The Price
by Ark

Summary

“I did not come here to argue,” Loki says, his hands slipping down around Thor’s neck. “I came here to tell you that there is no world where I do not love you, Thor. There is no timeline where I do not choose you. There is no universe that will be wide enough to keep us apart.”

Notes

This has been such a wild ride. Immense thanks to the friends who listened to me babble on ad nauseam for months: stuffimgoingtohellfor, bewaretheides315, barricadeur, reserve, robokittens, badspacebabies, eralkfang, pleasebekidding, yeats-infection, A, R.

Thank you to partners in crime raven-brings-light and stereobone for encouragement and hand-and-brain-cell holding.

Thank you to the unparalleled malefeministthor for all of the stunning art that you will find here.
Thank you to my tumblr and ao3 loves: this wouldn't exist without you.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Loki is gasping for breath.

He gags on air as though it were water in his lungs; it feels as thick and heavy and unyielding. The air does not wish to enter his body, but it is pressed inside by degrees by an outside force, and on his fifth breath it thins and starts to feel like air again.

He breathes, shuddering. But he breathes.

He opens his eyes with effort. He is cold, colder than he has ever been, colder than he thought it possible for a Jötunn to feel. His eyelashes are triangled with ice crystals. He blinks to clear his vision. It wavers stubbornly.

All he can see is a tall form looming over him, a face he need not glimpse the details of to know that it is worried. Loki relaxes, the fear of waking in such a way draining away with recognition. Safe.

“Thor,” he tries to say. His voice sounds cracked and broken, discarded. It emerges as a croak.

“Loki?” There’s an urgency in his brother’s tone that Loki has never heard before, but Thor has always been impatient.
If Loki had more of a voice he would make it sound sharp and snappish. He swallows, his throat a desert. “Who else?”

Thor makes a strangled noise, half a laugh, half something like a sob. “It has been a long time, brother.” His hand is warm—so warm—as it curls around Loki’s shoulder and seeks to guide him upward. “Can you sit? There is water.”

“If I must,” says Loki, refusing not to be peevish in such a state. Every part of him is frozen and aches with inertia, as though his muscles have forgotten how to be used. His vision is slowly but stubbornly resolving itself, Thor becoming clearer around all of his glorious edges.

They are alone in a dimly-lit room that has the trappings of a scientist’s lab; Loki is lying on a high metal table such as might be used for surgeries or the dissecting of specimens. He shivers. He is so cold.

Loki lets Thor pull him into a sitting position, remembers how to lift his hand, how to close it around the glass of water. He is afraid the water will pour from his mouth, that swallowing it down will prove an insurmountable challenge, but in the end he succeeds in a few proper sips.

It shouldn’t feel like such an accomplishment, but it does, and Thor watches the proceedings like it’s the most incredible act he’s ever witnessed, so Loki is somewhat mollified.

For a long moment he lets himself sit, breathing, propped up by Thor’s strength at his side. Then Loki says, “Tell me.”

“You died,” says Thor, matter-of-fact about it.

“I see,” says Loki. “That appears to be somewhat of a recurring condition.”

“What do you remember?” Thor’s tone is grim but determined.

Loki thinks about it. His brain—his memory—is as disused as his muscles, but all of him is now in thaw. He thinks.

He sees: the world on fire. Asgard lost. Death everywhere surrounding. Death inevitable. A face of evil, shaded a purulent violet, obscuring all else.

All else save Thor—Thor, bound, desperate, vulnerable, his eyes pleading with Loki not to do what Loki will do. Thor, for whom there is still hope remaining. Thor, who is hope.

“Thanos,” Loki whispers. Unbidden, his hand flies to his neck, but all is impossibly whole. He is uninjured. Save for the having been dead.

Thor nods. His eyes track Loki’s motion. “The Princess Shuri repaired the damage to your body,” he explains. “She is a great Midgardian healer and leader. You were then kept in cryostatic freeze in the country of Wakanda to prevent decay.”

“Lovely,” says Loki. “I suppose I should be grateful. I only feel a little decayed.” He clears his throat. His mouth tastes foul around the name when he repeats it: “Thanos?”

Thor looks away. It is the first time his eyes have left Loki—his eyes have been devouring every proof of Loki’s living with a fierce hunger that Loki does not understand.

“We could not stop him,” Thor says. His hands clench into fists. “I could not. I failed to deliver the killing blow, for I wanted to look him in the eyes and have him know who it was that handed him his
fate. I wanted you and Heimdall and the others avenged, and it was our undoing.”

“Let’s put the blame on the monster, where it belongs,” says Loki mildly, “rather than on the slayer of monsters.” But Thor’s words sink in, and if Loki’s cheeks had color they would be leached of it. “He—he used the Gauntlet?”

“I am selfish,” says Thor, which is an unexpected response. Thor is staring down, studying his balled hands. “I have been so selfish. I beg that one day you can forgive me for what I have done. I brought you back into a world that knows only sorrow and despair. I do not know where you were before; but you will not thank me.”

“He used the Gauntlet,” Loki says, horrified and impressed. If his lips remembered how to whistle he would whistle. “Son of a bitch.”

“Yes.” Thor raises his eyes, looks back at Loki again. Loki’s vision is good enough now to see what first the shadows had hidden: his brother is beyond exhausted, dark half-moons under his eyes, all of him fraying at the seams. It is a vision of Thor that he has never seen before, worn down and nearly spent. “Half of the life in the galaxy has been extinguished. Chaos and mourning rule most worlds. Those that remain—we seek a reversal, but all our efforts have failed.”

“Why bring me back?” Loki is genuinely curious. It seems a terrific expenditure of energy in a non-Thanos-defeating direction. A distraction when Thor should be focused.

“I had to,” says Thor. “I need you, Loki. I need you to show me the solutions I cannot see. I need you to think for me as you ever have. I know that if we are to win, it will be with your assistance. I know it. In the dark of night, as I lie awake, you are the only answer. My dreams also tell me it is so.” He heaves a breath. “I have been selfish, but I could not see another way.”

Loki blinks. Blinking is a nice action to recollect and execute. “That’s rather flattering, brother,” he says carefully. “You put too much faith in—”

“I did it for me,” says Thor, all at once: “It was also for me. I am tired. I did not wish to continue on without you at my side. This project—finding a means to restore you—has been my only respite. I have gone to many worlds, met with many sorcerers and priests and charlatans, read more books than you would believe of me.” In any other situation Thor would be smiling, but his mouth is a flat line. “This is all that I have hoped for. Most—most of us have forgotten what it is to hope.”

“Is that so,” says Loki. His restarted heart proves itself by seeming to squeeze in his chest. Then it thuds painfully. He gazes at Thor, unflinching, to ensure that Thor cannot look away again. “And what was the price?”

“What do you mean?”Thor has been an awful liar since childhood, and his recent times in tumult have not done anything to change that. His guileless expression might deceive or distract someone else, but Loki is wholly unmoved.

“The price, Thor,” Loki says. He folds his arms across his chest, allows a little thrill that he has accomplished such a thing as arm-folding. His muscles are starting to recall what it means to be alive. “For bringing me back. There is always a price.”

Thor stares at him for so long in silence that Loki is sure he will not answer. Then he says, “It was mine to pay, and I did so gladly. I would have given anything.”

“But—”

“I love you more dearly than anything else,” Thor says, and he must be truly, exceptionally
exhausted, for Thor has never looked nor sounded so raw. “It took losing you this third time to understand just how much. Yet for all of my grief I was lucky in one thing: you did not fall victim to Thanos’ Gauntlet—your death was one that could be reversed by someone with the knowledge to do so.

“I searched for and retrieved your body with the assistance of my brave raccoon companion, and you cannot tell me that you were not preserved—that you also came free of the destruction of our ship intact—so that I might restore you. The Gods have been cruel to Asgard but they let me find you and bring you back. They have shown me that mercy.”

It would take a much stronger and much less narcissistic man than Loki to remain unaffected by the depth of Thor’s affection. In truth he is somewhat taken aback by it; he knew before he died that Thor cared for him—they were always too bound up in each other, for good and ill—but this display before him is something else. Never in his most daring dreams would he have imagined it. Thor seems so on the verge of breaking, and Loki will not be the one to push him there. Not yet.

“All right,” Loki says at last. “We will speak of it another day. Did you say that a brave raccoon helped you find my body?” He tilts his head. “When was the last time you had a full night’s sleep?”

“Perhaps it will be tonight,” says Thor. His great shoulders sag with relief. “It is a very long story.”

“I seem to be lacking in other appointments,” Loki says, “what with being dead.”

Thor moves from where he has been leaning against the table at Loki’s side to stand before him. Loki is exceptionally proud that he does not topple over sideways without Thor’s support.

Thor tilts in, presses his forehead to Loki’s. Loki is exceptionally proud that he does not startle like a surprised horse. He focuses instead on the heat of Thor’s skin against his own, how Thor’s heat seems to radiate down through Loki’s veins, chasing away the ice.

“You cannot know how I have missed you,” Thor says.

“Start at the beginning,” Loki advises. “Begin with the missing.”

* * *

They are in the Avengers compound. Loki never thought to see the inside of such a building except perhaps in chains, and he observes various empty rooms with interest as he goes past in Thor’s arms.

His legs are still unsteady; it was a wheelchair or Thor carrying him, and Loki rather enjoys the spectacle of the latter, the King of Asgard bearing him through the halls as though Loki is the most sacred of treasures. That’s how Thor carries him, his anxious face searching Loki’s for any sign of discomfort.

“No crowd to witness the resurrection?” Loki asks, curious. He’s not disappointed—he doesn’t have the energy to expend on trying to convince Thor’s upright friends that he’s no longer of the mindset to destroy any of their cities.

“They are in Wakanda,” says Thor, climbing a staircase carefully, smooth-footed so as not to jostle Loki, “at a summit of world leaders. I asked to stay back. They will be some days.”
“Did they know what you planned to do?” Now Loki is even more curious.

“They did,” Thor says. “I do not think that they quite believed me. Certainly there was doubt.”

Loki coughs, delicate. “And I’m sure some disagreement as to the wisdom of bringing one such as me back.”

Thor half-shrugs, unwilling to let the motion affect Loki in his arms. “The testimonials of myself and Dr. Banner did much to put their worries to rest. You will find that my friends are forgiving. All have made decisions in the past that they are not proud to recount.” He rounds a corner, determined; his jaw is set. “All have suffered great losses due to Thanos. There is not one among them who would hesitate if there was a way to restore the people that they loved and lost.”

“It seems unfair,” says Loki, philosophical, as Thor shoulders a door open, “that I should return, while so many great heroes remain unretrievable.”

“It is not unfair to me,” says Thor.

To this Loki finds he can say nothing. Thor has brought them into a large, airy room, two walls lined with windows to let the sunlight in. Loki, who was recently dead, and before that in a cramped ship sailing through space, finds that he has dearly missed the sun.

The room is mostly unadorned, with a wide bed set against one of the walls of windows, two broad dark leather armchairs positioned by the other wall. A low table between the armchairs hosts a smattering of bottles and glasses.

There is a desk messy with papers and electronic tablets, a bookshelf beside it crammed full of books. Haphazard heaps of armor spill forth from the open closet door. High above the bed’s headboard, an enormous axe is mounted.

Though weakened, there is enough magic yet left in Loki for him to feel its great power even at this distance. Thor’s tale of the axe’s forging had made Loki shake his head—only his foolhardy brother would think taking the full blast of a dying star to be a reasonable trade for a weapon—but he cannot help admiring it.

“This is my chamber,” Thor announces, as though anyone else could leave his garments in such a state of advanced disorganization. “I thought to share it until you are well enough to claim your own.”

“A room of my own in the Avengers compound,” Loki says drily. “Will wonders never cease?”

“I hope that they do not,” says Thor, still not making any move to set him down. “What do you wish? I will leave you if you desire to sleep. I can prepare food if you are hungry. There is an electronic device that can show you the news of all that has passed since you were gone. I have been collecting books I thought you might like for some time. I—”

“Thank you,” says Loki, cutting through the flow of Thor’s nervous words, touched by these gestures and inspired to rare sincerity. “Truly, thank you. All I wish is for a hot bath for approximately three days.”

Thor smiles at that. “I will draw it myself.” He lowers Loki gingerly into the embrace of one of the armchairs. Then he disappears into the attached bathroom.

The sound of running water is more delicious to Loki than any feast could be. Loki tips his head back, lets himself remember what sunlight on his skin is like.
He closes his eyes, then quickly opens them: darkness is not something that he wishes to see, and a sick feeling of falling knots in his stomach. He jolts upright in time to smooth the panic from his face when Thor returns.

Thor lifts him again, easy as anything, and Loki tries to hide his sudden terror behind a rather decadent smile. “I could get used to this,” he says, as Thor carries him to the bath.

Thor refuses to be baited. “You should.”

Loki keeps being left speechless, a strange state for him indeed. He chalks it up to being rusty after being dead. It’s only when they’re in the bathroom that he realizes the logistics of this demand all the more participation from Thor, but if Thor is unfazed, Loki will act the same.

Thor sets him on his feet, keeps an arm looped around Loki’s waist for support. His other hand reaches to find the hooks on Loki’s ill-used leathers, but Loki bats him away.

“I can do this much,” Loki says, refusing to flush with Thor so near—there is nothing to be revealed that he is ashamed of. Thor helps him ease out of the open doublet, then to peel free of his pants, and it is such a blessed relief to be released from what had become his funerary wear that Loki is overjoyed to be naked.

It’s not as though he and Thor haven’t shared a bathing-room a thousand times before. Normally, however, Thor is not quite so near, nor holding onto him, nor staring at Loki’s face with his eyes incandescent. Loki is aware of him in a suddenly pressing fashion, and he pivots toward the bath to avoid it.

Thor’s assistance is needed for the final steps, and a steadying hand as Loki climbs in, and then Loki quite melts into the scented water. It is bliss; the first time the water closes over his head, drowning out all else, even sound, it feels better than breathing again. He emerges only when it occurs to him that Thor will worry.

For a moment Loki thinks that Thor will stand there in the doorway and keep watch over him. At any other point in their lives Loki would have found this hovering attention patronizing, or unbearable; he could not have countenanced needing Thor’s help so badly. But now it seems that neither he nor Thor have any inclination to be apart for very long. Loki would not mind if Thor chose to stay.

He nearly voices this, but in the same breath Thor says, “Do you need anything else?”

“Yes,” says Loki, languishing in bubbles. He lets a pointed look rest on the pile of leathers on the floor. Even free of them he thinks he can smell how they are scorched—even this far away he can see where blood has dried and caked. “Promise me you’ll burn those.”

Thor’s answering grin is nearly feral. He whisk the offending garments from the ground and bunches them under his arm. “With pleasure, brother.” Then he shuts the door.

* * *

It is not three days, but Loki remains in the bath at least three hours or more, running the tap hot when the water cools.
His fingers and toes prune, yet it’s hardly a care—it’s wonderful proof that his body is whole and functioning again. He feels disjointed, as though his skin does not quite fit yet, but the strange disassociation is a small price to pay.

The price. What Thor has paid Loki cannot begin to fathom, nor wishes to contemplate, though the thought consumes him. He knows there can be no bargain struck that would favor Thor.

The line between life and death is a barrier that few magickers dare to meddle with. It is dangerous territory, and always terribly exacting. His mind runs through endless scenarios, none of them pleasant, and he is still in the process of puzzling through it when Thor taps on the door, then sticks his head in.

“Dinner is ready,” he says, chest puffed with pride as though he’s killed and dressed a bilgesnipe for them.

Loki raises an eyebrow. “The terror of Asgard’s kitchens,” he says. “I’ll need to see it to believe it. I’m rather afraid to taste it.”

Thor pulls a who, me? expression. “It’s not my fault I set the kitchens on fire,” he protests. He produces towels and a robe from a cupboard under the sink. Loki shows that the bath has been restorative enough to stand up and get out on his own strength. “If the cooks had simply shown me the correct way to—”

“You know that they could not,” Loki tsks, drying off, then slipping into the robe when Thor holds it up. “It wasn’t proper. Father would have—”

“A ridiculous bit of etiquette,” Thor says, sounding as annoyed as he had a thousand years ago. “Where’s the pride in having a prince who could not produce a simple meal for his guests?”

“Where indeed,” Loki agrees, as he had then: he’d been Thor’s willing accomplice in the adventure down to the kitchens at night, and helped dampen the inevitable fires with magic when he finally stopped laughing.

He turns back around, belting the robe, to meet Thor’s eyes, and then both of them are laughing helplessly, shaking with it, leaning into each other to stay upright.

They keep laughing for far too long, verging on hysteria, past hysteria; it is no longer about the kitchens; it feels like expelling demons.

At last, tears streaming down their faces, they stumble from the bathroom arm in arm. Loki is immensely pleased to find that he can walk now of his own accord, though if he holds too tightly to Thor neither of them mention it.

Dinner is laid out on the low table by the armchairs. It consists of Midgardian wheat noodles with a creamy sauce, and slices of crusty bread coated in garlic butter—simple fare, but it smells shockingly good, considering that Thor prepared it, and Loki finds that he is starving.

He curls up in the chair in his bathrobe, the plate tucked into his arm, and eats with the relish that only a man brought back from the dead can muster. Thor happily goes back downstairs for seconds, then thirds, bringing also bottles of a fine red wine that Loki consumes with as much or more enthusiasm.

They speak animatedly of old, old memories from an easier time and place, passing the most pleasant hours that Loki can recall in a very long while.
It is also the most casual meal that he and Thor have shared save for the nights, too far away to properly name, when they would sit by the fire on some hunt or misadventure, a wineskin lodged between them. The future was bright and bold, then, and never was there finer company found than in each other.

Loki aches, suddenly, sharply, too sharp, a dagger between his ribs. He hurts for all that is gone: all that has been taken from them, and those things that he willfully lost.

“Thor,” he starts, and Thor must see the way his face changes, because he leans forward too quickly, stays Loki with a hand on his knee.

“Not tonight,” Thor says—pleads. “We will have many days to discuss what has come before and what has happened. Give me this one night at ease with you.”

Loki nods. He does not see how he could deny his brother anything now. Nor does he wish to. “Very well,” he agrees. “Pass me the wine.”

* * *

They fall into bed, hazy and giggling, not bothering to turn down the sheets. Loki struggles out of his robe, and Thor helps him, his hands hot as brands on Loki’s skin.

“You’re so warm,” Loki says admiringly. “I’m still so cold.”

Thor wraps his big body around Loki at once, drawing Loki into his arms; it’s like sharing bedspace with a furnace, and Loki all but purrs at the sensation.

“Is that better?” Thor asks into Loki’s hair.

“Much better,” Loki confirms, his words, he thinks, only somewhat slurred.

“Do you remember …” But Thor’s voice trails off, dreamy, sweet, drunk, into memory.

“I might remember many things,” says Loki, “if one were more specific.”

Thor laughs against him. “I was thinking how we used to lie like this, and pretend at being grown-ups.”

“Some of us are still pretending,” Loki says, and Thor laughs again. “Yes. I remember.”

“The first time I kissed you,” Thor says, contemplative, “you slapped me.”

“One of my finer memories of youth,” Loki agrees.

“I believe it rather established a pattern,” Thor says, and then it is Loki’s turn to laugh.

“We were ridiculous children,” Loki says around a yawn.

“Perhaps we were smarter than we knew,” says Thor.

“I was, anyway,” Loki allows.
Thor puts a gentle finger under Loki’s chin, tilts his head up so that Loki can see his face. Thor is pink-cheeked from the wine but his eyes have the same burning intensity that he’s evinced since Loki’s return. “If I kiss you now, will you slap me?”

“Probably,” Loki says, as though this were a perfectly reasonable question.

Thor leans down anyway, presses his lips to Loki’s cheek. His mouth is warm and wet, and Loki squirms and laughs and kicks at him.

Thor draws back, but tightens his arms around Loki, seals his body to the slopes of Loki’s, so that there is no room left between them. “Goodnight, Loki.”

“Goodnight.” It seems to Loki that Thor drops off at once—his brother’s exhaustion is unexaggerated, and his sleep is immediate and deep.

Loki lies still for a long time thereafter, feeling Thor breathing at his back, feeling himself breathe.

* * *

Loki comes awake because Thor has jerked into motion behind him, Thor’s arms closing around him convulsively before relaxing.

“Brother?” They both speak the word at once.

“Loki.” Thor presses his face to the back of Loki’s neck, inhales there, as though taking in Loki’s scent for reassurance. “I dreamed that all that happened yesterday was a dream. It was most cruel.”

Loki turns under Thor’s arm to face him. Thor is still in his Midgardian jeans, which he had not bothered to remove, now wrinkled and creased with sleep. His chest is bare, shirt tugged off at some point in the night, the expanse of his muscles infinite.

Thor’s hair is mussed, and he looks frightened for the first time that Loki can remember since they were small; he looks, despite the heavy world-weariness on his brow, strangely young.

Loki finds himself moved to tenderness by the sight. He is surprised he remembers how tenderness feels. He catches Thor’s hand, guides two of Thor’s fingers to the pulsepoint on his neck, so that the echo of Loki’s heartbeat jumps beneath Thor’s fingertips.

“I’m really here,” Loki says.

Thor’s ragged breathing slows, but his gaze remains lit up, too alert. “You said that once before,” he murmurs, “and still I lost you.” He swallows audibly, determined. “I will not again. I will not ever again.”

“You know such a promise is impossible,” Loki says, as delicately as he can manage. It should be unnerving to be the focal point of such unrelenting attachment—but he has always been hungry for this from Thor, jealous of all else that drew his brother’s attention, and he quite basks in it to have Thor so intensely focused and utterly to himself.

“It is not,” says Thor. “The promise is already made.” For a charged moment Thor is so close that Loki can feel sparks from Thor’s lips against the soft skin of his throat. Then Thor draws away, as
though suddenly aware he is generating electricity, and he rolls over onto his back, releasing Loki.

Loki does not go far; he props his head on his hand, studies Thor’s face. “Has it truly been so bad?”

“It has been unimaginable,” says Thor, and once begun the story pours from him as though a dam has given way. “Our time here now is an anomaly—a gift my friends have given to me. Soon enough there will be no quiet for us. Every world we have been able to contact is broken, Loki—each along different fault lines. Some lost all their leaders; some, their laborers; others are now bereft of their scientists or artists or holy people. All have lost; all. There is not a soul left that was not torn asunder by Thanos.

“He left not only grief in his wake, but tragedies without end: On Midgard alone, planes fell from the sky, captainless; boats capsized and sank in the oceans; vehicles crashed, causing more massed death that has no hope of reversal. Madness is commonplace now—one does not blink to see a person stumbling glassy-eyed down the street, weeping and wailing. It is strange if one goes outside and does not see that. In many places order has broken down, production broken down, wars broken out. What good are laws and rules if all that you love and have to live for is gone? The Avengers, too, are fractured, like all else, but we do not rest, for there is always something else that must be done.”

Thor is halfway to panting by the end of this speech, and Loki curls his hand around Thor’s wrist, grounding, trying to pull him free from it.

Thor cants his head to look at him. “I told you that you would not thank me for bringing you back. I am sorry that I was not strong enough to leave you at peace.”

“Dear brother,” says Loki, “do shut up on that account. You have no idea where I was—nor, indeed, do I remember,” he admits. He will not admit to knowing only falling darkness as he was pulled back into his body. He can recall nothing else. “Know that I would rather be here with you at the—after the end of the world.”

Thor closes his eyes and lets out a breath, as though releasing a great weight. “I had forgotten what it felt to be happy,” he says softly. He opens his eyes. “The mere sight of you now fills me with such joy that I can barely speak.”

Loki—blushes, like a youth, like a maiden caught unawares by the full force of Thor’s charm. He should know far better by now, but he has never learned. “Thor,” he tries, unsure.

“Loki,” says Thor. His eyes are so bright—there is lightning behind them. “Please.”

“Loki, please,” Thor says, bright-eyed, the sweet scent of crushed grass beneath them. They are stretched out under the blue Asgardian sky, a perfect cloudless day, hidden from sight in their favorite grove. They are no longer boys, but not quite men; still, they know enough to know they should be past such games as this. “How will we learn if we do not practice?”

“Oh, all right,” Loki says, magnanimous, as though he is not trembling for Thor to continue with every fiber of his being. What he wanted was for Thor to ask him. “One or two more kisses—I’ll allow it, if you’re more careful with your tongue this time. I don’t appreciate being slobbered on.”

And that is all that Thor was waiting to hear—he catches Loki by the back of the neck and yanks him in too close and, both of them laughing, they tumble through the grass—Loki stares back at Thor from the distance of centuries. “We were children then,” he says. “We did not know what we were playing at.”

“I was never playing,” says Thor. He is too close now. “Were you?”
Loki’s fate seems precariously balanced on a knife’s edge; should he but feint one way or the other, there will be a swift wound; but there are two different wounds to choose from, both painfully deep and unmistakably fatal.

“No,” Loki hears himself say, before he has decided what to say. “No, I was not.”

Thor’s expression is that of the sun breaking through a storm. “If I kiss you now, will you slap me?”

“That depends,” Loki answers, his heart in his throat. He tries on a smile that slips across his face, ill-fitted. “Are you better with your tongue? I don’t appreciate being slobbered on.”

“I think you’ll find that I am,” says Thor, his voice dropping low, and then—then he is moving to bridge the gap between them, but he doesn’t try to kiss Loki all at once.

No: first he takes Loki’s face between his hands, Thor’s eyes full bright as he runs his thumb across Loki’s cheekbone. Then he bends, and he kisses one of Loki’s cheeks, then the other, then the hinge of Loki’s jaw, then the soft flesh of his ear, until Loki is shaking beneath these ministrations. Thor’s tongue on his ear proves that his technique is shockingly improved; Loki stifles a gasp.

Only then does Thor move to claim his mouth. It is nothing like the inquisitive kisses traded when they were young: it is directed and desperate, as though held back for a long time and at last released.

Thor’s lips are hard upon him—not ungentle, but leaving no room to interpret this as anything like brotherly. Loki opens up to the urgency of it, and Thor licks deftly into his mouth, keen to demonstrate all the fine skills that he has gained.

Loki is fast dizzy with sensation, breathing too quickly through his nose so that they need not break apart. His brain is a symphony of raucous messaging, some thoughts saying this is Thor and others this is your brother and yet more still this is all that you love and all that you have and this is all that you have ever had and will ever—

Thor draws away with a gentle nip to Loki’s lower lip. Loki wants to chase after the fading kiss at once, but he holds still. It is much for them to adjust to, it is too much all at once and not nearly enough.

“Oh,” Loki whispers.

“Yes,” Thor agrees. “I had rather thought so.”

Their eyes are having a deeper discussion than their minds and mouths ever could; still, Loki will require some vocal clarification.

“For how long, Thor?”

“I cannot remember a time I did not feel toward you in ways that I thought I should not,” Thor says easily enough, as though he’s gone through it so many times in his head as to emerge unashamed. It’s an unwieldy sentence, but Loki thrills to hear it said.

Thor is saying, “When I learned that we did not share blood my guilt was somewhat reduced, and at the same time inflamed, for that did not make you any less my brother. Yet my relief showed me how boldly I wanted. When you left Asgard behind I often thought it was because you saw what was in my heart, and fled from me.”

“Fool,” Loki snaps, disbelief making him vicious. “If I had known I would not have gone.” As the words leave his mouth they ring harshly true, and both of them flinch from the pain and waste of it.
“Then there is some branching of the tree where we found each other long ago, and perhaps were happy,” Thor says. “Here we have both of us blundered and squandered much time. It was not until you died again that I was forced to understand the truth of what I felt—that it was not simply desire that might be better left hidden. I realized what I lost was the one person I needed to continue. I realized what was taken from me was not only my brother, but my partner, the other half of me. Can you see, now, why I told you I would gladly have given anything—anything—to have you back again?”

There are dark and jagged places within Loki that are slowly closing. His throat feels thick with mixed grief and giddiness. He blinks back burning tears.

“Fool,” Loki says once more, breathless this time. “I spent my entire life in your thrall, and thought you did not see me. I did great and terrible things in the hopes that you might.”

