. Not dead. “Just get out.” Rage bubbles forth, his own seiðr finally staving off whatever Eir’s had done. Everything comes rushing back to him - Laufey, battling Thor on the BiFrost, the shattering of the bridge, No, Loki, from Odin’s repulsed lips, Loki repulses him, disappoints him, Loki is a monster and can no longer hide it, monster, Jotun, father, not-father, not dead, not dead -

“Get out!” Loki screams as tears fill his eyes. His thoughts are screeching, fury and grief and
heartbreak and panic all spinning to the surface in a maelstrom of violence he wishes to unleash - he will unleash it, he will make Thor see. Green seiðr flickers at his fingertips, crackling with intensity -

And then Eir is hurrying back into the room, sliding up to him while Loki is focused on Thor, and her hands are on him, that numbing calm suddenly flowing through him again. Loki can feel his tears spill over as his shoulders slump. Eir wraps her arms around him, and he is so startlingly exhausted that he lets her.

Eir says something to Thor that Loki cannot quite hear. He thinks he catches the words unstable and time. Then Thor’s voice cuts through the haze. “I’m sorry, Loki,” he says softly, and then he is gone.

Two days after Loki tries to fall from the BiFrost, Odin and Frigga tell Thor that Loki is adopted. Thor sits with his lips parted as if he is on the edge of speaking, but the words are stuck somewhere in the back of his throat like an itch he can’t quite scratch. Frigga’s eyes are bright but she demurs to Odin, allowing him to explain how he’d taken a Jotun babe from the aftermath of the slaughter and brought him back to Asgard and raised him as Thor’s brother, prince of Asgard.

“Why?” Thor finally gets out, when Odin has stopped speaking and a thick silence has fallen over them. “Why didn’t you tell him? Tell me?”

“I believed it was in his best interest,” Odin says stiffly. His release from the Odinsleep has not done much to ease his haggard appearance - he’d appeared as a vision on the BiFrost, glorious king in shining colors, come to rescue his sons. Now, in the aftermath, it is clear that the rest had not done him much good.

“We sought to protect Loki,” Frigga adds, twisting her fingers together nervously. “We never wanted him to feel different. We never wanted you to view him differently, either.” She drops her gaze, staring at her fingers. “It was the wrong choice, we see that now.”

It was very much the wrong choice, but Thor cannot change it. He cannot undo what has been done. He closes his mouth. He still has questions, but they are jumbled up in his mind and he cannot think clearly enough to ask them. A strange numbness is settling over him. All he can think is that Loki’s entire life has shattered, and Thor was not there. Thor’s brazen, idiotic actions had banished him and left Loki alone to discover this horrible truth. Now, Loki hates him.

Thor clears his throat. “May I be excused, please?”

Frigga and Odin exchange a glance, and then Odin nods, once. Thor does not wait for any more words. He simply flees, as quickly as he can manage without breaking into an outright run. He is breathing hard as he makes his way through the palace halls and, when he is far enough away and relatively secluded, he drops to the ground. He leans back against the wall and draws his knees up, cradling his head in his hands.

You can’t kill an entire race! Thor’s words echo through his mind, magnified, along with Loki’s cocky grin. Why not? he’d returned. What is this sudden love for the Frost Giants?

But there was no love for the Frost Giants. There is no love for the Frost Giants. Thor had faced Loki and tried to talk him down because this new version of his brother, this violent, half-mad stranger, had shaken Thor down to his very bones. He remembers the chill that had gone through him - remembers how the more Loki talked, the more afraid Thor grew. He was not afraid of battle against his brother. He was afraid of what his brother had become, afraid that the slaughter of the
Frost Giants would push Loki over an edge from which he could not climb back up. *Loki*, his brother, would be lost to Thor, and only this stranger would remain.

It was not about Jotunheim at all.

Thor pushes his hands through his hair as his heart twists painfully in his chest. He does not care about the Frost Giants. They are savage monsters who exist only to inflict their destructive misery on the rest of the Nine Realms, beasts whom Thor vowed to slay - every last one. His own braggadocio plays on a loop in his thoughts as he recalls his lust for battle and glory, for *honor*.

*I’ve changed*, Thor had told Loki.

But he has not.

Frost Giants, Thor thinks, and his skin crawls. Evil, ugly creatures. His thoughts turn to Loki - beautiful and dignified and proud, his appearance always impeccable, his mannerisms neat and precise and ordered. He cannot reconcile the brother he knows with the monsters of lore, but then he thinks of Loki on the BiFrost, filled to the brim with rage and grief and madness, and suddenly it is much easier. He can imagine Loki as a red-eyed beast. Disgust rolls through him in one overwhelming, sickening wave and Thor closes his eyes, pressing his palms against his temples.

*Oh Loki, Loki, Loki*, he thinks, and he feels his throat constricting as tears spring to his eyes. Already the disgust has faded, shame settling down into his core. Thor remembers all of the proclamations he’s ever made against the Jotuns in his life, words that Loki must surely remember, too.

No wonder he hates Thor. No wonder. No wonder.

Without his noticing, his tears have started to fall. He has cried more in the past two days than he has in the last century. He is not finished, not for good, but for now he must put the tears away. Thor draws in a breath and lets it out again slowly, and then climbs to his feet. He wipes his eyes and steadies himself, and then he makes his way to the royal family’s private infirmary, where Loki has been ever since Odin pulled him out of the stars. Eir has concocted a soothing elixir that has kept Loki drowsy and quiet; each time Thor has looked in on him, he has been either sleeping or near to it.

It seems to be the case still. Thor hesitates in the threshold, looking in at his brother. His not-brother, not-prince, not-king, Jotun brother. Thor’s breath catches in his throat. Loki is laying on his side, his back to Thor, so Thor cannot see his face. His form looks small and defensive, thin limbs pale against the deep burgundy sheets. Yet even thus, he is familiar. He is the brother who has been the other half of Thor for a thousand years. He is brilliant and exquisite and refined, and he will come back from this. There is no other option.

Thor crosses into the room, coming around to Loki’s other side. He is surprised to find that Loki’s green eyes are open wide, though he is staring so listlessly at the opposite wall that Thor wonders for a moment if Loki has simply tuned out, gone somewhere else.

He pulls a chair close to the bed and sinks down into it. Thor starts to reach for Loki but then he pulls back, wary. “Loki,” he whispers, “are you awake?”

Loki’s eyes focus and he flicks his gaze at Thor, his eyebrows drawing down into a frown. “Of course I’m awake,” he says, and Thor is oddly glad to hear some of Loki’s old imperious tone.

Thor finds that he does not know what to say. He adjusts his position, fiddles with his hands, tugs
at his hair. Loki remains still and silent, going back to staring at the wall. “Where do we go from here?” Thor asks, when he cannot take the silence any longer. “Things cannot go back to the way they were, we both know that, but … Loki, you are my brother. First and always. That hasn’t changed.”

Loki scoffs.

At least he is not screaming at Thor. Taking this as a good sign, Thor plunges on. “My brother, and my very best friend. I love you, Loki. Perhaps you don’t want to hear it. I know you are angry at me. I wish I knew how to help you -”

“You can’t,” Loki interjects. His eyes suddenly look very bright. “You cannot help me, you cannot save me. I am beyond saving, Thor.” He blinks, and his face crumples just slightly before he pulls a deep breath. “You are not my brother,” he goes on, flat and void of emotion.

Even though a moment ago Thor was relieved at Loki’s reserve, he now suddenly, desperately wants the rage back. Loki’s words are so cold, so final. They plunge through Thor’s heart like a blade.

“Please leave now,” Loki says, and closes his eyes. “I am very tired.”

Thor swallows hard. He opens and closes his mouth, but no sound comes out. Finally, he simply nods, even though Loki cannot see him. He gets to his feet and dares to reach out, to touch Loki’s shoulder just briefly. Loki flinches away from the touch, and Thor draws back.

Time, Thor tells himself, remembering Eir’s words to him. _Loki just needs time._

This thought, however, does not make it any easier to walk away. And when Thor crosses the threshold and closes the door behind him, he hears, with a sinking heart, the very soft sound of Loki starting to cry.

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Time has ceased to mean anything. One day fades into the next, and the next after that, and Loki’s life has come to an odd standstill. He stays in the private infirmary, his quarters there comfortable and cozy - suitable for a member of the royal family, except he is not really a member of the royal family. Prince Loki of Asgard was a lie, just one stacked against the many fictions and illusions upon which his life was built. Prince Loki of Asgard does not exist.

It leaves him with the question of who remains. It is a question he silently grapples with while the world around him spins on. He is tended to mostly by Eir, who keeps him on a steady stream of elixir that calms his fury and rage. He sleeps much of the time. He is aware of Frigga (not his mother) and Thor (not his brother) coming in and out of the infirmary often, but he sleeps or pretends to sleep throughout their visits, and neither stays for very long.

Odin has not come at all.

Surely, he cannot stay away forever. Loki asks Eir about it one day. “Has my - Odin - has the Allfather been to see me?” he asks, tripping over his words. He is sitting up in bed, his hands wrapped around a large mug of soup. He has not been eating much in general, but even he cannot always say no to Eir.

Loki sips at the soup carefully. It is a warm broth, easy on the stomach, rich with the flavors of chicken and vegetables. He feels a lump in his throat that he tries to swallow past. It is his favorite flavoring when he is sick - Frigga must have requested it, then.
Eir is standing near the bed, fussing with her elixirs. There is an assortment of colored bottles and powders and shimmering honey mixing bowls spread out on her supply gurney. She looks up at him, her forehead creased with sympathy. At least she has stopped looking at him as if he is a stranger. “No, darling. The king has been otherwise occupied, I am afraid.”

The king sends a jolt of icy hot resentment through Loki’s lungs. Loki, King of Asgard, King of Monsters, King of Nothing. His fingers tremble and he has to draw in a breath to steady himself. “Oh,” he says, softly.

“I am sure he will visit soon,” Eir says, misinterpreting the crestfallen expression on Loki’s face. Odin’s absence does sting, but it is not that which troubles Loki. Instead, his mind has wandered back to his very brief, very disastrous reign upon a throne he’d never wanted. He had done his duty, when Thor had gotten himself banished and Odin had retreated into his rest, and in return Loki had gotten mistrust, disdain, mockery, and treason.

The truth of his Jotun roots may have been long-buried and hidden away, but certainly the wrongness inside of Loki radiated anyway. Loki thinks of Heimdall, Gatekeeper of Asgard for millenia, who preferred to be a traitor rather than serve Loki, King of Ugly, Broken Things.

Loki realizes that he has started crying. The tears are silently slipping down his cheeks and dripping into the mug he still holds at his lips. Eir has not noticed. Loki drags in a breath and lets it out slowly. He carefully sets the mug down on his night table and brushes at his cheeks. “What are you doing?” he asks, to change the subject.

Eir looks up from where she has been creating a liquidy, glowing blue mixture. “Medicine,” she explains simply, her gaze flicking worryingly over his face. “Your illness is not borne of disease, my prince. Rather, it is your mind that ails you.”

“That medicine is supposed to help my mind?” Loki tilts his head doubtfully.

“The brain is an organ, like the heart or the lungs,” Eir responds, “and when it breaks, it must be healed. I believe this elixir will help.”

Loki nods slowly. He watches her work, studying the graceful movements of her fingers, and wonders if his parents (not parents) have told her the truth. Would she tend to him with such care if she knew what he truly was? Certainly not, he decides. No one in their right mind would give care to a savage Frost Giant. To Eir, he is still a prince.

He wonders how long it will be until his secret spreads beyond the reach of his family, into the rest of the palace, the court, the council. He wonders how long it will be until people like Eir, whom he’s known his whole life, will look at him in outright disgust, no longer bothering to hide their dislike. Loki can imagine their scorn already. How dare a Jotun contaminate Asgard’s shiny, golden interior? Loki, King of Foul, Loathsome Creatures, will not belong.

It is a shame, he thinks, that Odin had not simply let him fall.

Loki must fix this error. He realizes it with startling clarity, almost losing his breath at the thought of it. His face remains impassive but somewhere in his core, his pulse begins to race.

Eir finishes her elixir and gives him an experimental dose. She tells him it may take awhile for him to feel any difference but that it is intended to fix whatever has broken in his brain, cure his sorrow and grief so that he may return to his normal life. There is no normal life to return to, Loki knows, but he nods anyway. She leaves him alone to rest and he waits until she has been gone for more than twenty minutes before he slowly climbs out of bed.
Loki stands in the center of the room. He lifts one hand and, in a shimmer of green-gold magic, a dagger materializes in his palm. Loki turns the blade over in his hands, running a finger along the hilt. Loki, King of Repugnancy, is a plague upon Asgard. His kind is a disease, and there is no place for him in the royal household, in any household, nor in any realm or world.

Nausea falls over him at the thought of it as angry tears burn his eyes. It is not fair. Loki has always been so certain of his place - less desirable than Thor’s place, perhaps, but still his. Now, it has all fallen away from him - no, not fallen, he corrects himself. Nor has it been stolen, for it was never his to begin with. No, his place has simply been taken back from him, leaving him floundering mid-air. Loved by no one, worth less than nothing.

He is only correcting an error, he thinks as he lifts his tunic, revealing his pale white stomach. He runs the blade along the edges of his ribcage, trying to remember his anatomy lessons until, with a harsh laugh, he realizes that those lessons pertained to Aesir anatomy, not Jotun.

If he knew where to thrust his dagger, he could pierce his vital organs and bleed out and be done with it all. Loki presses the blade harder against his skin, frustration mounting in his fingertips. He doesn’t know where. He doesn’t know how to do it.

Tears blur his vision and he presses even harder. He hardly notices the stain of crimson on the blade, or the sting of pain as he slices into his flesh. His pale skin is a palette, clean and pristine; it is a lie that must be revealed, an illusion he must shatter. If Loki cannot do the job in one swift plunge of blade, then he will draw it out. He will kill the Jotun underneath, let the monster bleed and rot until Loki is swept away with it. King of Insignificance, Prince of Nonexistence. Loki is nothing and nothing is Loki.

He hears someone scream, a deep anguished sound from the far end of a very long tunnel. Loki panics - he is not finished yet - and he begins slicing his skin with abandon, harder and faster than before. He only manages two or three swipes before Thor is grabbing him, pulling him into his arms, trying to wrench the dagger away.

“No!” Loki struggles blindly. “I am not finished! Let me go, Thor! No!”

“You’re finished.” Thor’s voice is irritatingly soothing, but Loki can hear the edge of panic underneath. “Give me the knife, Loki. Please.”

It is no use. Thor is much stronger, and Loki is beginning to feel the burning sting of what he’s done. His wrist goes limp, allowing Thor to grab the dagger, and then Thor is shaking him roughly. Dimly, Loki hears him call for Eir, but all Loki feels is panic and dismay and utter hopelessness. No, no, no. His shoulders slump and he begins to sob in earnest.

“Why did you stop me?” he demands through his tears. Thor looks absolutely wrecked. “I have to kill it, Thor. I have to get rid of it, get it out of me.”

“Get what out?” Thor asks gently, smoothing some of Loki’s hair back.

“The monster,” Loki snaps. “The Jotun. Isn’t that what you always said? We must break their spirits, we must slay every last one of them. I am one of them and so I must be slain.” He cries harder, pressing his palms flat against his bloodied abdomen, digging against the skin with his nails.

“No, Loki,” Thor says, a note of desperation - and fear? - climbing into his voice. He grabs Loki’s hands, holds his wrists tight. “I was wrong. I was so very wrong.”
Loki shakes his head, trying to wrench his wrists from Thor’s grasp, but he cannot. Then there is a flurry of activity as Eir rushes in, along with another of their healers. Loki drops his head, dragging in breath after breath, trying to slow his tears as they haul him to his feet, bring him back over to the bed.

Thor hovers close by as Eir and her healer set to work and, soon, the blood is cleaned away and the ugly red gashes against his skin have closed up, healed and vanished. By the time they have finished, Loki is no longer crying, but he feels wrung-out and exhausted. Eir gives him another dose of her blue mind-healing medicine as well as the soothing elixir.

“He must be prevented from conjuring his daggers,” Loki hears Thor tell Eir in a low voice. Loki’s eyes are closed and they assume he is not listening.

“I will speak with the queen,” Eir murmurs back. So they will take his magic away from him next. Loki’s heart falls and he rolls onto his side, pulling his blanket up around his shoulders. Eir and her healer take their leave, and Thor comes to sit by the bed, taking one of Loki’s hands in his own.