Thor reaches out a hand—Loki is somewhat pleased to see that the hand is unsteady—and threads his fingers through Loki’s hair. “Let us find forgiveness together,” he says. “All of that was in another life.”

“Yes,” says Loki simply. “It was.” He turns his face into Thor’s touch; it is mind-boggling that he should suddenly be permitted to touch his lips to Thor’s wrist.

“Well,” says Thor at length. His voice sounds shattered and pieced back together again. “What would you like for breakfast?”

* * *

It is the strangest meal that Loki has ever taken. He perches on a barstool by the kitchen countertop, watching the astounding sight of Thor succeeding at food preparation.

Yet Thor is also distracted, so the process proceeds slowly, haltingly. For each egg that he cracks, he must kiss Loki twice. For every tomato sliced, another kiss, or the brush of his fingers along Loki’s skin wherever he can find it exposed.

The eggs nearly burn because Thor is too busy tasting the inside of his mouth.

They are acting—like children, thinks Loki, heady with it—no, it is more like a couple newly wed and convinced of unfaltering bliss. That thought is so ridiculous that he fast pushes it away, but he does not push away Thor, who is bent to the task of kissing Loki’s neck and better left uninterrupted.

After they clean their plates, Loki says that he feels well enough for a walk, and Thor agrees that the fresh air will do him well.

They set out arm-in-arm, this time the posture wholly intentional, and Thor holds him close but not over-tight. They have agreed, for now, not to dwell overmuch on where they so badly failed each other in the past; but there is much of the present that Loki would know.

They stroll in comfortable silence through the green fields around the compound before Loki can bring himself to break the peace. The open air is indeed doing wonders—he feels stronger with every step out under the sun, and so at last he lets himself say: “The ship. There were survivors?”

Thor seems unsurprised at the question, though anguish and fury crease his brow. “They are few
enough,” he says. “Half the ship escaped—then another half again the Gauntlet claimed. I left the Valkyrie to lead them in my stead. She leads well. They take refuge on a planet well-known to Rocket, distant and hidden and safe. I would not risk them here. I fear Midgard will long be a battlefield.”

“Asgard yet lives,” Loki says, hushed and amazed. He has been so afraid to ask; Thor, so very forlorn.

“It does,” Thor says. “In time, it will grow. The memory of what we knew—what we were—will be passed down and not forgotten. That has given me great comfort.”

“You will rule there again,” says Loki, “when this is over, and more of your—of our people are returned.”

Thor glances at him sideways, then looks straight ahead. They pass over a short wooden bridge that spans a fast-running brook.

“No,” says Thor.

“Pardon?”

“I have abdicated,” says Thor, his arm shifting against Loki’s, as though the words still fit him ill. “My final decree was to abolish the monarchy. There will be no more thrones or kings in Asgard.”

Loki nearly trips then—he is so astonished that his feet lose forward motion. Thor keeps him balanced. “Brother, whatever for?”

“I was Asgard’s doom,” says Thor dispassionately. It is clear that he has worked hard to distance himself from this: it is clear that there is a limit to how many burdens even Thor can shoulder. “Surtur decreed it so, and it came to pass. I was responsible as any. As was Father. As was our sister. As were you. Our family long acted like a poison on the people. I have cut them free.”

“Thor—”

“It is done, and will not be undone,” Thor says. “It was overdue. The Valkyrie takes point until this time of crisis is past, and then leaders will be elected by the people’s will. It is simple enough, and good, and what remains of Asgard threw their support behind this change. It is done.”

Loki’s mind struggles with the soundness of his brother’s democratic reasoning against fifteen hundred years of imperial training. “You were born to be a king,” he says.

“As were you,” says Thor again.

Loki closes his mouth with an audible snap.

“Now neither of us will be,” says Thor, propelling them on. “It was, perhaps, the one solution we never saw.”

Loki shakes his head, but all argument has left him. He feels unmoored, on less steady ground than even returning to life felt like. He has rarely imagined a future that did not concern Asgard’s throne in some capacity.

Once, he thought to seize it; later, he did so; later still, he found himself content to consider a life at Thor’s right hand, helping to advise the course of their diasporic people. What else is there save Asgard?
“But what will you do?” Loki manages.

“Do?” Thor has led them from the main path onto a narrow, more scenic route, along a line of tall pine trees and craggy boulders.

“When all of this is over,” Loki says, aware then of how naive he sounds. He handwaves them through it. “Thanos defeated. Families reunited. Order restored.”

“You suppose those things are possible,” says Thor with an unexpected smile. “It is odd to hear optimism from you, Loki, though I like it well. Supposing such a thing could come to pass, and that we survived it—it is difficult to think so far into the dream that has escaped my friends and I, time and again.”

“You have done so, though,” says Loki, reading the faraway look on Thor’s face. A sudden spark of apprehension lights in Loki’s belly. “Tell me what it is.”

Thor is not looking at Loki. His gaze scans the green horizon. “I should like, I think, to travel for a while,” he says. “Rocket is an accomplished captain, and tells many tales of lands that I desire to see. I would like also to see happiness restored in places that are now so bereft.”

“Then,” Thor goes on, and suddenly his eyes with their faraway look are fixed on Loki. “We might open a school, here or on some other world that pleased us, and teach others the gifts that we were given. The idea came to me of many young people trained in our dual arts, and it was most pleasing.”

Loki blinks at Thor as though he has never seen him before in his life. “A school,” he repeats, trying to ignore how the warm concept of it blooms in his chest.

Thor nods, guides them deeper into the wood.


Thor tosses a rather haughty look over his shoulder. “You think me incapable of it?”

“I do not,” says Loki quickly. “Though I think you would go mad with restlessness after a few hundred years, and return to adventuring, and rescuing galaxies.”

They break through the treeline into a little clearing dense with grass and yellow wildflowers. It is as though Thor can sense that Loki needs a rest but is too proud to ask for it, and has brought them here on purpose.

Thor sits first, in a sprawl, then offers a solicitous hand to guide Loki down. He fixes Loki close under his arm. The fingers of his other hand are idly plucking at the grass, the flowers.

“That is the thing, brother,” says Thor slowly. “We do not have hundreds of years.”

Sharp fear spikes up Loki’s spine. He whips his head to look at Thor in profile, but Thor will only gaze downward, examining the petals that have come loose.

“That, Thor,” says Loki. “What did you do?”

“The price was this,” says Thor. “We will live out the lifespan of so many others around us—a human lifetime, not the years given to Asgardians or to the Jötunn. We will age and grow old. You and I are bound; should one perish the other will follow, and, Loki, know that when the witch told me this bargain, I wanted to laugh in her face, for it seemed to me far more of a prize than a price.”

Thor’s eyes—one the blue Loki has always known, the other, amber-colored and new—Thor’s eyes regard him mournfully. “I know it was much for me to presume,” he says. “Taking away your own years also, binding you to me for a length of time that once would have passed in a blink for us. I told you, I have been terribly selfish. I am sorry.”

“You would apologize to me?” Loki shakes Thor again, this time with greater violence. “You idiot—you complete and utter imbecile. You’d rob the universe of all the good that you might do—all the light you’d bear against darkness for thousands of years, for thousands—all the lives you’d save, the change you’d bring about, the evil slaughtered—you’d think to do this thing for the likes of me?”

Loki is gasping for breath. He feels like he had the day before, like he is drowning in oxygen. He wants to slap Thor, wants to hit him, wants to claw at him until he bleeds red and realizes that no man ever made a worse decision since time began. Thor only stares back at him, infuriatingly silent.

Loki is shouting now. “I am nothing, don’t you understand? I am small and petty and vindictive—I have amounted to nothing—I have done horrible things—I can only ever be your downfall—Gods, now I am, in truth, in full—how could you? How dare you? For sixty years, at most? Nothing, that’s nothing—I am nothing—we might have but a year, or less—madness, you’ve gone mad—”

Surely it is Loki who has descended into disorder—the words are ripped from him, the words are clawing their way out of his throat, while he shakes Thor and beats his fists against Thor’s immovable chest, as though some common sense might be hammered back into Thor’s damnfool heart.

At length, however, Loki’s hands are caught by Thor’s, who presses them together between his own; and Thor is also kneeling now, facing Loki in the grass.

“Loki,” Thor says quietly, into the onslaught, “I would have done it for a single day.”

Loki collapses against him, racked with sobs of anguish and outrage. Thor’s arms circle around and hold on, and they stay like that so long that the sun starts to sink down overhead.

“Come,” says Thor at last. His lips are pressed to Loki’s hair. “It grows cold.”

All of the strength he found before seems to have left Loki’s limbs. He does not protest when Thor lifts him into his arms and sets them off like that.

Loki hides his face against Thor’s neck so that he needn’t look at his face. “Damn you,” he says with vehemence.

Thor almost sounds amused, damn him, damn him. “This is why I did not tell you yesterday,” he says gently.

“I despise you,” says Loki. “You are the stupidest man I’ve ever met.”

“It’s not reversible,” Thor says. “You can’t goad me into changing my mind.”


“I have told you many reasons already,” says Thor. “How much I missed you. How dearly I wanted for your guidance. How deeply I found that I love you. How selfish I was on all counts.” Thor’s grasp tightens around him. “The truth of the matter is that the promise of one lifetime with you is
more precious than a hundred thousand years without you. The math was simple.”

“You are terrible at mathematics,” snaps Loki, his face burning. “You drove three separate tutors to leave Asgard entirely so that they might not be compelled to teach you again.”

Thor’s laughter radiates throughout Loki’s body. “I had forgotten that,” he says. “And in the end, who was it that drilled enough into my thick head to let me pass the fourth tutor’s tests?”

Loki freezes the sarcastic retort on his tongue, for he can hear how Thor swallows and takes a breath, in preparation to speak again, and all Loki can do is cling to him.

Thor says: “Don’t you see, brother? I might be at the forefront of battle, but I had you at my back when I won my greatest victories. How well have I ever fared without you? You saved me so many times there is no way to count them—from some danger, or from myself, or most often the two together: the danger I would find by not following your counsel. I do not know who I am when you are gone from me, and every time I have been forced to live that way, life feels cheap and purposeless. While there remains some chance that we may be together, I will always pursue it.”

“You are an insufferable, pathetic, incurable romantic,” Loki mutters.

“That is true,” says Thor. “I have not yet shown you just how much that is true.”

Loki shivers, and not from the cold. When they arrive back at the compound, he asks Thor to take him straight to bed.

Thor clearly intends to leave him there to rest, but Loki catches his wrist. “Show me, then.”

Thor’s surprised expression is a co-mingling between obvious desire and an abundance of caution.

“You aren’t well enough to—”

“No, but—”

“No, but,” Loki sing-songs meanly. He throws the shirt as far from him as he can, works on skimming down the trousers. “You say you want me so much you’d give up the life of a god,” he says, the words like shards of glass in his throat. “Well, have at me then. Take your reward. I think you’ll find the bargain rather lacking. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m good in bed, but not renouncing-immortality-good, you know? What do you think, brother? Not so much to look at, am I, when you consider how you got it?”

“I think you are the most stunning sight that I have seen,” says Thor. “If you knew the empty nights I lay alone and wished for nothing more than you before me, you would understand.” He crouches beside the bed, takes up one of Loki’s hands and kisses the palm of it. “Loki, my love, not like this.”

Loki wants to punch Thor clean across the face. It occurs to Loki, for a molten-hot moment, that he could destroy Thor, here and now, finish it between them for good. All he need do is destroy himself, and Thor will follow.

Instead he is horrified to feel the pinprick of tears threaten his eyes. His vision blurs.

“How, then,” Loki snarls, and when Thor gets to his feet, shaking his head, Loki shouts, “How!” at
his retreating back, but Thor is already out the door and closing it behind him.

Then Loki lies dazed and unmoving and choking on unshed tears, trying to understand why a morning so wondrous turned into a night so fraught.

He tries to think through it, tries to make any possible sense out of the choice that Thor made, the price Thor paid, but he only grows more incredulous and irate by the moment. He tries to—

The door bangs open, the doorway framing Thor in the light from the hall. Lightning crackles from Thor’s fingertips, goes out when his hands become fists. Thor stalks back into the bedroom the way he enters a battlefield.

“Fine,” says Thor. “Since you asked.”

In the skies outside the compound there’s an echoing boom of thunder.

Thor is tearing his own clothing off as he goes, naked by the time he reaches the bed, huge and nude and gorgeous beyond all descriptives as he climbs in and straddles Loki’s body. Loki’s mind blanks out, loses all the words for describing. He gazes up at Thor slack-jawed.

“You want to know how?” Thor says. “How I have thought to have you in my bed—these last months since I lost you, and all my life before? Then I will tell you, Loki,” he says, ducking his head. “Listen closely. I always start at your neck, like this—this spot exactly, where I touched you so many times, when I thought that I should not.”

He puts words to deed, kissing and laving his tongue along Loki’s neck, sucking a fierce blood bruise into the juncture of Loki’s shoulder, sucking so hard that Loki gasps and then groans. Loki arches shamelessly beneath Thor, not knowing what to do in the face of this unexpected ambush.

“Yes,” says Thor against his throat, “that is like the sound I imagined you would make; only it is far better than I imagined. Then, brother—are you listening?—then I claim every part of you that I can with my mouth, and I am convinced I can attend to every part; and I leave many more marks along the way, so that there is no mistaking that you are mine.”

“Thor—”

Thor’s mouth seems to be everywhere at once, hot and possessive, lingering indeed to add redblue bruises—on Loki’s hip, the tender inside of his thigh, his wrist by the pulsepoint, the tendon at his ankle.

Thor’s teeth often drag in the wake of his mouth and tongue, and now the sounds that Loki is making are frequent and incoherent, his world narrowed down to the circumference of Thor’s lips moving across his skin.

Thor parts his thighs again and slides between them, slides down. He drops a lazy sort of kiss to Loki’s cock, which has been hard since Thor straddled him; and Thor says, “Sometimes I spend whole hours with my mouth on your cock, never letting you come though you beg me—but I think today is not a day given to teasing. Do you agree? Yes? Then there is only one last remaining place to claim,” and then he is tonguing his way inside Loki, careful and confident about it in the same breath.

Loki bites his own knuckles so hard that he draws blood. Helplessly, he spreads his legs and lifts his hips so that Thor can work deeper. It is as though every time Thor touches him there is an explosion under his skin, and Loki is buffeted by such a wave of aftershocks that he can no longer hold still.
He reaches for Thor, feeling all of him that he can grasp, gripping desperate hands into his hair and tugging in encouragement; and when he does that Thor works his tongue wickedly in such a way that Loki all at once becomes intimate with the expression *seeing stars*.

“Thor,” Loki says, then with increasing urgency, “Thor.”

Thor pulls away, glances up. His expression is ferocious, focused. “I am very busy, Loki."

“Brother, please,” Loki says, suddenly so far past caring about anything save this that he has forgotten all else. “What happens next?”

“Always one to skip ahead,” chides Thor, biting into the meat of Loki’s thigh in a punishment that makes Loki keen instead. Thor gets up and vanishes into the bathroom, and for a suspended, shocky moment, Loki’s brain tries to come back online, but the connection falters when Thor returns with a small bottle in his hand.

“Next,” says Thor, resuming the narrative, “next you take my fingers. How many do you think you can manage? In my imaginings I stop at four, but I do not have to.” Then slick fingers are against Loki’s skin, Thor’s thumb circling his entrance as though in consideration.

When Thor meets Loki’s gaze again some of the bravado is gone. “If I do this I cannot go back,” he says quietly. “I will never be able to go back to before.”

“Oh, I see,” says Loki, rolling his eyes at this sincerity, not unexpected, and so very Thor he must keep from laughing, “was your tongue not enough to convince you?”

Even so goaded the first breach of Thor’s finger inside him is astonishing, a revelation. Loki says, “Fuck,” with feeling, and Thor says, sounding stunned, “Brother,” and then they stare at each other in heady silence as Thor presses on.

“When I thought on this,” murmurs Thor from between his knees, after what feels like a long while and not nearly long enough, “I did not know that you could be this tight, yet still yield this beautifully for me.”

“Flattery will get you more fingers,” says Loki, and Thor, surprised into a grin, kisses Loki’s knee and is quick to comply.

Loki focuses on the extraordinary sensation—the extraordinary knowledge—that those are Thor’s capable fingers working so diligently, Thor’s clever fingers that seek to please, that succeed in making him gasp and writhe.

When he looks down there is Thor, so lovely and so loved. There is Thor, who has given up so much for him, too much. There is Thor, waiting, as he ever has, as both of them have waited.

And Loki thinks he can at last understand the choice that Thor made, for he knows then with perfect certainty that he would have made it himself, had Thor been the one lost to him. How gladly he would have made it. How easily.

“Come here,” says Loki, and Thor does.

He balances over Loki, his cock hard and thick and ready between them. Loki reaches for the bottle and slicks Thor’s length himself. That length is more than considerable—Loki’s hand keeps going and going, but all the usual quips are caught in Loki’s throat.
There is only this: Loki guides Thor into him, and Thor thrusts in slow and deep. Both of them are quiet as it happens, though Thor kisses him, and Loki bites Thor’s lip. Thor opens up Loki’s body unimaginably on his cock, and Loki wraps his legs around Thor’s hips, wraps his arms around him, takes all of him.

“Loki?” says Thor, holding still.


After that there is nothing to hold them back, no barrier left between them, and Thor is trying to be careful but Loki urges him quickly past that. So what if he was recently dead, he tells Thor, he is now quite unexpectedly and spectacularly alive, and he wants nothing of gentleness.

Soon enough the force of Thor’s thrusts is such that the bed knocks against the wall, again and again and again and again and again, it is possible that they will ruin the bed and topple the wall.

Loki cares not. His body is alive in ways it has never been before, aware of Thor absolutely everywhere, everywhere they touch electric. He has ceased to care, also, about any sort of vocal restraint; he moans whenever Thor moves just right, which is often, and sometimes he begs; he licks the salt of sweat from Thor’s neck; he holds Thor’s lower lip between his teeth.

He is rabid, he realizes, to touch Thor—once begun there is no stopping Loki, he has been wanting to explore this bicep for centuries, and that shoulder blade for a thousand years; Thor’s marble-carved buttocks fit just so in his hands; and Thor’s cock fits him so well neither of them know what to make of it.

“You feel …” Thor says after a demonstration of stamina that luckily does not destroy the wall, but gauges vast dents into in the plaster. “I do not have the words.”

“Good words or bad words?” Loki asks, rolling his hips in time, glad to have regained the wits he lost in the first shock of it.

“Good ones,” says Thor on another thrust that inspires Loki to set teeth into Thor’s shoulder. “Very good words. Exceptional words.”

“You can just say ‘exceptional,’” Loki suggests.

Thor grins. His hair has gone dark with sweat, all of him is glistening; it is unfair that such exertion could make him look all the more breathtaking. “No. I mean to say, yes, but that is not it.”


“Yes and yes and yes and yes,” Thor agrees, punctuating each word with an outstanding—should Loki have offered outstanding as an option?—drive of his cock, “but I—I do not know if the words yet exist for how it feels to be inside of you.”

“Complete,” says Loki, muffled against Thor’s shoulder.

“What did you say, brother?”

“I said, stop dawdling and really fuck me, Thor. I have places to be.”

“What places?”

“You have exactly zero places,” says Thor, “outside of this bed, where I intend to keep you.”

“And when your—ah, ah, *ah*—when your friends return?” Loki wants to know.

“You would have them watch?”

“I truly, truly despise you,” Loki says, and Thor responds to that by following Loki’s injunction to really fuck him; now the wall is trembling dangerously, the entire structural integrity of the compound may be threatened.

“Brother,” Loki manages at length, “spend within me before you take the whole house down.”

Thor wraps his hand around Loki’s cock, stroking him to the rhythm they have made. “Come with me, then.”

“Such confidence,” Loki tries, but it is all bluster—he gives himself over to it, surrendering to the pure pleasure that crashes over him and has him tighten up on Thor, who exclaims Loki’s name like an invocation above him.

Loki feels his own profound release in the space between them, feels the way he stripes wet across their bellies and Thor’s fingers, feels the shape of Thor’s name on his lips, how Thor steals it by kissing him. Thor sinks back in, one last time, drawn impossibly far, and the hot spill of him is such that Loki cannot remember what it was ever like to be cold.

They stay like that, by mutual, unspoken accord, for a long while. When Thor pulls out of him at last, Loki’s first instinct is to protest the move on principle, but in the end he forces himself to lie still. Then he finds he has few options but to lie still.

“Loki?”

“What do you want now?”

“You’re shaking, brother.”

Loki is able to squint at Thor, an exertion that feels like an accomplishment. “You go try sleeping with a fertility god and see what happens.”

Thor’s tone shifts from concern to warm amusement. “Then you are well?”

“Define ‘well.’”

“Have I pleased you?”

“Define ‘pleased.’”

“Loki—”

“Oh, shut up, Thor,” Loki snaps, his arm stretching across Thor’s stomach, delighting to feel the evidence of his own pleasure drying on those chiseled planes. “You were there. You know what that felt like. Your cock is magical and I emerge a changed man.”

“Do not tease, for once,” Thor says, but he is laughing all along the lines of Loki’s body where they are still pressed together.

“For once, I do not tease,” Loki says. “It’s the truth, more’s the pity.”
“My cock is—”

“I said shut up, Thor."

“Loki?”

“Please let me rest. I was dead yesterday. I am not yet as limber as I’d like.”

“How I love you,” says Thor.

“Harrumph,” says Loki. But he lets Thor gather him up in his arms, and he sleeps with his head pillowed on Thor’s shoulder.

* * *

When they wake up Loki is feeling a great deal more limber. Thor has him on his hands and knees, his teeth fixed at the base of Loki’s neck, and it’s as easy between them as if they have always done this.

It’s so good. It’s so good that once started it is quite impossible to stop, and they spend the day finding new and inventive surfaces to fuck upon. Thor takes him on the kitchen counter at breakfast, burning the eggs this time. Thor lays him out on the billiard table in the basement, and Loki quite enjoys the burn of the green felt against his bare skin. On their after-dinner walk Loki pushes Thor down on the wooden bridge and straddles him there, rides him hard until the creak of wood grows ominous.

They break three chairs, a bookshelf, the pommel horse in the gym, and several beakers in Dr. Banner’s laboratory, thankfully empty.

“You’re going to be in so much trouble,” says Loki as Thor backs him up against the pristine white wall in a meeting room.

“I care not,” says Thor, and the rule-breaking from him is so delectable that Loki lets Thor lift him and fuck him into the wall, Loki’s nails quite thoughtfully scratching down Thor’s back instead of scrabbling at the paint.

“I think this has been the finest day of my life,” Thor says, when they collapse late at night on the floor of Thor’s bedroom after their final bout, too spent to move to the bed. The pulled-down quilt suffices.


* * *

In the middle of the night, Thor wakes up and collects Loki to transfer them to bed. Loki is content to sleep through it, but cracks an eye when Thor lets out a soft, surprised exclamation.

No one is more surprised than Loki to find herself like this; she had not, she thinks, intended it, at
least not consciously, but here she is.

“Stop gaping at me,” she says, resisting the urge to draw the sheet up over her body. “I expect you have seen a naked woman before?”

Thor bows his head, chastised, to press a kiss to the back of her hand. “I apologize, sister,” he says. When he glances up again his eyes are blazing, brilliant. “I have at that, though never one so captivating.”

It is not the first time that she has shown herself to Thor in this skin; but it is, of course, the first time wearing only skin.

“Oh, all right,” Loki says, before Thor’s hungry look can devour her. “If only so that you’ll spare me any more compliments like that one. Next you’ll try and tell me that line has actually worked for you before.”

“The sight of you has driven away the memory of any other woman,” says Thor. “I’m sure I cannot recall.”

Loki hits him in the face with a pillow. But she lets him crawl over her, where his mouth seeks out her breasts at once—how like a man—and she sighs to hide the shivery pleasure this induces. The bristle of his beard on her skin feels unbelievable now, not that she’ll let him know it.

When Thor can be coaxed away at long last from her nipples, he trails enquiring fingertips up the outside of her thigh, gentlemanly enough, Loki supposes; she lays her own fingers over his before he can venture further.

“I,” Loki starts, stops, maddened by how easily heat rises to her cheeks. “Thor, I—I have never been with anyone in this body,” she says. “Have a care at first.”

She tries to sound flippant about it, but her heart is beating fast, she finds, then faster still when Thor draws back. She ought not to have told him. How foolish she must seem. Fifteen hundred years of inexperience. Ridiculous.

Thor reaches for her hand again, folds it in his own. Her hand looks so small. “Truly, sister?”

“No,” says Loki bitterly, “I thought to entice you with every man’s fantasy of deflowering a centuries-old virgin.”

Thor looks confused at that, and in the end she takes pity on him. “Of course I did not,” she says. “Who would I have trusted save you?”

His expression then is of such sweet admiration and adoration that Loki knows that she will have him. That she wants him now—as she has always wanted him. She starts to pull him down towards her to indicate that without further preamble, for the right words in this are not known to her yet.

“Are you certain?” says Thor, doing a far too earnest thing, which is to touch her lips and cheek with a feather-soft fingertip. “You would let me have this honor?”

“No if you keep saying things like that,” says Loki. “Put your mouth to better use.”

And oh, he does. He does. Thor buries his head between her legs for so long that she loses count of the number of times he brings her to pleasure with his able lips and adept tongue.

He is so profoundly skilled therein that she would fly into a rage were she capable of anything save
crying out and running her fingernails through his hair to fix him in place.

How dare Thor be so masterful where she is so untried. It is, perhaps, the most out of her depth that she has ever felt around her brother, but she keeps forgetting to mind as he torments and teases her with his lush mouth and knowing fingers.

When he enters her at last Loki is so well-prepared, so loose-limbed with satisfaction, that there is no pain at all. Thor moves carefully, overly attentive and watching her face for reaction, but she shakes her head, and speaks his name as a plea not to stop.

Thor kisses her and kisses her, he won’t stop kissing her, and her breath catches to feel how different it is to hold him inside of her like this. She soon learns how she can tighten all around him in such a way that he gives a breathless moan she has never heard from him before. The power is fast intoxicating.

He rocks them slowly and leisurely and gorgeously that first night, a change from their rough acrobatics of late, his hand slipping back between her legs as he thrusts to introduce ecstasies decadent and new.

She is glad of the gracefulness of movement that he uses with her, he who so often prefers to hack and slash; still, after she comes down once more from gasping, she fixes him with a pointed look.

“You needn’t treat me as though I am fragile, just because I am a woman,” Loki tells him.

“If I have done so, it is only because your skin deceived me, and I thought you made of porcelain,” answers Thor.

Loki groans for several reasons. “You are unbelievable. Please do not say that women have fallen so easily for these preposterous statements in the past.”

Thor smiles against the skin of her throat as he kisses her there. His hips give a sensuous push; his cock slides slick and deep. “It is not that they have been easily flattered, no,” he admits. “It is more like a game. Women are so sharp-eyed; and so we try for distracting endearments and bring gifts in the hopes that you won’t see right through us.”

“That’s a losing game,” says Loki, but now she is smiling also.


He is faster here to unravel than when he is buried in her other body—she supposes that this is new to him, too, to have her like this; and he has shown great restraint in holding back his own pleasure for so many hours, and sharing so much of her own. She curls a leg around his back, urging him to completion, and he makes a grateful, stimulating sound; but then his motion stutters.

“Wait,” pants Thor. “I—Loki, is it safe?”

It is far too long since she wore this shape, for she nearly forgot the blessings and trials of womanhood. She gives a short nod, which is enough to assure Thor and let him chase his end inside of her—but she is still thinking about it even as his cock and fingers and his mouth on her breast bid her follow him once more. When he fills her then with his seed it is no mere figure of speech.

Thor lies beside her afterward, carding his fingers through her long hair, and she knows that he is thinking on it also. He is thinking so loudly that she sighs to cut through the ungreased wheels turning in his brain.
“Nothing would keep,” she explains, unsure of how to speak of this, “unless I chose to stay in this form that long.”

Thor presses his lips together, nods. His eyes flash.

“You might well ask me,” says Loki, exasperated, “before you explode and injure yourself.”