“I’m so sorry, Loki,” Thor is saying. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Loki opens his eyes. He gazes at Thor’s earnest features. “You should have just let me finish,” he replies, injecting every bit of ice into his tone as possible. “It would be better for everyone.”

Thor looks stricken, but he says nothing. He simply squeezes Loki’s hand more tightly.

When Loki sleeps, he no longer looks like a stranger. His features relax and he looks young, heartbreakingly so. The shadows under his eyes seem to disappear completely and his breathing, soft and even, reverberates like a comforting hum throughout Thor’s body. Thor listens to the sound and nothing else. He creates a pattern, like a song: inhale, Loki, exhale, alive, inhale, brother, exhale, mine .

Thor has not left Loki’s side since he walked in to discover Loki carving at himself with a dagger. Thor closes his eyes and leans against the back of his chair, wishing that he could scrub the image from his memory. Loki’s wild green eyes, his tear-stained cheeks, blood everywhere. As disturbing as that had been, however, it was nothing compared to the chill of Loki’s words. I have to kill it, the monster. We must slay every last one .

Oh, how Thor wishes he could manipulate time and space itself. He would go back to their childhood and take back every eager proclamation he’d ever made against the Jotuns. If only he had known.

“Thor,” says his mother, her soft voice cutting through his thoughts. Thor looks up to see her standing in the threshold, twisting her fingers together.

Thor feels terrible for her. The queen has never looked more tired than she has these past days. Sorrow has etched itself into her face and never leaves her eyes. Thor wishes to take her pain away from her so she would not feel even an ounce, and yet - he is an awful, terrible son - and yet, he feels she deserves it for the role she’d played in Odin’s silence.

Thor deserves banishment and more.

He tries to make his features impassive as he nods to her. “Mother,” he responds, and his voice wavers a bit. “Loki has been sleeping.” He knows Eir has spoken to Frigga about what Loki had done. Thor sees no need to address it further.
Frigga nods as she comes fully into the room. She sits down in a chair beside Thor, reaching over to close one of her hands over his. Her skin feels cool against his knuckles. "He will sleep for awhile yet," she says, gazing at Loki’s slim, prone form. "Eir’s elixirs will keep him calm, but they are not a long-term solution."

“And what is?” Thor asks. “He cannot stay here forever. He needs to be well again, but how do we make him so?”

Frigga continues to gaze at Loki. She lets go of Thor’s hand in order to lean forward a bit and take one of Loki’s hands between both of hers. She smooths her fingers over his palm. “I do not know,” she finally responds. As Thor watches, tiny flickers of gold seiðr shimmer at her fingertips. Trails of faint gold light travel up Loki’s arm and disappear into his chest. Frigga never stops stroking his palm and Loki does not stir.

“What did you do?” Thor asks, although he is sure he knows.

“A simple binding spell,” Frigga explains. She brings Loki’s hand to her lips and presses a kiss to his knuckles, and then releases him. “To block his seiðr would feel like a punishment to him, like taking Mjolnir from your hands. Loki can still access his magic, but I have bound his ability to conjure from his pocket dimension.” She finally looks at Thor again. “No more daggers.”

Relief courses through Thor. He knows that Loki will be upset with even the smallest limitation placed upon his magic, but it is preferable than allowing Loki unrestrained access to weapons with which to harm himself.

Thor’s relief is short-lived. “That, too, is a temporary solution,” he points out, with some difficulty.

Frigga’s features are tight, and tears spring to her eyes. Immense guilt washes over Thor - certainly, his mother does not deserve this, no matter what her wrongdoings. He has never seen his mother so thoroughly rattled. “I wish I had answers for you, child,” she tells Thor as she gets to her feet. “I do not. Eir says we must give him time. To what end, she does not say. Loki’s illness has sprung from his discovery of his origin, and that cannot be changed.”

Thor slumps a bit, pushing his hands through his hair. “It is hopeless, in other words,” he says, and he hears his own voice crack. “We cannot make him not Jotun, is that what you mean? And as long as he is Jotun, he will be mad?”

“You simplify my words,” Frigga counters. “I mean to say that, regardless of what he is, Loki must be reminded who he is. My son, your brother. A prince of Asgard. We are kin through love, and love is stronger than blood.”

But is love stronger than the stain of Jotun blood on our hands? Stronger than the stain of Aesir blood on theirs? Thor knows better than to voice this question aloud - he is dismayed that it has even crossed his mind. Yet he cannot help but think of the bad blood spilled over thousands of years. All that binds Asgard and Jotunheim is war, savagery, and desolation. Thor does not know if love is truly stronger than that.

Thor loves Loki fiercely. He loves Loki like he loves the rain, like he loves the lightning that pounds in his veins and the thunder that roars in his wake. Loki is a part of Thor - but Loki is something else now, too. And Thor’s love for Loki did not stop him from taking up arms against his brother, when the choice was between Loki and Asgard.

His own thoughts make his skin crawl. Thor laces his fingers together so tightly it hurts. Frigga has taken his silence for agreement. She touches his shoulder once, and then she takes her leave.
Silence falls once again, punctured only by Loki’s steady breathing. Inhale, Loki, exhale, alive, inhale, brother, exhale, mine.

Thor rearranges himself in his chair so that he can sit comfortably and still reach Loki. He takes the hand that Frigga had held and he brings it to his lips, as their mother had done. I’m sorry, Loki, Thor thinks as his lips graze Loki’s knuckles. He no longer knows what he is apologizing for. All he knows is that he can say it every second of every day of the rest of their lives and it still would not be enough to fix what has been broken between them.

Loki stays in the infirmary for the better part of a month, until Eir says there is nothing further she can do for him. Her mind-healing medicine is given to him twice a day, and it makes him feel less like he wants to claw his own skin off, but only slightly. The medicine soothes the worst of his rage and takes the jagged edges off of his grief, but the absence of those emotions leaves behind an empty hole that Loki cannot seem to fill.

It would seem to him that if there is medicine to take away his pain, there should be medicine to replace it with happiness. He’d asked Eir, but she’d simply told him it did not work that way. Even medicinal peace of mind is beyond his grasp.

When he returns to his rooms, it is as if nothing has changed. All of his belongings are exactly where he’d left them. The servants have continued their cleaning routines and everything glimmers, shiny and bright. Loki feels as if there should be dust and cobwebs clinging to the corners. The Loki he’d been the last time he was in these rooms no longer exists. He is different now, irreparably altered.

Thor, who had been intent on escorting Loki back to his rooms, pulls open the heavy draperies. Loki flinches at the harsh glint of sunlight that pours into the room. “Please, don’t,” he says and flicks his wrist. The draperies snap shut again. Loki ignores Thor’s dismayed expression.

“You can leave now,” Loki adds, his mouth twisting into a sneer. “You have done your duty: I am safely in my quarters.”

“Can I not simply wish to be in your company?” Thor retorts.

“I do not see why you would want that, especially when your company is not likewise desired.” Loki pokes around his belongings, like a skittish cat sniffing out its new surroundings. He runs a finger along the furniture, peers inside of his wardrobe to find all of his garments laundered and pressed, exactly as they should be. The precise, categorical order of his books is unsullied, and even his writing desk - the one chaotic blight in his tidy rooms - appears just as he left it.

Thor folds his arms. He has been watching Loki re-orient himself, and when he speaks, he sounds tired. How tired he must be, Loki thinks, having to handle his mad, misfit, not-brother Loki. “Is this how it is to be, then?” Thor asks. He sinks down on the edge of Loki’s bed, his eyes never leaving Loki’s still-wandering form.

Loki crosses over to the hearth, absently calling forth a fire to light it. His mother has not lifted her binding spell - Loki had been furious when he awoke to feel it pressing against the core of his own seiðr - but it only prevents him from conjuring items from his pocket dimension. The rest of his magic is uninhibited, and he cannot help but wonder if it was a kindness or an oversight on his mother’s part. Loki watches the fire blaze to life. How easy it is to call forth a flame; it takes no effort at all.

“You and I, forever at odds?” Thor continues. “Do you care nothing for the lives we have built
together? Or for our friendship?"

“It is quite fitting,” Loki responds, watching the fire, “that we should be at odds, just like our Realms. Tell me, Asgardian - how long before that woman’s influence over you wears off? We both know you will never see her again, not without the BiFrost. Tell me how long before you forget how soft she made you and remember how much you loathe those foul, wretched Jotuns. Every last one.”

Thor’s voice is tight. “Leave Jane out of this,” he says. “Say what you will to me, but she has done nothing to deserve your harsh tongue.”

“Hasn’t she?” Loki is standing close enough to the fire that it is starting to grow uncomfortable. He has always been a touch too intolerant of heat, a strange quirk he’d never given a second thought to. Now, it was yet another aspect of his new identity of which he was all too aware.

He waits for the anger to rise up so that he may unleash upon Thor the tongue-lashing both he and his woman deserve, but the anger does not come. He can feel flickers deep in his core but they are smothered by a strange, dull ambivalence. It slithers through his bones and reminds him that, no matter what he says, it is pointless. Thor has more than proven that he does not understand Loki, will never understand Loki. Nothing Loki can say will change that.

“She has not,” Thor insists. He gets to his feet and begins pacing. Loki’s shoulders tense, but he does not turn around. He listens to the weight of Thor’s footsteps, back and forth. “What happened, Loki? I left behind a brother - my best friend - and have returned to a stranger.”

“I told you,” Loki snaps, and some of the anger does break through then, “I am not your brother. You can cease your mindless fretting, Thor. Your compassion for the Jotun foundling runt has been acknowledged, and you are free to resume your normal life. I’m sure your mindless sycophants miss your company.”

The flare of Thor’s temper is palpable; Loki can almost feel it in the electricity that crackles in the air. “I did not make you Jotun,” Thor says, “nor did I make you my brother. The Norns have willed it, and so it is. What you are matters not to me, Loki.”

Loki wants to laugh. He does - the sound breaks from him harshly. It trembles. “How nice,” he says, “that you have the luxury to decide it does not matter. For it was not you who was abandoned, not you who learned that you are the monster children fear. It matters very much to me, Thor.”

“I did not mean to undermine that,” Thor tells him, exhaling a breath.

That doesn’t warrant a response. Loki wants to step away from the fire. He can feel it warming his insides, flushing his cheeks. His forehead burns. Instead of moving away, however, Loki steps in closer to the hearth. Wordlessly, he reaches inside, allowing the flames to lick his fingertips. Carefully, he extracts a single flame from the rest. He draws his hand back, watching as the flare crawls over his fingers and dances in his palm. “Look,” he says, turning to show Thor. His hand is already burning and blistering. “Look how quickly it burns. One tiny, harmless little flame. It can devour a Frost Giant whole, Thor, and do you know what? I wish to let it.”

Thor has frozen, staring wide-eyed at Loki, but at Loki’s words he springs into action. He closes the distance between them in two strides, bunching the material from his own tunic and using it to smother the flame. The hard press of Thor’s hand, snuffing out the fire, hurts, but Loki just laughs again. He allows Thor to pull him into the adjoining bathing chamber, allows him to plunge Loki’s hand into the wash basin filled with cold water.
“Loki, Loki,” Thor is saying. His eyes are very bright, as if he is about to cry. Loki realizes that his own vision has grown blurry. Thor strokes Loki’s hand carefully. The calluses on his fingers scrape against blistered skin, and Loki cannot help a hiss of pain. “I’m sorry,” Thor says. He lets go and Loki lifts his hand from the basin. “I’ll call for Eir,” he says, but Loki shakes his head.

“Just leave it alone,” he says. He deserves to be scarred. He deserves to be devoured. He turns on his heel and leaves the bathing chamber, exhaustion sliding over him in a rolling wave. Loki crawls into his bed and glances at Thor, who is lingering in the threshold. “I need sleep,” Loki says, dismissively.

“I don’t mind staying,” Thor replies. His expression is unreadable.

“Fine.” Loki is suddenly too tired to argue. He presses his body into the sheets, folding himself up small. He cradles his burned hand close to his chest, and closes his eyes.
Thor is beginning to lose track of time. He feels like he has lost himself, and Loki consumes him. Loki is all that matters, Loki is the center of the universe. If he leaves Loki alone for too long, Thor does not know in what state he’ll find him: having burned more of his skin, having dragged a blade across his veins, having come up with any number of ways to hurt himself.

Loki has always been volatile, but never like this. Loki’s behavior scares Thor. It scares him deep in his core, makes him feel as if he is constantly balancing on a very narrow bridge, and one false step will send him careening off the side into a world where Loki is lost to him.

Loki doesn’t say much. He doesn’t really do much at all. Before, he lived in the infirmary and now, he lives in his chambers. He doesn’t read or write, doesn’t open the draperies. He sleeps a lot, more than Thor has ever seen him sleep in their lives.

Sometimes, Thor feels as if Loki is already lost to him. He has been broken in some irreparable way, and is unwilling to try putting himself back together.

Thor neglects his training routine, his royal duties, his friends. Thor cannot concern himself with those things, not if Loki hurts himself while Thor is away playing with a sword. He thinks this as he lets himself into Loki’s chambers early one morning, as has become his custom. He is mildly comforted that Loki has not put up any spells to bar Thor’s entrance - for, truly, if he wished not to see Thor, he would. Some part of his brother is still in there, Thor thinks. Thor just has to figure out how to dig him out again.

Loki’s chambers are in their usual state of pristine tidiness. The bed is completely made and does not look slept in. He finds Loki sitting in the window. For once, the draperies are open, and Loki is
staring out at the gardens below. The sunlight casts shadows on his features, making him look even more pale and untouchable than usual. When he hears Thor’s footsteps, he slowly turns his head, acknowledging Thor with a glance before he turns away again.

Thor goes over to the window and sits down opposite Loki. The seat is big enough for both of them, but just barely. Thor’s legs are hanging off of the side, since Loki’s are outstretched and he seems to have no intention of moving them to make more room for Thor. Thor’s calf brushes against Loki’s, and Loki flinches.

“Sorry,” Thor says, adjusting so that he isn’t touching Loki. He cannot help but think that there was a time, not so very long ago, when touching Loki was like breathing, natural and intrinsic and ever comforting. “I see you’ve decided to open the window today. That’s good. You should be getting some sunlight once in awhile.”

Loki’s shoulders rise and fall. He does not respond.

“Have you eaten yet?” Thor asks. “I can request something sent up from the kitchen - or, we could go down and eat together. We have not shared a meal in too long, Loki.”

“I’m not hungry,” Loki replies. He still hasn’t looked at Thor again. His red-rimmed, green-eyed gaze is fixed on some point out the window - a specific tree, a raven, or nothing at all. Thor cannot tell. He wishes that Loki will look over at him and give him that familiar Loki grin, the smile that spreads slowly across his cheeks and makes his eyes sparkle with humor and mischief. Got you, brother, he’d say. It’s all a trick! I can’t believe you fell for that!

Thor feels his lungs constrict with the thought. He knows that this is no trick, that this is not Loki up to his usual mischief, but Thor wants so badly for it to be a scheme. To what end, Thor would never know, but Thor often did not understand the goal to Loki’s mischief. Why do you bother with such trickery, Loki? Thor would ask, when your time could be better spent on the training grounds?

Better spent sparring with you, you mean? Loki would return. Better spent losing to you?

That is not what I mean, Thor would protest with a laugh. He would assume Loki is only jesting. Only that soon, I will be king and I will lead us to great and glorious battles! I wish to have you by my side, among the strongest warriors of Asgard. Trickery is such nonsense, Loki, and magic will do you no good on the journey to Valhalla.

The words reverberate in Thor’s ears. They’d had some version of the same conversation countless times, and for the first time, he hears the words not for how he intended them but for how Loki must have taken them. In Thor’s mind, he was encouraging and making sure Loki knew that his place was always beside Thor. In Loki’s mind, the words likely sounded dismissive, undermining of his interests.

He remembers what Loki had said to him during their fight: I never wanted the throne. I only ever wanted to be your equal. It made no sense to Thor - for if Loki was not already his equal, then what was he? Who else in all of Asgard would be equal to Thor, if not the second prince, his brother, his best friend?

Neither of them have spoken of the fight. It lingers underneath the surface, too raw to be touched. Thor has tried to avoid thinking of it too much because when he does, he can’t help but remember the sickening chill of betrayal, the intense rush of anger, of fury so white-hot it pulsed in his veins and thrummed throughout his limbs. Thor has pushed his feelings aside, because whatever he feels, Loki feels much, much worse - but, he cannot deny that it still hurts.
Thor remembers Loki’s taunts, his harsh words screamed in a rage so deep it must have been buried for centuries, and Thor had never even noticed. He remembers Loki’s tears, how they streamed down his face and stained his cheeks even as he threatened Jane in a voice made raw with bitter jealousy.

There is no sign of that furious, crazed Loki now, but Thor is not so foolish as to believe it is gone. It has merely been tempered, aided by Eir’s medicines meant to heal Loki’s mind. All they have done is turn Loki into a shell.

“Are you simply going to sit and stare at me?” Loki asks, interrupting Thor’s thoughts. Thor blinks and realizes that Loki has finally looked at him. His eyes seem empty, Thor thinks, and his heart gives a painful lurch. “Or are you here for some purpose?”

“I came to ask if you were hungry,” Thor replies. “You must start eating more, Loki. You are going to make yourself ill.”

“I am ill,” Loki snaps, “so what does it matter?”

“You are unwell, yes,” Thor agrees, “but you cannot remain so forever.”

“Why not?”

Thor blinks. “What?”

“I said, why not?” Loki’s eyebrows lift, very slightly. He looks at Thor earnestly, and Thor remembers the BiFrost - you can’t just kill an entire race! Why not? Loki’s smile, cold and triumphant, sending tiny shivers down Thor’s spine. There is no smile now, no glint of madness in his eyes, but Thor finds the words just as disturbing as he did then.

“I have no place here anymore,” Loki continues. “I am not your family, and you are not mine. Sooner or later, the Allfather will have me face my crimes against Jotunheim and against Asgard, like a common criminal. Either I will be ill in my chambers, or ill in a dungeon cell. Certainly, the Allfather would not be so kind as to give me the axe. He quite enjoys my suffering, I think.”

Thor’s chest feels as if it is freezing over slowly, cold snaking its way down to his belly. He opens his mouth, but his voice feels like it is stuck and he cannot make a sound. “Surely you don’t mean that,” he manages hoarsely.

“Which part?” Loki folds his arms loosely over his abdomen. Thor has not seen Loki dressed in his full colors and leathers since the BiFrost. He is draped only in a loose-fitting, emerald green tunic and black trousers. His motion tugs a bit of the material from his tunic down over his collarbone, and Thor notices it looks a little sharper than usual.

“Any of it,” Thor says, bringing his gaze back to Loki’s pale, drawn face. Everything Loki has said is wrong, but Thor does not know what their father intends to do about Jotunheim and the idea of the axe as a kindness makes Thor feel as if he has swallowed shards of broken glass. He decides to focus on the part he can attempt to fix. “Of course you are my family. How many times must I tell you? That you were not born of Mother makes no difference, Loki.”

“Oh, Thor. How truly naive you are.” Loki leans his head back against the wall behind him and gives Thor a smile that does not reach his eyes. It is barely a tilt of the lips. “It makes all the difference in the world. It is not just that I was not born of Mo- of Frigga. I am not just any Asgardian foundling. I am Jotun. That is my blood, my heart. Everything I thought I was is a lie, and everything I am is disgusting and savage and cruel.”
“Loki, that is not true,” Thor argues. He must tread carefully - it is the most Loki has said at one time since their fight, and if Thor says the wrong thing, Loki will likely clam up again. Yet Loki’s words prick at Thor’s skin like little needles, making him shudder. Loki is wrong, wrong, wrong - and yet, how can Thor convince him of that, when Thor is the very person who proclaimed he’d slay all of the Frost Giants? “You are not like them.”

A strange look passes over Loki’s face. “Them?”

“The Frost Giants. The Jotuns,” Thor explains. “You are Asgardian, in every way that matters. You were raised here, with us as your family. You were brought up in the customs and traditions of Asgard. It doesn’t matter what the Jotuns are - their shortcomings are not yours. They have nothing to do with who you are.”

For a moment, Loki does not speak and Thor feels anticipation coil in his stomach. Have his words gotten through to Loki? He waits, watching Loki carefully, but Loki’s face remains impassive until, strangely, he laughs. He laughs and shakes his head, closing his eyes. “And here I thought, from your valiant display of heroics, that your opinion of the Frost Giants had changed.”

Thor frowns. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t care about them,” Loki snaps. His words echo thoughts Thor himself had after learning of Loki’s origins, and it makes his shoulders stiffen. “You consider them monsters, still. Don’t you see, Thor? Telling me that I am not like them doesn’t mean you accept me. It means you are making an exception for me. Your naive, sentimental mind believes you are extending me a courtesy, a kindness, by reassuring me that what matters of me is what reflects you, not what reflects the truth.”

“I don’t understand,” Thor says, frustration beginning to well up in him. Why can Loki not simply listen to him? Why must he be so argumentative? “Is it not the fact that you are Jotun which has you so upset? Why does it upset you further for me to separate you from them?”

Loki snorts and rolls his eyes. “If you don’t understand, I certainly can’t explain it to you.”

“Well, I wish you would try,” Thor counters, his frustration betraying him. “I have done everything in my power to try to help you, Loki, but I can only do so much. You twist my words, my actions, and use these so-called insults to punish me. Why do I not deserve the same forgiveness I have shown you?”

“Forgiveness?” Loki echoes, and his eyes widen. “You think you have shown me forgiveness?”

“What else would you call it?”

Loki stares at him for a long moment. The air is so still, so tense, that neither one of them seems to breathe. Thor’s confusion and frustration hum beneath the surface, whereas Loki seems to be on the brink of either tears or screaming rage - which, Thor cannot tell. He is holding himself stiffly, and realizes he is bracing for both.

Neither comes. Loki’s shoulders slump, and he turns away from Thor, turning to look out the window once again. “Please leave, Thor.”

Thor is not entirely surprised, but he still resists. “Loki -”

“I mean it. And don’t come back. I am done humoring your show of concern. Return to your life, and leave me to mine.”
Thor feels his irritation deflate from him. He feels hot all over, skin prickly with the beginnings of panic. This is exactly what he did not want. Loki cannot be left alone, and Thor does not want this to be how they leave things. He does not budge, and that seems to make Loki angrier than anything.

“I said, leave!” Loki exclaims, with more emotion than he’s expressed in days. He lifts a hand and an orb of green seidr appears in his palm, which he flings at Thor. Thor feels himself being thrown back as if shoved by an enormous weight. He flies off of the window seat and lands, hard, several feet away. He blinks, wide-eyed, at Loki, who simply lowers his hand and turns away again.

“Fine,” Thor says, and presses his lips together. He pushes himself to his feet. He will go to Frigga, he decides, for certainly Loki will not turn on her the same way. She will prevent Loki from being alone. Thor waits a moment, to see if Loki will acknowledge him further, but his brother remains quiet and small, already looking as if Thor has left. Thor sighs and grudgingly lets himself out of Loki’s chambers. As soon as he is outside, he sees a flash of green roll over the chamber doors and his heart sinks to realize that Loki has finally bespelled the room in order to keep Thor out.

Loki draws his knees up to his chest and wraps his arms around them. He feels impossibly small like this, as if he could simply fold himself into a ball so tiny that he would vanish from existence completely. The wall is hard and rough against his back, and the glare of the sunlight coming in through the window glass is beginning to make him feel too warm. Yet he does not move.

The gardens are just below this particular window and have always been Loki’s favorite view from his chambers. Asgard’s palace gardens are plentiful, greens and reds and violets springing up throughout the entire year. In the warm months, Loki would often open this window and let the air, which smelled sweetly of moss campions and white buttercups and lillies-of-the-valley, drift inside. Now, the glass remains firmly shut and Loki feels as far removed from what he’d thought were idyllic memories as it is possible to feel.

He wonders what his upbringing would have been like on Jotunheim, before he remembers that there was never going to be any upbringing for him there. He would have frozen to death, eventually, if Odin had not found him. To be raised with the Aesir, in a false family, with a false exterior - or to die. Those were his life’s choices, made for him before he even knew what life was.

Thor doesn’t understand. Loki brings his knees even closer to his chest, resting his chin on them. He feels chilled to the bone. To Thor, it is so simple: if Loki was raised Aesir, then he was Aesir. Thor accepts Loki only as Aesir, and he admits that the Jotuns are monsters. He separates Loki from the rest, in order to continue to see Loki as family. What would Thor say, Loki wonders, if he were to see Loki’s true form? Would he recoil in disgust? Would he turn away, harden his heart against his not-brother?

And if Thor truly believes the Frost Giants to be monsters, to be an entity from which Loki must be separated, then why did he stop Loki from destroying them, once and for all? Loki’s own words echo back at him, even as a full body shudder goes through him, as it always does when he thinks back to that night. I could have done it, Father! Yes, he could have done it - he would have done it, if Thor had not intervened. Thor hates the Frost Giants, but he places their importance over Loki’s. He betrayed Loki to save a world he would never deign to consider equal. It means Loki is worth even less than the Jotuns. How can Thor not see?

Loki feels his vision grow blurry. Will he never stop crying? He claps his hands together at the back of his neck, squeezing his eyes shut. His entire body is tense, like there is an itching beneath his skin that he can’t reach. It makes him want to pace, want to scream, want to slam his fists into
the glass to watch it shatter. There is something terrible and ugly inside of him, and Loki does not
know how to get it out. Every time he tries, someone stops him, but they won’t tell him what to do
instead.

Loki wishes, yet again, that Odin had simply let him fall. Anything that would have greeted him in
the void, including a miserable death, had to be better than living like this.

His chamber doors creak open, and Loki snaps his head up in alarm. He’d specifically charmed
them so that nobody could come in, especially Thor, and he braces himself - but it is only Frigga
who rounds the corner, carrying a tray of food.

Loki exhales, his shoulders slumping a bit. He wipes his eyes quickly, trying to rid his face of the
evidence of his tears. Of course Frigga could undo any spell Loki cast. She’d taught him
everything he knew, but not everything she knew.

“Good morning, Loki,” Frigga says with a warm smile.

As angry as he is, Loki cannot bring himself to be disrespectful to her. “Good morning,” he
mumbles. He winds his arms around his legs, resting his chin on his knees again. He watches
while she sets the tray of food on a nearby table and then approaches him. Loki holds himself still
as she brushes a hand over his forehead, pushing some of his hair back.

“You look better,” Frigga says, with forced cheerfulness. Loki knows it is a lie. “But you could
stand to eat. Runa” - the family’s main cook who, like Eir, has always known Loki - “says you’ve
been sending your meals back uneaten.” Her palm slides over his cheek and then her fingers come
under his chin, gently tilting his head up so that he must look at her. Whatever she sees must
displease her, for a strange look passes over her face, but it is gone too quickly for Loki to interpret
it.

“Come, then, child,” she continues, letting him go. “It would break Runa’s heart if this lovely meal
was to go to waste.”

“I didn’t ask for it in the first place,” Loki points out. He keeps the edge out of his voice, for the
sake of his mother, but he doesn’t move, either. When Loki looks over at the tray she has brought,
he sees a bowl of porridge sweetened with honey, the way he’d always preferred it, and an
assortment of fruits, along with a tall goblet, likely filled with milk. Looking at all of it makes
Loki’s stomach hurt.

“I’m not hungry,” he adds, glancing up at Frigga again.

“Try to eat a little,” Frigga insists. She settles herself gracefully on the window seat, occupying the
space Thor had taken earlier. Unlike Thor, everything about Frigga is elegant, from the way she
smooths her skirts down to the way she folds her hands primly in her lap and looks at Loki
expectantly.

Clearly, she does not intend to leave. Loki sighs but obediently picks up the bowl of porridge and
brings a spoonful to his mouth. The honey is sweet, sharp against his tongue, and despite himself,
Loki relishes it. He eats a few more bites, and only when he notices his mother’s small smile out of
the corner of his eye does he stop and return the porridge to the tray.

“Some milk, too,” is all his mother says. Loki draws in a breath and lets it out slowly, irritated, but
he does drink about half the goblet of milk.

“Have I eaten to your satisfaction?” he asks, when he has returned the goblet to the tray and curled
himself back up in his corner of the window seat.

“Truthfully? No. But I will take it.” Frigga reaches over pats his knee. “There is to be a feast tomorrow evening. The Allfather requests that you be present.”

Loki swallows hard. He suddenly wishes he hadn’t given in and eaten, for the mention of the Allfather makes his stomach twist and he feels as if the porridge and milk are going to come right back up again. “Am I permitted to refuse his gracious invitation?” he asks, trying to keep his voice even. But Frigga does not miss how it trembles, and her eyes soften a bit.

Even still, her voice is firm. “You are not,” she responds. “It is time for this family to resume normal activities, and you with us. As the second prince of Asgard -”

“T- I am not a prince of Asgard,” he cuts her off. “Why must you persist in this lie? Everyone knows it is not true, so there is no need to put on airs.”

“It is not a lie,” his mother replies. “You are as much a prince today as you have ever been.” She sighs, folding and unfolding her hands in her lap. “I know that this revelation surrounding your birth has been … a great shock to you, my child. I understand how upset you are and how that has influenced your actions of late.”

“No, you don’t,” Loki counters. His jaw aches with the effort of not snapping at her - but, Norns, he wants to. His heart hurts with the strength of his love for her, but he is angry at her, too. She is not truly his mother, and she has lied to him his entire life - just as Odin has.

“You said,” Loki goes on, his voice dropping, “that he kept the truth from me so I would not feel different. But why did you not intervene?”

“It was not my place to defy the will of the Allfather,” she reminds him. “You know that, Loki.”

“But …” Loki does not even know why he is crying, but his vision is blurring again. He can feel the tell-tale tightening of his throat, the slight tingle of his nose, which signal that tears are not far to follow. For all of his reputation of possessing a silver tongue, his feels his words grow jumbled and nonsensical. “You had to know,” he attempts, anyway, “that I would be upset to learn this truth. To be Jotun? To be the monsters we were taught to fear?”

“Which is why we did not tell you,” Frigga responds, tilting her head at Loki as if she does not comprehend him. Perhaps she doesn’t. Loki isn’t sure what he is asking.

“Could you not … soften the blow?” he finally manages. “Why have us believe the Jotuns are monsters if you and Odin knew I was one of them? How am I not also a monster?”

Frigga’s face collapses into something resembling sympathy. She sighs and reaches out, placing her hand upon Loki’s cheek. He had not realized some of his tears have spilled over, until she wipes them away with her elegant fingers. Loki used to think he had his mother’s hands - their shape, their tendency to fidget. Now he knows that nothing of him is his mother’s, except perhaps his magic.

“Oh, my darling,” she says, “you are not a monster because your blood may be Jotun but your heart is not. They are Asgard’s enemies. We cannot change that. It does not make you Asgard’s enemy.”

“Then I am separate from them,” Loki says. “Is that what you are saying? You do not consider me a monster because I have been raised in this family?”

“Yes,” Frigga responds, brushing his cheek once more before drawing back. “That is correct. We
love you as family, Loki.”

“But …” Loki presses his lips together. They taste of the salt from his tears. “But you do not love me that is Jotun. You do not love the me that was born of Laufey. You only love what you have decided I am to be.”

Frigga’s mouth turns down. “No, Loki -”

“And I am an enemy of Asgard,” Loki continues. “How long until the Allfather decides to punish me for Jotunheim? For the BiFrost? He saved me, but he has not spoken to me. He detests me, just as the rest of Asgard does!”

“No, darling, no.” Frigga reaches for him, but Loki does not want to be touched. He pushes himself to his feet, moves away from the window, and folds his arms around himself. He wonders if he will ever stop feeling so cold. It’s nothing to do with the temperature and everything to do with the ice inside of his veins. His birthright - icy insides, a frozen heart. If he wills it, will his heart crystallize and harden until it stops beating? Can Loki claw it from his chest and slam it to the ground and watch it shatter? His fingers itch with the need to try. Perhaps that is where the monster truly lies, and what he must expel from himself in order to get rid of it for good.

Frigga is twisting her hands together, over and over again. Her face is drawn tight with worry as she watches him, as if she can guess at his thoughts. When she speaks, however, all she says is, “I cannot dispel you of these poisonous thoughts that ail your mind. But they are destroying you, my child. You must accept that what I speak is true: that I am your mother and that I love all of you with my whole heart. As does Thor. As does your father. Perhaps you need more time to make peace with this. You shall have it. Sooner or later, you will come back to us.”