He draws a line from her breastbone down to her navel with one finger. “Is it something that you might—that you might consider someday, sister?” His own phrasing is awkward now; they are so awkward in this, suddenly a pair of ungainly foals.

“Undead less than seventy-two hours, and already you would see me swell with child,” Loki says, trying for humor, which usually does not fail her—but everything is failing her now. This is unknown territory in an alien land.

“I did not say that,” says Thor. His expression is far too serious, bereft of any humor at all. “I would not suggest such a thing in the world that we have now.”

Loki shuts her eyes. When she opens them again Thor is studying the curve of her cheek with the intensity of a portrait-painter.

Loki says, not knowing what she will say until she says it: “In truth, I do not know. It always seemed such a total impossibility. Circumstances being altered—” Time; they have so little time. “—I do not know.”

“Nor do I,” says Thor. “It is well enough for the thought to exist.”

“It is well,” Loki agrees cautiously.

“Then to more pressing business,” says Thor, face split by a blinding smile, satisfied and self-satisfied. “Say if I succeeded in pleasing you, or if i might labor further in your service?”

“Norns, not this again,” Loki says. “Brother, you are conditioned to be insufferable to me in all the forms I take.”

“And I, bound to adore you no matter that form.”

“See if I turn into a snake next,” Loki mutters.

“My most admired serpentine sibling—”

She hits him dead-on with the pillow.

* * *

Loki opens his eyes to a faint dawn light. Thor is awake beside him, turned toward him, has been watching him sleep.

“Well, that isn’t unnerving at all,” says Loki around a full-bodied stretch.

“I do not know how I can be so lucky,” says Thor, by way of answer.
Loki pokes a finger into Thor’s chest; won’t tell him that it is a delight to feel how his chest won’t give way in the slightest; won’t tell him that there is anything devastatingly attractive in being a hulking wall of muscle.

“Save such cloying declarations for your sister,” Loki suggests. “She likes them, though she’ll never tell you that.”

Thor gives a lopsided grin. “I thank you for the advice.”

“Wasn’t that a fun and entirely unexpected adventure,” says Loki, somewhat ill at ease about it. “I don’t think you’ll be content until you’ve had me every which way there is to have.”

“You’re right,” Thor agrees too readily. “I strive to know all of you, brother.”

He’s still staring at Loki, so intent that Loki starts to feel as though Thor’s gaze will flay skin from bone.

“Stop that,” Loki snaps. “What are you going on about?”

Thor seems to be considering whether he should speak further—a sure sign that he should not. But logic and caution rarely keep him back, and soon enough he is saying, soft, “You have never shown me your Jötunn shape.”

“No,” says Loki, horror-struck.

Unconscionably, Thor is still speaking. “I should like very much to see you.”


“No,” Loki says, the word wrenched from him, bitterness filling him like bile. He scrambles across the bed, away from Thor, keeps his back to the wall. “No. You go too far.”

“But I—”

“You do not know what it is you ask,” Loki says, lip curling back to bare teeth. “Do not ask me again.”

Once Thor would have argued with him, rash and arrogant as anything. He has grown wiser, for he chooses to lay down the hand he extended toward Loki, and he nods. “Be at ease, Loki. I am sorry. I will not, if that is your wish. I did not mean to offend you.”

“Offend me,” Loki repeats. “Offend me!”

“Please,” says Thor, and lucky for him he stays where he is. “I do not understand.”

“Since that is your natural state, I would think you more comfortable in it,” Loki says savagely, quite needing then to be cruel. He laughs, shrill and cutting, at Thor’s flummoxed expression.

“You see yourself as so great, so magnanimous, the mighty Thor, so kind and forgiving and generous of heart—you think that it will be nothing to look at me and find there the face of an enemy you hated and hunted, whose blood you howled to spill? You expect that fifteen hundred years of learned disgust and stewed prejudice will vanish, because you try and make yourself forget what I am, and can bring yourself to fuck me while I wear this Aesir skin? Do you think that two days of fucking has fixed all this in you, and that your stomach would not turn to gaze upon me blue-skinned and black-horned and red-eyed, like a devil out of your Midgardian hell? Do I offend you, brother?”
“Indeed you do not,” says Thor, looking as though Loki has blown him back with a foul blast of magic Loki dearly wishes then that he could summon. “I deserve every word. I take no pride in the arrogant fool that I was—I have renounced him, and I will spend what years I am given trying to atone for where I was so short-sighted. But, Loki,” and his blue eyes are stupidly, unspeakably sincere, “I do not make myself forget. I never forget. I would not lose anything about you.”

Loki’s smile is dangerous, a curved knife. “Is that so,” he says. “Then you have some Jötunn-fucking perversion, is that it? How many other monsters did you bed before you slew them?”

Thor is on his feet. “Stop this,” he says, suddenly angrier than Loki can remember seeing him. “Say what ill you would of me—I beg that you do—but I will not hear you speak of yourself in this manner. You cannot think I should stand to let anyone—even you—say such things about my brother.” He strides forward forcefully, and Loki, caught out in surprise, can only gape at him, shrinking back against the wall as Thor advances.

But Thor marches past, headed to the bookshelf in the far corner. He yanks free a broad stack of books and scrolls from the top shelf.

Loki has not yet had the time—given their other activities—to investigate the library that Thor amassed, but as Thor returns to the foot of the bed he can see that most of the books are old, very old, near to crumbling; on other spines he sees words written in a range of languages from many worlds far beyond Midgard’s stars.

Thor pours the lot of it at Loki’s feet. “What little I could do while you were gone from me, to feel that sometimes you were closer,” he says, and Loki looks up from the books, astounded to hear Thor’s voice tight with tears. “I collected and read every work of history and lore that I could find or buy or barter for on the people who first made you.”

“What,” Loki says, staring.

“It is a pathetic start, I know, a tiny step backward from the long road of prejudice you described, but I—Loki, do you not understand, even now, what place you have in my heart? That you have all of it? There is nothing about you that I do not wish to know, so that I might love you the more for knowing more of you.”

Thor is moving to the closet next, blindly grabbing after clothes; then he turns on his heel and is gone with a slam of the door.

Loki sits staring for a long time. When movement seems like an option again, he reaches for the scroll on the top of the pile, unwinds it as though in a daze. Instead of a history he finds it full of painstaking notes, written in Thor’s scrawling, unmistakable script:

_The Jötunn are a noble folk who trace their lineage all the way back to—_

“Fuck,” says Loki, scrubbing his face with the palm of his hand. “Fuck.”

He spends an hour or more with the books, paging through them, uncaring that there are soundless tears trickling down his cheeks.

Thor does not come back—Loki does not blame him. It would be so much the better for Thor if he never came back at all.

Finally he gathers up the literary collection—it is impressive, really, and touching in a way that Loki does not know how yet to grapple with—and he returns the books and scrolls to their shelf.
He fusses over puzzling out an efficient order of organization to them that he knows is a distraction from the maelstrom of his thoughts. Then he goes into the bathroom, refusing to look at himself in the mirror-glass, and he runs a scalding shower, letting the water serve as a rebuke.

Only when he steps out at last does he stand before the mirror. His skin is an angry pink-red from the heat. His dripping hair is soon combed smooth of the tangles acquired from rolling so much against the bedsheets.

He has long been a vain creature, working hard upon his body and his appearance in an effort to differentiate himself from Thor. No one could stand next to Thor and hope to outshine him; that was impossible; but Loki could stand in stark contrast.

His hair worn sleek and dark as night to Thor’s unruly sun-gold.

His limbs, lithe and supple where Thor was solid mass.

He favored clothing of extravagant cuts and cloths, preferring lines that flaunted the feminine in him. Thor put on whatever came first to hand, armor clunky and practical.

If Thor would have wings upon his helm, Loki walked beside him wearing horns.

On the ship carrying Asgard away from its ruin Thor had asked Loki for the first time to help him dress. “I know not what a king should wear in such a hall as this,” Thor had said, and Loki had thrilled and smiled and known exactly. He’d wrapped Thor in black leather, with a jet breastplate that set off the gleam of the eye still left to him, and brought some order to the glorious hair the Grandmaster’s henchmen had so callously hacked away; and when he was done a king had stood before him.

Loki has not tried to use magic since Thor brought him back to this life. It was drained away with the rest of his strength, and has been as slow returning; but he can feel it now flooding through him and pooling in his fingertips. Illusions are always the easiest.

He looks at himself once more in the mirror, the web of bruises strung across his body from where Thor’s hands have gripped so tightly, where Thor’s mouth has sought and marked.

Then he closes his eyes, and when he opens them he is wearing a belted tunic of dark, rich green; he has made the form not after Asgard’s archaic fashion, nor Sakaar’s eccentric one, nor Midgard’s unadorned style—he has dressed, he thinks, like himself. Whatever that means. He is not sure anymore, if ever he was.

He keeps his feet bare. He likes how quietly he can move, he always has. When he slips downstairs it is without sound.

Thor is in the kitchen. The relief that Loki feels to see him bent over the sink tells him many things. He heard an outside door slam after Thor’s leaving, and wondered if it would take his brother a long while to return.

But Thor is washing dishes with fixed, methodical energy—maybe a bit too much of it, there’s a wet broken bowl on the countertop—and Loki is able to approach without giving himself away.

Once, he would have used this to painful advantage, driven a knife in low on Thor’s back and taunted him about letting his guard down.

Now, Loki goes to him. He touches his forehead between Thor’s shoulder blades. Slides his arms around him, Thor so broad yet still a circumference he can span.
Thor startles but does not tense. He shuts off the faucet.

"Forgive me," Loki says to Thor’s back. It’s easier not to have to see his expression in this. "You are too good. How are you so good?"

Thor’s hand, damp and sudsy, comes up to clasp over Loki’s at his midsection. "There is nothing to forgive. It is I who should apologize, for what I thoughtlessly asked of you, and for leaving you like that."

"Let me have this one," Loki tells him. Thor goes quiet. Eventually he ducks his head in a nod.

How long they stand like that Loki cannot say. It is strange and rare to hold Thor in his arms, and not the other way around—to comfort and calm Thor, and not need to be the one reassured.

"Sit," says Loki at length, though reluctant to let him go. "I’ll make some food since I made our breakfast so late."

Thor turns in his embrace. His eyes widen at the sight of Loki, and he rubs the edge of one silken sleeve between his thumb and forefinger. "You look—well," he says. "You look far beyond well. Your magic—?"

"Back, to some degree," Loki says, preening only a little at the praise. A little. "Not, unfortunately, enough yet to produce something delicious for us out of thin air."

"But you did," says Thor, smoothing the tunic down Loki’s sides, lingering as his hands dip lower. "Sit down." Loki shoves Thor toward a stool across the counter, but he’s smiling.

"When did you ever learn to cook?" Thor wants to know. "They wouldn’t let you in the kitchens either."

"I did not," Loki admits. He can concoct fantastic potions from nettles and stardust, but not prepare a soup. He works instead on piecing together passable sandwiches from the supplies in the refrigerator. He brews them a strong pot of coffee, a skill they both knew well enough from morning campfires; it is not so different using an electric stove. It is not so different from potion-making.

A thought occurs to him as he sets cup and plate before Thor. "How did you pick it up, what you’ve made for us these last days?"

Thor tucks into his sandwich. "Jane," he says around a bite. "She was very busy. It was something I could do for her."

Loki has not been keen to ask. He is surprised when his stomach does not knot with fearsome jealousy, as it ever did. Instead he feels only curious, and oddly sad. "She is—?"

"Gone," says Thor. The rest of the sandwich vanishes under his next, convulsive swallow. "We will restore her also." It is said as almost more of a plea than a statement. Loki can hear how badly he wants to have it confirmed.

"This world will surely benefit from her brilliance thereafter," Loki says neutrally, and, he thinks, rather genially. It is a fine thing not to feel jealous. If Jane were to appear at that moment he would make her a cup of tea.

Thor’s face is creased with sadness but Loki earns a soft, surprised smile for that.
“You loved her,” Loki says.

“I did,” says Thor, unhesitant, “as best I knew how. She was so much cleverer than I. As I told another lady—as ladies often do, she saw right through me.”

Loki hmms, sips at his coffee. “You have a type, dear brother.”

“Raven-haired geniuses,” Thor agrees. “I have never been subtle.”

This renders Loki willing to indulge the topic further. He cradles the mug in his hands, staying quiet, sensing that this is good for Thor to speak through. For all of Thor’s quick generosity of feelings it has ever been hard for him to examine wounds.

Even so, his next words startle Loki. “She knew how I felt about you,” Thor says, investigating his empty plate, “after Svartálfheim, she knew.”

Loki feels a sharp pain run through his chest. His jaw clicks when it drops. “You **told** her?”

“I did not need to tell her anything,” Thor continues. “She witnessed how we were together. Little escaped her quick mind. I returned maddened with grief. For a time I could do naught but mourn you. One day, she asked me if it was so.”

“Oh, Thor,” says Loki. He sets down the coffee and takes his brother’s hand. “You are such a fool. I was dead.” *That you knew,* Loki does not remind him.

Thor lifts his shoulders in a shrug, not caring to deny the charge. “Jane and I parted as friends,” he says. “I hold her in the highest regard. She did not quite understand, I think, how it was between you and I; but she saw, and she knew. She was right to call for an end.” Thor tosses back his coffee as though taking down a draught of liquor.

Loki chews his lip, debating, then unable to stop himself from asking. “What did you tell her?”

“That I loved you beyond all else,” says Thor. “That I always would. That death does not rest so easily upon you, and that if I could find you again in this lifetime I would not be parted from you again.”

“Just exactly what one dreams of hearing their paramour declare about his treacherous sibling,” Loki says with a roll of his eyes. But he squeezes Thor’s hand.

Thor stands up abruptly. “Let’s go outside.”

“Right behind you,” says Loki, relieved.

Outside it’s much easier to breathe. They walk together around the length of the compound, silent but still joined by interlaced fingers. There was a time when Loki would have relinquished any claims to thrones or dreams of fame and infamy to be seen walking in Asgard’s gardens in such a way with Thor.

The fine weather reminds him of Asgard. It is warmer than recent days, with a high, blazing sun and only a bare handful of clouds to trouble the blue sky. A thin winding breeze stirs their hair.

“I wish we could ride,” Loki hears himself say wistfully.

It was the singular activity where they’d been evenly matched from the start—thrown into the saddle as mere babes, both grown to be highly skilled on horseback. Neither Thor’s strength nor Loki’s
tricks could ever gain much of an advantage, not that they hadn’t spent years in escalating competition to try and prove otherwise.

Thor blinks. His face lights up. “Perhaps we can,” he says. “I will make some phone calls.”

“Will you, now,” says Loki, amused, but enjoying the hopeful feeling in his chest.

“Race you back,” Thor says, letting go of Loki’s hand.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Loki says, but Thor has already taken off, and with a curse and a laugh, Loki lopes after him.

The thought of riding has put them into mind of Asgard indeed, and Thor was always trying to race him somewhere or another there.

It isn’t until he is hard upon Thor’s heels and trying to trip him with a magical barrier—Thor sidesteps it—that Loki realizes he isn’t winded at all, and that breathing comes easily.

At the doorway, Thor rewards Loki’s second-place finish with a kiss that sweeps him off his feet.

* * *

“So this is what it’s like to be an Avenger,” Loki muses, watching with his arms folded as the horse trailer backs slowly up the driveway. “Ask for something outlandish and receive it within the hour.”

Thor frowns at him without heat. “The service is paid for. I thought you wanted to—”

“Oh, I do, very much,” says Loki. “I’m impressed, is all.”

“Loki,” Thor starts, then pauses; he’s been hesitant, hiding something, since getting off the phone. Loki feels his jaw tighten. He nods. “They’re coming back,” he guesses. “Your friends.”

“Tomorrow night.” Thor seems unable, or incapable, or elaborating further.

“Back in action then, I suppose,” Loki says, trying to keep his voice even. He’s known that this could not last, that these stolen days would come to an end; still it is hard to look upon it.

“I must,” says Thor. He clears his throat. “You will work beside me?”

Loki stares at him, so surprised that he takes a half-step sideways. “They’d let me—what! A war criminal among Earth’s mightiest heroes?”

“We have several of those now,” says Thor, as though it were that simple. He ghosts his fingers across the small of Loki’s back. “We want for able hands and minds. You are richly gifted with both.”

It’s a sign of what these days with Thor has done to him that Loki feels himself nod before he has even worked through the tangled knot of considering it.

“If you think it can be so,” Loki says. Norns, but Thor has ruined him. Here he is bargaining to join the Avengers. He tries for levity. Desperately. “Will I get a costume?”
Loki may be well and truly fucked now, but the look that Thor throws him is so full of loving warmth that he stops remembering why he should care.

Thor is saved from having to reply by the arrival of the trailer. The driver hops down from his cab and Thor must busy himself with paperwork on a clipboard.

The driver, a man with a chipped-tooth smile, a cap of white hair, and the calloused hands of a farmer, looks them over without much curiosity, projecting a strong sense of it being Not His Business.

He’s the first Midgardian that Loki has seen since returning, and it’s only when the man comes closer in order to open the back of the trailer does Loki see that he isn’t as elderly as he thought—the man is bent as though beneath a great weight, the wrinkles on his forehead newly made. Above his empty smile his eyes are haunted. Thor did not exaggerate about the toll Thanos has taken, Loki thinks.

“I’ll be back for them in the evening,” the driver tells them, unlocking the trailer’s back door and sliding free a ramp. “You boys ride?”

He clucks with his tongue, and two fine thoroughbreds—one bay, one black, nearly so alike in pacing as to be brothers—emerge down the walkway. Their lines are strong and proud, their manes and coats healthy; they make pleased whinnying sounds to be back in the fresh air; the sight of them makes Loki feel something difficult to parse until he realizes that it is happy.

“Once or twice,” says Loki.

Thor claps his shoulder just a little too hard. “My brother makes a jest. They are in expert hands.”

“Eight o’clock,” says the driver with a nod, as he retrieves saddle and tack from the trailer. It’s clear that he’s in no mood for smalltalk, nor given much to wondering why they should want to ride in a world such as this; he seems glad enough to be employed. With a departing wave, he is back in the cab and driving off.

Loki goes to the horses. Horses choose him, not the other way around. They stare at each other appraisingly, then the bay ducks his head. Loki pats his flank with a thankful hand.

“Race you,” he says to Thor.

In everything riding it was a competition between them. He sees Thor’s answering grin in the periphery of his vision before they’re both diving for the gear, wrestling it out between them.

They can saddle horses mid-battle, falling-down drunk, one-handed, backwards, blindfolded. Thor is fast but Loki more precise. Each buckle feels like an extension of his hands as he works; bridle and harness glide exactly into place; not once does he hesitate. Then he is swinging himself up into the saddle just as Thor sets his boot to stirrup.

Loki doesn’t even gloat. Not overmuch, at least. He is beaming. “I win.”

“That wasn’t fair,” Thor gripes, settling in.

“It was perfectly—”

“I became distracted,” Thor says. “The look on your face when you’re concentrated like that—”

“Excuses, excuses, brother,” Loki says, but he surprises all four of them as he sidles the horse alongside Thor’s and pulls Thor into a bruising kiss. When Loki lets go, Thor’s eyes are shining.
“Thank you for this,” Loki says. Being earnest suits him like an itchy garment but there’s nothing else for it.

Thor cups Loki’s cheek with the hand not holding reins. “Do not thank me yet,” he says. “You’re about to lose again.” Then he’s off at a gallop with Loki giving chase.

They ride all afternoon, through the fields and over hills around the compound, discovering distant meadows to race and jump in.

Loki laughs in delight when his horse clears a high wooden fence in a perfect arc of a leap. The wind whips his hair as he turns to watch Thor follow after with as much grace.

Thor’s horse falls into a slow walk beside his, and for a while they pace unhurried.

“I have not heard you sound like that,” Thor says, “in a very long time.”

Loki does not deny it or seek to throw off the observation. “Buy me a horse,” he says instead.

“I will buy you a stable,” says Thor.

They lead the horses to water and then Loki drags Thor down from his saddle, pushes him back into the tall meadow grasses.

He takes up residence between Thor’s thighs and passes what feels like a delirious century swallowing Thor’s magnificent cock and sucking it and tonguing it and choking on it until Thor pulls him free with a growl. He rolls Loki onto his back beneath him and fucks into him hard and fast, as fast as they’ve been riding.

Loki gets a hand around his own cock and jerks himself to Thor’s punishing rhythm. “Race you,” Loki gasps out, and is rewarded with a startled laugh from Thor that vibrates all the way down to his bones.

Thor complies, of course—Thor is incapable of not accepting a challenge when issued—and the quick snap of his hips would be overwhelming if Loki were not so focused on his own hand, his own cock. In the end they come together, at a distance of seconds for which no clear winner can be discerned, excepting that they both have won.

“A tie,” Thor declares, kissing the tip of Loki’s nose before collapsing onto his back in the grass, breathing fast short breaths from the exertion.

Somehow it’s the little kiss that does it. Thor buried inside of him and fucking at a mad pace is not so moving as that casual, affectionate act, intimate and teasing and kind.

“I love you,” Loki says. Once said it’s irretrievable and so he says so again, turning to rest his head on Thor’s shoulder so that he needn’t gaze into his eyes—this isn’t a fairy tale, and they are not a courting couple. “Thor. I love you.”

Thor takes in a shuddering breath, lets it go free. His hand moves up and strokes through Loki’s hair, then again, again. He seems to understand that Loki does not desire a long discussion about this declaration, that Loki simply needed to have it said.

That Thor did. He puts his arms around Loki and draws him close, and Loki can feel that the bunched-up tension long present is relaxed from his brother’s bold muscles. They lie there unwound, holding onto each other, until the lateness of day bids them to ride again or lose the last few precious hours with the horses.
When the driver returns to retrieve them Loki relinquishes his bay with a mournful stroke along the horse’s neck and a sigh. They thank the man and the horses both, and return to the compound still pressed together, listing into each other's space.

“I think I could grow accustomed to a day like this,” Loki tells him, as they work side by side improvising a sort of dinner from canned foods in the pantry.

“We will have horses, wherever we come to live after Thanos is defeated,” Thor says, shaking onion salt over the beans he has carefully not burnt. “I will make sure of it, even if I have to raise them myself on a planet without horses.”

Loki pours them generous glasses of wine and drinks half of his before he ventures: “And if Thanos cannot be defeated, brother?”

It takes Thor a while to answer. He’s been looking far more refreshed and at ease these last few days—near-constant sex can be restorative, Loki supposes—but the shadows under his eyes show that he has often considered that outcome.

“The others—my friends—they cannot let themselves address such a possibility. It is the hope alone that the Gauntlet’s damage can be reversed that keeps them on their feet.” Thor looks up, looks at Loki. His eyes have gone dark. “I am not always so sure. I feel guilty that, having you back with me, I can see a way forward regardless.”

The events of the day have worked on Loki to be far more sentimental than is generally given to him. The wine also helps. “I swear to you now—if there is a way to do it that is within my power to find, I will find it.”

“I told you when you came back,” says Thor, the expression on his face so fiercely approving and appreciative that Loki would flush if the conversation were not deadly serious. “I feel you to be essential. I know it, Loki. We need your help.”

Loki rolls up his sleeves—both literally and figuratively. “Since we are so soon to return to the work at hand,” he says, “tell me some of the ways that you have tried and failed.”

They sit at the table, eating and drinking, and Thor does. It is a series of tragic stories after the great tragedy. Plots to find and capture and subdue Thanos, plots to use magic, use powerful objects, use technology, use every tool at Midgard and its allies’ disposal that might catalyze a reversal of circumstance. None have succeeded, and each has successfully worn down the Avengers’ energy and initiative.

“I will kill him,” Thor is saying, draining the dregs of his first bottle of wine. “Even if we cannot undo what he has done, one day I will kill him.”

“Of that I have little doubt,” Loki says mildly, truthfully, for there is a look of grim resolution in his brother’s eye such as he has never seen before. “I should like to assist you, or at least stand nearby, smiling.”

“He slaughtered Asgard as though we were sheep,” says Thor, pouring more wine, his grip tight upon the bottle, “as though we were less than bleating sheep. He murdered the finest man among us like livestock.” This glass vanishes in a single swallow. “Death is too good for Thanos.”

“Heimdall died a valiant death,” Loki says, letting himself feel the ache of it. “He will surely be the first to greet you in Valhalla.”

Thor says nothing. Then he says, in the softest voice Loki has ever heard emerge his mighty body: “I
miss him, Loki. I miss him and Volstagg and Fandral and Hogun and Sif—” Here his voice falters. “My fearless Sif. I miss my friends. I miss Father and Mother and the Asgard that was. How have we lost it all? All?”

It’s a strange sight to see Thor so close to breaking, but Loki has been expecting it for a while. Even Thor cannot abide such grief without outlet. Especially Thor, with the soft heart that he has.

Loki reaches for his hand across the table. Clasps it. “Not all is lost,” he reminds. The role of comforter does not come naturally to him, but it is not an anomaly: he used to placate Thor in his childish rages and his fits and passions when they were small. “Asgard yet lives in a place that you have found for it, hidden among the stars. Your friends and our family stay in your heart, and—” He pauses; sentiment is so very difficult to phrase. “—and in mine. We will not soon forget them. We preserve them.”

Thor’s eyes are bright with tears. One tracks down his cheek. “You are the only thing that I have,” he says. “You are everything, Loki.”

Loki’s heart does an odd thing, which is to leap and then proceed to race very fast. There are so many different ways to respond that war within him: sarcastic, flippant, romantic, cruel, calm, indifferent.

Instead, he presses Thor’s hand, and says: “Well, what are you going to do with me?”

* * *

In bed that night Thor is different. He is worshipful in a way Loki struggles to put to words, as so many mysteries of religion escape definition.

Even the sweet attentiveness that Thor displayed with his lady-self cannot be compared to this. Thor speaks them through every touch, explains why he wishes to deliver it, begs of Loki to know his response, describes to Loki how it feels to feel him thus.

When he is inside Loki after a very long while, Loki is so moved and worn down and emotionally wrenched that he hears himself returning the favor.

Loki says, “You cannot know what it is like for me to hold you, so I will tell you. You make me believe the bards’ tales too late, damn you.”

Thor’s eyes are wide, pupils turning his blue gaze nearly black. He thrusts once, hard, smooth, sure, like a prompt. “How is that, brother?”

“All that I once thought abject nonsense,” says Loki, who has definitely had too much wine and not yet begun to realize it, “the epics about great love, love that transcends even death. I often scoffed. You will remember.”

“I do,” Thor allows, kisses his forehead. “Your criticism sent not a few musickers from court in tears.”

“I may have spoken over-hastily,” Loki admits, catching Thor by the back of the neck to fit him yet closer. “How you prove me wrong.”
They lie together afterward, tangled up, sharing air.

“I know that you have reservations about tomorrow,” Thor says eventually. “Nothing will change between us.”

“Everything will change,” Loki says, “but I suppose it needn’t be for the worse. Promise instead that when things seem dark or strange, you will remember this day, and bid me to remember it.”

“I promise, love,” says Thor. “I promise.”

* * *

“Hello,” says Loki.

The silence then is such that a pin-drop would be deafening.

The remaining Avengers, whom they have met on the lawn, disembark from the quinjet with their eyes on him.

The reactions are much as Loki expected. Natasha Romanoff is wary, brokering no nonsense. Her hand openly flirts with the weapon at her belt. James Rhodes regards him with tired curiously, with a tilted head and a hundred questions on his tongue. Steve Rogers is the most surprised. He stares unblinking at Loki, and this is the one aspect that Loki could not have anticipated—that Steve’s expression would be such a mix of hope and hunger upon seeing him.

“Son of a gun,” breathes Steve. “Would you look at that.”

Bruce Banner is the first to approach. He comes straight over to Loki and Thor, puts out his hand in offering, a gesture deeply meaningful and deeply kind when Loki has time to think back upon it later.

“It’s good to see you again, Loki,” Bruce says. He reminds the others of just how much time has passed since New York. “You seem a whole lot better than when I saw you last.”

Loki takes the offered hand, shakes firmly, gravely. “And you, Bruce,” he says on both counts.