Her words should be comforting, but they are not. It is not enough. Loki watches her as she stands and comes over to him, holding himself stiffly as she cradles his face in her palm and presses a kiss to his temple.

It is not nearly enough.

Thor paces the hall outside of Odin’s office chambers. He has walked to Loki’s chambers so many times, checking to see if Loki has lifted the spell on his doors, that he is beginning to feel a bit mad himself. If Loki will not see him, then Thor will focus on fixing a different problem: Loki’s punishment. He does not know if Loki is correct in assuming that there will be one, but certainly if the Allfather wishes to treat Loki’s actions as criminal, then he will listen to Thor’s defense. He must.

He is having trouble, however, gathering up his courage. His relationship with his father has been strained since his would-be coronation. Odin has been so disappointed in Thor of late and does not speak to him more than necessary. The lifting of Thor’s banishment did little to ease the tension between them - if anything, the events that followed made things worse. Meals, when Thor and his parents manage to sit down together, are awkward, quiet affairs. Most of the time, Odin is very busy with his duties as king. Thor knows that the attack on Jotunheim must be addressed. He wonders how his father has handled it thus far.

Thor will learn nothing by pacing the hall. He sighs. He has faced many foes, all manner of monsters and beasts and dragons and has never felt more than a thrilled anticipation for the fight. He fears none of them more than he fears Odin.

Thor lifts a hand to knock loudly at the chamber doors. Several moments of silence go by. Just as
Thor is about to try again, the doors creak slowly open, called by Odin’s command.

His father’s office is adjacent to the king and queen’s private chambers and is an opulent, luxurious room filled with books, scrolls, and several writing tables. The room glows golden, aided by the warm fire that always burns in the hearth, along with numerous torches and lamps. It is one of the most comfortable rooms in the palace, yet it is also one of the most intimidating, for one cannot enter without Odin’s express permission. Odin is the center of the room around which the opulence and order revolves, and he cuts as imposing a figure at his main desk as he does atop Hliðskjálf.

Thor swallows hard as he approaches his father. Odin does not look up from his writing scrolls as Thor enters, nor give any acknowledgement that Thor is there. When he is close enough, Thor drops to one knee, lowering his head. “Allfather,” he begins, “I would ask for a brief audience with you, in regards to Loki.”

Odin still does not look up. When Odin and Frigga had told Thor of Loki’s adoption, Odin had seemed as accessible as a father should be, if made weary by recent events. Now, Thor sees only the king. He still looks tired, but he does not radiate exhaustion as he did before.

Thor’s heart hammers fiercely in his chest, echoing in his ears, as he waits for Odin’s response.

“You may speak, my son,” Odin says, finally. He looks up, pinning Thor under the weight of his one-eyed gaze. He sets his quill aside and gestures for Thor to rise.

Many times, Odin has impressed upon Thor the obligations of the throne of Asgard - that he may find himself in circumstances where his heart wishes to rule in one way, while duty requires another. The king’s duty is to the people and to the realm above all else. Theoretically, that includes family, but it has never been put to the test - until now.

“I spoke with Loki earlier,” Thor begins, shifting his weight as he stands, “and he is under the impression that dire punishment awaits him for the role he played the night the BiFrost was destroyed. I came to ask you if his impression is accurate.”

Odin hums in acknowledgement. “Certainly, his actions do require punishment of some sort,” he says. “Were it any other citizen of Asgard who acted thus, punishment would await.”

“Yes,” Thor agrees, “but he is not any other citizen of Asgard. He was king regent at the time.”

“Do you mean to say that the king should be above the law of the realm he rules?”

“I only mean to say that Loki was not in his right mind, due to the position he was in,” Thor counters. He can feel his pulse thrumming in his veins, his nerves skittering through his body like little electric shocks. It is a wonder his voice is so steady. “Loki did not receive the same preparation for the throne as I did, Father. He is young still, and he can be unstable of heart even at the best of times. You know Loki as well as I do. You know his mercurial nature.”

“As I know yours,” Odin responds. “Was it not your mercurial nature, your lust for battle, that rendered you banished at my hand?”

Thor has the grace to look embarrassed. “I did my best to learn that which your banishment sought to teach me,” he answers.

“Yes, you did.” Odin’s stern tone falters a bit, and he exhales a sigh. “More quickly than I thought you would.”

“Shouldn’t Loki be given the same chance as I?” Thor implores.
“Loki’s crimes are graver than yours,” Odin points out. “You invited war with Jotunheim, yes. Loki, however, committed regicide against Jotunheim’s king. He has destroyed the majority of their realm and taken countless lives. Because of his actions and the destruction of the BiFrost, the Realm Eternal is now cut off from Alfheim, Vanahem, all of the realms we rule. His actions will have far-reaching consequences that I cannot overlook, as king.”

“What about as a father?” Thor asks. He dares to move a bit closer to Odin’s desk, meeting Odin’s gaze directly. “He is still your son, is he not?”

Odin sighs again. For a moment, the last traces of the king disappear and Thor’s father looks tired - world-weary and aged. His eye flickers with something akin to grief. “Of course he is my son,” he answers softly. “This pains me as much as it pains you, Thor.” A beat passes, and Odin clears his throat. “But it is not my decision alone,” he continues, firmly. “I answer to my council, and to my people, and to my realms.”

“You answer to your family, too,” Thor dares. He holds his breath, knowing his statement is too bold - but Odin simply nods, rather than lashing out.

“Yes. I do,” he agrees. “I will take your words under consideration, as I have taken your mother’s. You are not alone in caring for Loki, my son.”

Thor nods. He does not like the reply - for certainly, if Odin meant it, would he not go above and beyond to ensure Loki does not end up in a dungeon cell, or worse? Thor’s stomach clenches with ice as his mind ponders the worse possibilities. But surely Odin will not sentence his son to death, nor would the council execute a member of the royal family. Thor breathes in and out, but now that the thought has occurred to him, he cannot let it go.

“Tell me, at least,” Thor fumbles, “that he is not for the axe.”

If Odin is surprised at Thor’s words, he does not show it. “No,” he responds simply, picking up his quill, “he is not for the axe.”

Thor feels his throat tighten. He swallows back a sudden urge to cry as he imagines Loki, small and angry, with his head on the chopping block. *Not for the axe*, he repeats to himself, and bows his head. “Thank you for your audience, Allfather,” he says, for there is nothing more to be said in Loki’s defense.

When Odin nods a dismissal, Thor lets himself out of the office with haste, waiting until the chamber doors have closed behind him before he lets himself collapse. He slides down, his back against the doors, and presses the heels of his hands into his eyes.

Oh, how he wishes he could turn back time. It is far from the first time he has wished this. If he had not let his outrage get the best of him, if he had not acted on fury and impulse, they never would have gone to Jotunheim. Loki would not have discovered he was Jotun, and Thor would not have been banished. So much Thor has lost, and what has he gained?

He does not have an answer.

Thor does not know how long he sits there before he forces himself back up again. He wanders through the palace, first checking Loki’s rooms to see if the spell has been lifted (it has not) and then to the balcony in his own quarters which overlooks the training grounds. He catches sight of Fandral and Sif sparring and feels a stab of guilt, for he has spoken to none of his friends since his return from Midgard. He’d been so thrilled when he saw the familiar faces of Sif and the Warriors Three in New Mexico, against all odds. He had not expected it, but nor had he truly questioned it.
Now … now, his mind is spinning and he finds himself pushing away from the balcony. He leaves his quarters, hurrying through the palace, and materializes on the training fields before he even knows what he is doing.

Sif catches sight of him first. Her face breaks out into a smile and she tosses her ponytail, holding her sword up in a greeting. “Thor!” she cries, which draws Fandral’s attention. When they reach him, Thor allows Sif to hug him, permits Fandral’s warm clap on the shoulder.

“We have missed you, my friend,” Fandral says, sheathing his sword and flashing the dazzling smile he has used to woo more maidens than Thor can count. “Truly, it has been too long.”

“We have missed you, my friend,” Fandral says, sheathing his sword and flashing the dazzling smile he has used to woo more maidens than Thor can count. “Truly, it has been too long.”

“Where have you been hiding?” Sif adds, tilting her head up at him.

“Loki is unwell,” Thor responds. He does not miss the shadow that crosses Fandral’s face, or the faltering of Sif’s expression. “I have been with him.”

“We are sorry to hear it,” Sif says, and the words sound forced. Have his friends always treated Loki thus? *I only ever wanted to be your equal.* Thor has always considered Loki his equal, but now, as he looks at his friends, as he remembers the events of the last several days, he considers that, perhaps, others had not. Certainly, Loki would catch what Thor would miss - the grudging acceptance he sees now reflected on his friends’ faces. Their expressions hurt, a stabbing pain Thor feels in his bones.

Thor tilts his head. “Are you?”

She blinks. “Of course. We care for Loki’s well-being.”

“Did you care for his well-being when you defied him as king?”

The words spill out, surprising Thor as much as they surprise Sif and Fandral. Sif’s mouth opens slightly, but no sound comes out; Fandral’s eyebrows disappear underneath his shaggy blonde hair. “Thor?” he asks uncertainly.

“When you came to Midgard,” Thor elaborates - because now that the words are out, he cannot take them back. He must follow them through to their conclusion, even if he already knows he will not like it. “Loki had ordered you not to, but you went anyway. To bring me back?”

“Well, yes,” Sif says, exchanging a bewildered look with Fandral. “You belonged on the throne and Loki would not permit your return.”

“But I did not belong on the throne,” Thor counters. “I was *banished*. Loki sat on the throne because the regency fell to him. If Odin would not permit me home, why would Loki?”

“He lied to you,” Fandral reminds Thor. “He told you that your father was dead, did he not?”

“Yes,” Thor admits. Yet another thing that does not make sense, that Thor has not been able to talk to Loki about because Loki is so fragile, so ill of mind. He remembers the aching feeling of loss as he sat inside that SHIELD facility. Loss, and abandonment, and grief were all thrust upon Thor’s at Loki’s hand, leaving Thor to wallow in a human’s shell, the core of which had been carved out expertly with Loki’s own dagger.

It hurts to remember, but the loss he’d felt then was miniscule compared to what he’d felt when Loki let go of Gungnir and he’d thought his brother would die.

Sif reaches out, laying her hand gently on Thor’s arm. “We only wanted what was best for you,
“Yes,” Thor says again. “But not what was best for Loki.”

Again, Sif and Fandral exchange a glance. Slowly, Sif withdraws. “Thor,” she begins, “I know that you care a great deal about your brother. But your feelings blind you. You do not see him as he truly is. Loki’s jealousy of you fueled his actions, to your detriment. He behaved as a traitor would.”

Thor swallows hard. Sif’s words are not wrong, not really, but he hates them all the same. Loki is jealous of Thor - yes, but what younger sibling would not be? In royal families, such a thing is common. Loki himself has acknowledged his jealousy, but he has also said Thor should not doubt Loki loves him.

Loki says a lot of things, Thor reminds himself. Ever more, lately, Loki’s words are nonsensical, full of anger and bitterness. How can Thor trust what is true and what is a lie?

“What did he do?” Thor hears himself ask, focusing first on Sif, and then on Fandral. He can feel the tears gathering in his eyes, but he keeps his gaze steady. “What traitorous actions concerned you enough to go to Midgard? Tell me what crimes my brother committed that I do not already know. Tell me that my brother’s heart hardened against me without hope of softening again, and I will accept that you were right to act as you did. Please.”

“He sat upon the throne,” Fandral speaks up, “knowing it was rightfully yours, and knowing your banishment was not justly deserved. He said he would not undo Odin’s last command, that he was acting in the interest of Asgard. He refused to see reason, Thor!”

“If he did, so do I,” Thor replies. “All you are telling me is that he accepted the regency placed upon him and made effort to uphold the Allfather’s rule. Perhaps he acted out of jealousy. Perhaps not. Is this justification for treason?”

“We believed it was,” Sif says, and though her expression is hard and her shoulders set, there is a slight quiver to her tone that was not there before.

“I believe differently,” Thor says quietly.

“Thor -” Fandral starts.

But Thor is already walking away.

Loki is staring at himself in the mirror.

He knows every inch of his reflection by heart. He was often self-conscious growing up, agitated about his appearance in comparison to Thor’s. Thor blossomed so naturally into something beautiful, like a work of art carved out by the Norns themselves. Loki kept waiting for a similar transformation to befall him, but his limbs remained slim, his features sharp.

Eventually, it became apparent that it was not to be. Thor’s beauty was revered throughout the kingdom. Loki was revered for nothing.

He remembers looking into mirrors often, each time wishing that someone different would be staring back at him. He cannot help but laugh at himself now, for he is someone different and the truth is more hideous than his Aesir skin, in all its disappointments, could ever be.
Loki has removed his tunic, and is tracing a finger lightly over the spot where he thought his heart was. Jotun hearts may be in a different place. How would Loki know? Who can he ask? If he went to the library, would he find books on Jotun anatomy, Jotun biology? He cannot imagine why Asgard’s library would have such a thing.

Eir might know, he thinks, but he does not want to ask her. She will inquire as to why he wants to know, and if she has not learned the truth yet, Loki is not going to be the one to tell her. He does not know how far his secret has spread by now. Perhaps, she already knows. Perhaps everyone does, and they are speaking of him in disgust, in revulsion. How can his mother request he attend a feast, of all things? Does she wish to display him in front of Odin’s court only so that he may see the glares for himself?

His skin is so pale. Thor’s always glowed golden, even in the colder months when it was imprudent to spend much time outdoors. The cold never bothered Loki much, but Thor disliked it. There had been clues all along the way, clues Loki never bothered to pick up and examine. This is partially his own fault, he can admit. If only he had been smart enough to figure it out sooner.

His skin is pale, and he is bony, wiry. His muscles are solid, but they are small. Loki’s fingers trace down from his heart to his ribcage. He presses in between the grooves, feeling the tautness of skin. His abdomen is almost concave, the bottom of his rib cage jutting out just slightly, just enough to be noticeable when he looks.

*Runt,* he thinks in disgust. *Jotun runt, discarded and thrown away.* Had Laufey even looked at him before ordering him cast out? Did Loki’s mother - his biological mother, whoever she may be - protest, or did she toss him aside without a second thought? Runt of the litter from a pack of beasts, missed by no one, mourned by no one. Loki. He would like to believe he is more than the sum of these parts, but he has never been one to push aside the truth in favor of idealism. That is Thor, through and through.

The longer Loki stares at himself, the stronger his urge to destroy what he sees grows. He brings his fingertips back to his heart, or what he assumes is his heart. He cannot access his pocket dimension and though he is certain he has daggers hidden in his chambers somewhere, he doesn’t bother to look.

Golden seiðr shimmers at his fingertips, which he presses to his skin. He flinches a bit at the sting of it, but does not stop. His fingers move quickly, and only when he has finished and his skin feels like it is on fire does he stop to admire his work.

In delicate, beautiful runes he has carved *runt* directly over his heart.
The Aftershocks.

Chapter Notes

Reminder: This deals with mental health issues, suicidal attempt and ideation, and self-harm. Please heed these trigger warnings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part III: The Aftershocks

Thor sits on the ground outside of Loki’s chambers. He rests his head against the doors, which still do not open to him, and stretches his legs out before him. He’s sat this way so many times in their childhood, whenever they fought or Loki grew cross with him. Loki has been locking Thor out of his chambers for centuries. It makes Thor want to smile, for at least in this Loki has remained consistent, even if everything else has fallen apart. Loki would lock Thor out, and Thor would sit outside and plead and plead until Loki finally yielded and let him back in.

They are not children anymore, yet it is so easy - so natural - for Thor to fall back into their routines. How can it not be? There isn’t a childhood memory that exists without involving Loki in some way. Even as a babe, Thor does not remember a time when Loki was not there. He does not remember when he was the sole child of Odin and Frigga, Asgard’s only prince. He wonders if such a time even truly exists. For himself and for Loki, it does not.

They are like twin stars, revolving around one another, neither existing without the pull of the other. If one burns out, then so does the other. But Thor refuses to let Loki burn out. Loki shines too brightly to be extinguished. He just needs to remember.

“Loki,” Thor calls softly. The rooms beyond the doors are silent and still; perhaps, Loki is sleeping again, or perhaps he is still sitting in the window, gazing outside. Thor knows Frigga had been to see Loki earlier, and that she managed to get him to eat something. That was hours ago. Surely he must be hungry again by now. “Loki, it’s nearly time for the evening meal. Will you come down and eat with us? It would please Mother and Father … and me.”