Thor looks like he could kiss them both.

Bruce’s welcome does much to dispel the tension—that is, until Clint Barton clatters down from the quinjet.

The moment that their eyes meet, Loki can glimpse the arrow that Clint wishes to plant in his chest. He sees it—feels it, and so does Clint: Clint nods. Loki nods. The arrow will always exist between them.

But Clint’s face is the most wretchedly grieved of the lot of them; no man should have to bear what he has borne, Loki knows.

Clint does not pause to be part of the greeting party on the lawn. As he goes past, however, he says over his shoulder, “You gonna use your tricks to find a way to bring back my family?”

Everyone is watching them now.
“That is my intention,” Loki says, shocked at how earnest the words emerge—it is not mere self-preservation that propels him to speak. He tells them what he told Thor. “If it is within my power I will not rest until it is so.”

“Good enough,” says Clint, and he goes inside without a backward glance.

The strained mood is broken when a small body barrels across the lawn and hits Thor’s legs. It’s an attempt to send him toppling over that Thor manages with a laugh. Loki has seen many sights in his life, but few like that of his brother, looking delighted, bending to engage in a complicated series of welcoming hand-gestures with an upright, extremely vocal raccoon.

“I’m Rocket,” the raccoon informs Loki when he acknowledges him. “I’m at least seventy-five percent responsible for saving your dead ass, so we can discuss proper recompense later. If you’ll excuse me, I’ve earned some R&R. What does a guy gotta do to get a proper drink around here?” With another playful shove at Thor’s knee, he, too, vanishes toward the compound.

Next a regal, bald-headed woman in elaborate red dress exits the quinjet. She has a spear in her hand that looks like an extension of her body, and an air of such deadly capability about her that Loki is taken aback and instantly intrigued. She stares at him without expression, telling him that his death is easily met at her hands. But her expression softens when another passes in front of her, and she stands at attention.

“Thor!” The girl who emerges from the plane is that: a girl. Nearly a child, and yet very far from one, Loki sees: there is hard-earned wisdom already on her brow, and her sharp gaze is far-seeing. Grief and many other burdens rest heavy on her slim shoulders, but nothing can keep the brightness from her eyes.

She heads for them without hesitation, picking Loki apart with the curiosity of a natural scientist—even Bruce had not puzzled through him like this. By the time she reaches them she has reverse-engineered him, Loki thinks.

Thor gives her a gallant, courtly bow such as would make their mother proud. “Princess.” He kisses the hand that she extends. “Shuri, this is my brother, Loki, that I told you so often about.”

Loki follows Thor’s example—royalty is royalty, even on Midgard, and he will hardly be found eschewing etiquette. He bows low, and when he straightens he finds that her eyes are sparkling.

“Loki,” she says. “I am glad to meet you properly. I have so many questions.”

“It will be an honor to answer them to my ability, Princess,” Loki tells her. “I am at your service.” It’s really inappropriate for Thor to be staring at him like that in such company. His brother’s approving smile might open wide to swallow him whole. “I’m told that I have you and your country to thank for my current condition.”

Shuri inclines her head. “It was the least we could do,” she says graciously, her clever gaze alighting on Thor, “for a great hero of Wakanda.”

“I feel like we need a group hug,” says Bruce, looking around at the lot of them with relief.

“Let us begin with dinner,” says the fearsome warrior that Loki will learn is called Okoye. “The journey was a long one.”

“That,” Steve says, diving for the concept like a lifeline, “that’s a great idea, General. You think we can still get pizza delivered out here?”
“Pizza,” Loki repeats. The odd word seems to tickle his tongue.

“Oh my god,” says Rhodey.

“Oh my god,” says Natasha. “You were in New York City and never—”

“Okay, so, we’re getting pizza,” Steve says, smartly steering them all from ruminating too much upon New York. He leads the way, letting Loki draw up beside him. Thor nods at Loki when he looks back, like he’s never been so proud or pleased. “Granted, this’ll be nothing like a proper Brooklyn slice. For that, it’s all about the crust, and you need a real good sauce passed down for generations, and home-grown basil, and the cheese should—”

* * *

They order a dozen pizzas, and Loki fast learns to appreciate the delicious baked Midgardian confection. It’s not neat with the melted cheese running to strings, and it feels vaguely barbaric, eating thus with their hands—but everyone is so hungry and celebratory upon its arrival that he fails to care.

He eats his slices the way that Steve Rogers shows him, folded in half.

Loki is far from naive. He knows that none of them trust him—not even Thor, who knows and loves him enough that he knows not to trust him—and he’s aware that one false move would result in three-quarters of the room aiming a weapon at his throat, many of them happy for a reason to use it.

For Thor’s sake alone they give him the benefit of the doubt, and he is surprised to find how badly he wishes to prove worthy of it.

He mostly stays quiet, letting the thrum of conversation pulse around him, learning more from offhand remarks than he could from direct questions. It is strange to see these people from the inside as an ally instead of an enemy or an asset to seize. Begrudgingly, however, as the night wears on, he begins to understand why Thor values them so.

They are smart, the lot of them, but beneath intelligence all are deeply feeling. That seems to be the mark of an Avenger. It is not so much bravery or outlandish abilities that distinguishes them as it is the necessity of caring for the welfare of others above all else.

Once Loki would have laughed and mocked this as folly. Such a weakness it is to feel so deeply. But he looks at Thor eating pizza and all of the old instincts die on his tongue.

They are not perfect, Loki learns. They are far from perfect, profoundly flawed. Their strength comes from teamwork, from the lot of them pooling resources so that together they are more capable than apart. They have been so grievously wounded by what Thanos has done that he can see that they are propping each other up, running on fumes, sharing fumes.

The beer, wine, and liquor pour quickly that night, the rare occasion where they feel themselves off-duty. Eventually easiness and some laughter comes to bear in the fluid conversation.

For a while now Loki has felt Thor’s eyes upon him but thought that in this alone his brother might be prevailed upon to have a little sense. Not so.
Late into the evening, Thor clears his throat. “There is something that I would like to share with you, my friends,” he says, and the raucous noise around them goes quiet.

“Do not,” Loki hisses. “Thor. I will stab you even here.”

Thor ignores him, gesturing proudly to indicate Loki with the beer bottle in his hand. “Loki and I are lovers,” he announces. “He stays in my chambers and will remain there going forward.”

Silence.

A deafening pin-drop would be simply marvelous.

Loki has enough magic now to disappear, and he strongly considers it. They’re all staring, the lot of them, such a variety of disorienting expressions chasing across the myriad faces that he cannot stand to look.

Finally the Princess Shuri reaches daintily for a slice of pizza as though untroubled by the situation at hand. She is followed by Rocket cracking open a beer for himself and another that he passes to Thor.

The chatter resumes around them. Thor is beaming. Loki is the color scarlet but he has not vanished. His escalated heartbeat starts to slow. He feels incredulous, knocked over, yet his fight-or-flight response is proving unnecessary.

“You owe me fifty dollars,” he hears Natasha say under her breath to Bruce.

* * *

“Why did you do that?” Loki makes himself ready for bed with all frustration, throws his tunic—black, and new made for the formal occasion that day—across the back of the armchair rather than fold it. “Are you quite insane?”

“It would not be the first time you suggested that is so,” says Thor, sounding unfairly calm, and going about the same preparations. Loki refuses to be distracted by Thor’s bared torso, bound with diamond-cut muscles and impossibly strong limbs for days. He looks decidedly everywhere else in the room save at Thor, and Thor says, “Would you have had me lie to them?”

“Certainly you should have fucking lied to them,” Loki snaps, taking out his indignation on a pillow, which he angrily fluffs. “Or else said nothing. They are not like us, Thor. They do not understand our history.”

Thor shrugs. “Be that as it may,” he says, at least conceding the point, “they would have quickly found out anyway. That was my thinking. How could they fail to see the way I look at you, or that we share a room?”

“You were not thinking,” says Loki. But he feels himself caving in, the battle already lost. He has grown unspeakably soft. He swallows to hide his panic, turns his face away.

“Besides,” says Thor, and then he paces so purposefully around the bed that Loki stumbles back in surprise, drops his pillow. “I am not ashamed. Why should I attempt to hide what I would shout for all the world to hear?”
“You are mad,” says Loki, decisive. He raises his hands as though to ward off an attack. He should have kept hold of the pillow.

“Just so,” says Thor. There is lightning in his eyes, lightning under his skin, lighting threatening to crackle along the lines of him. “Marry me.”

Loki’s heart stops. Starts. Stops. Pauses. He cants his head, looks around for an escape. He lowers his gaze and cannot look at Thor. He cannot remember how to breathe. He remembers what it was to gasp for breath as though the air would not broker with him.

“You speak of impossible things,” he manages at last.

“Do I?” says Thor. Closer, he’s closer; why is there so much of him? “You named yourself Odinson and swore yourself to me before my world ended. Did you think I had forgotten?”

“I—” At the time, Loki hadn’t expected to ever have to account for what he knew to be his last words. “I don’t see how that’s—”

“Loki Odinson,” says Thor, and a terrific shiver seizes Loki from crown to toe. “I would have you bear that name because it is mine as much as your own.”

Loki looks up. The words come unbidden after a wrenching stretch of silence. “As you said. That is already the case.”

Thor crowds him against the wall, all of him blazing hot and heated, his eyes twin torches. ”Then perhaps we need no ceremony to affirm it.”

“Is that so,” says Loki, dry-mouthed, and more dazzled than he’s ever been. Still he cannot merely back down and give over without further commentary. “What do we need, then?”

“A consummation,” says Thor.

He has Loki first against the wall, helping to muffle Loki’s cries now that there is the danger of disturbing the others. Then Thor has him on the bed, where Loki’s cries are no quieter, and last, when the sun is rising, standing with Loki’s hands braced against the window frame and Thor’s hands settled over his, so that they can watch the approaching dawn.

“Speak it but once, as you did before,” whispers Thor into his ear as he moves, the both of them slick with sweat and unwilling to admit exhaustion but both pushed far past their limits. “Please. For me.”

“Loki,” Loki says. For the first time in a very long time the names do not burn in his mouth with anything like uncertainty or anger. All he can feel is relief. All he can feel is Thor inside of him, around him, urging him onward. All he can feel is loved. “Odinson. Loki Odinson.”

“Beloved,” says Thor. “Loki Odinson. We need never tell another soul of what has passed here this night, but know that I am sworn as though it were a high priest who bound us.”

Loki turns his head sideways so that Thor can kiss him. “Perhaps not for a while—the timing seems inappropriate to tell others of it,” he concedes, so dizzy with what he realizes is euphoria that it is Thor’s arms alone that keep him upright. “But do you really think when all of this is over that I am going to miss the chance to plan a party about me?”

* * *
“They cannot ask this of us,” Thor whispers, his fury draining into disbelief.

Art by the outstanding malefeministthor. I'm on tumblr here.

Thank you so, so, so much to everyone for the feedback so far—it is my fuel! I love you a lot.
Loki joins the Avengers.

Well, he’ll never receive a membership card or a proper costume or be featured on a cereal box, but he numbers now among their ranks. He is one of them.

It takes some weeks before the strangeness of having him in attendance fades for all concerned. It takes longer for them to stop keeping a wary eye on him at all times.

But Loki works hard alongside them, diligently and without complaint. Eventually, though it is clear
they will never quite be able to forget New York, nor his role there, they seem to have forgiven him for it.

The first time he is photographed in public on a mission, what remains of the world’s media has an attack of hysterics. There are ugly blaring headlines across newspapers and television talking heads speculating on the remaining Avengers’ sanity and just how fast Loki should be locked up and prosecuted.

Loki doesn’t go outside for two days. He is afraid that he has become a dangerous distraction, as photographers swarm and shout in his wake. His brief career at superheroeing is, he believes, quite finished.

Steve Rogers holds a press conference. With his megawatt smile and his blond hair swept into a wave, the Captain explains that Loki is now a valuable part of their initiative, with unique knowledge and expertise vital in the fight against Thanos and the chance to reverse what the Gauntlet has done.

“Isn’t that what we all want here in the end, folks?” Steve asks the bank of microphones and cameras, and no one will speak to disagree.

The next day another catastrophe occurs, as catastrophes are always occurring; the media moves on, the newspapers forget about him entirely.

“I told you it would be well,” says Thor, who has been trying to coax Loki to leave the bedroom for days. “You worry too much, brother.”

There is more than enough to worry about. He may well be part of the Avengers, but with that comes such a horrid weight of responsibility that it’s no wonder few people are rallying to join.

Under the terms that Rhodey and Steve struck up with the remains of the United Nations, the Avengers maintain independence as a body but agree to answer the U.N.’s calls for assistance.

The U.N. is always calling.

Midgard exists in a state of near-total chaos. Once, Loki would have found such disorder fascinating to observe, even relished and encouraged the sight. Now that he is tasked with taming it he has come to dislike the senseless displays of violence and abhor the agony he witnesses.

Every day brings something different and terrible: riots and fires and floods and wars just begun, people stampeding over fallen bodies to follow rumors of food, bridges collapsing due to their maintenance workers’ disappearance.

Fist-fights in streets that devolve into hours-long melees among the populace, for there is so much pent-up grief that it manifests most easily as rage. Heists and hijackings to be thwarted, as the criminal element has gained confidence everywhere as order devolves.

Sometimes—rarely—the mission is purely humanitarian; they are there to deliver essential supplies, or ferry a world leader elsewhere, or visit the orphanages full of children whose parents vanished to try and bring a smile to blank faces.

The first time Loki returns from such a visit, he crawls into bed still wearing his clothes and boots. Thor finds him like that. Thor does the same, lies down beside him and pulls Loki into his arms.

“I am sorry,” says Thor quietly, his breath tickling the fine hairs at the back of Loki’s neck. “I said that you would not thank me for bringing you back into this world.”
“I may not thank you overmuch,” Loki agrees after a moment of considering it. “But I am glad to be here.”

“In all our years, you never looked so beautiful to me as you did today,” says Thor, his tone lighter after Loki’s reply.

Loki’s surprised laugh sounds piteously small and tired, and he turns over in bed to address Thor. “Tell me—was it the covered in soot look, or later the covered in mud, that so attracted you, brother?”

“It was at the orphanage,” says Thor. “How clever you were with your magics. Your shows of sleight-of-hand with their colorful sparks. The little animals you made race around the beds. How you healed in the sick-room when you thought no one was looking.”

“I—”

“Whenever I think I cannot possibly love you more, I am mistaken,” says Thor. He closes his eyes. “It frightens me how much I love you.”

This sends an unpleasant jolt through Loki’s gut. “Frightens you.”

“Yes,” says Thor tightly, eyes closed. “I know that you would not be alongside us for so much horror were it not for me. I see how it is wearing you down, as it has worn the rest of us to shadows. There is only myself to blame. And every time we go into danger, I must consider that something could occur that would take you from me again. The thought of losing you makes me want to set Midgard on fire once and for all, so that at least we might know some rest.”

“A tad extreme, that contingency,” Loki says. He lets his hands track idly through Thor’s hair. There was a time when he would have been made furious at such a patronizing—though well-intentioned—speech as this, but that was long ago, and they are both of them too exhausted. “Thor, I do love you, but trust that my decisions are my own. Perhaps I go to ensure that you do not blunder your way into death or doom. Recall that I am especially invested, as your death means my own. Have you considered that?”

Thor’s pursed mouth relents into a more relaxed line, and Loki kisses him.

“It is strange to discuss this now, with no end in sight,” Loki starts, hesitant, and gathering wits enough to speak through it, “and on a day when we witnessed so much need and suffering. We must succeed, if only to see the orphanages emptied. But I—I also watched you. I watched how you were with them.”

Generous and sweet and so, so kind, letting tiny bodies climb all over him, Thor a one-man, heavily muscled, belly-laughing playground. He’d devised frolicking games for the adventurous children, then sat on the floor and told hushed stories to those who were most shy; throughout the visit he was not without a clinging appendage around his neck and on both legs. The children appeared to adore and trust him implicitly. Loki would have been content to watch them together for a long while.

Thor’s eyes fly open. “Sister,” he says.

He brushes a loose lock of hair from her cheek. He is, Loki decides, looking more nervous now than she has ever seen him look.

“Be at ease,” she tells him, leaning a little into the touch. She tries to mask how nervous she is herself. “It is only that I have been considering what you asked me to consider. And I have come to think—if our current circumstances should be vastly improved in the ways that we could wish—I
think I might agree to such a joint venture.”


“I speak Thor, but not always perfectly well,” says Loki. “Is that agreement or disagreement?”

He reels her in hard against him, hands suddenly relentless in their quest to lock her body to his. Thor pushes back her hair and kisses her neck, her throat, along the bend of her cheek, then takes her mouth as though it is the first time they’ve kissed, so great is his enthusiasm.

“Know, Loki, that you have spoken of a wish kept so dear in my heart I tremble to even say its name,” says Thor when he draws back.

“It is, of course, a long way away that we might even discuss this again, and such conditions may not be possible,” Loki reminds him, though she is pleased by the depth of feeling in his reaction. “Still I thought that you would like to know.”

Thor tucks her under his chin. “You give me a new wind. The challenges that we face tomorrow are nothing when I imagine the rewards of the future.”

“Indeed,” says Loki, sly. “Perhaps you would like to practice?”

Thor makes love to her for so long that night, both of them loud with unbridled enthusiasm, that Bruce bangs on the shared wall not once, not twice, but three times before their ardor cools.

“Listen, you two, I love you, but I also love sleep,” Bruce says through the wall upon his last attempt.

“Sorry, sorry,” Loki calls, laughing, but Thor is already pulling her astride him again. She stares down at him. Tilts her head. “We are not being very thoughtful.”

“Then perhaps you should go very, very slow to keep us quiet,” Thor suggests, his expression deliciously wicked for once. She knew she loved him for many reasons—occasionally having good ideas among them.

* * *


It’s a city he’s been keen to avoid, and glad that the Avengers have not been called to during his tenure. But the day’s briefing is printed clearly before him. His chest feels tight.

He knew there was something off about the day from the start. He is rarely ill, yet awoke with a fierce headache that abated only a little with coffee and the small tablets Natasha recommended from the medicine cabinet.

None of them look thrilled about the prospect of New York. The city is full of memories and ghosts.

“If we’re lucky, it’ll be a pretty quick in and out,” says Rhodey. “We’re bringing back a good deal of the Stark warehouse for safe-keeping. Best case scenario, it’s a packing job.” His face is neutral, but his eyes are sad, then distant, and Loki knows that he is thinking about faraway places that Tony Stark may or may not be.
Steve speaks fast into the silence. “Nat, me, and Rhodey can handle the warehouse. Thor, you and Loki and Rocket will go to Strange’s.”

Their Wakandan visitors have long since returned home, though Loki looks forward to weekly virtual check-ins with the Princess Shuri. Her science is simply another form of magic, and they find much to converse about. Clint has taken to coming and going, running his own side-quests and missions to keep from running off the rails entirely, and Loki will not pretend it is not somewhat of a relief when he is gone.

“And I stay here to hold down the fort,” Bruce is saying. “Good call, Cap. New York doesn’t always agree with me.”

“Strange’s,” Loki repeats.

Natasha nods. “That’s why we need you there. We’re taking a lot of magical books and objects as well. All kinds of weird stuff, to see the manifest.” She tips her head sideways and gives Loki what might be approximated as a smile. “Your job is to make sure none of the weird stuff blows up.”

“I cannot wait,” says Loki drily, though in truth the mission is now far more interesting.

His magical research into the problem presented by Thanos has been limited here to information available on the Internet, three-quarters of which was bullshit, and the few texts he could buy or beg from what libraries were intact. Being one of the Avengers has certain advantages when it comes to book-borrowing, but his resources have remained frustratingly thin.

To have access to Dr. Strange’s vast collection, not to mention the items of no doubt great power kept in the sanctum—only imagine the possibilities—

Thor treads on his foot. “Stop plotting,” he whispers in Loki’s ear. “I see you starting to plot.”

Loki looks at his brother. Blinks owlishly. “Apologies. Old habits.”

Steve is undeterred by their whispering. “Wong’s closing up the house. Doesn’t think the collection is safe, way things are right now,” he tells them. His jaw tightens. “Never thought I’d live to see the day when New York City was on the verge of collapse.”

The city suffered massive damage when half of its occupants disappeared, leading to a subway system now broken, choked roads, streets piled high with trash, bridges and tunnels that armed gangs warred over, since entering and exiting the city was a thing of great value now.

Attempts to bring in more police, then the army, had just made things worse, resulting in several different popular uprisings breaking out in the boroughs. Queens has declared itself entirely independent, and communications from Staten Island are hard to come by.

“Okay,” says Steve, visibly pulling himself back together. “We clear?”

“One question,” says Rocket. “These magical artifacts. Just how priceless are we talking here?”

* * *

In the end Loki must use a cloaking spell to get them to Strange’s address.
The city is worse than the reports. Most streets and houses are boarded up, and the only people loitering on the sidewalks are heavily armed. All around them buildings and cars are burnt-out shells, and there is more filth and signs of abject suffering than he would have believed without seeing.

The last time he and Thor were here—a lifetime ago—this was one of the most fashionable neighborhoods Manhattan had to offer. Now it looks like so many of the warzones they’ve come to know too well.

The spell is easy enough to cast and hold. He has been using his magic on missions so often that his skill has grown considerably these last months. But the closer they get to Strange’s the worse Loki’s headache feels. By the time they reach the doorway and are admitted he would like nothing more than a dark corner to curl up in.

More pressing business is at hand: there are many apprentice sorcerers of Strange’s order busy around the house, boxing up books and objects. Loki does not like it here one bit, headache notwithstanding. He is trying hard to banish the memory of falling and falling and falling with no ground or explanation in sight, a little trick of Strange’s he swore the man would pay dearly for.

That is behind him now, Loki reminds himself, and Strange is not here.

They stand waiting, Thor sometimes chastising Rocket for trying to pocket an object, Loki trying to appear as though his head is not in danger of splitting in half. He flinches and sees Thor’s gaze flick over, questioning, but that’s when their host appears at the top of the staircase and descends to greet them.

When Loki looks at Wong, he recognizes at once a man of great power and even greater intellect. Magic radiates out from him in dense layers, each one clearly learned through many years of study, training, discipline, and practice.

He is, Loki sees, the sort of sorcerer who is ever-learning, not content to stay stagnant in any area—the huge variations of knowledge in the power-signature around him attest that this is so.

He is a man who makes Loki duck his head in a sign of respect before Wong has even reached their level. Wong regards him thoughtfully, and Loki can only wonder what Wong reads in him.

Thor and Rocket are looking between them, clearly having missed something and confused about it.

“Wizards,” says Rocket in a loud aside to Thor. “It’s like they get off on acting all mysterious. Never understood it. If I could make rubies appear by waving my hands around, you think I’d be putting on airs?”

“Welcome, my friends,” says Wong, smiling over this observation. “Your assistance is most appreciated. I hope you will not mind if I return with you to see our collection safely housed?”

“We insist,” says Thor, “and we are happy to help.”

Loki does not think that he is making a good first impression on a man he would like to impress. His head is hurting something awful, so badly now that as Wong comes closer his vision starts to blur. He grinds his teeth so that he will not groan. This has never happened to him before, and the timing is incredibly inopportune.

Wong shakes Thor’s hand in greeting, then bends to shake Rocket’s, and then he is reaching for Loki’s hand. Their fingers touch—

White light fills Loki’s vision. The pain is unbearable. He drops to the floor, clutching his head,
unable to keep down a scream. It sounds piercing and terrible to his ears.

“Loki!”

He can barely hear Thor over a rush of sound like waves crashing over him. He is being dragged out to sea, carried away by dark waters.

“Please stand back, Thor, it is all right.” That’s Wong, sounding wonderfully calm. Loki clings to his voice like a rope tossed to a drowning man. “Your brother is having a premonition.”

A premonition?

He is deposited on a distant shore. The gray beach is empty save for a large silver looking-glass. Loki gazes through it like a window.

He sees a storeroom in the Avengers compound. It has been converted into a study. At a broad desk he and Wong are studying an ancient book. They raise their heads and look at each other with twin expressions of deep excitement.

“That’s it,” says the Loki in the looking glass.

“Loki, I think it’s time that you’re getting back now,” says Wong from across the ocean. Cool fingertips settle on his brow and then Loki is opening his eyes, flat on his back in the front parlor of Strange’s cursed building.

Thor is on his knees beside him, stricken. Rocket is watching the proceedings with his arms crossed, looking like he’s glad at least of the entertainment. Wong is knelt on Loki’s other side, curiosity writ in every fine line of his features.

“I think we need to talk,” Loki says.

* * *

As the quinjet mercifully leaves New York behind them, everyone puts their heads together. Even Natasha, flying the plane, has set it to autopilot and is mostly turned around to hear.

“All right,” says Steve. “One more time for those of us who only know magic from Harry Houdini.”

“Loki experienced a premonition upon meeting me,” Wong says, slowly for the others’ benefit. “He and I are in agreement that what he saw may prove to be significant in our efforts to undo Thanos’ damage.”

“Premonition has never numbered among my abilities,” Loki tells them. He gestures to include Thor beside him. “The gift of prophecy is generally Thor’s realm. That is why I was unaware of my condition. Yet the foresight must be an important one to have affected me so strongly—I felt its beginnings before I even knew we were going to New York.”

Rhodey pinches the bridge of his nose between two fingers. “Just what’s the difference between premonition and prophecy?”

“Prophecies almost always come to pass eventually,” Wong explains. “They are quite inescapable. Premonitions provide a sense of what could happen—but there is no guarantee that it will. For
example, in this case, if I chose not to visit the Avengers compound, there is no way the scene that Loki saw would ever occur.”

“Now my head hurts,” says Rocket.

“Yeah,” Steve agrees. “By coming with us, there’s a better chance this breakthrough happens, but aren’t we actually trying to make the breakthrough happen only because Loki already saw that it might happen?”

Wong inclines his head. “It is better not to trouble yourself with paradoxes, Captain Rogers,” he says, polite. “Many magicians have driven themselves quite mad, going down that line of thinking.”

“Okay, sure,” says Natasha. She looks skeptical, her eyebrows up, but interested enough to allow for it. “Let’s say you and Loki are right about this. What does it mean?”

“I saw Wong and I engaged in magical research,” Loki answers. “We appeared to arrive together at some kind of solution. I assume that it must concern a way to reverse what Thanos has done, or at least to destroy him. I cannot imagine anything less than an event of that much future magnitude would cause me to experience what I did.”

Thor has been unnaturally quiet since leaving the sanctum, and now he sits with his arms folded across his chest and a brooding expression on his face. “Or it could be a trick,” he says, finally breaking his silence.

Loki glances at his brother. “Sorry?”

“I will not put anything past Thanos,” Thor says. “He has used you most cruelly before. He is known to have beings of mysterious powers in his employ. Perhaps this is part of some scheme of his to halt our efforts for good.”

“Oh, great,” says Rocket. “More fun possibilities.”

“All paths must be considered,” Wong says with a nod. “But for the time being I believe that we should follow this suggestion. We can do our best to design the room that Loki saw, and with his leave, I will assist him in research going forward.”

Warmth and gratitude are still discomfiting emotions for Loki, but he is getting used to feeling both. “I would be honored,” he says.

Loki can tell that Thor doesn’t like it—that none of them look too overjoyed about their prospects. But a gathering excitement joins his feeling of gratefulness.

They have labored for so long without any signs of a solution that he will cling to these straws, this hope. He must. That’s what Avengers do, after all.

* * *

“I hate this,” says Thor that evening, as Loki exits the bath.

Thor is propped up against the doorjamb, has been watching him, looking stormy. Loki feels blissfully relaxed and restored after his soak, all signs of headache gone. He indulges in a comforting
caress to Thor’s miles-wide bicep as he goes to comb out his hair.

“It was you who told me since my first day here that you believed I would prove useful to the fight, brother,” Loki points out.

Thor’s eyebrows knit together. “That was before I saw you scream and fall today,” he says. “Loki, my heart stopped.”

Loki sets down the comb and paces back to him. He takes Thor’s face between his hands, pulls him down the few inches that make him easier to kiss. Kisses him, long and slow and meaning it.

“I’m fine,” Loki tells him. “In truth I am more than fine. I feel I have a purpose—a direction, at least—for the first time in this.”

“I am afraid,” Thor admits, “of many things. But I fear most that such a quest will take you away from me.”

“There may well be some travel,” Loki says, not seeing any reason to lie or soften it. In pursuing magical texts and tomes—for he described the book he saw in the vision as best he could to Wong, and it does not seem to number among Strange’s collection—journeying elsewhere could prove necessary. “I think you know that nothing can truly distance us now.”

“I love you,” Thor says. His hands, sliding down Loki’s body, are trembling with barely repressed emotion—an attempt to dampen thunder.

Loki raises an eyebrow. Then he goes up on his toes to whisper in Thor’s ear, “Show me how much.”

They only just make it from the cold bathroom tile to the softer carpet beyond. Thor comes into him sideways, his front to Loki’s back, holding Loki’s leg above them so that he can thrust at an extraordinarily deep angle. His mouth moves along Loki’s neck, kissing him there, tasting his still-wet skin.

Each reentry of Thor within him is centered and sure—as though Thor with the motion of his hips and his cock is saying this is what we are now and will always be, yet there is nothing routine in his rhythm. No sooner has Loki let himself settle than Thor is changing his speed, his depth, his drive. Then he pulls out and guides Loki onto his back, slides between his thighs and takes him face-to-face.

Thor kisses him, teeth catching on Loki’s lower lip. He thrusts back in, rough and possessive and perfect, and Thor says, “I cannot be far enough inside of you.”

“You’re doing a fine job,” says Loki, smiling around a moan, arching to accommodate Thor’s substantial length and girth. “You could, perhaps, stand to go harder—”

“Brother—” It’s a word torn gruffly out of Thor, and then his hips turn and he will absolutely break them through the floor and send them plunging into the living room below, Loki is sure of it. Thor catches his wrists, pins them firm to the carpet as he moves.

“Better,” says Loki approvingly. “Now if one were to also move a bit faster—”

“It’s weird,” Bruce tells them later, on his way to check his lab equipment to see why the building and grounds were shaking. “There’s never been significant seismic activity in this area before.”
For the first time in his many lifetimes, Loki has a friend all his own.

He supposes that Thor could be considered a friend when they were young, but Thor was also related, so it didn’t really count. Then there were Thor’s old companions: loud, boisterous, self-righteous busy-bodies like his brother split up into less agreeable multiples. They’d allowed for Loki’s presence because of Thor, but the unsubtle dislike had been mutual.

Then there are Thor’s new friends: the Avengers have come to tolerate him, and Loki has even had what could be called pleasant conversations with most of them at this point. They’ve been in the trenches of total chaos together and climbed out. The old animosity is lost on both sides, replaced with a kind of grudging acceptance.

His favorite amongst them is Natasha. The woman’s dry wit and no-nonsense attitude speak to Loki’s sensibilities, and in good moments he would like to believe that he intrigues and amuses her. But Natasha Romanoff is not his friend. None of the Avengers are.

Shuri is brave and gracious and so vibrantly brilliant; Loki would give up a good deal for her, he thinks, but neither is the proud young princess his friend. He considers her a rare colleague in intellectual arts—someone to be consulted, not confide secrets in.

Wong is his friend.

From every way that Loki looks at it, distrusting, certain there must be some deception, there is Wong’s calm and truthful face to tell him otherwise.

They started amicably enough, bound by Loki’s premonition and the decision to pursue it. Then, as they began to share and pool their magical knowledge, they found themselves to be sorcerers of extremely different disciplines, yet both motivated by a relentless drive to learn more.

Two men who are equally hungry must either fight each other for scraps or band together to seek out more rewarding sustenance. Loki is lucky that their inclinations led them to adopt the latter approach.

They spoke for hours and hours of what they had read and experienced in the past; the questions about the nature of the universe that still drove them; the dreams of wide-ranging magical mastery they used to dream before this nightmare with Thanos began.

Wong was as good as a librarian as he was a magician, with a nigh-on photographic memory for what he had seen, and he was as delighted to hear about Loki’s rather more cosmic training as Loki was to hear about Wong’s ancient Midgardian arts. And eventually, as many days went past in each other’s company, they began also to talk of more personal affairs, and to address each other openly as friends.

His friend.

Loki appreciates Wong’s serene seriousness, his unflinching commitment to his Order; but beneath the dedication is a man with a wicked sense of humor—understandable, Loki learns, since Wong is often given to bouts of sly hilarity himself.

What Wong finds sympathetic in Loki, Loki is less sure about; perhaps he has simply been lonely for intellectual company, after the loss of his friend Strange and so many months holed up in an unraveling city.
It helps that Wong knows Loki’s history but never served as a witness to it. Wong may look at him and see a reformed monster, Loki thinks, but at least he never met the monster.

They begin to travel together to far-flung places, using the resources and authority given to the Avengers. They rescue priceless books from crumbling libraries. They uncover libraries thought to exist only in realms of folklore and myth. With Rocket’s assistance, and Thor’s, some of the trips they make are even intergalactic.

Many nights Loki will fall into bed, smelling of old, old books, and Thor is there to smile at him and help him shake free the dust. As weeks pass without any signs of danger, Thor relaxes about Loki’s new calling, and is most entertained by the stories of these literary adventures.

Thor still worries when he is gone for a long stretch of days; but their enthusiasm upon reunion always makes the effort seem worth it.

Loki has seen the pride in Thor’s eyes when his brother is relating Loki’s findings to his friends second-hand. It is all worth it.

In truth—especially now that he is partially excused from the daily missions into madness when he and Wong have a new lead—this could well be the happiest time of Loki’s recollection.

He feels an unusual emotion that could be guilt whenever this thought arises: so much of the world is miserable and downtrodden and destroyed. But he cannot undo what he is feeling.

“You were right,” he admits quietly one night, after three days away from Thor that has resulted in Thor ensuring that Loki comes apart three times in succession in their bed. Loki is so tired and drunk on pleasure that he can barely move his head from where it rests on Thor’s chest.

Thor pretends to be quite shocked. “Me, brother? Correct about something?” He kisses the top of Loki’s head. “Are you quite well? Surely you aren’t possessed by another book-guarding demon?”

“We’re taking more safety precautions now,” Loki tells him. He tilts back so that he can examine Thor’s face. “I should finally thank you for what you did, Thor. You were right. One lifetime here with you is worth any price. I mourn the years that you lost for yourself, still; but as for me—to live as we are, like this, even in a world such as this, is so much more than I deserved.”

Thor goes still. Then he says, his lips to Loki’s hair, “As I told you. For me it was far more of a prize than a price.” His expression shifts into shades of joy and relief so profoundly lovely that he is almost too beautiful to look directly at.

“If you are content,” continues Thor, “I am not trying hard enough to please you. I would have you always anticipating more and better things. That, Loki, is what you deserve.”

* * *

Loki returns from Cairo with Wong, boxes of borrowed precious books and ancient papyrus carried between them.

The trip was most edifying and fascinating, especially the part with the mummy in the pyramid, and some of the material could prove valuable. But it is hard for them to ignore the growing sense of frustration at how little fruit their investigations are bearing where Thanos is concerned.
They have compiled vast archives and identified hundreds of spells and rituals and items of worth that might prove helpful—but nothing on its own capable of bringing down the Titan, and nothing that would do anything to bring back those that the Gauntlet took.

There have been no signs of further premonitions, not even a tingle that might indicate they are looking in the right direction.

Thor is waiting for them when they step through Wong’s Sling Ring portal, which is now Loki’s preferred way to travel. Quinjets seem terribly loud and unsophisticated by comparison.

The sight of Thor—of Thor looking at him like that—will never not be thrilling, Loki thinks, but he and Wong have spent the last several hours puzzling through their latest dead end and it is hard to feel thrilled about anything.

Wong nods to Thor, lifts an eyebrow at Loki, and sees himself off, levitating the boxes of books behind him.

“Will you come with me?” Thor asks, taking both of Loki’s hands. “There is something I must show you.”

Loki manages to stifle a sigh, since the smile on his brother’s face would charm paint right off the wall, and he lets himself be drawn around to a path behind the compound. He cannot help but voice some of his pent-up feelings of frustration as they walk: “Another day likely wasted. How many more can we afford? I had thought to be useful at last, but when will we admit that this is all likely to prove useless—”

“Close your eyes,” says Thor, “else, let me blindfold you.”

Loki looks at him, nearly stumbles over the non-sequitur and a tree root. “What?”

“Loki, please,” Thor says. “Humor me. It is a surprise.”

Loki has never particularly liked surprises—far less so in this new world, since they tend to be born of mob violence or a demon jumping out of a book when you least expect it. But Thor’s expression is so pleading he knows any argument is lost.

“If this is some kind of a celebratory gathering,” Loki says, “I will be upset. I’m much too tired to illusion a better outfit.”

Yet he closes his eyes, since Thor asks him to, and he lets his brother guide him. The terrain becomes rougher, suggesting that they have entered the wood. At least with his eyes shut tight and Thor leading the way he doesn’t have to think about much for a blessed few minutes.

“Here,” says Thor at last. “You can open your eyes.”

The mare is the color silver—the color of the moon on its boldest night.

She is all graceful lines, but built on the compact side, made for running and jumping light on her feet and not for a battlefield. Her coat has been combed until it glistens with high gloss, and on the ground beside her is a new saddle and matching bridle, both of dark green-dyed leather. Only a long lead rope keeps her tethered to a brass ring driven into the earth.

“Oh,” Loki says, soft.

Thor lets go of his hands and Loki goes to her. She is sharp-eyed, taking in his measure; at last she
drops her head and nudges his hand with her nose. Then she gives a spirited stomp with her foreleg, and Loki has the distinct impression that she is laughing at his slack-jawed look.

Thor grins so broadly that it’s possible he will pull some muscle necessary for smiling. “She is yours,” says Thor. “There is no loan.”

“Mine?” Loki’s throat won’t work correctly around the word.

“Yes,” says Thor, “though she has a will of her own, this one. That is why I chose her for you.”

“Thor,” Loki starts. The mare blinks at him, as though daring him to deny her. He already knows that he cannot. He is lost, utterly undone by this. “It is too much. It is so much.”

“Nonsense,” says Thor. He comes up behind Loki, wraps an arm around his waist; the other hand strokes gently down the horse’s nose. “She is your wedding gift,” he says into Loki’s ear.

For a long time Loki can say nothing. His hand that the—his—mare keeps nudging is trembling. He finds his voice.

“I will treasure her,” Loki says.

Somehow Thor’s impossible smile grows wider. “A small stable and ring have been built in the closest field behind the compound,” he says. “It was difficult to conceal their construction from your sight. Wong helped.”

“Did he now,” says Loki, half in a dream.

“He is a good friend to you. He was most enthusiastic.” Thor indicates the tack on the ground. “I have left her saddling to you. I thought you would want to be the one to do so, since you are so much faster at it than I.”

“She’s perfect,” Loki murmurs. The mare snorts. He swears that she looks pleased.

“I know well your exacting taste,” Thor says. He kisses Loki’s temple, lets him go, but Loki turns around and flings his arms around Thor’s neck, yanking him into a heated kiss with no end in sight. It only ends because his little horse whinnies, impatient for attention.

“Demanding, aren’t you,” Loki says adoringly, turning back to her at once. “What is she called?”

“Soda Pop,” says Thor with a helpless shrug. “The Midgardians have strange ideas about the naming of beasts. You will, of course, call her something else.”

“Not for anything, brother mine,” says Loki. Soda flicks her tail.

“I have a sparring session with Natasha,” Thor says. “I’ll leave you to ride. Loki,” and Thor’s tone dips so serious that Loki glances up at him, “you are working yourself to the bone. You take no rest, have no sport beyond our bedchamber. Not that I am complaining about that part.” Thor’s hand is warm on the small of his back. “My hope is that you will let her carry you away from all of this sometimes. The day we rode together, you laughed in a way that was free and easy. How I have longed to hear that sound again.”

“Perhaps you will later,” Loki says, bending to start sorting through the new tack, such happiness bubbling up in him that he could quite float away. “I intend to spend the entire night thanking you.”
Besides his mother, his brother, and his worthy friend Wong, Loki has never cared for another living creature as he does his new horse.

He awakens before the dawn to exercise her whenever he can; he insists on feeding and cleaning and curry combing her himself every day that he is present, even mucks out her stall—a duty that Prince Loki, who also prized horses, would have sneered at.

He escapes to ride her through the fields and hills when the weight of expectations or the aftermath of a mission feels too heavy. Her fiery temperament suits him well—long will they run before either of them realize that they should slow down again.

Sometimes Thor borrows a horse and comes with them, and those are glorious, golden hours.

One day, Bruce shyly asks if he might be shown how to ride around the paddock, and Soda behaves herself wonderfully and does not try to test him—and her whole noble bearing, Loki thinks, suggests patient amusement with the amateur.

Rhodey takes to ordering apples and carrots to the compound by the crate. Natasha smuggles her cubes of sugar. Rocket is not keen to come close but occasionally he will perch on the fence and watch Loki put her through her paces, offering a slow clap for their dressage training.

Wong has no interest in riding, thank you very much. But he will also come out and watch the exercises, bringing a stack of their research material, sometimes calling out a question or consideration of some magical principle for Loki to turn over in his mind.

Clint has only been at the compound a handful of days in these last months, looking haggard and bereft but determined. One of those days he encounters Loki and Soda on their walk. “I’ll be damned,” is all he says, and then he steps off the path so that they can go by.

Loki is cooling Soda down at twilight, speaking to her in the low tones he always uses, when he becomes aware that they are being watched. He suspects Thor, who remains their most devoted audience, but when Soda’s ears flick back he knows that it is not his brother. She knows Thor well.

He turns around to see Steve leaning against the paddock gate. Surprised, Loki gives him a nod, and Steve pushes off the fence and walks closer.

“She’s a pretty one,” says Steve, standing five feet from them, spine and shoulders straight. Loki bites his tongue so that he does not correct the Captain; it’s not Steve’s fault that he cannot recognize the most beautiful horse on Midgard. Steve is unpracticed at it, as he admits: “Never rode myself much. Couple drills in the Army, way back when. In New York, when I was growing up, riding was mostly for the rich folks.”

“We’d be happy to give you a lesson, should you like,” Loki says, opening the box of grooming tools to an approving whicker from Soda. He gets out a brush and sets to the task.

Steve only minimally shifts his stance. “That isn’t why I’m here,” he says.

Ah. Loki has been expecting this for some time. Since the Avengers’ first return to the compound, really. That it has taken so long tells him how difficult the subject is for the Captain to grapple with. Loki decides to take pity on him and not make Steve speak it.
“You wish to ask me about my experience after death,” Loki says, keeping his eyes on his firm, even brushstrokes. Then he looks at Steve. “You would know what I saw and felt—if, perhaps, I encountered others in that state.”

A muscle jumps in Steve’s cheek. He opens, then shuts his mouth, then opens it again. He takes a step back. “Did you just read my mind?”

“That is not a talent that I have,” Loki tells him truthfully. “I read your grief, Captain. You have lost people dear to you.”

Thor had told him once about Steve Rogers kneeling on the ground in Wakanda, his hands bathed in ash, his eyes staring, unseeing. They were not able to persuade him to move away for many hours.

“Yes,” says Steve, for attempting to deflect it would be a refutation of his dead. “Yeah. I did.”

Loki moves around to work on Soda’s neck. She stands quiet and statue-still, his brilliant girl, feeling out the scene and knowing not to make one. “I wish that I could tell you more,” he says. “I truly wish I could. The truth of it is that I remember nothing.”

He will not say to Steve—for he does not know it himself—whether that means that there is nothing there, after all is said and done. He will not tell Steve that he remembers only falling, falling, as Thor pulled him back into life.

Steve’s jaw clenches. He nods. He examines his boots. “Thanks for your honesty,” he says, and it sounds earnest enough. But Steve always sounds earnest. There is deeply embedded pain in his voice that Loki understands: while not all emotions come easily to him, grief is one that he knows and recognizes all too well. “I’m not sure what I was expecting to hear. Or what I even wanted to hear.”

“I can tell you this, Captain,” Loki offers, combing through Soda’s mane until it is smooth and sleek. The urge to comfort would have once been strange but it is no longer so. Steve looks up from his boots. “I also remember no pain, no fear. No punishment, though I led a life that would have tilted most scales of judgment. My memory records nothing, but when I think on it—I think that it was peaceful.”

They stand in silence together, the three of them. After a while, Steve asks if he can help with the horse, and Loki shows him how to brush her hindquarters without risking a kick. When Soda is cozy in her stable and all of her equipment packed away, he and Steve make their way back to the compound together.

“You’re a good man, Loki,” Steve says into the gathering dark. “Anyone ever tell you that?”

“Not with a straight face,” Loki answers, feeling rather like a kick from Soda has landed on his chest. Steve smiles a little at this reply. “I like to think we’re not the sum of our weaknesses or our mistakes,” he says, “but rather—we’re what we choose to do with those after they’re tallied up.”

“Thank you,” Loki says, so sincere that he can barely recognize himself.

“You’ve been a real asset to the team,” Steve goes on. “I’m sorry I haven’t said that enough. I appreciate the effort you’ve put in on missions, and the magic stuff with Wong. We all do. We know how hard you’re working to help us. You didn’t have to do that.”

Loki ducks his head, lets his hair at least partially obscure the expression on his face, which must resemble that of a landed fish. This heart-to-heart is a completely unexpected development of the
earlier conversation, which he had long anticipated.

Not this. Not this praise, this acknowledgment, this kindness. He feels alive with nervous energy and nowhere to put it. “Of course I did,” Loki says. “Thor did not bring me back so that I could laze about while the rest of you saved the galaxy.”

“Not sure he would have minded if you had,” Steve says. “Truth of the matter is, you gave us Thor back. You brought him back also.”

Loki has never had cause to think such a thing before, and it almost stops him in his tracks. He swallows; his throat feels dry, his heart too fluttery.

They approach the compound, and Loki both wants to run screaming from the friendly intensity of their exchange and also continue it far into the night.

What a wonder it is to speak and share thoughts with others that he would never before have dreamed to say to another living soul. The catharsis is incredible.

“Captain Rogers,” Loki says, and then, at Steve’s lifted eyebrow, “—Steve. What would you say to a drink?”

“I thought you would never ask,” says Steve.

* * *

That’s how Thor discovers them later: with a bottle of Irish whiskey being shared out—no, that bottle is finished, is tilted on its side on the coffee table, they have another open.

Steve is telling Loki a raunchy story from his war, making evocative gestures with his hands, when Thor pokes his head into the communal living room. Thor’s gaze on Loki is incredulous, then incredibly pleased. There are sparks behind it. His gaze gives Loki other ideas.

“May I join you?” Thor asks, and upon their enthusiastic nods he enters the room.

When he’s close enough Loki reaches up and tugs Thor down beside him on the couch, leans back into the heat of his broad body. They are rarely physically affectionate in public—Loki’s call, he realizes.

Thor glances at him sideways, tries to parse his mood. Then he slides his arm snug around Loki’s shoulders.

Steve doesn’t miss a beat. “So then Buck says to Morita, I swear to god—”

“No one told me we were having drinks,” says Natasha, when she comes to investigate the noise and laughter an hour later. “I’m really good at drinks, you guys.” She jerks a thumb at herself. “Hello, Russian. Trying not to be offended at my lack of invite.”

“What is the finest beverage in Russia, Agent—Natasha?” Loki asks, curious.

“Oh, boy,” says Natasha, headed for the liquor cabinet. “I’m glad you asked me that question.”

“If we destroy this compound in an alcohol-fueled accident, Tony—Tony will never let me hear the
end of it,” says Rhodey, taking a seat twenty minutes after Natasha has introduced vodka onto the scene. “Okay, who’s pouring?”

Bruce blinks and adjusts his glasses when many hails erupt upon his appearance in the doorway. “It’s not the best idea for me to be drinking much,” Bruce says, going to fetch a light beer from the fridge. He grins around the room. “This is such a good idea, though.”

“The first sign of common sense I’ve seen from you lot, and I almost slept through it,” Rocket gripes. “Someone mix me all the things you’re drinking into one bottle so that I can catch up proper.”

The din in the living room, combined now with music, is loud enough that they’re happily shouting over each other to be heard. But the room quiets down as Clint enters. “A guy can’t get any rest around here. Can he get a drink at least?”

Clint takes them in, their flushed cheeks, the bottles, the upended cups, the open bags of chips. His eyes settle on Loki, curled against Thor in the corner of the couch. His eyes narrow. Loki sits up straight. Thor’s arm tightens around him.

Clint juts his chin. Indicates Loki. “What’d they drink in your fancy space-palace, anyway?”

The sudden recession of noise makes Loki’s ears ring. Everyone is watching.

“Many wonderful things,” Loki says carefully. He weaves a spell between his hands, creates a ball of green light that turns into a tall silver tankard. “Mostly mead.”

He holds the drink out to Clint. After a moment that seems to stretch into forever, Clint accepts it. Tastes it.

“Not half bad,” says Clint. He reclines by Natasha and doesn’t relinquish the tankard.

Loki breathes again. Thor is staring him down like he’s going to kiss him or do something a great deal more involved on the spot. Loki elbows him surreptitiously. Decorum.

“You did not tell me that you could make mead,” says Thor.

“You didn’t ask,” says Loki.

“I want one next,” says Steve.

“If you drink magic, does that make you kinda … magic?” Rhodey asks the glass of vodka in his hand.

“No, Mr. Rhodes,” says Wong, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. “It makes you drunk.”

“I want a magic mead after Steve,” says Natasha.

“Wong!” Loki exclaims on a delayed reaction, glad to see his friend—to see two of his friend as his vision wavers. “What will you have?”

“A hard time waking you lot in the morning,” Wong says.

But he goes to sit next to Loki and Thor on the couch, and they all stay up until sunrise so that there is no need for anyone to wake until the afternoon.
“Last chance to change your mind,” Loki whispers against Thor’s cheek.

“I never will,” says Thor.

Loki’s done his work thoroughly and well, so that when he lines up his cock—his achingly hard cock—and starts to thrust inside, Thor is wet with slick and open for him.

Yet his brother is tight—so sweetly tight—and as Loki gives him more and more inches Thor closes his eyes and tips his head back, shows the line of his throat.

This is new, exceedingly new, exceptionally new. Loki feels half-delirious with joy, half-blinded by the strength of his desire, half-mad to even attempt such a thing as this. His math is off, he knows; he can calculate no probabilities here.

Thor had returned from a mission gone badly, bloodied and battered—there’d been many civilian casualties, and no, he did not wish to speak of it. The shadows stood out starkly under his eyes. When he emerged from the shower after an hour in the steam he stalked naked across the room to the bed, took the book that was in Loki’s hands out of it, and all but fell on top of him.

Then Thor said, meeting Loki’s eyes so there was no denying his intent, “I want you to fuck me.”

Loki was instantly hard—instantly ready—instantly interested. But he slid a hand through Thor’s damp hair and said, “And why is that?”

“I need to feel something new,” said Thor, reaching between them to palm Loki’s cock, his eyes flashing to find Loki hard at the very thought of it. “I need to remember what it is like to feel something new.”

So Thor had never let another have him in such a way. Loki wondered, sometimes, often, with an emotion that teetered between natural curiosity and a raging jealousy so bone-deep that he avoided asking in order not to learn the answer.

While Loki lay beneath Thor, staring up and trying to work his jaw around the enormity of it, Thor hesitated. “That is—you do want me like that?”

“Brother,” Loki managed at last, “it is more perhaps a question of how to express a thousand years of wanting you like that.”

And so Loki took his time, spending full hours getting Thor accustomed to his fingers, making Thor come again and again on his fingers. There were many assists from Loki’s mouth and his free hand, so that Thor would only associate this feeling with total, all-encompassing pleasure, pleasure that eclipsed all else.

Finally Thor was reduced to begging Loki to have him, a plea that numbered among the finest moments of Loki’s existence, and Loki could, after all, deny him nothing now. Still he gave over that whispered moment for Thor to tell him nay.

Instead Thor spreads his legs all the wider, pushes up with his hips to pull Loki deeper. Loki groans, his teeth skimming the skin of Thor’s neck. He tries to stay steady for this; but there has never been anything in the history of the world like the God of Thunder on his back, those warrior’s thighs cradling Loki, the slow press of Loki’s cock into him. The sight of it alone undoes Loki, let alone the
sensation of Thor gripping hot and tight around him.

Loki is torn between competing instincts, one an urge to be so delicate here that it quite unnerves him, the other a sharp possessive shouting voice that tells him to claim Thor utterly, to fill him and fuck him and mark him as Loki’s inside and out.

He tries to strike some sort of compromise between the two. Puts down his head and kisses up Thor’s bared neck, tongues at his ear and murmurs, “More, love?”

Thor’s eyes open at once. His head jerks in a little nod, confirms it, and so Loki, sweating with the effort of self-restraint, goes on.

“How stunning you are like this,” Loki says, needing to speak through it lest he start screaming. “How splendidly you take me.”

Thor’s Adam’s Apple bobs on a swallow. He opens his mouth, but nothing emerges; then he swallows again, tries again. “You needn’t treat me as fragile,” he says, “just because I am a man.”

Loki bursts out laughing, nips the tender flesh at the base of Thor’s ear with his teeth, turns his hips and thrusts his cock all the way home. Thor lets out a shaky breath, his hands on Loki’s back flexing for purchase before they relax.

“Brother,” Loki says, prompting.

“It is strange for me,” Thor admits. He gazes up at Loki, his blue eye the color of summer skies and as wide, the other sun-gold. “Yet already I would keep you here forever if I could.”

“Do not tempt me,” says Loki, such a thrill of electricity playing up his spine that he wonders if Thor is throwing off sparks. He tries another thrust, hard and purposeful, to watch Thor bite his lip, then shifts his angle with knowing intent, to hear Thor gasp.

“Ah!” Thor cries. “Yes, that felt—”

“Right here?” Loki asks. “Just like this?”

“Gods, yes—”

The shouting voice in Loki’s head is winning out above the softer instinct. Thor responds perfectly beneath him, arches eagerly to meet Loki’s thrusts, now that he understands intimately how they can bring pleasure in their wake.

Loki gives over to his need to possess, finding for them a rhythm that is not punishing, not that, but neither is there any mistaking how with every incursion Loki is staking a deeper claim.

“You wished to feel something new,” Loki says when he draws back from kissing Thor’s mouth, where his tongue had similar ideas about claiming, “tell me, brother, how do you feel?”

“Complete,” says Thor.

Loki nearly loses the rhythm. He stares down at Thor’s upturned face, examines its guileless lines. “You heard me say that.”

It isn’t a question. It feels like a hundred million years ago instead of half a year. He had forgotten the word if not the truth behind it.

“It is the best thing I ever heard you say,” pants Thor, “save giving our name again as yours.”
“Shall I recite that now,” says Loki, all barriers fallen between them in the push and pull of this, “or would you rather hear me say that one day our children will bear an even better name than the one we have—Thorsson and Thorsdottir do, I think, have a much finer ring, and will be untainted—”

Thor moans, his eyes going shocky, his lips parted in surprise from Loki’s words and a particularly well-aimed thrust. “Loki. Loki.”

“Or perhaps,” says Loki with his slyest of smiles, leaning in to shape the thought against Thor’s cheek, “perhaps now that I know how exquisitely you take my cock, I will use my magic to transform your body instead of my own, get children on you, watch you proudly carry them—you would, would you not? Ah, I see that you would.”

“Loki—” Thor is coming apart underneath him, shaking, spilling wet between them with his cock untouched. He tosses his head, his expression astonished at the force of his unraveling. His breathing is ragged, erratic. A storm gathers in his eyes, spends itself, goes out.

Loki kisses him, takes pity on his rather overwhelmed brother by burying his cock and following quickly after. Another day, Loki would—will—enjoy fucking Thor for much, much longer, fucking him to another spend, another; but Thor is staring at him, moved to a place past speech, and Loki does not wish to hold back on joining him there.