There is no response. As a child, Thor never felt silly speaking to the doors but now he cannot help
but reflect that this is ridiculous. He continues anyway. “Runa is making pheasant with butter and garlic, just the way you’ve always liked it. Honestly, brother, you won’t get this kind of special treatment forever. I’d take advantage of it now, while you can.” He laughs a little, but only silence meets his words. Thor sighs and draws his knees up a bit. Already, he is feeling stiff and uncomfortable.

“Do you remember when we’d quarrel as children?” Thor asks. “I’d have sat out here for days, if that was how long it took for you to speak to me again. Such things are easier as children, I imagine, but stubbornness is ageless, Loki, and I’ll sit here for days if I must. I’ll wear you down.”

Not likely, Loki would reply, if he were speaking to Thor. Thor closes his eyes; it is true, Loki has always been more stubborn of the two, but Thor is much more motivated now.

“Very likely,” Thor says, as if Loki really had responded. “I know you think me fickle and dull, but you underestimate me. You underestimate how much I care for you.”

You underestimate me all the time, Loki would say. Thor again remembers Loki’s words in the observatory; he is beginning to feel like the words are haunting him. I only ever wanted to be your equal. “Loki,” Thor says, “you must know I never intended to make you feel like you were less than me. I’ve always thought so highly of you. I have always valued you. I assumed you knew, that these things were simply understood.”

How would I know? You’ve never shown me. You’re arrogant and spoiled, Thor, you always have been. You’re used to everyone circling you as if you are the sun. Including me.

“Yes,” Thor agrees, “that’s true. I am arrogant and spoiled. I took you for granted. I took our friendship for granted.”

We aren’t friends.

“I consider us so. As I consider us brothers, even if you continue to deny it.”

Thor waits a moment, but there is no reply. He is no longer sure if he is making up Loki’s side of the conversation, or if Loki has penetrated his mind, whispering his answers in Thor’s head since he cannot bring himself to speak them aloud.

The sound of boots makes him look up, and he catches the eye of a pair of the royal family’s private guards. The Einherjar look at him a bit oddly. Thor gives a sheepish smile, but does not bother to explain why he is sprawled on the floor outside of Loki’s chambers. He waits until the guards’ footfalls have faded, and then he speaks again.

“It’s not too late to fix things, Loki,” he says, an earnest note dipping into his voice. “We’ve all made mistakes these past days, but nothing’s been done that can’t be repaired.” His breath hitches on the words as he remembers the look on Loki’s face just before Loki let go of Gungnir. He could have lost Loki for good. Forever. There was no coming back from the void, no coming back from the vast emptiness of space. Loki would simply be gone. There would not even be a body left behind for a funeral befitting a prince. Thor supposes they would have filled a boat for Loki with his most precious belongings - his magic books, his quills and tapestries, his special things. It would not be the same.

Thor realizes that he has started to cry, yet again. His tears are warm, sliding down his cheeks, and there is a lump in his throat that refuses to dissolve. Thor swallows hard, drawing in a breath, and tries to speak with a steady voice. “There’s nothing that can’t be repaired,” he repeats, “but that would not be so if Father had not saved your life. When you let go, Loki, it felt like … like my
heart was a star that had collapsed in on itself. Everything exploded, all of the light was gone, and there was just nothing, nothing. I wouldn’t have been able to bear it, had Father not pulled you back. I can hardly bear it now, but at least I know that you’re here.”

Thor rubs his eyes, giving Loki space to answer if he wants. He still doesn’t hear anything from the opposite side of the doors, but he has to believe that Loki is listening to him, that somehow he can hear Thor’s words and know them, in his heart, to be true. “Do you remember, Loki,” Thor continues, “when we were just coming of age and Father wanted to send me away? He said I was old enough to begin making diplomatic visits throughout the Nine Realms, and Alfheim was to be first. He would not let you accompany me; he said you had not yet reached the appropriate age. I was to be gone several months.”

The memories had been long forgotten, in the grand scheme of things, like most memories were. But as Thor recalls them now, they crystallize in his mind like they had happened just yesterday, and he and Loki were as close as they ever were. Thor smiles a little as he turns his head, resting his cheek against the doors.

“I didn’t understand it,” he admits. “If I was of the appropriate age, surely you were, too. We were not so far apart. Yet Father would not budge, nor would Mother intervene. It was our first time being separated from one another for more than a night or two. How we cried. Do you remember?” Thor cannot help a laugh, even though his tears. “One might think Ragnarok had come, for how deeply we grieved. I remember feeling like my heart had been torn from my chest. It’s the first time I remember feeling pain that was not earned in sparring or battle. You said you felt the same.”

There is the tiniest scraping sound from the other side of the door, and Thor freezes. “Loki?” His heart thuds in his ears, but as much as he strains, he doesn’t hear anything else. Likely, he’d imagined it. Thor sighs, pressing his forehead to the door and closing his eyes. “Loki,” he says again, but now it is barely a whisper, a sound filled with raw longing. “I feel that way again, brother,” Thor admits, and certainly Loki cannot hear him even if he was ever listening, for Thor’s voice is so soft. “Eviscerated. Like my heart’s been torn out. I feel like I can’t breathe. How can you not be my equal, Loki, when you make me feel thus? We always said we were two halves of the same whole.”

It is so quiet that all Thor can hear is his own breathing, and the occasional sniffle as his tears slow. He feels wrung-out, tired beyond reason. Thor traces a finger against the doors, imagining that Loki is on the other side, mirroring his position.

Loki sits with his back pressed to the door, knees drawn up to his chest. Thor has stopped speaking, but Loki can still hear him breathing on the other side. His words repeat themselves as Loki examines them, seeking falsities in his sentiments. He remembers the year Thor spoke of, when they were to be separated for the first time. Odin’s proclamation had felt like a blow to the sternum with Mjolnir and, for the first time, Loki thought he understood what the phrase a broken heart meant. It was true that Thor had also been very upset. The first night they heard the news, they’d locked themselves in Thor’s chambers, laying entangled with one another in Thor’s bed while they cried and made whispered plans of approaching Odin to give his permission for Loki to join Thor, plans to appeal to Friggs’s sympathy, plans to sneak Loki along if they must.

Thor clearly does not remember, the way Loki does, how as time passed and the trip grew nearer, it became harder for Thor to hide his excitement. Such a fuss was made about the trip, with the palace having been thrown into preparations for weeks beforehand. Thor was to be accompanied by the Warriors Three and Lady Sif, along with a delegation of Asgard’s highest council members. More and more often, Thor’s time would be occupied with his duties and preparations and he spent
his free time with his friends and gave up on convincing their parents to let Loki come along. “You’ll see, brother,” Thor began to say, whenever Loki broached the topic, “the time will go by faster than we know, and we will be together again.”

Loki challenged him only once. “Don’t you want me to come?” he asked. “Father could still change his mind.”

Thor smiled and reached out to cup Loki’s neck fondly. “Of course I want you to come,” he said softly, the pad of his thumb brushing Loki’s jaw. Then he clapped Loki on the shoulder and drew back. “But Father is probably right. You are still young, and anyway, Father says the time apart will do us good. He thinks we spend too much time together as it is.”

“But you don’t think that,” Loki said. He imagined an invisible dagger slowly carving a hole in his chest, Thor’s words at the hilt. “Do you?”

Thor sighed and looked away. “I don’t know. Maybe we do. You’re still my brother, Loki, and we’ll always be together. Just … just not right now.”

“Oh.” Loki’s voice was very soft; he could feel his throat tightening, his chin trembling just a bit. Either Thor did not notice or pretended not to. He just beamed at Loki, warm like the sun, and then Fandral called for Thor and Thor jogged off, already laughing at whatever Fandral said.

After that, Loki didn’t talk about it anymore. He didn’t see Thor much at all. He spent more and more time in the library, in the gardens, keeping himself company with his magic and books, reading practically the entire library to keep his mind occupied. When that wasn’t enough, he took to the sparring fields, learning how to fight with a sword against opponents two times his size. He sported many cuts and bruises and his muscles ached and burned when he collapsed into bed at night. He’d never truly mastered the sword, not the way he did his daggers, but he was proficient enough and, a few months after Thor left, Odin and Frigga allowed Loki to travel with some of the warrior boys his age on a quest that led them to Nidavellir. It had not ended well.

Loki’s fingers ghost across his lips. Thor remembers only what he wants to remember; he comprehends only what fits neatly into his perspective. Loki’s fingers trail down to his collarbone, the pad of his index finger rubbing the runes across his heart. How can Thor know what true evisceration is? How can he even compare?

He sighs, dropping his forehead to his knees. Thor knows nothing, but even so, Loki wishes he had not stopped speaking. He longs to hear Thor’s whispered confessions of how much he loves Loki and how deeply he feels his loss now. It gives Loki a strange kind of satisfaction to know that, if Odin had not pulled him back, Thor would have mourned deeply for Loki’s death. Loved more in death than in life was still to be loved.

There is nothing to be done about it now. Loki considers returning to the broken rainbow bridge. He can imagine the cold air on his face and hear the heavy thudding of his heart as he pictures himself standing on the barbed edge and leaning over until there is nothing left beneath him but the abyss. Loki closes his eyes, and the urge to fulfill his fantasy is so strong that his fingers itch to claw at his skin, as if he can somehow shed it and break free all the faster.

Norns, he wants it so much he can taste the bitterness of it on his tongue. But it is a useless want, a wish unfulfilled. Thor and Frigga watch him too closely; he’ll never even make it out of the palace alone, nevermind to the place where the bridge ends. Magic might help, but if he fails, Frigga will bind what seiðr he still has left. Too risky; to wish and want is better than to try and fail.

Loki sighs. If only he had never tried to be king.
Thor walks toward the end of the rainbow bridge as dusk begins to fall, the sky beyond the horizon dipping into its evening hues of orange and pink and gold. Thor has not been anywhere near the bridge since that awful night, but he has felt drawn here, inexplicably, and sitting outside of Loki’s chambers was not getting him anywhere. The fresh air feels good, Thor must admit.

Though the Observatory is long gone, Heimdall stands at the end of the bridge, keeping watch. He stands still as a statue, gripping the hilt of the BiFrost sword. Thor walks up beside him and takes in the vastness of the abyss beyond, a shudder going through him as he remembers the heart-stopping moment when Loki let go of Gungnir and fell to the depths below.

“My prince,” Heimdall greets, giving Thor a nod. Thor has not seen Heimdall since the fight. He knew Loki had done something to freeze him on the bridge, but it is only now that Thor realizes Loki’s ability to do so came from being Jotun. The realization is not necessarily a pleasant one as Thor wonders, briefly, what else his brother is now capable of.

He pushes away the thought. “Heimdall,” he says, returning the nod. “I apologize that I’ve not seen you. Are you well?”

“Very well, my prince. The damage was not bad. To my body, at least.” Heimdall remains as neutral as always, both in tone and facial expression, but Thor cannot help assuming Heimdall is upset about the bridge. It belonged to Heimdall more than anyone.

“I’m sorry,” he says. He does not have Mjolnir to occupy his hands, and he finds himself fidgeting, twisting his fingers together. “For destroying the bridge.”

“It had to be done. You are not at fault,” Heimdall replies.

“But Loki is,” Thor ventures uneasily.

Heimdall does not respond right away. When he looks over at Thor, there is something in his golden eyes that looks like sympathy, though it’s entirely possible Thor imagines it. “I hear Loki is unwell,” Heimdall says. “How does he fare?”

Thor sighs, shaking his head. “I don’t know,” he admits. He can hear his own defeat. “He won’t speak to me. He injures himself. He sleeps often, and he doesn’t eat. I fear that Loki is lost to me, Heimdall, and I don’t understand how to find him again.”

The words are far more candid than Thor intended them to be, but he has always been able to be honest with Heimdall. There is something about his neutrality and his watchfulness that had always bothered Loki, but it makes Thor comfortable enough to speak truths he might otherwise hide away. Perhaps, it is that Thor suspects Heimdall already knows everything, anyway - both what he sees, and what he infers between the lines.

“Loki is on a separate path from you,” Heimdall tells him, shrugging ever so slightly. “As he has always been. He must find his own way now.”

A long silence stretches between them. “Did you know,” Thor finally asks, very quietly, “about Loki? About what he really is?”

Heimdall gives a wordless nod.

“Is that why you did not trust him on the throne?” Thor does not look at Heimdall to see his reaction. Sif and the Warriors were not alone in their betrayal of Loki, but it is not so easy to challenge Heimdall on this point as it had been his friends. Thor can feel his heart skipping beats as
he waits anxiously for Heimdall’s reply.

“No,” Heimdall says, but he does not elaborate.

Frustration joins anxiety. “I have never known you to be reckless, nor treasonous.” Thor swallows hard, giving Heimdall a sideways glance. “Loki was legitimately given the throne, you know.”

“Yes,” Heimdall agrees. “I know.”

Thor again waits for him to justify his actions, to explain why he’d held so little faith in Loki, but Heimdall says nothing else. Thor sighs, folding his arms over his chest. Heimdall may be loyal to Thor, but he does not answer to Thor, and they both know it. Whatever his reasons, he has no wish to share them and, clearly, Odin had not felt Heimdall’s actions to be worth punishing. Thor does not understand why treason is permissible against a regent king but not a ruling one. Or, perhaps, it is not that treason is permissible against a regent king, but it is permissible against Loki, only.

Thor’s throat tightens at the thought. He is beginning to realize what Loki has tried to tell him all along - that he is the less favored prince, that there are different rules for Loki than there are for Thor. I only ever wanted to be your equal. Thor blinks as his vision becomes blurry.

“So,” Thor says, to distract himself, “Earth is lost to us.”

“No.” Heimdall looks at Thor pointedly. “There is always hope.”

Thor swallows hard. He has barely thought of Jane at all since coming back to Asgard. “Can you see her?” he asks quietly. He thinks of how they parted and how Thor will not be able to return to her as he promised; he hopes that she is not angry with him and that somehow, across the cosmos, she understands. He likes to think that she would, if she knew.

Heimdall gives a soft, gentle laugh, as if Thor’s question amuses him. Perhaps, it does. Heimdall can always see everything. “Yes.”

“How is she?”

“She searches for you,” Heimdall answers, and Thor feels his stomach twist in a knot. He thinks of her warm brown eyes, of her endless curiosity, of her impish grin, and the knot tightens. Oh, Jane, he thinks, I hope you forgive me quickly. It is impossible for Thor to return to her and, even if it were not, he will not leave Loki any time soon.

Jane will never find the way to Asgard. Thor wishes there was some way to tell her to let him go. He wishes Heimdall’s gift extended to communicating across the cosmos, to all of those he can see through his golden gaze. He wishes he had never met Jane or been banished to Midgard when Loki needed him most.

Thor wishes so many things lately.

Late the following afternoon, Frigga sends a handful of the princes’ gentlemen to Loki’s quarters in order to prepare him for the feast. In the past few days, Tyr has led a group of warriors on a successful hunt and, as is tradition, they have brought their spoils back to the palace to honor the king. It is all so endlessly trite, and Loki has no desire in the least to obey his father’s command to attend. He’d intended to stay hidden away in his chambers, but his mother easily removes the charms locking the doors and accompanies the servants, likely to prevent Loki taking out his anger on them.
“I do not wish to attend this feast,” Loki says. He is standing stiffly in the center of the room, his mother perched gracefully on the edge of his bed, while the men flurry around, preparing Loki’s wardrobe and bath.

“It will do you good to leave your rooms,” Frigga replies, folding her hands. “And, as I told you, your father specifically requested your presence.”

“Why?” Loki challenges. He folds his arms stubbornly. “Does he wish to humiliate me in front of the entire kingdom? Cast me out as he cast Thor out?”

“Your father intends no such thing -”

“He’s not my father!” Loki exclaims, anguish breaking from him as the words spill out. Frigga looks momentarily stricken at the strength of his outburst, and Loki tries to swallow down the rage that is threatening to overcome him. Eventually, he suspects his rage will render Eir’s elixirs useless. Now, he simply looks away, pressing his lips so tightly together that his teeth grind together. There is an awkwardness that hangs in the wake of his words. The gentlemen pretend they did not hear Loki’s admission, but surely they will gossip among themselves later.

Neither Loki nor his mother speak for several minutes. They are quiet as the men lay out Loki’s dress for the evening, quiet as one of the younger men says, “The bathing chamber is prepared, my prince,” and only then does Loki speak again.