He chases pleasure so overwhelming and earth-moving that there has been nothing quite like this for him before. Thor tightening up around his cock is better, Loki is certain, than being welcomed into Valhalla; he is already there. He forwards his final claim, gives over his seed, holding himself as far inside as he can to watch how Thor takes it.

He puts his forehead against Thor’s, and he says, “Was that enough newness, brother?”

“I will not ever have enough of you,” Thor says.

It almost hurts—the pain is in Loki’s chest—to ease them apart, but eventually Loki must, as slowly as he can.

What a world it is that he now inhabits.

He leaves the bed to fetch a bowl of warm water and a soft towel, then spends a long while attending to Thor, until Thor is stretched out soothed and clean upon the sheets, quiet as his eyes track Loki’s ministrations.

“Loki.” When Loki glances up Thor’s face is troubled, struck through with retroactive guilt. “I have not done this for you before.”

Loki shrugs. “Not all of us need coddling.”

Thor smiles, as Loki hoped he might; the air, heavy between them, grows lighter. “Can we do that again?”

“In an hour, should you like,” says Loki easily. “On the hour, should you like.”

“I love you,” says Thor. “I love you so very much.”

“Unsurprising,” Loki agrees. “I was fantastic, I know.”

Thor reaches for him, tugging Loki into his arms. “I am afraid to confirm that, lest your head grow any larger than it already is. You will be incapable of lifting it.”
“What’s the matter with my head? It’s perfectly well-shaped. Now, we could critique your arms in terms of proportional ratio—”

They spend the rest of the night in bed, laughing and needling each other—except every hour on the hour, when they are quite otherwise engaged.

* * *

Loki and Natasha collapse near to the same moment, bodies aching, wincing as the floor presses the places where bruises will show soon enough.

“It’s a draw,” says Natasha. “Goddammit, I nearly had you.”

“Your skills are exemplary,” Loki acknowledges, not able yet to pick himself back up again. “You fight like one of the Valkyrie.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” says Natasha, “and not like you’re just comparing me to the only other woman who’s ever kicked your ass.” She hitches an eyebrow. “Thor and Bruce told me all about that. It’s one of my favorite stories about you.”

Loki tips his head, but when he finds her smiling at him he returns the same, tentative. “It was intended as a compliment,” he assures. “The Valkyrie are unmatched. And the women of Asgard have long been among our fiercest defenders. My mother was a most formidable warrior—she wielded both magic and steel. At my best I could not have challenged her.”

“Good answer,” says Natasha. “You ready to go again or you need a little more down time to rest up?”

Loki hauls himself to his feet. The gym surrounding them is a mess of scattered weaponry. He picks up two long wooden staves and she raises an eyebrow. “I would learn your technique with these,” he says. “I have not seen your better.”

“Flattery, flattery,” she says, but accepts the staff that Loki tosses over with an eager look.

“Only—” and here Loki pauses, scans the quiet, high-ceilinged room. Sometimes when they spar they draw an audience; Thor is often here, watching avidly like it’s his favorite sport, patiently awaiting his turn. But today they are alone. “May I show—there is something that I would share with you.”

For a moment it seems that Natasha will respond in a mocking fashion, as is their typical mode of exchange, but she scans Loki’s expression with her eyes trained for nuance. She nods.

Loki looks back, gathering her now-long hair up into a knot so that it will not hamper her vision. Her clothes have shifted also, falling neatly along the curvier lines of her body, and though her height remains the same her grip changes on the staff; as a woman her center of gravity calls for different kinds of movement.

Natasha blinks. Then she says, slowly, after a moment, “That’s some trick.”

“It is not a trick,” says Loki, “nor an illusion. It is me.”
Natasha studies her, considers this. Loki’s heart is beating fast beneath her breast. It has been so long since she showed this self to anyone save Thor that she feels quite unsure of her reception.

“Are you actually trying to say,” says Natasha, and Loki’s heart thuds, “that I could have had some relief from the perpetual bro-fest around here and you’ve been holding out on me this whole time?”

Pure relief floods through Loki, better than any intoxicant. “I was not sure what you would think,” she admits. “I am not accustomed to having other women to speak to. Only Thor knows of this.”

Natasha’s eyes are sparkling when she rolls them. “Yeah, and I can imagine just what Thor wants to talk about when you look like that.” She spins the staff from hand to hand, already back to business, but there is an understanding between them that was not there before. “You want to learn to fight like me, is that it?”

“I am much less practiced in this form,” Loki explains. “I would prefer for my abilities to be equal in both.”

“Lady,” says Natasha, “when I’m done with you you’re going to wonder why any man even bothers. There’s a reason why they like guns and lasers and blasters and axes, and that’s because, hand to hand, we’d beat them every time.”

“I feel that I have much to learn,” says Loki, happily surprised into a grin.

“Get your guard up,” says Natasha. “We’ll start with staves and end with what to say to assholes on the street who would do better keeping their opinions to themselves.”

Much later, exhausted, they drag themselves to the kitchen and start on dinner preparations, talking animatedly about every topic under the sun. Natasha is so wise and practiced that Loki wishes she could take notes for posterity.

It’s Natasha who encourages her to stay in this body as long as she likes, and not to give a damn about what any of the rest of their team might think.

“Let them know you,” Natasha says. “They only wish they could look that good in a dress.”

So she stays. When the others come down for dinner, they are smart enough not to say anything at first, though there’s a fair amount of staring. Thor looks at her warmly, hungrily, adoringly, as he ever does.

“Just so we’re clear,” says Natasha, nonchalant, “we’re not cooking for you because we’re women. We’re cooking because we’re fucking starving and we don’t hate you guys. You can have some food also. If there’s enough left.”

It’s Rocket who blows them all past the initial strangeness of this new dynamic. He hops right on up to the counter by Loki’s side so that they are at a level, then regards her with the most lascivious expression she’s ever seen cross a raccoon’s face and ever hopes to see again.

“Hello, gorgeous,” Rocket says. “Anyone tell you that you could do much better than Thor? I get the whole muscles thing, but when it comes to knowing how to treat a lady—“

“Rabbit,” says Thor warningly, looking caught between laughing and tearing his friend in half.

“What? I’m not supposed to have eyes?”

Loki glances over at Natasha. Natasha says, “This isn’t like our street harassment scenario, but it’s
still harassment.”

“Okay, okay, okay,” Rocket says, lifting his paws in a gesture of peace. “I’m sorry. I see beautiful things, I admire them.” He jumps back down to the floor. “Respectfully. From a distance.”

She remains in this skin for a week straight, until it is as comfortable to wear as the other. Steve blushes and sometimes calls her “ma’am,” but that is only on the first day. Rhodey is charmingly complimentary in a way that Rocket has not quite mastered. Bruce is fascinated by the ability to shift, peppering her with constant questions of the physical and metaphysical.

Loki realizes that Bruce shares the capacity to change into something else as well, but for him the choice is hardly voluntary and the other does not feel like his own self. She spends long hours in conversation with Bruce as they speak their way through it.

Natasha is her teacher in the rites of the modern woman and an increasingly close and terrifically funny confidant. Wong acts as though nothing has altered at all, saying that bodies are temporary and spirit far more essential. Soda stamps a foot at the sight of her from a distance but when she is close enough, Loki discovers that her scent remains unchanged. The horse nuzzles her at once.

Thor loves her just the same, loyally and fiercely, and like every day could be the end of the world.

* * *

The United States government is disintegrating. Whether it was ever cohesive is open for debate, but the central branch is fast losing control over its states, its cities. The rural counties have become ghost towns without resources.

Like so much of the world—like so many worlds—America is descending into lawlessness and violence.

Worse: there’s such a sense of hopelessness that where once people would have organized and tried to rebuild, now there is no concept of resilience, no idea of recovery on the horizon.

The burden falls yet heavier upon their shoulders. Who else can hope to restore what is lost save the Avengers?

Beyond the relative bubble of the compound, conditions are deteriorating faster than the Avengers can help counter. They are standing at a broken dam, trying to hold back a wave with their hands.

Loki and Wong increase their rate of research, waking early and working far into the night. Having visited almost all of the resources at their disposal, their time is spent sorting through inventories and poring over texts, even those they’ve read so many times that they are able to recite the spells by heart.

Sometimes they string their findings together into hopeful magical formulas and bandy them back and forth:

“What if we hit him with an ancient Teutonic sleeping spell, then the poison charm you won from that faerie, and used the Tibetan phurba stake for good measure?” Loki asks, leaning back in his chair, feet up on the desk in the study they constructed from the view he saw in his premonition.
“Always with the instinct to stab, my friend.” Wong shakes his head, tries not to smile. “That
presumes that we can find Thanos, which Barton has been trying to do for months,” he points out.
“Further, it assumes that if we found him, we’d have the time for such complicated spell-casting.
And of course, it does nothing for the problem of the Gauntlet’s damage.”

Loki sighs. “All right. Your turn.”

“The ritual of unmaking that we read about in the secret library of Alexandria,” Wong suggests.
“Used upon Thanos and the Gauntlet from a close enough range, I theorize that it can reverse the
effects.”

“I like the way you think,” Loki says, “only you know that’s intended to counter simple spell-work
and curses. Against the Infinity Gauntlet it would surely pop like a bubble.”

Wong purses his lips. “Then what about—”

They pass whole days, then weeks and months like this. Occasionally some of the others wander by,
stare at them like they’re speaking Sumerian (sometimes they are), and quickly wander off again.

Then arrives the night when Loki brings a trunk of some of the more powerful objects at their
disposal to the study in the hopes that one or another will inspire.

As he sets it down on the desk he becomes aware that there was a time, not so long ago, that such a
collection would have inspired no end of greedy thoughts and devious plans.

But all he feels is tired and hopeful that the quinjet will deliver Thor back from the latest mission
before morning. This is who he is now, Loki thinks; this is what he has become.

Instead of weak, he is astonished to feel a rush of pride and something that might be happiness. He
plucks a plain bronze bracelet from the box and holds it up so as not to think too hard about anything
save the problem at hand.

They know these objects well, having studied their powers and principles, but they had split the
work down the middle, so that their expertise varies.

Wong glances over from transcribing an intricately illuminated medieval manuscript. The spells it
holds mostly concern fire and they’ve been afraid of losing their only copy to a fiery accident.
“Increases a magician’s power exponentially, but at the cost that he can never use it more than once,
and never cast the spell it was used for again.”

Next Loki hefts an enormous curved sword inlaid with gems on its pommel.

“Will always strike true on its intended target,” says Wong, “but the wielder will feel the exact same
amount of damage as is dealt to her opponent.”

“That seems a poor bargain,” Loki says, setting it down.

Wong shrugs. “Some would embrace the terms. When you are bound to an enemy so deeply that
you would use such a recourse, there is not often life left for you on the other side of it.”

Loki shivers. If Thor had known of this sword before Loki’s return, he does not doubt that his
brother would have wielded it against Thanos to a fatal end without a second thought. He makes a
mental note the lock the weapon away.

Next there is a bowl of beaten silver, tarnished nearly to black.
“Allows you to scry and see sights of the past,” Wong says, “with the understanding that if you gaze too long you will go quite mad.”

“Lovely,” says Loki. What he wouldn’t give to glimpse his mother’s face again—perhaps in some year long before he brought her grief, see her untroubled and laughing and alive—but they need their wits about them. This isn’t the time for self-indulgence. “The raccoon is right. Wizards are fundamentally odd people.”

“You know as well as I that there must be a balance in everything,” Wong says gently. “Such powers and charms and gifts can never be had for free.”

Loki looks up at him, meets Wong’s level gaze, then gives a short nod and looks away. Wong is one of the only ones who knows—unless Thor has told others, which he doubts—what price Thor paid to bring Loki back from death.

Wong pushes back his chair, and then he is at Loki’s side. He lays a hand on Loki’s shoulder, warm and knowing. “Sit down,” he suggests. “My turn.”

Loki sits. Wong rummages through the trunk, draws forth a slender golden circlet.

“Allows you to hear the thoughts of others,” Loki tells him.

Wong turns it over in his hands. “And the repercussion?”

“I did not try it,” Loki says, lip quirked, “but as far as I could research, the repercussion is having to hear the thoughts of others.”

Wong tutts at this, amused. Then he blinks, fishing out an antique pocket watch on a platinum chain. “Where did we find this?”

“In the hidden relics room at the British Museum Library,” Loki answers. “It can—”

“Send its user backwards and forwards in time, but only for a moment in either direction,” Wong says at once. “I recognize it. Strange had a particular fascination for the manipulation of time, ever since he bore the Eye of Agamotto. He wrote several treatises on the matter.” Wong sets the watch down with care. “He and I disagreed about the perils of changing such laws of nature. But he argued that in dire circumstances it was necessary, and he was proven correct.”

Wong does not often speak of his missing friend, and though Loki has no love lost for Stephen Strange, he would extend Wong the same comfort that Wong has so often given him.

“Strange was a talented sorcerer,” Loki manages, choosing not to mention that he’d looked forward to challenging him one day and seeing just how far those talents extended.

“Indeed, he was,” Wong says, cants his head, “and stubborn as anything. Did I ever tell you that I was killed, and he reversed time to bring me and many others back again?”

“No,” Loki says around a blink. “That is not a story that you shared.”

“The failures of our Order are not, I suppose, a topic I am keen to speak about,” Wong says. “Nor that experience. As you told me of your own, I remember nothing after; but well do I recall the fear of death before it took me.”

“Would you believe me,” Loki says, “if I told you that when I faced Thanos and knew he was my death, I was not afraid?”
“You have not lied to me before,” says Wong, his expression showing surprise and curiosity. Heady affection such as Loki has rarely known courses through him. To have a friend who would say such a thing—think such a thing of him—and have it be true—

“Since I fell from the Bifrost and Thanos found me, I had long known that he would mean my end,” Loki explains, trying to soften his claim of fearlessness so that it does not sound like so much braggadocio.

He speaks of his own cowardice instead: “I spent so long fleeing from him, and hiding from him, and trying to find some way to twist out of it, that in a way it was a relief to be able to stop running. I only regret that so many others suffered around me.” He glances down, at the manuscript on the table before him, the elaborate lines that show a castle on fire. “I was only afraid then for Thor.”

“Those are worthy ways to feel,” says Wong, and Loki startles at the choice of adjective but stays quiet. “Someday, Loki, I hope to see you stop blaming yourself for what came before. We have all of us lead imperfect lives—but here, at the height of despondency and despair, we are the ones who have chosen to push back the darkness. That is not for nothing. That is who we are.”

Loki swallows, and his throat feels thick; he sketches a nod. For a while they do not speak. Wong replaces the objects in the trunk, wards it securely closed, then takes the seat beside Loki at the long desk. He pulls a stack of books toward him and starts to page through one at random while Loki sits staring.

Wong is ever patient with him. It takes Loki some time to gather together what he wishes to say, for such truthful words do not spring easily to his tongue even now.

At last, Loki says, “There are many days that I feel like an entirely different person, like I cannot recognize the one I was before. And when I catch sight of him, I recoil, for he hated himself, and I hate him too.”

“We can never become completely new, I think, nor should we,” Wong responds after a moment of consideration. “But such changes can be made by ourselves and be brought by others to us that we are reshaped, and our past selves seem like strangers. Strange learned this as well. In your case, from what you have described, I think it a sign of a strong character that you always had, but that needed some time and trial to find its true form.”

“Your opinion means more to me than I can say,” Loki starts, then stops when he sees Wong with his brow deeply furrowed. “What is it?”

“Perhaps we have been going about this in the wrong way,” Wong says. “Perhaps the solution does not already exist for us to find.”

Loki feels suddenly plunged into ice. He shakes his head to clear it. “No?”

“Maybe,” says Wong, “maybe it is a matter of creating something new—some spell all our own. Or changing one that already exists, with our will and fortitude, into something else entirely.”

The cold is spreading so rapidly throughout Loki’s body that he is surprised Wong cannot feel it radiating off of him. It is biting, terrible, not the comfort a Jötunn should feel on wintry planes but a raking of frozen claws across the length of him.

He has only known this pain, this cold, once before, and it was when he opened his eyes because Thor bid him to—Thor—Thor—
Loki is gasping for breath.

From a distance he becomes aware that he has slumped over, then slid sideways off of his chair. Wong is at his side in seconds, holding him while he shudders.

“Thor,” Loki hears himself moan. “It has to be Thor.”

Wong’s face is schooled to show no worry. His voice is even, encouraging. “What must Thor do, my friend?”

“Go back.” Loki’s teeth are chattering violently. The words feel foreign on his tongue, as though someone else is forcing him to speak them. “He must go back. New York—”

“What is in New York? Loki!” Now Wong’s tone is strict, like a firm teacher speaking to a recalcitrant student, but Loki can no longer find the air to answer him.

Darkness is pulling him down, and though he is drowning it is more comforting here in the frozen water where he need not try to breathe. He goes under the ice.

* * *

Loki opens his eyes. The lights in their bedroom are lowered, and he is tucked into bed in his favorite set of nightclothes. He feels perfectly well, only confused as to how he got there—and then it all comes back to him.

Everything comes back.

So that when he turns his head and sees Thor sitting beside the bed, his cheeks pale and his eyes unerringly fixed on Loki’s face, Loki feels no physical distress but he also feels as though his heart has been pulled clean out of his chest.

He tries his best to hide it. Thor looks so incredibly, wondrously relieved—like his own heart has been returned to him. He is already holding Loki’s hand; now, he squeezes it. “Loki.”

“Brother,” Loki says. “How long have you been sitting there?”

“A moment was too long,” Thor replies. His beautiful, bold, painfully honest face, so full of love, will be Loki’s undoing. “It has been some hours. How do you feel?”

“Fine,” says Loki shortly. He knows himself: if he is left alone with Thor he will not be able to deliver the message that he must. He may be changed for the better, an evolved man, even a good one—so his friends keep telling him—but no one is as good as Loki needs to be now. He cannot be near Thor until it is said and done. “You must call the others for a meeting.”

“But—”

“Do it now, Thor. Please.” Loki’s expression must be as terrible as he feels, for Thor does not argue with him.

Thor moves quickly, but when he reaches the door he turns back, returns to the bed, ducks in and seizes Loki in a kiss that speaks of the desperation he felt these long hours of Loki lying unconscious.
Loki knows that he should turn his face aside—knows it and cannot bring himself to. Norns help him, but he kisses back, and for a space that unfolds and unfolds and unfolds they cling to each other.

When the door closes behind Thor, Loki lets himself cry—but only for a single, body-shaking, soul-crushing sob. It will not do to go before the others bearing such signs of grief.

After that indulgence, he washes quickly and dresses in black: he will wear his mourning if he is unable to speak of it or show the tracks of tears. Then he goes downstairs.

They are waiting for him in the briefing room when Loki comes in, all of them with matching serious expressions. The seat at the head of the table that Steve usually takes is empty. Steve sits to its left. To its right is Thor, trying hard not to appear as worried as he no doubt feels.

Every other chair is taken, so after a moment of hesitation, Loki claims the seat at the head.

He must speak; he must; he must. There can be no equivocation about this. He opens his mouth.

“I believe that I know how to undo the Gauntlet’s damage,” Loki says.

Pandemonium.

So many voices erupt with questions and exclamations that it is impossible to distinguish one from the other. Finally Clint’s voice rises, sharp and crisp, above the rest. “For the love of God, let him talk.”

Loki shoots him a grateful look. Clint nods. The room fades into total silence. Becomes a tomb.

“I know how,” Loki starts, stops, not knowing how to speak this without sounding quite mad. Perhaps he is mad. He fervently hopes that he is mad. “Because I remembered how it happens.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Steve demands.

“Wong and I were researching when he suggested an idea that is surely vital to the process. As soon as he did, I was—seized in the grip of something, I know not what,” Loki admits. “I began to remember events I had not ever seen before, yet I can feel them even now, for they occurred in the past.”

“That makes even less sense than the first go,” Rocket says.

Loki ignores him. He must have it out now or he never will. “Here is what happened: during the battle for New York that we all recall, a portal opened before me, and Thor came through it. This Thor.” Loki cannot turn to indicate his stony-faced brother, but he can feel Thor throwing off tension beside him.

“We were—ah—at odds at the time. But after convincing me that it was not a trick, Thor made his case for why the Infinity Stones needed to be destroyed before the Gauntlet could be made. After some time, I agreed to help him.” Loki cannot look at any of them now. He studies his folded hands upon the table. “I may have been a craven villain then, but even I did not wish to see Thanos possess such total power and wield it. I quite despised him.”

“And then what?” That’s Natasha.

Loki spreads his hands. “That is the extent of the memory,” he says. “It ends with my agreement.”
“I don’t—” Rhodey holds up a finger. “Wait, back up. If this hasn’t happened yet, how can you remember it?”

“Because it also already happened,” Loki tells him.

“This is nutso,” says Rocket. “This sounds like some bunk Quill would come up with.”

“Paradoxes, Mr. Rocket,” says Wong. He is regarding Loki with an expression on his face that speaks of a deep sympathy that Loki hopes the others do not yet see.

Steve says, “Let’s say I’m willing to believe this. If your memory ends there, how do we know if it even works? What if the next thing that happens is you and Thor getting eaten by a hungry Chitauri?”

“Because if that had occurred I would not be here now,” Loki points out.

Steve scratches his head. Natasha says, “How would you even destroy an Infinity Stone? It took everything Wanda had, and in the end that still wasn’t enough.”

“Very good.” Loki nods at her. “That is the main problem as I see it as well. We need only obliterate one Stone in order to ensure that Thanos can never assemble the Gauntlet in the future. I had in my possession at the time the Mind Stone, and was shortly to gain the Tesseract, and with it, the Space Stone; I am certain that I could use one to destroy the other. If I cannot, I believe that Stormbreaker may be capable of it.”

“I remember nothing,” says Thor. He is staring at Loki unblinking, has been stock-still and silent until now. “If this happened in the past, why do I not also remember it, or any of the rest of us?”

Loki shakes his head. “It happened only to me. It is quite imperative that you, traveling back in time, should never encounter your past self.”


“I am certain that we kept such plans to ourselves,” Loki continues. “The more people involved the more possibility of failure, and—” He only flinches a little. “At the time, the rest of you would hardly have trusted me to help.”

No one disagrees with that. Certainly not Clint, who has a hopeful look in his eye and something close to the shadow of a smile on his face. But then Clint bites his lip and says, “Aren’t we getting ahead of ourselves? We don’t have the Time Stone. How’re we supposed to send Thor back there?”

“The Time Stone is hugely powerful, but it is not the only way to manipulate time,” Wong says, and Loki tries to broadcast his gratitude to his friend.

Wong takes up the thread so that Loki does not have to: “Loki gained this memory after I suggested that perhaps the correct approach to take is to create a spell of our own, or alter an existing one. This would seem to be the way forward. Now that we know what is required, I do not believe it will be difficult to generate the magic that we need.”

Bruce has been sitting quietly all the while, taking notes and scribbling out formulas on the notepad set on the table before him. Loki watches him, and so he sees the moment when Bruce gathers himself to speak.

“The thing is, you guys—” Bruce begins.
Loki is on his feet, shoving back the chair so hard that all of them turn to look at him. “Apologies,” Loki says. “I’m afraid I’m feeling quite faint again.” He’ll pretend to swoon if he has to, in order to not be present for this; but Thor stands up immediately.

“Let me help you back upstairs,” Thor says at once.

“If Wong would assist me,” Loki says, slipping from his brother’s reach, “he has a concoction of herbs I find most restorative.”

“Of course,” says Wong, coming around to offer Loki his arm, which Loki leans heavily on. A true friend. Wong understands.

Loki does not breathe again until they pass out of the room and the door shuts behind them. Through the glass walls he can see Bruce getting up to draw on the whiteboard. Thor is staring after him, but Loki does not look back.

Once they are out of sight he straightens up and releases Wong’s arm. They walk quietly together, and then Wong leaves him at the foot of the stair.

“I am so very sorry, my friend,” says Wong.

Loki wants to cry and scream and gnash his teeth, and he knows that if he did so Wong would stand with him and still understand.

“I am a coward,” Loki bites out. “But I could not sit beside him when he found out.”

“You are in love,” Wong says. “That is always a brave act.” Wong’s hand on his shoulder is a welcome comfort. “You have been extraordinarily brave today.”

“It is the only way,” Loki says.

Wong clucks at this. “Perhaps—”

“We have searched fruitlessly for more than half a year, and these are our singular signs and clues,” Loki says. “You know as well as I that it is the only way.”

“Rest, and we will speak on it after,” Wong says reassuringly. “I—”

They are standing by a window, and so they watch as a sudden flash of lightning cuts across the sky, followed by a boom of thunder that rattles every windowpane in the compound. Loki closes his eyes.

“I had best be getting back,” Wong finishes. “Go on.”

Loki goes upstairs, his feet steady in their pacing for all that his heart is a minefield.

* * *

A torrential downpour crashes from the fast-gathering gray clouds. From his seat in the armchair by the window, Loki watches the fields grow drenched with water.

He tries to push as many emotions from him as he can to get through what must come next, seeking a kind of numbness.
But when the thought occurs that he should go and check on Soda to secure her for the storm, he breaks.

He wanted Thor to find him sitting stoically, composed, staring artfully out the window. Thor finds him instead bent under a pressing weight, his head in his hands.

Thor moves to the armchair beside Loki’s, drops heavily down. He smells like ozone and rainwater, as though he has been standing outside in the thick of it, and Loki knows then that of course he has.

They sit for a long while in silence, the furious declarations of thunder beyond the walls doing Thor’s speaking for him.

At last, Thor says, “Is it true? I need to hear it from your lips, Loki. Midgardian science is often flawed.”

Slowly, Loki raises his head, but he cannot yet look at Thor. He watches the rain. “Tell me what Bruce said.”

“He said—he said—” Loki has never heard Thor’s voice falter as it does now. “He said that if the plan that you laid out were to succeed, that—that this timeline would come undone. If Thanos never constructs the Gauntlet, then all of this reality we have lived since the Gauntlet’s snap will cease to be, as though it never happened.”

“He is correct,” Loki says, though he chokes on it.

The lightning flashes so close to the window that Loki has a momentary fear that Thor will set the compound ablaze.

“Then I will play no part in any such plan,” Thor says.

Now Loki looks at him. His brother is soaking wet from crown to toe, dripping rainwater down the leather armchair into spreading dark puddles on the carpet. Thor’s hair is plastered to his head, and his eyes, Loki thinks, would be wild if they were not lit up entirely by lightning. He looks terrifying. He has never looked more a god, even when striking down Hela and casting aside her minions like they were children’s toys.

“What?” says Loki.

“You heard what I said,” Thor says, refusing to meet Loki’s gaze. “Shall I repeat it?”

“Thor, that is madness,” Loki says. His heart is racing painfully fast. Of all reactions, he has not considered this one as a real possibility—Thor is too much the hero, has always been. Always it was Loki who tried to find a way out. “You must be able to see that?”

“Madness,” says Thor, as the rain starts to fall so fast that he will flood the fields and roads, “madness is asking me to give up the love of my life and the life that we have built together. Madness is telling me that it must be me who does it willingly, who walks into the past with a smile on my face to destroy my hope of the future.”

Loki would enjoy nothing so much as to weep, openly and brokenly. But if he does so Thor’s resolve will yet harden. Instead, Loki says, “If it helps, you definitely weren’t smiling when you walked through that portal in my memory.”

Thor gives a little grunting sound at that.
“This solution is the last I would ever desire,” Loki says, and he finds himself moving to kneel before Thor’s feet, rain puddles be damned. The motion forces Thor to finally meet his eyes. “The idea of it makes me feel like I am coming apart. But we are only two people, brother. Billions have been lost. Worlds are on fire. Midgard is at a tipping point, soon to tip over into absolute chaos. How could we continue to live happily here together—after we know that we two have the means to ensure that none of it comes to pass?”

“I could,” Thor says, rather meanly, and Loki has a glimpse of the arrogant, uncompromising boy he once was, a very long time ago.

The thought almost tricks Loki into smiling, for that Thor he handled best of all. He raises an eyebrow, stares his brother down—well, up—and says, “Is that so, your majesty?”

Thor blinks. The lightning fades from his eyes, and he frowns to see Loki knelt on the floor before him. He reaches for Loki, pulls him over and atop him, so that they are face to face, Loki straddling his lap.

On any other day this would be a most promising position. But today they simply look at each other, needing the close proximity. Loki combs his fingers through Thor’s wet hair, and Thor’s arm curves around Loki’s waist, holds tight, so tight.

“They cannot ask this of us,” Thor whispers, his fury draining into disbelief.

“They can and they must,” Loki says. “As we would ask the same of others, were situations reversed.”

“You have not thought it all the way through,” Thor says, still too stubborn. “It is true that there is widespread suffering and grief. But life has also moved forward for countless others as it has for you and I. New loves have been discovered. Children born. Friendships forged. Leaders arisen and societies changed. For some, life is still promising. Who are we to take all that away as though it never happened?”

Loki presses his lips together. He has been so consumed by his own wrenching sense of loss that he has not thought far past it, that is true. “Wong would say there is a greater good,” he tells Thor. “The desires of these few cannot outweigh billions who deserve to have their lives back, and the misery of billions more.”

“But you also have not considered all that could be altered if we change the timestream in New York,” Thor says, trying a new approach. “Bruce spoke on that at length. Change one thing in the past, however small, and it goes off like an explosion in every direction. It affects all that we knew to come after. The future we will set into motion then is entirely unknown.”

“Perhaps it will be a bright one,” Loki murmurs, putting his head down on Thor’s shoulder so that he will not have to look at Thor’s pleading, all-too-persuasive face. For Loki has considered this part—quite a lot. “Imagine if there is no attack from Malekith. No Hela. No Ragnarok, Thor.”

“Do not bring Mother’s death into this. That is a low blow,” Thor says, and Loki can feel Thor’s voice rumbling angrily in his chest. “There will always be a Ragnarok. Whether it is put off for some years—consider that it occurs again, but we are in no position to save even as many as we did. All of Asgard could be lost.”

“But—”

“In a future that evolves differently because New York is changed, perhaps Mother and Father live
yet longer,” Thor acknowledges, and there is a quiet wistfulness to his tone before it is replaced with steel again. “I may reign someday as king in the golden hall, a position I do not desire to ever hold. And you—you will despise me.”

Loki raises his head from Thor’s shoulder, sits upright with a jolt. “Is that—is that truly what you think?”

“I cannot lose what we have become,” Thor says. “I will not.”

Loki knows that if he tries to speak then nothing will emerge but agony, so he only reaches out, strokes the stubborn line of Thor’s jaw with his thumb. Loki is not strong enough for this, he thinks. How can he be the one to persuade Thor of what must be done, when it is the last thing that Loki wants himself?

He knows that eventually, Thor will listen to reason. When his brother’s first furious reaction gives way, his heroic instinct will set in. The others will convince him over the course of days. Thor will be made to see the logic of it. Thor well understands sacrifice, and eventually he will accept this one as well. It is only a matter of time.

Time.

Loki sucks in a breath at the realization. Lets it shakily out. He cups Thor’s chin in his hand so that Thor will look up at him. There are silent tears welling from Thor’s eyes, and Loki bends to taste the salt of one on his tongue before he says what he knows all at once that he must.

“Brother,” Loki says. “My dearest love. I understand now. This is the price that I must pay. No one can come back from death without a terrible burden to balance; and though once I thought the guilt of what you gave up for me was mine to bear, we learned otherwise together. A lifetime with you, even a short one, is a paradise that I never earned. This life could not be mine to keep for so long. A taste of it, to know its beauty and its truth, is far more than most dead men ever receive. Now I must return it.” He tightens his grip on Thor, afraid to let go—as soon will be inevitable. “This is surely why the signs were sent to me.”

The expression on Thor’s face is as though Loki has driven a dagger into his chest—a killing blow, not the softer stabblings Loki sometimes subjected him to. “No,” Thor says softly, then stronger: “No. The Norns could not be so vicious.”

“The Norns are indifferent,” Loki answers, “but they are wise.” He tilts in, presses his forehead to Thor’s. “This was a kindness, a boon granted. Had you asked either of us, after Ragnarok, if we could envision such a life, we would have laughed ourselves sick. We got to experience all that we had secretly longed for, healed what was broken between us; it was an impossible chance. And now we must—”

“No.” Thor is still not listening. He breaks Loki’s hold on him, though gently enough, turns them around and sets Loki in the chair, stands up. “I am sorry, brother. Forgive me, but it is too much, and I cannot hear any more.”

He drops a kiss to the crown of Loki’s head; Loki shuts his eyes while that happens. Thor goes to where Stormbreaker is mounted over their bed, seizes the axe, and then the door closing hard behind him.

***
Loki’s initial reaction when he is left alone is unbridled panic. What will Thor do? What blinding wildness has taken him?

Will he stand on the tallest hill, howling challenges at Thanos until, perhaps, he is heard and answered? Will he embark on some foolhardy quest or plot of his own, bring about his death anyway—and Loki’s too, since they are bound?

Just as Thor used to be on the battlefield, a thousand years ago: Thor would fight on despite the inevitability of defeat, of surrender, until Loki dragged him free of it. Loki must stop his brash actions before they lose everything just the same, and with it the parts they must play to help the rest.

Then from a distance he hears the resonant thwack of Thor’s axe out deep in the wood beyond—Thor using Stormbreaker to work off his energy where the damage will not be irreparable.

Loki sits still, listening to the regular sound of it, the crash and fall of trees. He lets out a caught breath. Thor has also changed. Thor may be irrational and impulsive but he is not totally unreasonable. Loki may yet retrieve him.

He waits a while with his own grief, his own rage and outrage and despair, until he can master his expression once more. Then he slips back downstairs.

The compound is deathly silent save for the howl of wind and rain against the walls. The Avengers have closed themselves off in their rooms or workspaces to think through it. All except Steve, who Loki discovers sitting on the couch in the darkened living room, his head sunk to his breast.

Steve looks up as Loki passes by; Loki nods, and though he has been “Steve” to Loki for many months now, suddenly formality feels more acceptable—like meeting someone at a summit, or at a grave. “Captain?”

Steve sits with his jaw tight for so long that Loki is unsure if he will respond. But finally Steve says, “That’s a helluva thing you’d do for the rest of us.”

“It is not only for the Avengers,” Loki says. If the scales were not so obviously tipped toward the side of saving the entire galaxy, Loki is sure he would not be inclined to quite so much self-sacrifice. He chooses not to volunteer this.

“Yeah. I know.” Steve’s hair is also wet, and Loki wonders just how many of his teammates have been wandering about in the storm, like characters from an overwrought old Midgardian novel. “I’m having trouble working through the ethics of it. Seems to me like we’re canceling out an awful lot that’s happened—and leaving a whole lot of what happens after to chance. I don’t like it.”

“I wish, most fervently, that there was some other way,” Loki says. Having just fought through such a conversation with Thor, he has no will to do so again.

“It’s that—I can’t help it, I keep thinking about Bucky,” Steve says. “About Bucky Barnes, my—my friend. If everything changes after New York, it may be that I never meet him again, that I never find out that he’s the Winter Soldier, never get a chance to help him. He’ll never go to Wakanda, I’ll never get to tell him that I—he could be kept a Hydra prisoner and tortured for the rest of his life. How could I do that to him?”

Loki inclines his head. “It is a possibility, and a horrifying one,” he agrees. “But would you rather live again in a place where there is still the possibility of a Bucky Barnes left to save, or here where he is gone forever?”
Steve frowns, and Loki says, “I think you already know the answer to that.” Then he says, for his own comfort as much as Steve’s, “I believe that in our lives, certain people are inexorably bound to us—the strings of our fates are tangled, as it were. We will always find each other again.”

Loki starts to turn away, and Steve, perhaps not wishing to be left alone with his thoughts, asks, “Where are you going?”

“To tell Thor what I have just told you,” Loki tells him, “and hope that he hears me this time.”

“You might want to take an umbrella,” Steve says mildly, and Loki laughs for the first time since he opened his eyes on this wretched day.

Outside the rain is falling in endless curtains, and the bitter wind is difficult to push against. Loki’s boots sink into sucking mud with every step, making each step a struggle. He could use magic to ease these conditions around him, he knows—but perhaps he is as prone to gothic melodrama as the rest of his team, for there is a kind of catharsis found in weathering the storm.

And the storm is, in a way, for Loki: evidence of how deeply Thor feels for him, spread out through the infinite skies. Sometimes Loki will pause, and tip back his head, and let the water rush over him like an embrace.

It is easier going once he reaches the treeline. The ground is not so soft here, and only some of the rain can come in. He follows the sound of Stormbreaker singing through the trees. Thor is not difficult to trace.

His brother began cutting at the edge of the little grove where, a year and a lifetime ago, Thor had first told Loki the price for bringing him back from death.

How foolishly Loki reacted then. He should have understood at once that every day they were given here was a gift, that the time he was living on could only be borrowed. He bows his head in sorrow for all the moments that he has wasted since.

Thor stands at the center of a circle of destruction. He has thrown off his shirt—rather a natural state for him—and the entirety of his powerful body is bent to the task of leveling tree after tree.

Loki pauses for perhaps a minute or seven too long to watch the breathtaking play of muscles ripple from Thor’s arms across his shoulders and down his back. Then he calls for Thor, pitching his voice above the noise of the axe and the wail of the wind.

Stormbreaker halts midway through a tree trunk; Thor draws her free. The tree is precariously half-cut, so Thor simply shoves it over, where it falls with a ground-shaking thud. He turns around to see Loki waiting on the edge of the woodland carnage—by where their grove, now more of an open field, still lies.

Thor is breathing hard, his chest glistening with sweat and rain, and the sight of him then is, bar none, the most stunning thing that Loki has ever seen or ever hopes to see again.

This strengthens his resolve. Loki picks his way across felled logs and snapped branches until he reaches Thor. He must be showing some of how he feels, for any urge of further fight or flight seems to leave Thor as Loki nears. Thor sets Stormbreaker down and waits.

When he is close enough to touch Thor, the sound of the wind and thunder recesses, and the rain dares not fall between them.

Loki says, “You are afraid that, when we reset the past, none of this can ever be again. You voiced a
fear that in another sort of future I would hate you. You think me capable of that.” He reaches up with both hands, frames Thor’s face between them. “You are mistaken.”

Thor’s eyes are dark as the clouds above them. “Brother, I—”

“I did not come here to argue,” Loki says, his hands slipping down around Thor’s neck. “I came here to tell you that there is no world where I do not love you, Thor. There is no timeline where I do not choose you. There is no universe that will be wide enough to keep us apart.”

“Loki—”

His name is all that Thor can say, for then Thor is bending to crush Loki against him, crush his mouth against Loki’s, holding onto Loki like he would make of them one body if he could.

Then he is lifting Loki up into his arms, still kissing him with an intensity that borders on violence, and Loki wraps his legs around Thor’s waist to help, fists his hands into Thor’s hair in encouragement, licks and bites at Thor’s mouth with matching force.

Thor walks them like that away from the ruins of the trees, toward the former grove; as soon as he hits grass he lays Loki down upon it, then turns Loki over onto his hands and knees, for the ground is soaked through.

Loki vanishes their clothes as soon as he gets his breath and bearings back, readies himself with another murmured spell, but coherence lasts but a moment—Thor’s hands and lips and teeth and tongue are all over him, lightning-fast, so that Loki never knows where next Thor will strike.

Then Thor’s thighs are heavy against the back of Loki’s thighs, Thor’s hand is exquisite in its bruising grip on Loki’s hip, and Thor thrusts harder into Loki than he ever has, so that Loki tosses his head of wet hair, shows his teeth and keens with the pain and pleasure of it, the pain and pleasure of being alive.

“I love you,” says Thor.

“Again,” says Loki.

Thor’s cock is merciless in its drive, relentless, enormous; he is splitting Loki open, is planting Loki in the earth, for every thrust lodges Loki’s hands and knees farther into grass and dirt.

For every thrust Thor says, “I love you,” and Loki says, “Again.”

This is past love-making, past fucking, past anything they have done before. It feels like a sacred ritual, the perfect rhythm that they make, the push-pull, push-pull, push-pull, the litany of their words a prayer to any Gods who listen.

“Again,” Loki pants, and Thor’s hips snap forward, Thor’s cock is held within him: there is no other place for it, it was made to be only here. “I love you,” Thor breathes against Loki’s neck, and Loki rides back upon him, takes him yet further, farther, deeper: Loki can, for he was shaped like this for Thor. They are the fitting of two halves for whom even wholeness is not enough.

When Thor lies back in the grass and rain, and Loki straddles him, sinking down upon his cock so slowly that that every shared breath between them is felt, Thor says, “Again,” and Loki says, “I love you.”

Thor’s body rises up to meet him, and it is like riding the waves in a tempest-tossed sea. “Again,” says Thor.
Loki drops down to kiss Thor’s mouth, to drink sweat and water, both sweet, from the pool of Thor’s collarbone, to sink his teeth into the skin of Thor’s neck, so that Thor knows that Loki would devour him if he could.

“I love you,” Loki says.

“Again,” says Thor.

Release is not the goal here—binding togetherness is, and so they try to keep away from it for a long, long time. It seems to Loki that he can see them from far away, two bodies moving, striving, gliding, plying—two bodies that cannot be close enough, that cannot gain the cohesion that they crave, but oh, they will try, they will try.

When Loki comes at last, unable to keep that tide at bay another second more—it has been some hours, he thinks—there are tears in his eyes and on his cheeks that Thor catches with his tongue, and the cry that Loki gives is as much an oath of affirmation as it is a sob of loss.

Thor goes with him; it is impossible now that he could not; and Thor is silent as he gives over, as though the sound that he would make then is quite unspeakable. Above them the sky is lit up with sudden lightning, such brightness that for a moment it would seem to be day. The counterpoint of thunder that follows rolls so far into the distance that all of Midgard will be told of it.

“Show-off,” Loki whispers, letting himself be pulled back down to earth and wrapped in Thor’s arms, while Thor stays deep inside of him.

“I love you,” says Thor.

“You will again,” Loki says.

* * *
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

When Thor stops loving him time will stop and the planets will stop revolving around the sun and the sun will stop. The sun will shine on us again, he’d told Thor, but that was nonsense. Loki meant nothing by it. Had only hoped to make Thor feel better and to be honest he liked the poetic contrast since he was about to go into darkness because Thanos was going to make him stop forever.

Chapter Notes

Hello and welcome back! Thank you all so much for the feedback so far; I adore each and every single person reading this. Yes, you.

Art as ever by the exquisite malefeministthor.

I’m on tumblr over here.

***This chapter contains a sort of roleplayed consensual dubious consent, so if that's not your cup of tea, you may want to skip that scene. It should be pretty obviously approaching when I say it's an active roleplay.
After the grove, Thor is willing to listen more to reason, if not completely resigned to it yet.

He is unwilling to be away from Loki for longer than an hour or two, and the others seem to understand. They go out of their way to give them space, excusing Thor from many missions, and politely averting their eyes and not mentioning it upon discovering them in a broom closet, or the laundry room, or the gym floor, or that one time that they were left behind in the quinjet.

Thor is with him now almost always, always there when Loki awakens, and the last thing he sees when he falls asleep at night. Thor is there to watch Loki ride Soda around her paddock, an activity that Loki will now never skip; he watches his sister spar with Natasha, ready with compliments on how finely her technique has advanced, that both Loki and Natasha appreciate; he asks and receives permission to sit in the study while Loki and Wong debate magical theorems.

Once, such discussion would have bored Thor to death, but now he listens, attentive, sometimes glancing up from his own reading to offer a soft-voiced suggestion or ask a question that can prove welcomingly clarifying for all three of them.

Loki was afraid, the morning that he woke up with a new memory of the past, that now that they knew the solution, events would accelerate with terrible rapidity. But he and Thor have been given the gift of days, then weeks, and this time neither of them will allow a single moment to be
There is considerable debate among those in their trusted circle about whether Loki’s plan should be followed. Loki is astonished, to say the least, considering how long they have all pursued the Gauntlet’s reversal, but caution appears to be the governing factor at play.

Shuri and Bruce want all the scientific probabilities of such a course charted out between them before they proceed. Okoye, who thinks the plan should go forward, also insists that it be brought before the U.N. and as many other worlds as can be contacted before it is put into motion.

Steve continues to be divided on the matter of its ethics; Natasha is inclined to distrust it, and spends their sparring sessions interrogating Loki on all the ways it could be a trick from Thanos or some other unseen enemy.

The most enthusiastic supporters of moving as fast as possible are Clint and Rhodey and Rocket, which is understandable: they have much to gain by resetting time, and little, they think, to lose by losing the present. Wong tends to share their opinion, though he mourns for Loki alongside him.

One morning Loki comes into the bedroom after breakfast and finds Thor packing a rucksack with both of their clothing.

Loki leans against the doorway with his arms crossed, watching these preparations, and wanting to kiss Thor, and do far more, when he sees that his brother has chosen Loki’s most preferred and flattering outfits—in truth, he hadn’t thought that Thor paid quite that much attention to aesthetics.

“Don’t tell me,” Loki drawls. “You’re taking me on a tropical vacation?”

“I would wish it,” Thor says, not looking up from the methodical task of folding. “I would like nothing more.”

“Running away, then, are we?”

“I take back my previous statement. I should like that even more.” Thor zips closed the bag, looks up. There’s an anxious energy about Thor—almost nervous, Loki would think, if he could remember a time when Thor was nervous to compare it to—and then Thor says, “I was about to come and find you. I’ve received an answer to a message that I sent.”

Loki’s eyebrows go up in unison. “Such suspense, brother. Where are we going?”

“Asgard,” says Thor. Says the word like he says I love you.

For a moment the floor seems to drop away, and Loki feels a loss of equilibrium. He stares at Thor, unable to provide a response.

“The Valkyrie invites us,” Thor continues. “They were contacted about the possibility of our plan, same as every people that we can reach. She asks that we visit their new home.”

Thor made it clear since Loki’s return that his self-exile from New Asgard was voluntary and deliberate. He wanted to give the survivors enough distance from their formerly royal family so that none of Thor’s influence would be part of the nascent outpost. Even so much as Thor’s support of a minor law or farming proposal might tilt popular opinion in that direction, and he wanted no such power.

But Loki knows how much his brother has longed to visit and walk amongst their people again. Loki knows, for he feels it soul-deep in himself.
Those cut off from their home never stop dreaming about it, even if that home has ceased to be. They will always be strangers on Midgard, no matter how long they stay or how warmly they are embraced here. Among Asgardians they are who they are.

“When do we leave?” Loki manages, feeling nerves as well now but also a building excitement, butterflies loosed in his belly.

“Whenever you are ready,” Thor says. Loki’s prompt reply seems to move him greatly. He retrieves Loki from the doorway, encloses him in his arms and an extremely approving kiss. “The Captain was with me when I received her message. He gives us a leave of two days.”

Two days is no time at all, but it is far, far better than nothing, especially in this reality where every second together counts.

“I have been ready for a long time,” Loki tells him honestly, and so Thor takes his hand, slings the pack across his back, and reaches for Stormbreaker: they are consumed by brilliant light, and then they are on Midgard no more.

* * *

The Valkyrie meets them upon landing, but she is not alone.

To Loki’s surprise it appears as though many Asgardians last seen onboard the Statesman are waiting—and mixed into the crowd are new faces: the handsome, gray-skinned Oblarae people, whose planet they are on.

The Oblarae, tall and bald and almost preternaturally attractive, lost many of the youngest and strongest from their population due to Thanos. A formerly thriving, fertile world with a renowned inter-planetary marketplace and a history of mercantilism, they were well-known to Rocket, who helped Thor and the Valkyrie lead negotiations to settle the Asgardians here.

The Oblarae mixed rural villages dedicated to farming and the craftsmanship that made them famous with sophisticated cities that ran on the technology they acquired through trade; they also had a strong defense force to protect their amiable planet.

Due to the loss of so much youth, they embraced the Asgardians with open arms, giving them land to create an autonomous town all their own in exchange for sharing the output of the Asgardians’ labor.

Some few Asgardians chose to leave for the cities, or go off-world entirely; some joined the defense force to show their appreciation to their new patrons; but most remained to carve out a place to live, so very far from their lost home but surrounded by their own people, and safe as could be made in this new reality.

It’s clear to Loki as he looks around that not a few Oblarae have taken to their Asgardian neighbors—there are, he sees, bald-headed babies with a silvery cast to their skin being bounced on many an Asgardian knee.

It is the first time that he is fully witness to some of the more resilient outcomes of the Gauntlet’s destruction, and he makes himself look past these new-formed families, else be torn asunder by the knowledge that they will be the ones to unmake them.
He is distracted from these thoughts by the commotion caused when the Valkyrie leaps upon Thor beside him, both of them exclaiming and rocking back and forth in the fervor of their embrace.

All around them, there is the cheerful atmosphere of the festivals Loki longingly recalls from his boyhood: musicians playing familiar instruments whose sound thrills him down to his toes, children chasing each other, wearing crowns made of flowers, adults donning their finest garments, clutching goblets and tankards and all in flushed high spirits. When Thor lifts and spins the Valkyrie a cheer goes up through the crowd.

It is significantly quieter when she turns to Loki. She wears no armor but instead simple dark leathers, such as his armsmasters would once have been clad. The only insignia of her rank is a stamp of color at her collar—a tiny arched rainbow wrought in metallic threads.

She extends a hand to him, and he is quick to take it. “Loki,” she says, “We rejoice to see you again.”

And then—he will never forget the sound of it, nor the emotion that follows after—a similar cheer ripples through the crowd as it had for Thor.

All his life—his many lives—this was what he wanted: to be proudly known to these people, to be equal to the golden brother beside him, to be hailed by them on his own merits. Not his father’s, not his mother’s, not Thor’s—his own, hard-earned. Now that it has come to pass, Loki can barely speak.

“Councilor Brunnhilde,” he says. “My own joy at the sight of Asgard is unbounded.” He presses her hand, releases it. “I thank you all for welcoming us home.”

After that the crowd rushes in to surround them, everyone smiling and shouting excited greetings above the music. Once such a lack of decorum and ceremony would have been unheard of, even punishable, but these are free people.

The happy flood of them sweeps Loki and Thor away, and Loki has never been so glad to not be the man that he once was.

They tour New Asgard, a neat, smartly laid out town of redbrick structures by the foot of an enormous mountain and a shimmering freshwater lake. Many of the houses were built along the waterfront, for the practicality of defense as well as fishing potential and the opportunity to pleasure-sail; the town has no gates or walls, in accordance with Oblarae tradition.

They visit the bustling marketplace, bursting with wares that make Loki’s heart contract with longing. He buys some few souvenirs, and would fill up his arms were it not for Thor’s grounding presence beside him. They inspect the training-grounds, where the traditions of Asgardian fighting continue to be practiced, and a theatrical hall where its arts still flourish.

The Valkyrie informs Loki that his play remains a favorite amongst the people, and Loki is glad that he does not weep. He touches the well-trod wooden floorboard of the stage but once before they leave.

At the center of the town square is a fountain with a carved statue. Already weathered by time and water, the simple gray stone is detailed but not ornate. It is not intended to show any obeisance, Loki sees at once, but rather, it rises as a tribute to memory. He and Thor halt before it a long while, left alone for the first time on their tour.

Frigga stands beside Odin, both crowned with carved leaves instead of gold. Water is pouring from
her outstretched hands. Even worn down by the seasons, her face has such a likeness that Loki nearly reaches up to touch the cold stone cheek.

Thor’s hand rests upon his forearm. They decided not to make their relationship explicit to the Asgardians, but not to hide it either: Loki has a feeling this last eccentricity from their former royals would shock no one, nor surprise anyone who knew them well or even in passing. They will not deny it, nor voice it unless asked; the balance seems appropriate.

“I miss her,” Loki says quietly. “I miss her every day.”

“As do I,” says Thor. And then, after a considerable pause, he says, “She told me once—shortly after you fell from the Bifrost—that she wished she had not given into Father’s demands, and instead raised us as she intended, after he first came back with you. Not as brothers, but as betrothed, princes who would unite our worlds together.”

The last place within Loki that is torn apart begins to mend, stitch by stitch. He sucks in a breath. “She said that?”

“I was too distraught then to really understand what she meant by it,” Thor says. “Confused, and angry, and grieving. I could not comprehend why she would say such a thing. But now I think that she saw what we had denied, and knew herself to be all the more in the right. What did she not see, Loki? What did she not know? I believe that she knew us better than we knew ourselves.”

“Betrothed,” Loki says, shaking his head at the life that could have been—a life where he knew what he was from the start, where he might have loved Thor openly and unerringly all his years. He aches for it in the same way that he has grieved so many losses, as he grieves what will be the loss of their new world. So much waste. So much. He swallows down the pain before it threatens to choke him. Tries on something like a smile. “Only imagine how I would have challenged you before I let you win me.”

“Oh, I have. I do,” says Thor at once, his eyes glinting, “I continue to, for you never stop challenging me, and I will never presume to have won you. It is my heart’s goal to pursue that honor.”

Loki looks at him sideways, all heat, and then covers Thor’s hand on his arm with his own. It feels well to do so in their stone-carved parents’ sight. “Now we are sworn,” Loki says, soft. “I hope that she can see that, and know her first instinct was correct.”

If a person could melt from sentiment alone, Thor would be a broad puddle on the cobblestones. “I choose to believe that she can,” Thor manages at last, since it is inappropriate to do much else with most of New Asgard watching them from a distance. They stand together, paying the last of their respects, until it is time to feast.

It is a feast as grand as any from their youth—but it is not lavish, nor formal, and there is no hierarchy or ceremony to attend to. The central meeting-house is large enough to hold the whole town, and it has been made festive for their visit, decorated with fresh flowers on every table-top and bright torches lining the walls. The wooden tables are all long and communal, set in rows, without one at the head of the room; the food is laid out buffet-style, leaving each to make up their own plate. The meal is lively and noisy and the best-tasting of Loki’s life. The fare is simple and abundant, highly traditional, and he and Thor clean their plates so many times that it becomes a sort of game for their table-mates, then the whole hall, to watch them.

Once-favorite delicacies Loki nearly forgot about explode with flavor on his tongue. Honey wine, oh, honey wine—how had he never magicked this up for them on Midgard?—he drinks bottles of it,
matched only by his brother’s enthusiasm.

Through it all the Valkyrie tells them of the town’s origins and progression, its trials and triumphs. She sits as first minister of a council of seven, each man and woman elected by the people; it is upon her to cast deciding votes, though she proudly explains that not many issues have come to such a divisive ballot.

She wrote to Thor in the message sent to Midgard that New Asgard roundly supported Loki’s plan. But as Loki gazes around at the laughing faces, hears the piping music, watches the children play their games in the hall’s corners, sees the newborn babies rocked—he cannot imagine how that could be the case.

When he tries to ask her, faltering, she tells him that such discussion can wait for the morrow. For tonight, they are home.

Under the table, Thor takes his hand; and Loki holds onto it, as he never had in the Asgard that was.

* * *

They are installed for the evening in an empty house, a merchant’s dwelling, its occupant recently moved with her family to one of the Oblarae cities. It rather neatly solves the problem of how he and Thor might room together, for the house has several bedchambers, and no one in town need know where they choose to sleep.

By the time they are conducted there, Loki is exceptionally drunk; spectacularly so; and the sweet wine has loosened his tongue to the extent that nothing will hold it back. The moment the door closes behind them, he points accusingly at Thor.

Loki is not angry—he is sad, and exhilarated, and distraught, and so full-up on so many emotions that are no longer foreign, nor deniable, that are a part of him. This is who he is, this reeling, emoting, extremely unsteady person on the verge of tears.

“Did you do this on purpose?” Loki demands of his brother.

Thor, equally inebriated, is tilted at an angle against the door to remind himself not to fall over. “Tell me first what I stand accused of doing.”

“Bringing me here,” Loki manages, “in order to change my mind.”

“The invitation was the Valkyrie’s idea,” Thor answers. “I only agreed that it would do us well to visit but once, before we can no longer do so.”

Loki sits down where he is—in the middle of the floor in the house’s entry-way. He puts his head in his hands. That stops some of the spinning. “How can we? How can we undo what they have built here?”