“I wish to bathe in private,” he says, addressing the man but gazing pointedly at his mother. “Dress as well.”

Frigga twists her wedding ring around her slim finger, hesitating. “All right,” she agrees, finally. “I will come to collect you in one hour, child. That is final.”

Loki clenches his jaw. He does not respond.

When his mother rises from the bed, the gentlemen take their cue to leave. Frigga crosses over to Loki and cards her fingers through his hair, pressing a lingering kiss to his temple. Her lips are warm against his skin; she smells comfortingly of saffron. Loki closes his eyes and breathes in deep. “Mother,” he whispers, and she draws back to look at him with a raised brow.

Tell me that you love me, he wants to say. Tell me that if you saw me as I truly am, in my hideous skin, you would still love me. The words catch in his throat; they gather in his windpipe and cut off his air. Loki knows he would never allow himself to say such a vulnerable thing. He would be too afraid that Frigga would not tell him what he wanted to hear.

When Loki says nothing, Frigga gives a small hum. “One hour,” she repeats.

After she is gone, Loki forces himself to go through the motions of bathing and dressing. Since yesterday, he has added to the collection of words across his heart - along with runt, he has deep runes spelling out monster, villain, and ugly. In the bath, Loki traces over the deep crimson marks, liking the way that they feel beneath his fingers. They feel like tattoos, a representation of himself that he will see whenever he looks in the mirror, lest he forget what he truly is.

The gentlemen have chosen an outfit of black and gold, with just hints of dark green woven into the fabric of his tunic. Loki dresses without ceremony, and smooths his hair into stiff submission for the first time in days. He ensures that his collar is fastened tightly at his neck and when he looks in the mirror, he sees someone only vaguely resembling the prince he used to be. His outsides are perfect and polished, as they should be, but his eyes are red-rimmed with shadows.
beneath. He looks like a broken version of himself.

As promised, his mother returns in exactly an hour. Loki is sitting on the edge of his bed, waiting for her. When she comes into the room, she gives him a critical once-over and then sighs. “Oh, Loki,” she says, sliding her arms around him. Loki holds himself stiffly, but he does not pull away. Frigga hugs him tightly until Loki squirms and then she reluctantly lets go.

“Your father wishes to see you before the feast,” Frigga tells him, dabbing carefully at her eyes.

Loki freezes. “Why?”

Frigga just shakes her head and extends her arm for him to take. Loki does so. He realizes, suddenly, that Odin does not care if Loki is at the feast at all - he wants to see Loki to hand over his punishment, and would not deign to either come to Loki’s chambers or call him formally to the throne room. Another ruse of convenience for the Allfather. A hot twist of betrayal coils in his stomach - his mother could have given him proper warning, but then, going along with Odin’s deception seems to be what she is good at. The thought is viciously bitter, but Loki cannot bring himself to be sorry for it. He partly wants to push away from her, in his anger, but he feels as if his knees will give out if he is not holding onto her.

He forces himself to put one foot in front of the other, everything growing hazy and still around him as they go from Loki’s quarters to Odin’s office chambers. Loki can’t help but notice that Thor is nowhere to be seen, but he cannot think about it, because the office chamber doors are opening and Frigga is still the only thing holding him upright as Loki faces Odin for the first time since that horrible, awful night on the BiFrost.

Odin is as formidable as ever. He stands tall in the middle of the chambers, waiting, hands folded in front of him as his single eye watches Frigga and Loki enter. The lines of exhaustion in his face are more pronounced now than they used to be, and Loki cannot help but wonder how much of his new weariness is a result of Loki’s actions.

Frigga gives Loki a slight nudge, and Loki obediently drops to one knee. “Allfather,” he says, only his voice gets stuck and he has to clear his throat and try again. “Allfather.”

“Loki,” Odin replies, and glances at Frigga. “Please leave us, my queen.”

Loki glances up, shooting his mother a panicked look. Frigga just gives him a reassuring smile, nods to Odin and then, with a swish of her skirts, she is gone.

Silence falls heavily around them. Loki waits, his gaze on the floor, until Odin says, “Please stand, Loki,” and then he forces himself to straighten. His knees tremble and he has to focus very hard on remaining upright.

“Have you called me here to pass your judgement, then?” Loki asks, and this time, his voice is a bit clearer. “To lay down your sentence?”

“I have called you here,” Odin responds, “to speak to you as a father must speak to his son.”

“Is that what I am to you? A son?” Loki watches Odin’s face, searching for the slightest frown or twitch that will give away what he is thinking.

“What else would you be?” Odin’s face betrays nothing.

“A great many things, Allfather, but not a son.” Loki folds his arms, nearly wrapping them around himself.
“Enlighten me.” Odin gestures with one hand, his single eye solemn and expectant.

Loki swallows hard. He can feel hot tears burning his eyes, but he refuses to let them spill. He recalls his conversation with Odin in the Vault and his heart squeezes and Loki wishes he could run his fingers over the runes he’s carved into his chest and feel the reminder of the truth. “Am I not a spoil of war?” Loki asks, when he finds his voice. “Am I not a pawn you intended to use how you saw fit - to unite your kingdom with Laufey’s? It must disappoint you, Allfather, to know that Laufey is dead by my hand and you can no longer carry out the plans you intended. So what is the king of Asgard to do with a frost giant? Shall you banish me? Cast me out into some godforsaken realm with nothing but the clothes on my back?”

“Perhaps,” Odin says, and Loki’s shoulders stiffen. “Banishment did Thor well, though he still has a long way to go before he is ready to rule.”

“I am not Thor.” Loki’s voice is brittle. “And if you banish me to teach me a lesson, I shall never come back, even once I have learned it. Not ever.”

Odin exhales. He turns away from Loki and wanders over to one of the large windows near the crackling hearth. From here, high up in the palace, the entire golden city is laid out before them, shiny and clean and unblemished. It is only from close-up that all the cracks start to show. “Thor came to see me yesterday,” Odin says. “He is very concerned about you and your punishment. He is under the impression I plan to send you to the executioner’s block.”

Something very cold settles in the pit of Loki’s stomach and, for the space of a heartbeat, he truly cannot breathe. “Would you truly send me to my death?” Loki asks, the words little more than a broken whisper.

“No.” It is a simple word, no reassurance behind it. “Your crimes are grave, my son, but they are not deserving of such a cruel punishment.”

He does not say Loki is not deserving of such a cruel punishment.

“You have always been a prince,” Odin continues after a moment. “An heir to the throne of Jotunheim, yes, but also to Asgard. Yet here, you were heir in title only, Loki - you were never intended to rule.”

Even though he knows this to be true, the words still gut Loki. The tears do spill then, and he draws in a breath, doing his best to blink them away. “Why?” he asks. “Why bring me here as your son and your heir if the throne was never for me?”

“How could I not?” Odin finally turns away from the window and faces Loki. His brow is furrowed, tight lines at the corners of his mouth. “A king must act in protection of his realm and his people, always. It is part of the job, Loki. You were Laufey’s son. I could no more leave you in Jotunheim than I could leave the Casket, for both gave Asgard the advantage over our enemy realm.”

Loki feels hot all over, his stomach sinking further and further with each word. It is one thing to suspect these things are true, but it is quite another to hear them confirmed with Odin’s own lips. Loki feels as if he is going to vomit.

“I did not intend to raise you as my son,” Odin admits. “You were meant for a noble family - one who could raise you close enough to me, at court, that I could keep watch over you. You would be raised Aesir, of course. We would raise you with Asgard’s principles and beliefs and foster you into a role as a liaison between Asgard and Jotunheim - an ambassador, perhaps, to broker
continued peace. When the time was right, we would negotiate for you to take your place as the rightfult king. That was the plan.”

The room seems to spin around him, everything blurring and tilting. Loki’s head pounds; he can feel bile rising in his throat. Odin speaks so casually of the babe Loki as if he was an object, a pawn, a tool to use in his agenda to conquer Jotunheim to his own liking. Loki was never meant to be an Odinson; he was never meant to be a person at all. “Then not only am I merely a stolen relic, but I am a mistaken one at that, a burden who was never meant for this family.”

“You were not meant for this family,” Odin agrees, as calmly as if he does not notice Loki’s visible distress, “but you have become a part of it, regardless. When I brought you back from Jotunheim, Frigga took to you very quickly. She disagreed with my intentions for you and insisted we raise you as our own. She argued that Jotunheim had cast you out, that it would never accept you as king, so my plan was doomed to fail. Your mother is a powerful ally, Loki, but an even more powerful rival. We argued for over a year, but she prevailed and, thus, here you are.”

The words are so simple and straightforward. Odin’s expression does not change, even as Loki has to reach out and grasp at the corner of his great desk in order to keep himself upright. “It must have disappointed you terribly,” he whispers, “to lose that argument. It must disgust you daily to look at me, knowing what I am.” He draws in a breath and lets it out, managing to right himself again. “You should have smashed my head against those temple walls, for that would have been kinder than what you are saying to me now.”

“No, my son, you misunderstand me. I do not say these things to be cruel to you,” Odin says, taking a few steps forward.

Loki recoils away. “I warn you, do not touch me.”

Odin halts where he is, looking back at Loki; for the first time, Loki can read the emotion on his face. He looks … almost hurt, but that is not possible. Loki is imagining things. “I say these things so that you will know the truth,” Odin goes on, after a pause. “All of it. These events occurred over a thousand years ago, Loki. Yes, at first I was disappointed and angry. My intent to secure the future of Asgard and peace with Jotunheim failed, and I had a son I never intended to raise. But as time passed, I changed my mind. As I watched you grow, I grew to love you as my own. Eventually, I could not imagine you not being my son.”

“You may save your false sentiment,” Loki snaps, gripping himself so tightly he can already feel the bruises where his nails are digging into his biceps. “I do not believe it.”

“No, I don’t imagine you do. But that does not make it less true. Your mother wished to be honest with you from the start - precisely to avoid this unfortunate situation, I am sure - but ultimately, we kept the truth from you so that you would never know that you were not meant for us. We raised you as we raised Thor, so there would never be any difference between you. We are a family; you and Thor and your mother are my greatest treasures. I ask you to consider a thousand years of loving you against a few years of wishing to send you away, and come to your own conclusions about which weighs more.”

“And teaching us that Jotuns were monsters?” Loki forces himself to ask. “How much should that weigh?”

Odin’s brow furrows slightly, as if this aspect has not occurred to him. “If you were never intended to know you were Jotun, why should it matter what they are?”

Loki opens and closes his mouth, no response coming out. It matters, of course it matters, but he
finds himself at a loss to explain why. He cannot process everything Odin has said to him - he needs to let it sink in, needs to analyze every single word when he has the clarity to do so, and maybe then he can discern if Odin is, in fact, being sincere. “Please,” he whispers, swallowing hard, “please just tell me my punishment and have done with it.”

A shadow crosses Odin’s features and he clasps his hands together in front of him, worrying a bit at his thumbnail. “Very well,” he says with a sigh. He goes to his desk, sitting down gracefully as he watches Loki. “You should know I have discussed the matter at length with my advisors and with your mother. Everyone agrees that this is the best course of action.”

“I understand,” Loki says stiffly as he squares his shoulders. “I am prepared to accept your judgement.”

Sitting down, Odin has to look up at Loki, but Loki does not feel any better for it. He still feels small and inadequate in his father’s presence; he feels as if he is being pressed even smaller under the great weight of everything Odin has told him. Still, he forces himself to meet Odin’s gaze steadily. Whatever punishment awaits him, he will accept with his dignity - what is left of it, anyway - intact.

“Your actions have caused great damage to our realm, to Jotunheim, and to the other kingdoms under our protection. What remains of Jotunheim is in ruins and, with Laufey slain, the frost giants are without a leader and without aid. Furthermore, the destruction of the BiFrost has cut us off from our allies in Alfheim, Vanaheim, and Nidavellir. A small town on Midgard has been destroyed by our hand and we cannot offer reparations to Midgard’s rulers. We are removed from them, at a time when Thor has revealed himself and Asgard as more than myth to the humans.” Odin sighs heavily. “It will take a very long time to recover from these things, Loki.”

Loki wants to flinch under Odin’s gaze, but doesn’t. He knows what he has done, and his only regret is that he did not succeed. He does not care if Jotunheim is in ruins, nor does he care about Midgard’s people or the town or the woman that took Thor away from Loki and sent him back changed in all the wrong ways.

Odin seems to be waiting for him to say something, but all Loki does is repeat, “I understand.”

“There is also the theft of the Casket of Ancient Winters,” Odin adds, “and the harm done upon Heimdall with it. You must return the Casket, of course.”

The Casket - the wretched relic that had started all of this, that had shown Loki what he truly was beyond all doubt. Loki had almost forgotten he had it. It was tucked away in his pocket dimension, which Frigga had bound him from accessing.

Not that it mattered. “The Casket belongs to me,” Loki replies, lifting his chin.

Odin seems to be waiting for him to say something, but all Loki does is repeat, “I understand.”

“It is a relic of the kingdom of Jotunheim and I am Jotunheim’s rightful heir. You said so yourself. It is mine, and therefore, I will not return it to your Vault.”

Odin sits back a bit, regarding Loki with something resembling curiosity. “It will do you no use,” he points out, “away from Jotunheim.”

“It will do more use in my hands than in your vault,” Loki replies. “I suspect you know this. You want it back so I may not yield it as a weapon against you and yours. You know I am the only one who can do so. You also want it as a trophy, and to actively prevent Jotunheim from ever rising to
power again. I’m sorry, Allfather, but you cannot have it.”

It is not often that anyone tells the Allfather what he can and cannot have or do - especially his son, the youngest prince. Odin looks at Loki for what feels like a long time, and even though Loki’s knees are trembling, he holds himself upright and gazes back at Odin without blinking. In truth, he does not care if Jotunheim ever recovers either the Casket or its former glory. Loki never intends to touch it again, let alone wield it against anyone, for the cost of revealing Loki’s true form is not one he wishes to pay.

But Loki’s true intentions matter not. He does not want Odin to have the Casket, and that is all there is to it.

Odin yields first. He sighs and nods. “Very well,” he says, simply. “Now, your punishment. We are sending you away,” Odin tells him, after a pause. “Into exile. Your mother’s relatives on Vanahheim have agreed to take you in for at least a year, perhaps longer. Officially, you are exiled until such a time is revealed that you have repented for your transgressions against the throne.”

Loki is far from the only one who has transgressed against the throne. He says nothing in his own defense, knowing whatever words he spoke would fall on deaf ears. Odin’s mind is made up.

“As far as the government of Asgard is concerned, you are rightly serving your sentence. You must know, however, my son, that this exile is not banishment.”

At that, Loki’s brow furrows in confusion. “It’s not?”

“No. You were ill-prepared for the regency that was placed upon you, and you were acting in defense of Asgard, however misplaced. These things were taken into consideration.” Odin’s gaze flicks over Loki’s face, something sympathetic flashing across his features. It is gone again in an instant. “You are very unwell, Loki. We wish - I wish - for you to heal. You must come to terms with the truths you have learned, today and before, and you must do it far from Asgard. Your title and your seiðr are yours to keep. You will be taken care of and provided for. When you return, we will all put this ugly business behind us. This is the command of Odin and cannot be challenged or amended, thus I have spoken.”

Loki is uncertain how to respond. Odin could have given a much harsher judgment; Loki almost wishes he had. It would be easier to be cast out and disowned than to have to wonder why he was not. “When am I to leave?” he asks finally.

“In a fortnight. Without the BiFrost, we must prepare a properly guarded travel vessel. I will tell Thor that he is to escort you personally, of course.”

Of course. Loki presses his lips together. He nods his understanding.

There is a heavy silence as Odin and Loki regard one another. Odin likely feels that he has done all he can to reassure Loki, but Loki is left with only hollowness. It is not for lack of answers; it is that the answers he has received are disappointing and unkind, no matter how Odin may believe otherwise. Looking at Odin, Loki feels in his gut that he will never again be able to consider him his father, that he will never again truly feel like part of this family. He feels untethered and utterly alone and he wishes, even for just a split second, that Odin’s edict had been the axe. It would have put Loki out of his misery for good.

The evening is cool for this time of year, and a pleasant breeze drifts in through the balcony of the feasting hall as Asgard’s nobles and warriors gather to celebrate. Tyr’s hunting party had gone
through the wilds of the outermost reaches of Asgard’s forests and they’d come back with victorious tales and even more victorious spoils, slain beasts and animals which the palace’s kitchens heartily prepared along with enough fruits and vegetables for a week’s worth of feasting.

Asgard loves little more than a good hunting feast, Thor thinks as he walks arm-in-arm with his mother to the great hall. He keeps his eyes peeled for his father and Loki, whom his mother assured him would be in attendance tonight, but he sees neither. It disappoints him, but he has a smile pasted on his face, warm and bright and - to anyone not looking closely - reminiscent of the golden prince he’d always been.

He walks his mother to her place at the head of the table, glancing around as he does so. Further down the table, he catches Sif’s eye and quickly looks away. He has not spoken to her - to any of his friends - since he’d confronted her and Fandral over Loki. Thor is not angry at them, exactly, but he is disappointed and somehow, that’s worse.

“Thank you,” Frigga says, leaning up to kiss Thor on the cheek as she lets go of his arm.

“Of course.” Thor smiles back at her, but his smile lasts only a moment. “Do you suppose Loki will be here soon?”

Frigga smooths a hand over his hair, sympathy flickering in her eyes. “Shortly, I am sure,” she replies. “He is meeting with your father first.”

Thor’s blood runs cold. His father had assured Thor that Loki was not for the axe, but he cannot help the shiver of panic that goes through him at the thought of Loki facing Odin alone, accepting whatever terrible punishment Odin saw fit.

He is physically tense, realizing it only when he becomes aware that his mother’s fingers are wrapped around his forearm, applying gentle pressure. “Thor,” she tells him, “it is all right.”

“I should be with him,” Thor murmurs.

“You cannot help him right now,” Frigga says, and lowers herself gracefully into her seat. She gestures for Thor to sit, as well. “Loki and his father have much to discuss. He knows he must face the consequences of his actions, but that is not the only matter to be addressed between them. Your father has waited too long to summon Loki, but now, we will all be able to move forward.”

“How?” Thor asks. He barely feels his chair beneath him as he sinks down. “How can we move forward when nothing will ever be the same again?”

“Perhaps, that is why we can move forward,” Frigga responds. “You are right, things will not be the same, but that does not mean they cannot be good. There are no more secrets now.”

Thor tilts his head. “Is it truly that simple, Mother?”

Frigga’s eyes darken with an unexpected sadness. “No,” she admits softly, and reaches out. She brushes some of Thor’s blonde hair away from his eyes, tucking errant strands behind his ear. “But we must hope,” she adds. “It is all we have.”

Their attention is diverted, then, with the arrival of Odin. Thor’s heart stutters in his chest as he peers past his father and the Einherjar accompanying him, seeking out Loki. At first, it seems that his brother is nowhere to be seen but then, as the guests occupy themselves with greeting the king and the Einherjar spread out, Thor sees Loki trailing behind, shoulders hunched, as if he wishes to draw no attention to himself.
It is impossible not to. Thor starts to lift a hand, to gesture for Loki to come sit. Loki glances at him; for a moment he is wide-eyed and panicked before his features close into a mask of impassivity. Thor becomes aware of pockets of conversations lulling to a halt, voices being lowered as Loki’s presence is noticed.

It is the first public appearance his brother has made since the BiFrost was destroyed, the first public appearance since his regency as king ended in a violent explosion of kaleidoscopic color. Rumors have circulated at court, Thor is aware, but he does not know how much anyone truly knows about what happened. Loki’s reputation is colored but not ruined. To see Loki at the feast, united with his family, will help repair some of the damage. Though some seem wary, Thor is heartened to notice several scattered smiles of those who are pleased to see their prince.

It becomes clear, a moment later, that the smiles do not matter. Before Thor can do anything, Loki takes a few halting steps backwards. His gaze flickers over the crowd, over Frigga and Thor, and then abruptly, he turns on his heel and disappears back down the entrance hall.

This does not go unnoticed. A flurry of conversation breaks out, many voices drowning each other out.

“Silence,” Odin calls, but Thor does not wait to hear what Odin will tell the people. He pushes his chair back and hurries after Loki. Loki is walking very quickly, but Thor manages to catch up to him just outside of the stairwell that leads to the royal family’s private quarters.

“Loki!” Thor reaches out and grasps Loki’s arm just above the elbow.

“Leave me alone,” Loki snaps. He tries to wrench his arm from Thor’s grip.

“No,” Thor says stubbornly. “Not until you speak to me.”

“I don’t owe you anything, Thor,” Loki says. He looks at Thor, revealing that silent tears have already begun slipping down his cheeks.

Thor inhales a sharp breath as he gets a good look at Loki’s face. How is it possible that Loki looks even worse than he did yesterday? His eyes are very red and the shadows beneath them are very pronounced. The black clothes he wears make his skin look even more pale. He is dressed immaculately, for the first time in several days, but his fine garments do little to improve his appearance. Rather, it is like Loki has put on the costume of who he used to be and it only serves to announce how much he is changed.

“Loki,” Thor gets out brokenly. He releases Loki’s arm so that he can grasp Loki by the neck. His fingers tangle in the soft black hair at Loki’s collar. “Loki, you have to stop this. Stop this mourning, stop this punishing yourself.”

“How? ” Loki’s voice is as wrecked as Thor feels. “I can’t. I can’t go back to who I was, and there is no future for me here, either, and I just -” He cuts himself off, sagging into Thor’s touch rather than jerking away from it. It seems as if the fight has drained out of him. Loki closes his eyes. “I can’t, Thor,” he whispers again.

“Come here,” Thor says. He tugs Loki close, wrapping his arms around his brother’s thin frame. Loki must truly be exhausted, because he leans into the embrace, even though his shoulders stiffen slightly. He drops his forehead to Thor’s chest, and his fingers grasp tightly at the material of Thor’s dark red tunic.

For a long time, neither of them says anything. Thor is too afraid that the wrong word will send...
Loki recoiling; Loki simply breathes in and out, muffling the occasional sniffle against Thor’s shirt. Thor smooths back Loki’s hair and rests his fingers just behind Loki’s ear, feeling the stuttering of his rapid-fire pulse. When Loki’s pulse finally slows and his breathing evens out, Thor manages to pull back a bit. “Let’s go upstairs,” he says, more of a command than a suggestion, but Loki does not argue. They go to Thor’s rooms and Thor locks the doors, with instructions to the guards that they are not to be disturbed.

Loki sinks down on Thor’s bed. He looks up at Thor, his green eyes wide and vulnerable. He looks so different from the crazed, desperate version of himself who’d attacked Jotunheim and forced Thor to destroy the BiFrost. Looking at him now, Thor can almost believe he’d imagined the entire thing, that Loki had never been so full of white-hot rage and bitter fury, that he had never fought Thor with fire and hatred in his veins. He looks, now, like the younger brother Thor has always loved.

“Mother said,” Thor begins hesitantly, “that you met with Father.”

Loki flinches, and then he nods. “I am being sent away,” he says, somewhat mechanically. There is no emotion in the words. He looks down at his hands, picking at his fingernails. “To Vanaheim. Exile.”

Thor’s heart sinks. He doesn’t know how to react. On the one hand, it is not prison or death, and he must be grateful, but on the other hand … “For how long?” he asks, with some difficulty. It surprises him how much he suddenly cannot bear to think of being separated from Loki.

Loki’s shoulders rise and fall. “At least a year, he said. Perhaps longer.”

Hesitantly, Thor crosses over to the bed. He eases himself down carefully beside Loki, wracking his brains for what to say. “A year is not so long,” he finally manages, trying to put some optimism into his voice. “Hardly anything, really. You will be back before you know it.”

“I don’t want to come back,” Loki says, so quietly Thor almost does not hear him.

The words make his heart sink even further. It actually hurts, like ice and stone pitting in his core, making it hard to breathe. “Well,” he manages, “well, you may feel that way now, but after some time-”

“No.” Loki drags in a breath. “I think I’l truly never come back to Asgard.”

“You don’t mean that,” Thor says. He feels dizzy. “Never is a long time, Loki.”

“I do mean it.” Loki draws his knees up. He settles himself like that, wrapping his arms around his legs, absently brushing at his still-damp cheeks. “There’s nothing here for me anymore. Can’t you see that? I was never meant to be a part of this family, and now that the truth is out, we can’t go back. I need not be a prince of Asgard, for I will never be king - nor do I want to be. I cannot go back to pretending to be a son of Odin, not in my heart. I have nothing here. I do not belong here.”

With each word, Thor feels as if the world around him is tilting. He grips at the covers on his bed, grasping silky crimson sheets between his fingers. “But what about me? We are still brothers, Loki.”

“We are not,” Loki corrects. The words are even, final. “We will never be brothers again, Thor.”

It would have been less painful for Loki to drive a dagger into Thor’s gut. Thor feels hot all over, clammy, and yet he is cold, too, and his heart feels as if it has ground to a halt before slowly, with great effort, picking up a beat again. Though Loki has said the words before, this time there is no
undercurrent of anger or grief hinting that they are nothing more than a verbal jab. Loki truly means it this time.

Tears spring to Thor’s eyes. Damn Odin and his careless secrets; damn him. Odin should have told them this horrid truth from the start, yes, but if his intent was always to keep it a secret, then he should have made sure that it stayed that way. It should have been buried so deeply that it would never have enough power to spring forth and rip them apart so thoroughly.

“How can you say that we will never be brothers?” Thor demands. He pushes himself back up from the bed, clenching his hands into fists so that he won’t reach out and take Loki by the shoulders and shake him until all of his madness falls out. “Do I truly mean so little to you?”


“Then explain it to me. Make me understand - because you are right, I don’t. Why does it matter so much what you are that you are willing to throw away everything we’ve ever known?” Suddenly, they have picked up right where they left off in their argument the previous day, before Loki shut down and literally threw Thor out.

Loki’s face crumples a bit, but just as quickly, his features turn to rage. The change is so sudden and swift that it catches Thor off balance. “Listen to your own words! Listen to what you just said! You said why does it matter what I am, not who I am. You, Mother, Odin - you all keep telling me what I am doesn’t matter - it’s like I am not even a person anymore!”

Thor blinks, completely baffled. “Loki, of course you are still a person.”

“Am I?” Loki challenges. “If you saw me as I truly am, you would not think so.”

“Show me, then,” Thor shoots back, a challenge of his own in the hard edge of his voice. Beneath that, however, there is a flicker of curiosity - and uncertainty, as well. His palms feel sweaty. He does not know how he will react to the sight of his brother - beautiful, regal Loki - with blue skin and crimson eyes, but he reminds himself that it is still Loki, underneath. “Show me,” Thor says again, quieter this time.

Loki is staring at him, his lips slightly parted. He looks completely taken aback; for once, Thor has managed to surprise him. The air hangs heavy around them as they stare at one another, both hardly daring to breathe. Thor clenches and unclenches his fists; Loki closes his mouth and presses his lips into a thin line. He looks away first.

“No,” he says, so quietly that Thor hardly hears him. “No, Thor, I will not.”

Thor has been holding himself rigidly, knowing that every single nuance of his reaction will be dissected by Loki, but at Loki’s words, he feels himself deflate a bit. “How can you say that I see you not as a person but a monster,” Thor asks, just as quietly, “if you won’t even show me that your true form is no less a person than the form you wear now?”

Something in Loki’s expression snaps. “Don’t you dare judge me, Thor,” he says, dangerously quiet. “You’re such a hypocrite. You, who would have proudly slain every Frost Giant in Jotunheim for a taste of honor and glory - you, who have never shied from declaring the Jotuns horrible, savage monsters. I am not the one perpetuating that idea, just because I do not wish to prostrate myself at your feet, in my true form, laid bare and waiting for you to grant me clemency for existing.”
“Do you truly think so little of me?” Thor asks, taking a step back, as if the weight of Loki’s vicious words have pushed him off balance. He feels his cheeks warm, feels heat spread over his ears and to the back of his neck. He can hardly see Loki, for his eyes have filled with tears that threaten to spill over.

“Was it not you who said the Jotuns must learn to fear you? Was it not you who slaughtered them where they stood, right on their very own soil, for their fickle insult to your masculinity? At least I had a purpose and was not merely acting out of my own injured pride!”

“Some purpose,” Thor snaps, hurt spilling over. He has been trying so hard to be patient, to be understanding, but he has feelings, too. “What did you seek to prove? That you were a worthy son - that you were my equal and, thus, deserving of the throne. You said so yourself. Don’t fool yourself into thinking your intentions were any more noble than mine, brother.”

Loki’s eyes flash. “I could have saved Asgard from the war you so carelessly started.”

“And I would not have had reason to start it had you not let the Jotuns into Asgard in the first place,” Thor snaps.

Loki springs up, lightning-fast. He shoves Thor back, with such pent-up anger that Thor stumbles back several feet. Thor is surprised at Loki’s strength, though he knows he should not be. Loki may look frail of late, but he is still every bit the fighter he’s always been. “If you weren’t so arrogant and hot-headed, I’d have had no need to let them in,” Loki snarls, shoving Thor again. “You weren’t ready for the throne!”

Thor’s temper snaps, and he shoves Loki in return. He has been pushing aside his own anger since that night on the BiFrost, pushing aside his hurt feelings, his confusion over Loki’s betrayal. Now, Loki is pulling out everything Thor has tried to put away, pulling it out right over the ragged seams of Thor’s frayed edges. “That was not your decision to make,” Thor growls.

“But I was right, wasn’t I?” Loki challenges. He’d gone careening backwards when Thor shoved him, catching himself on one of the the bed’s posters. He doesn’t bother righting himself, just grips the poster and scowls back at Thor. “You weren’t ready. Why was it that you refused to listen to me? Just as Father always refused to listen to me. Why did it take that woman mere days to change you when I - your brother, your best friend - could no more move you than I could Mjolnir?”

He repeats the words Thor had given to him in the days following the events on the BiFrost to remind Loki of who he was, who they were, when it seemed the world beneath their feet was as shattered as the rainbow bridge. Now, they seem so false, spit like venom from Loki’s mouth. Yet beneath there is a raw, aching hurt that makes Thor draw in a breath, reeling himself back in.

“Why does she bother you so?” he asks quietly. “What should it matter who had me see reason, so long as I saw it?”

“Because it is only yet another thing to prove that everyone has more worth than I do,” Loki says. All of a sudden, it is like the anger has receded again, back to wherever Loki has hidden it of late, aided by soothing elixirs neither of them quite understand. “You call me your best friend, but you always remind me to know my place. You listen to Father, you listen to your friends, you listen to a mere mortal you hardly know, but you don’t listen to me. You find worth in me only when I am of use to you, and otherwise you cast me aside as Laufey cast me aside, as Odin cast me aside. You are no different from everyone else, Thor, and that is why I cannot call you brother any longer. Don’t you see? It hurts too much.”

_I only ever wanted to be your equal._ Thor’s mouth goes dry as the words that have been haunting
him in the background suddenly slam into him full force. He stares at Loki, wide-eyed. Everything clicks into place, then, everything Loki has been trying to tell him all along. Heimdall, the Warriors Three, Sif … none of them saw the need to swear fidelity to Loki, because they had taken their cues from Thor, who never treated Loki as his equal. Thor was always for the throne, and he made sure everyone - especially Loki - knew it.

Everyone catered to Thor’s whims, no matter how misplaced. He remembers how quickly the Warriors and Sif had agreed to accompany Thor on a fool’s mission to Jotunheim, just as quickly as they chose to follow him to New Mexico against Loki’s wishes. Certainly, they expressed their doubt - until Thor appealed to their vanities. But Loki …. Thor forces himself to think back to that day and he remembers Loki telling him it was a bad idea. When he realized Thor was intent to go, he held back and remained quiet until Thor implored him to join them. You are coming, aren’t you? Thor recalls asking.

Loki, who had folded himself small on the steps, who was faced away from Thor, had turned. There was the briefest hesitation, and then Loki flashed him a beautiful smile that put a sparkle in his eyes, brought light to his whole face. Yes, of course.

He knew it was a bad idea from the start. He knew the risks. Yet he supported Thor anyway - not out of sycophancy, but out of concern. Out of love. And how had Thor repaid him? By growling at him to know your place when Loki tried to reason with Thor’s stubborn pride.

“Loki …” Thor gets out, hesitantly. It feels as if once the curtain has been lifted over his blindness, he cannot stop the truths from pouring in. Thor walked around Asgard as if it already belonged to him, and everyone let him. In doing so, not only had he taken Loki for granted, but he’d encouraged the same treatment in others. He’d given his implicit permission for Loki to be considered less than. Thor had stood aside and done absolutely nothing while Loki’s gifts and skills were mocked, while Loki endured thinly-masked disdain and snide remarks from their friends, while Loki’s rule as king was undermined from the moment he was handed Gungnir. All of this entire, horrible sequence of events could be traced back to Thor’s own selfishness, his own blindness.

Loki had paid for Thor’s mistakes, paid in pride and paid in blood, and even still, Thor is trying to keep Loki in his role as subservient brother, loyal second prince. No wonder Loki hates him. No wonder Loki wants nothing to do with him anymore. No wonder Loki does not trust Thor enough to reveal his Jotun skin.

Thor feels sick with the weight of his realizations, all slamming down upon him at once. He feels his knees give out, and he sinks down to the floor, half-heartedly reaching out to clutch at the mattress, as if to use it to stop his descent. He twists the sheets around in his fingers and looks up at Loki, who is staring back at him with wide, brilliant green eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Thor says. The words are meaningless; they are pebbles dropped into an ocean of regret, but Thor must say them, anyway. “Loki, I didn’t realize … I’m sorry,” he says again. There is nothing he can say to explain himself, except the truth: He had not known how much pain he was causing Loki because he had never bothered to try to see.

“You were always the sun,” Loki responds, letting out a breath. He releases his hold on the poster and slides down next to Thor. “And I your shadow.”

“I never meant to make you feel like a shadow,” Thor says, glancing over at Loki. His brother’s features are carefully blank, as if he does not wish to reveal any more of what he is thinking, but the glitter of tears in his eyes reveals what he is feeling. Thor longs to reach out and brush the tears away from Loki’s face. He clasps his hands in his lap instead.
“I know,” Loki admits, and sighs. “You’ve never been malicious, Thor, even to me. Sometimes, I wish you had been. It would be easier to justify hating you.”

“Do you truly hate me?” The words are hard to get out, but suddenly, Thor desperately needs to know the answer.

Loki looks at him for a long while. He looks at him for so long that Thor almost thinks he won’t answer. He feels his heart thudding in his chest, all of his muscles tensed and waiting. Finally, Loki shakes his head and looks away again.

“No,” he says softly, and rubs his eyes. “I don’t truly hate you. But I think I need to be away from you for awhile. You don’t mean to, but you make everything worse for me.”

Thor nods, miserably. He feels that he can understand better, now, why Loki welcomes his exile and wishes to see no end to it. On Vanheim, away from Thor, he can be whomever he wants. A fresh start. “Have I lost you forever?” he can’t help but ask.

Loki shakes his head quickly. “I don’t know what we’ll be after this,” he admits. “Not brothers. But maybe friends.”

Maybe friends. It is a bitter pill to swallow, Thor thinks, to have the entirety of their lives reduced to maybe friends. Two halves of the same whole, two stars rotating the same sun … but, how can Thor mourn the loss of what was never really true to begin with? Maybe friends. “Maybe equals,” he hears himself say, a note of hopefulness in his tone. He glances at Loki out of the corner of his eye and catches Loki glancing back.

“Maybe,” Loki agrees.

The next morning, Frigga comes to Loki’s chambers with a food tray. Loki has not eaten since the tiny meal he’d managed two days before and, though he hates to admit it, his stomach rumbles at the sight of a fresh bowl of porridge with honey, fruit, and milk. He partly wants to ignore the food, just to make a point, but instead he allows himself to sit up and take a few spoonfuls.

“You’ve lost weight, child,” Frigga points out. She has joined him on his bed, sitting on the edge while she strokes his hair lightly. “I’m glad you’re eating right now, but this is not enough to sustain you for the entire day.”

“I know,” Loki says simply. He closes his eyes for a moment, enjoying the feel of her fingers carding through his hair. The gesture reminds him of being a child, seeking Frigga out for comfort when he’d hurt himself or when he felt scared or melancholy. She would pull him into her lap and stroke his hair and tell him stories of great seiðmaðrs who would use magic to fight dwarves and elves, who would befriend delicate creatures like fae and sprites. Loki used to love to imagine himself as a powerful seiðmaðr one day, going on adventures and besting so many foes that Thor and the warriors would have to respect him.

“Loki?” Frigga asks, pulling him back from his memories. Slowly, Loki opens his eyes and realizes that his spoon has gone limp in his hand. He clears his throat and looks down at his porridge.

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“I was just thinking,” he begins hesitantly, “of the stories you used to tell me as a child. About the fae and the sprites?”

Frigga’s eyes soften. She nods. “Yes, you used to love those tales,” she responds. A smile flickers across her face. “You were most fascinated with the willowisps of Midgard, do you recall? You begged me for months and months to teach you how to shapeshift into an orb of light, so you may
flicker through the gardens like the willowisps.”

“You told me they were such a beautiful sight,” Loki says. “The Midgardians believed that to see one was akin to being visited by a muse, and they would produce great art and poetry. I liked that idea. I wanted to be something beautiful and radiant, to be a sight that would be welcomed instead of scorned.” He swallows, looking back down at his bowl. Suddenly, his appetite has vanished again. He pushes his spoon through the remainder of his porridge and feels a lump in his throat.

“Oh, my child,” Frigga says, “you are beautiful and radiant. You have always been thus.”

Loki shakes his head, trying with difficulty to swallow the lump. “I never cared much for this form,” he admits. “Thor was the beautiful one. But to know that this form is not even what I truly am … the truth is so much uglier than I could have imagined, Mother. How can you even bear to touch me?”

Frigga draws back. She lets go of his hair and grasps his chin in two fingers, gently forcing him to look at her. “Loki, it breaks my heart to hear you say such things. You are not a parent, so perhaps you simply do not understand the love a parent innately holds for their child.”

“But you aren’t -”

She releases his chin, only to close her hand over his mouth before he can finish. “Yes, I am,” she says, firmly. She lets go of his mouth, her fingers going to his hair once more. “Biology matters not, my son. I understand that you need more time to come to terms with all of this, but never forget that I am your mother, I have always been your mother, and I will always be your mother. As such, I love you exactly as I love Thor - that is to say, more than life itself.”

Loki swallows hard, the back of his throat tightening. He wipes at the few tears that have escaped and slid down his cheeks, but he cannot bring himself to refute her words. They are the best thing that he is ever going to get from her, he knows - and they are not small words, they are nothing to scoff at.

But he realizes that his mother still separates him from the Jotuns, that her love for him - true as it may be - has only come about because she considers him Aesir as well as her child. The Frost Giants are monsters, but Loki is Loki, and it is only in this way that she can speak truly of her love for him. She wants him to believe that the rest of it is irrelevant.

She has the privilege of considering his roots irrelevant, but it is Loki’s identity. He cannot simply disregard it as she - and as Thor - can. He does not know what to do with this revelation, for speaking it will not make her understand it, nor will it change how she feels.

Perhaps, this is one of the things he must come to terms with while he is away.

“All right,” he says finally, and Frigga visibly relaxes. She smiles and pulls him close, pressing a kiss to his temple.

“All right,” she echoes.

They sit together for awhile, Frigga urging Loki to eat the entirety of his meal. He manages most of the porridge and a few strawberries, along with the entire goblet of milk, before his stomach protests. It will take him awhile to adjust, should he choose to begin eating properly again. Frigga acknowledges this unspoken truth with a hum when he pushes away the remainder of his meal.

Loki has just finished eating when his chamber doors slide open and Thor steps hesitantly inside. The previous evening, Loki removed the charms keeping Thor out. His anger at Thor has all but
disappeared, so suddenly that it should be alarming, but Loki knows it is because finally, finally, Thor has seen the damage he’s done to Loki. He has realized the weight of it, and he shows remorse, and perhaps, that is all Loki ever wanted from him.

Last night, they had stayed in Thor’s chambers for a long time, moving to Thor’s bed, entangling themselves in one another as they’d done when it was Thor who was going away. This time, they did not cry and make whispered schemes to stay together. They did not speak much at all, really, for they were both drained and exhausted. They simply took comfort in each other’s company until listening to Thor’s soft, even breathing lulled Loki nearly to sleep, at which point he returned to his own rooms.

Now, Thor meets Loki’s gaze from near the doors, as if asking permission before he comes in further.

Loki’s lips tilt at the corners in a faint smile, in the affirmative, and Thor comes all the way into the room. “Hello, Mother,” Thor greets Frigga. “Am I interrupting?”

“No, my child. Loki was just finishing his morning meal,” Frigga responds. She gets to her feet and smooths her skirts. “I should be leaving, though. I am to meet with your father shortly. Preparations are to be made for Loki’s journey to Vanaheim.”

“What are people going to say?” Loki asks, glancing up at her. “About my absence?” He has not thought much about Asgard’s reaction to him as a betrayer of the throne, but the feast last night made it perfectly clear that public opinion on him is mixed. He should not care, yet he does.

“Nothing,” Frigga replies. “Thor, for Norns’ sake, stop hovering there. You should hear this, too.”

Thor, looking chagrined, takes a seat and both boys look at their mother expectantly. She is twisting her hands together, as she does when she is nervous.

“Both of you leaving the feast last night,” Frigga says, “caused quite a stir. Rumors have been circulating, with is nothing unusual at court, but your father wished to quell them - better late than never, I suppose.”

Frigga sighs the irritated sigh of a wife toward her husband, rather than a queen toward her king, before she proceeds. She tells them that the official story is that Laufey breached Asgard’s security and made it into the sleeping Odin’s chambers, where Loki killed him in Odin’s defense. Loki then took it upon himself to retaliate by setting the BiFrost upon Jotunheim, at which point Thor was forced to stop him by destroying the bridge.

After Loki fled the feast, and Thor with him, Odin addressed the rumors circulating around court by painting Loki’s actions as those of a brave yet confused boy. He revealed nothing of the fact that Loki lured Laufey into Asgard, or of the explosive fight between the princes. Loki’s exile has been framed as a personal retreat, so that he may recover from the stress of it all.

“So Odin has covered it up,” Loki says flatly, as it sinks in. He is not even surprised. In order to explain Loki’s actions fully, Odin must also admit his own failures as a king and as a father. Norns forbid he tarnish the shiny reputation he has built around himself.

“Please, Loki, I wish you would not judge your father so harshly,” Frigga replies. “He wanted to save your reputation as much as his own. Can you truly fault him for that?”

Loki just shrugs, looking down at his hands.

Thor, next to Loki, clears his throat. “Is it only the court who has heard this tale, or the council as
well?"

"The council knows as much as it needs to," Frigga says.

"That is not an answer," Loki points out.

"It certainly is," Frigga replies. She flicks her gaze from Loki to Thor and back again. "My stubborn boys. We are all doing what we must in order to move forward and be a family again."

They will never be a family again, but Loki refrains from saying so. He is wearing his mother’s patience down, he can tell. Frigga loves him, but she is not perfect, and Loki realizes it now. He glances over at Thor, who glances back uncertainly. Then Thor nods. "All right, Mother," he says. "We understand."

"Good."

After she has taken her leave, Loki settles back on his bed. He fingers the runes on his chest through the soft material of his night clothes. He and Thor look at each other; they are both uncomfortable in the daylight, tense and unsure about where they stand with one another.

"Are you hurt?" Thor finally asks.

"What?"

"You keep -" Thor rubs his fingers over his own chest, imitating Loki’s gesture. "Is something wrong?"

Loki hesitates. Then he sighs and grasps at the collar of his shirt. He unbuttons the top, pulling it down to reveal the runes.

Thor’s eyes go wide. He reaches forward, hesitantly and, when Loki doesn’t pull back, he traces his fingers over the marks. Loki watches as Thor’s eyes grow bright. He does not think he’s ever seen his brother cry so much as he has in these last weeks. There’s a certain power to that, Loki thinks, that he has this ability to bring Thor to his knees through how much he hates himself. It doesn’t entirely make sense to him, what one has to do with the other, but it intrigues him, regardless. He allows Thor’s fingers to linger on the gashes, to trace each rune while taking in what they say.

"Is this truly how you feel about yourself?" Thor finally asks, drawing back.

Loki lets go of his shirt, letting the material fall softly back into place. "Yes," he admits. The corners of Thor’s mouth turn down. "Would it be foolish to ask why?"

"You know why," Loki responds, which is as much of an answer as saying yes, it would. There is no venom in his tone, though, despite the familiar well of resentment for Thor. It will take Loki a long time to not feel resentment for Thor, even if the anger has dissipated for now.

"Would it be foolish to ask you to stop?" Thor goes on, bringing his eyes up to meet Loki’s. "It pains me greatly to see you hurting yourself like this, Loki. I don’t understand. Does it make you feel any better?"

"It certainly doesn’t make me feel worse," Loki snaps, drawing his knees up and wrapping his arms around them as he stares back at Thor. His irritation fades again instantly and he sighs. "It does make me feel better," he adds, so quietly that Thor has to lean forward to hear him. "I can’t
explain to you why, except to say that … sometimes, everything inside of me feels wrong, Thor. I feel wrong, and it consumes me until I feel as if I’m going to go mad. By doing this …” He gestures toward his heart, “…if I mark my outsides, then perhaps my insides won’t feel so horrible.”

“There’s nothing else you can do?” Thor asks carefully.

“Not so far as I’ve figured out,” Loki admits.

Thor tilts his head, regarding Loki for a long moment. Sadness seems to have permanently etched itself into his features. “I think I understand,” he finally says, to Loki’s surprise. “I don’t … really feel horrible inside, but I anger quickly, I always have. Sometimes I feel I’m going to explode with all the anger I feel, and so I must take to the battlefield or the sparring grounds and hit things until I feel better.” He pauses, and he gives Loki a wry smile. “You know that.”

Loki nods slowly. Thor’s anger has always been a force to contend with; his time on Midgard and everything that has happened since may have tempered it a bit, but neither is so foolish as to believe it is gone for good. Loki has never considered, however, that Thor’s battlelust comes from that itching, driving need to rid himself of something wrong inside of him.

“Perhaps, we are not so different,” Thor adds, giving voice to Loki’s thoughts.

Loki’s mouth turns down. “Are you suggesting I seek battle as you do?”

“No. It’s not in your nature.”

“But I am a Jotun,” Loki reminds him. “I am a savage. It should be in my nature.”

Thor shakes his head. “Maybe I have been wrong about that,” he admits. “It isn’t fair to judge an entire race. I have been doing much thinking these past days, Loki, about everything that’s happened and everything you have said. My first instinct is always to judge - the Jotuns, for being monsters, the Midgardians, for being primitive. I have been proven wrong time and time again. Perhaps, all I know is that I know nothing at all about any of them.”

Loki stares at Thor - such an admission does not come lightly, he knows, and can tell from the way that Thor is flexing his fingers, not quite meeting Loki’s gaze. “Oh,” is all Loki can manage to say.

“That doesn’t mean I think this is okay,” Thor says, gesturing at Loki’s chest.

“I know.” Loki brings his fingers back to his tunic, rubbing against the runes. “Maybe,” he says, very hesitantly, “you can help me think of something else. To - to help me, I mean.”

Thor’s features brighten. “Yes,” he agrees, quickly, and then he reaches out again. He pulls Loki’s hand away from his chest and slides their fingers together. Loki looks down and gives in to the instinct to curl his fingers around Thor’s and hold on tight.

The End
time got away from me, and then I got very overwhelmed >_< but, please know I read every single one more than once and they mean the world to me, thank you so, so much! Come hang out with me on tumblr!

[Dialogue Disclaimers: 1. "Does it make you feel better? / It certainly doesn't make me feel worse" was blatantly ripped off from a deleted scene in TDW between Frigga and Loki, which you can watch here. // 2. The words spoken between Heimdall and Thor at the end of their scene here are taken from the last scene of Thor, just with the context rearranged for this story. // 3."He's not my father" is a shoutout (literally) to when Loki shouts this at Frigga in this scene in TDW. // 4. Thor asking, "Do you truly think so little of me?" is a little bit of a play on when Loki asks Thor this in Thor Ragnarok, which I can't find a clip of that includes this line from Loki, but I'm sure everyone knows what I'm talking about.]

(**Adding disclaimers 2-4 because, unlike the first, their original contexts weren't from deleted scenes so I assumed the references were understood, but I overthink things so I decided to make it clearer. :) )

End Notes

Come hang out with me on tumblr! Comments make my soul sing; if you liked this, please consider leaving one. <3 :)

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