Thor’s hand settles along the back of Loki’s neck, and then his brother lowers himself ungracefully to the floor beside him. “We will hear their reasoning tomorrow,” he says. “I expect much of what we have seen was a show put on for us, Loki. Not false, no, but a sort of exaggerated pageant. Surely you saw the grief on their faces—saw how many families, as we once knew them, were missing mothers and fathers and children.”
This is why Thor would have been the better king—would always have been better. For all of Loki’s sharp intelligence, he rarely saw what was directly before him, always looking for a grander scheme. He saw the pageantry, and not behind the curtain; saw the smiling faces, and not counted which faces were missing.

He curls into Thor, confusion overwhelming him, and Thor presses a kiss to his forehead. They sit like that together in the hallway until some of the alcohol is burned off. Then Thor says, “Shall we choose a bed?”

The house is all on a level, and they prop each other up to navigate the necessary steps. They choose the room with the largest window. It opens up onto a once-neat garden, the plants and vegetables and grasses overgrown since the house’s abandonment, but Loki likes the wild look of the greenery. They pull the bed over to the window for a closer view, then somehow manage to shed their clothing and collapse onto the mattress.

Despite the activity of the day and the exhaustion and inebriation of the night, neither of them can sleep, and they lie awake for hours, limbs tangled, speaking in low voices of another Asgard.

“Do you know how often I would be restless in my bed, and think about what could be if I had the courage to present myself at your chamber door?” Thor asks, an abrupt shift from their reminiscence about old tutors. Thor’s hand is petting idly through Loki’s hair.

“Mmm,” agrees Loki, then pictures this occurrence so clearly in his mind’s eye that he relates it to Thor: “I can see it now. You, fresh-faced, with long spun-gold hair, and a new crimson cloak with its hood up, since you imagined that might conceal you from sight somehow, sneaking across the palace in the dead of night to tap upon my door. How flushed your cheeks would be when I opened it.”

Thor gives a quiet chuckle beside him. “Indeed,” he concedes. “And my heart in my throat as I tried to address you.”

“What would you have said?” asks Loki. Here in New Asgard, tucked against Thor, the pain of what never was feels more like a game.

“I would have asked for an audience,” Thor says without hesitation, “then, once inside, confessed that I could not go another moment without telling you the truth of what I felt. You would stand before me in one of your lovely dressing-gowns I longed to peel off of you, arms crossed, stamping your foot a little with impatience—you never did like to be awakened at an inopportune hour.”

Now it is Loki’s turn to laugh. “Quite so,” he allows. “But I would have been most intrigued and hopeful, for all that I might have tried to hide that from you.” He nudges Thor’s chest with his chin. “And what was it you felt, then?”

“Chiefly lust,” Thor tells him, “when we were young men, after our childhood kissing games ceased. How you maddened me, Loki, with your elaborate costumes, your outrageous flirtations. Later the parade of lovers. I longed to challenge them to duels, yet had no claim that could have merited it.”

“And I would have murdered you had you tried to present such an action as protective,” Loki points out.

“And you would have murdered me,” Thor agrees. “But how I desired you. Once I even considered enlisting the help of a sorcerer to create a glamour, to make it seem like I was someone else, and then attempt to win your attention. In the end I decided it would be an unforgivable deception, and unsatisfying, for by then I wanted more than just your body. I wanted your whole heart.”
Loki draws their fingers, which are threaded together, to his mouth, and kisses Thor’s. “A similar scheme used to cross my mind,” he admits, “and frequently, for I needed no outside help to change the way I appeared. The number of times I nearly made myself look a buxom serving-maid and slipped into your rooms does not bear repeating.”

Thor lets out a laughing breath. “I’m sure I would have spent centuries trying and failing to find the same maid, had we passed such a night.”

“We cannot know, but that does seem likely,” Loki hums, and Thor laughs again. Then Loki says, “When you stood before me in my chamber. How would you have spoken of this lust?”

“And if I confirmed it?” Loki asks.

“Kissed you at once,” Thor says, “like this.” He pulls Loki upward towards him, kisses Loki open-mouthed, licks hot between his teeth.

“Then?”

“Begged to be admitted to your bed,” Thor says, “and begged to never be allowed to leave it.”

Loki grins. “You move quickly.”

“I would have sworn myself to you then,” Thor tells him. His eyes are serious, fixed, his humor faded. “Even brash and arrogant as I was, certain all Asgard and its glory was meant for me, my feelings about you have been my only constant, Loki. I would have sworn.”

Loki exhales. “Why did you never knock?”

“I was afraid,” Thor says readily enough. “Of rejection, but of acceptance also. I did not know your heart; as badly as I wanted you, it tormented me to think that I might get to have you in secret, yet still have to watch you courted and courting others. I imagined that one or both of us would be made to marry for some alliance, that I would have to endure our forced separation. It seemed better, when I was young and foolish, to avoid the risk of losing you by not trying to make you mine.” Thor’s hand resumes stroking through his hair. “And why did you never come into my room as a pretty maid?”

“I wanted it to be me,” Loki says, honest as he’s ever been. “Illusions amused me—were a pastime. Tricking you for a tumble seemed easy enough, but as you say, the deception would not have satisfied. And I, too, feared our separation, feared jealousy, certain that one day I would have to stand to the side and watch you be wed. But it was more simple than that in the end. I wanted you to know that it was me. To have chosen me. I did not think that was something that you would do. You say on occasion you dared dream that I felt the same way. I was quite sure that was impossible.”

As Loki speaks thus, Thor’s expression becomes shuttered, grieved. “We were aligned for so long, and did not know it,” Thor says wonderingly, holding Loki tighter against him. “We were both so fucking stubborn. We lost so much time.”

“It may be that in another future we will come to it more quickly after New York,” Loki murmurs.
Thor’s grip turns into more of a grapple. “I still cannot bear it,” he starts. “I—”

“Shh, brother, I know,” Loki says, and covers Thor’s mouth with his own to quiet him. When he draws back, he says, “Let us not think on that. Not here in Asgard. Let us remember who we were, and give them what we never had. We can give them peace—then let them go.”

Thor’s eyes are shining as he catches on. “How might you propose to do that?”

“Watch.” Loki’s smile is laden with mischief. The idea blossoms in his chest and he knows, through his own rising excitement and quickened heartbeat, that it is a good one. He sits up and back, straddling Thor now, and then he passes his hands over his face, runs his fingers through his hair, feeling it shorten under his fingertips.

Thor’s intake of breath tells him that many years have been banished from Loki’s features by illusion. How youthful and unburdened he must look—a few hundred years old, only, the age when he first started taking on that parade of lovers that bothered Thor so. He neglects to mention that the lovers were paraded precisely to bother Thor in the first place.

Instead, he reaches for Thor. This illusion is even easier to craft than his own, for this was the first face that Loki ever loved, a face that used to overwhelm and obsess him. The face that he saw every time he closed his eyes and let someone else bring him to pleasure.

Loki closes his eyes now, and when he opens them, Thor in the freshness of his swaggering youth stares back. His sun-bright hair spills over his shoulders, his cheeks smoothed free of weary lines, and the amber eye is its old electrifying blue once more.

“Oh, yes,” Loki says. “This is one of my better ideas.” He tangles his hands in Thor’s luscious hair at once with a happy sigh. “How I’ve missed this hair.”

“I’ve been thinking about growing it out again,” says Thor, defensive, which fits just perfectly with the declarative way he spoke when he wore this face. Thor lifts a hand, touches his own taut cheek. “I am afraid to ask for a mirror. I’ll want to slap myself. What a boor I was.”

“We will be each other’s mirrors,” Loki tells him, then arches an eyebrow. “And I will be the one doing any slapping.”

That’s as good a place to start as any. Loki slaps Thor soundly across the face, the crack of it loud in the quiet of the room, then tosses his head.

He looks prideful, imperious, spoiled, bored, full of intrigue—all the ways he used to look before other ways to be were known to him. “You presume to declare yourself to me, brother, and gain entry to my bed—but you cannot expect that I will yield to you so readily. Make your case for why I should even entertain the thought.”

Thor turns back, the force of the slap having turned his face sideways. His eyes flash above his reddened cheek. “Have a care,” he snaps. “I have a council meeting with Father in the morning and it would be most untoward if I appeared wearing your handprint.”

Oh, but Thor is exquisite, even shifting his voice into the haughty lower register he affected at this age. Loki could kiss him—but that would be breaking character. Not yet. Instead, he does as he would have immediately had Thor addressed him in such a way: he tries to slap him again.

Thor catches his wrist before he can connect, cinches too-strong fingers around it. Loki laughs disdainfully. “Untoward! Untoward is being naked in your brother’s bed and asking to fuck him.” He shifts in place, teasing friction just a little upon Thor’s cock trapped beneath him—Thor’s cock
that went instantly hard upon the slap. Thor’s lips part in a soundless ‘o.’ “But I believe we quite left etiquette behind when you kissed me against my chamber door. So. Ask me.”

Thor is gazing enraptured at Loki’s face, which Loki imagines means his performance and appearance are convincing enough. It occurs to him that if he was obsessed with Thor in this era, by Thor’s own confession his brother was equally motivated.

This is evidenced when Thor visibly makes himself hold still, lets free Loki’s wrist. “Indeed, I did not come here to fight with you, Loki,” he says in a softer voice—the good, gentle side of him that was also always present, that had endeared Loki as much as anything else. Could Thor know that? “That you have humored me this far has made me bold, and reckless with hope, and I forget myself. It is as I told you when you let me in,” and Thor reaches up, palms Loki’s smooth cheek. “I desire you more than any other, and have done, for as long as I knew what it was to desire. Before that, even. You recall that it was I who would try to kiss you, when we were barely out of the nursery.”

It’s true—it had been Thor who was brash enough to try such things—not that Loki ever discouraged him. Loki tilts his head, unbending just a bit, and gives a curt nod.

“So you say,” Loki says cautiously. “And if I indulge this profound desire you claim to have, you’ll—what? Condescend to add me into the occasional rotation of your bed-hopping schedule, pleased at your rather nontraditional conquest, and we return to swordfighting practice tomorrow as though nothing has happened?”

Thor’s perfectly blue eyes go round with perfect dismay. “No,” he says at once. “No, never. It would stay secret, of necessity, but if you will have me, I promise you—I swear to you, Loki—that I will not have any other. I am already yours. It is but for you to choose if you should want to keep me.”

Loki narrows his eyes. “What if I do?”

“Then there has never been a happier man on Asgard than I,” says Thor, “and if you permit me, I will love you until the dawn, and every night and every dawn thereafter.”

“A compelling argument,” Loki allows. Then he does as he thinks he would have, at last: let slip some of his scornful facade, and allowed himself to begin to believe his most hidden, desperate wish could come true. His lips curve a sly smile. “Until dawn? Am I to be persuaded that even you are so virile?”

“Make it the dawn of the day after next,” responds Thor with the brazen self-assuredness that used to infuriate and arouse Loki in equal measure, “and still will I be inside of you.”

Now there is no mistaking Loki’s response, his bit lip, own hard and ready cock. He laughs, more than a little breathless, and bends to press a kiss to Thor’s mouth—tentative, testing, as though he has never done such a thing before. Thor does not even blink beneath him, as though frightened that any sudden movement might make Loki startle and change his mind.

“All right,” says Loki when they break apart at length. “I shall try you for tonight.”

Thor surges up beneath him, all enthusiasm, wraps Loki in his arms, kisses his neck—then pulls back, conflict on his youthful brow. “But say, I beg you, if you have also desired me, brother,” he says. “I have flattered myself time to time, thought I saw you staring, but I must know—”

Loki rolls his eyes. Pretending at a thousand years ago, and some dynamics never change. “Oh, shut up, Thor,” he says. “Modesty does not become you. As though there has ever been anyone anywhere who did not desire you.”
Thor is able to muster up a blush. Loki has not seen him do so for centuries, and has to keep himself from trying to lick it off of his cheeks. “I care not what anyone anywhere else thinks. I must know if you—”

“I have not touched any person,” Loki says shortly, “nor let them touch me, without imagining that they were you. Does that answer your question sufficiently?”

This time Thor does not have to play at his astonishment. “Indeed?”

“Yes.” Loki heaves a breath. His past and future selves are becoming conflated, for this was long his truth. “Again I ask: will that suffice?”

“Brother,” Thor says, then seems quite incapable of saying anything else; perhaps the past and future Thor are as moved. “Brother.”

He kisses Loki then as passionately as Loki would have ever wanted Thor to kiss him, a kiss so charged and hungry that it borders on frantic. Once, Loki would not have imagined making such a revealing confession aloud. Yet what more do he and Thor have to lose? What more to gain? Thor deserves to know the full truth of it, the depths Loki felt for so long.

“Tell me then how I may have you,” Thor whispers in his ear, when he breaks from the kiss to kiss across Loki’s skin back toward the goal of his neck. “I am yours, and yours to command.”

Oh, but that *would* have been the exact thing to say to excite Loki in their youth, and so, so dangerous. Perhaps it is better for the galaxy that they had not come to this before. Still, Loki works them through it.

“Mine in every way, Thor?”

“I am.”

“Would you kill for me?” Loki wants to know, tucking back a strand of Thor’s honey-blond hair behind his ear.

Thor’s jaw sets. “Should you ask it of me.”

“Would you pillage for me? Raid and strip inoffensive worlds?”

“Should you desire their jewels, I would lay them at your feet.”

Loki considers this. He lets his fingers start at Thor’s shoulders and trace their way down his magnificent chest, over his nipples, the cut of his abdomen, the flat stomach that needs no youthful illusion.

“Would you love for me?” Loki asks in his most seductive tones. “To deflect the attention and the questions that we might attract. Would you court those I chose for you, for distraction, lie to them, lie with them, let them think you adored them?”

Thor blinks—that gorgeous, naive face, untested yet by the universe, shows only inexperience and selfishness and unbridled need. The idea would have pained Thor even then, Loki knows. But Thor does not hesitate. “Should yours remain my true bed, I would do anything to keep my place in it.”

“Very good,” says Loki, feeling as he might have felt once to hear this as a distant thrilling ache. “Then you may have me any way you like, dear brother. I will lie on my back for you like a royal virgin bride, so that you may practice how to fuck one. Or would you prefer me on my stomach? 
Yes? You would mount me like a common beast?”

“Loki,” Thor growls, and he flips them, landing Loki on his belly and following after. He pins Loki under his weight. “I will at that, if you keep saying such beastly things.”

“Hmm,” Loki trills, his mouth twisting a wicked curve. He still goads Thor, of course; but how he would have relished goading him at this age, when Thor walked around puffed-up about his own capabilities, ever keen to test them and prove his mettle. “I wonder, if I struggle, if you have it in you to hold me down and take me anyway—to truly claim the prize you say you most desire.” He glances over his shoulder at Thor, whose gaze is lit-up and starting to burn at this issued challenge. “I do not think that you do.”

With that, Loki aims a vicious elbow back against the side of Thor’s head, catching him half-unready, for Thor only manages to dodge half of the blow. Thor exclaims as the elbow lands, grabbing for Loki’s arm to immobilize it, but Loki is already bucking against him, giving a real go at throwing Thor off of him, of finding the means to slither free.

Thor enters the melee at once—and Loki knows that it excites him now as it would have then. There is nothing like a fight to engage his brother, and one fought naked in bed, with such a reward at stake, has Thor fast bringing all of his own expertise to bear.

They wrestle furiously, deliriously: Thor is much stronger but Loki far sneakier, uncovering Thor’s weaknesses and exploiting them, twisting free of holds that should be impossible to break. Loki’s triumphant laughter rings in both their ears, another goad; and Thor’s breath emerges ragged as he is pushed further into the frenzy of battle. How long they grapple Loki cannot say, swept away by the rushing adrenaline of it.

Finally Thor succeeds in planting Loki face-down on the mattress once more, an immovable hand pressed between Loki’s shoulders while he sits astride Loki’s thighs.

“Yield,” Thor demands.

“I will do no such thing,” Loki snarls, and starts to flick his hand, where he collects a ball of green light.

Thor grabs his wrist with such bruising force that Loki cries out, the spell dying on his tongue. Then Thor seizes his other wrist, yanks Loki’s arms behind him, crosses his wrists together and holds them caught at the small of Loki’s back in a stronger grip than iron.

“No cheating,” Thor says, his voice dangerously low.

Try as he might, Loki cannot break this hold, and the attempt to do so leaves him winded. It is not comfortable, with his arms wrenched back, his shoulders strained. Thor heavy on his legs, Thor holding his wrists tight enough to threaten circulation—not comfortable, and Loki also cannot remember when he was last so aroused.

“What was that you said, brother? That I do not have it in me?” Thor asks, but it is not a question, for then two of his fingers, big and blunt and slicked only with spit, push their way into Loki without further preamble.

Loki curses him, scrambles for leverage that he cannot find—then takes the fingers deep with a shocked gasp he doesn’t need to play-act. “Ah!”

“Yield,” Thor repeats.
“Go fuck yourself,” Loki suggests sweetly, around gritted teeth.

“My intent is otherwise,” Thor says, working him roughly open. The too-dry drag of it burns and electrifies Loki in equal measure; they have done everything with one another at this point, but the brutal intimacy of this arrangement, and the faces that they wear now, make this something else entirely.

Thor does not proceed quickly, instead drawing on the knowledge gained over the last year to ensure that he is pleasing Loki as much as he is tormenting him (and Thor is the one who speaks of cheating!), until Loki is breathing through his nose, so tightly grit are his teeth and lips sealed against giving Thor the satisfaction of hearing him cry out again.

But as Thor spears him on three merciless fingers, then four, and goes on and on like that, Loki gives a grunt, unable to even remember how to shout.

“You are an accomplished brute,” Loki manages to pant. “Well have you proven that. Yet you continue to delay what you swear you came here for. Perhaps your prowess is not as they say after all. Perhaps your cock is not so legendary, and will not stay hard enough for the task at hand.”

Thor twists his fingers, and Loki muffles his shout with a mouthful of bedsheet. Thor shifts forward, so that his cock, huge and astoundingly hard, rides up against the cleft of Loki’s ass.

“Say that again, brother,” Thor blithely suggests, but Loki is still biting into the sheet. Then Thor, cruel, cruel Thor, Thor pulls free his fingers all at once with Loki on the edge, leaves Loki thrashing at the loss.

“I’ll release one of your hands,” Thor tells him. “Make us oil. Any tricks and I will still find a way to fuck you without it.”

Loki responds precisely as he would have then: with a shiver of pure excitement and anticipation and indignation. He gives a short, curt nod, and Thor frees his weaker left hand, Thor’s grip tightening yet further on the trapped right wrist.

It takes some moments for Loki to recall an appropriate spell, so shaken is he by the truthful play of this that it seems sometimes time is blurring. Sometimes he is himself as he is now, assured of Thor, who loves him more than anything and is equally loved in return, and sometimes Loki is the young man whose face he wears, full of conceit and incredulous to have his hotheaded, self-righteous brother at last in his bed.

So distracted is Loki that he can produce nothing elaborate, so the oil manifests in a simple clay bowl rather than the delicate blown glass concoctions he has often magicked up. Thor does not comment on it, but forces Loki’s hand behind his back once more; then Thor dips his fingers and slides all four of them back inside Loki as Loki, unprepared for it, moans at this spectacular affront.

“Barbarian,” Loki bites out appreciatively. He flexes his caught arms, but nothing will budge Thor’s hold. “So you mean to have me like this—as a conqueror takes his prisoner?”

“It was you who challenged me, told me that I lacked the will to do so,” Thor reminds him. He withdraws his fingers, scoops oil from the bowl anew to coat his cock. “I do not lack it, Loki. Do you think, now that I have in my grasp what I have wanted all my life, that I will not seize it?” The head of Thor’s cock enters him, followed by enough abrupt inches that Thor’s free hand must grip Loki’s hip to keep him in place, so that Loki can do naught else but receive it. “If you believed that, you badly overestimated my forbearance when it comes to you.”
Loki cannot answer, full-up and being filled with yet more cock; he cannot recall when last Thor felt this massive or unyieldingly hard inside of him—his brother’s arousal is spiked with this game as well.

Is it even a game any longer? Perhaps it is an exorcism.

Whatever it is, here he is bent over under Thor, utterly caught, completely at his brother’s mercy, and Thor is showing none of it. He thrusts his cock into Loki as relentlessly as Loki described, as one might indeed punish a captive enemy, and—

Loki whips his head around, examines the sharp concentration on Thor’s face, the grim, resolved set of his jaw that does not fit that lush young mouth.

“Oh,” Loki groans then for many reasons, understanding at once. “I believe we are no longer in the right era for these faces. If one could guess—?”

He shuts his eyes in concentration, now practically impossible with Thor thrust so far inside of him. But illusions are always easiest. He hears Thor shape a small, inarticulate sound of surprise and need and knows that he is correct.

Perhaps they were long meant to come to this—this point in life that they both danced around discussing, that they avoided like staring at the sun.

Loki’s betrayal, his many betrayals, his diabolical descent, his awful criminal acts. Thor’s willingness to fight him alongside strangers, defeat him, to bring him to heel, to drag him home in chains.

Thor’s horror at what Loki has become surpassed only by his anger and his grief. Loki’s horror at himself hidden beneath obstinate disdain and affected amusement. He gives it all back to them now in appearance so that they might at last look upon it point-blank.

Thor’s features have hardened with difficult years, but he remains so beautiful like this that Loki’s heart hurts as it had then. His flaxen hair is grown yet longer, bound here and there with ceremonial braids; the prominent mourning-braid that is entwined with Loki’s own dark hair makes Loki swallow as though he cannot get in enough air, as it had then. Unlike the clear blue of his arrogant youth, this Thor’s eyes are haunted by shadows.

Loki, too, has changed: his hair is long and messy against his neck, his skin all the paler from captivity, his cheekbones more prominent from the trials that he came through. There is a sneer on his lips that he has not felt for a very long time, yet still feels familiar as he forms it.

He has not told Thor—will not ever tell Thor—what befell him when he fell from the Bifrost into the void, but he knows, and knew then, that even those tortures do not begin to excuse what he chose to do afterward. Loki let himself give in to his darkest, most chaotic impulses, the interest in villainous immorality that was brewing in him; Thanos merely provided the means to that end.

And so he manifests around his wrists the cuffs and chains that bound him, that he earned. As he earned this punishment—and, he hopes, might also have earned this chance at redemption. What if Thor had paused in his heroism, and let himself have this?

Maybe after a different New York they will discover it.

Now it is but an act, but a necessary one. As Thor stares at him, silent and measuring, Loki says in a cold voice, “Well, brother? I am at the mercy of your justice. Have you changed your mind about delivering it?”
Thor’s hand tightens on his wrists—clenches reflexively around the chains. Then he draws out his cock and thrusts back in much harder than he entered. “No. I have not.”

“What a surprise,” taunts Loki, grunting under this ruthless thrust, and then the next, and the next, “what an absolute delight to learn you capable of this. I thought you so simple that I knew everything about you. Imagine you hiding your desire for me so well for so long. You, deceiving! It is wonderful.”

“We are neither of us what we once appeared to be,” Thor agrees, and Loki trembles, as he would have then, at the heavy, weary, determined tone of his brother’s voice. Thor keeps one hand on Loki’s bound wrists and the other dug in on Loki’s hipbone, keeping him still as he starts to fuck him at a pace that is neither slow nor fast, savage nor gentle, but forces Loki to feel every inch—it is resolute, unwavering, justice delivered indeed.

“Do you think,” Loki struggles to say, lets his head hang under this decree, “do you think that you can fuck your goodness into me, Thor, that you can change me, change what I have done, with the weight of your cock? Do you expect me to apologize for what I am, beg for forgiveness, because you finally decided to treat me as you should have long ago?”

It is almost too much—too terrifically close to who they are now, even with the hard-won rewards of their miraculous year between them. Playing at distant youth was an amusement; this is slicing the tourniquet on an open wound with the hope of cauterizing it.

For a time Thor says nothing, does nothing but continue the concerted motion of his cock. He is callous with Loki now, unsparing, driving his own pleasure deep as he can, repeating, repeating.

“I do not think that,” Thor says at length. “I know better. You are you, and fucking you will not change that, nor would I have it change you. I fuck you now because I want to, because I have always wanted to, and I am tired of denying myself. With your actions, you forfeited the humane treatment I would extend to any other prisoner of war.”

“Gods,” Loki moans, not having to play any part at all.

“Call this justice,” Thor continues, increases his speed, “or call it injustice and indulgence. For me it is all of those things, and I care not for what you have to say, Loki.”

To this Loki can only respond with silence, and his surrendered body giving way under Thor’s uncompromising rhythm. Then he ventures, “It may be—oh!—that I have underestimated you.”

“My hope is that you will not do so again,” Thor tells him, tugging on Loki’s chained hands so that his shoulders strain back, while he aims a particularly unflagging thrust, “and that the next time you feel such a predilection toward misconduct, you will come to me instead for correction.”

Loki feels tears prick his eyes, feels heat and shame and desire so staggering that he almost comes untouched. “Thor, I—”

“I do not recall giving you permission to speak,” Thor says. “I was kind enough to remove the muzzle, but if you must be gagged I will find other ways.” He moves his hand from Loki’s hip, presses three insistent fingers against Loki’s mouth; and though Loki startles, and half of his instincts tell him to fight and bite, he lets in the fingers, then sucks at them, chokes on them. They taste of his body, and of Thor: of earth and rain.

“Yes,” says Thor, and reseats himself so eagerly that Loki falls forward, and would go down but for the chains in Thor’s hand holding him up. “Like this, when you are silent, I can look at you and
remember that I had a brother that I loved.”

Tears are trickling now down Loki’s cheeks, born of both the appalling pain in his breast and of total catharsis; they should have addressed this long ago, at the beginning, when Loki first came back. But this, near the end of it all, in their bed in New Asgard—this is still important, this is healing them as much as it is breaking them in half.

Thor fucks him like that for a very long time, possibly all the years between then and now; it feels that way to Loki. Halfway through, Loki stops merely taking it, and starts to move with his brother, riding back on him, no longer fighting the chains but using them for leverage. At length Thor removes his fingers, and all that Loki can do is exclaim his appreciation and desperation.

“Please,” says Loki, when he recalls how to speak. “Please, more.”

“You surprise me, Loki,” Thor says, and by now Loki knows every tone of his voice so well that he knows Thor is seconds away from giving over. “I did not think that you would ever yield.”

“Consider this,” says Loki, as he might have done. Should have done. Would have. The sneer on his lips is vanished. “Which you have not yet considered: that I am as desirous of receiving your retribution as you are of delivering it.”

Thor’s free hand runs through Loki’s sweat-damp hair, gathers a fistful of it, and with a last, ferocious thrust buries himself inside of Loki and spills there.

Spills out lust and hatred and love and fury and agony and yearning and bitterness and devotion, spills all of what they were. It pulses hotly through Loki, a scourge and a balm, and he closes his eyes to feel and never forget it and never let it rule him again.

When Thor is through he pulls out of him, now all gentleness, smoothing concerned fingertips over the bruises increasingly evident on Loki’s hips and at his wrists.

“I’m sorry,” Thor says, sounding risen from a dream, as though only just realizing what he has done. “Loki. Forgive me, I got carried away. I—”

“Shut up,” Loki says, his eyes still squeezed closed, unwilling to let even Thor ruin this sense of release. “Shut up. Don’t you dare take that back.”

Thor goes quiet. When Loki opens his eyes, his brother meets his gaze. Nods. The thing that they avoided most lies pierced and dead and bested between them.

Thor strokes Loki’s thigh. “Take off these illusions.”

That is easily accomplished, and the relief of watching his Thor come into view—still as strong as he was in youth, nay, stronger—his Thor of the shorn hair and the amber eye, the grizzled, deliciously bearded cheek, Thor with circles under his tired eyes and the weight of worlds on his brow, Thor who loves him beyond reason—Loki is dizzy with it. Thor has never been this beautiful before.

Loki’s bindings vanish also, and he sits up and back, relishing every movement that makes him wince. He flexes his wrists, trying to work feeling back into them, when Thor takes his hands between his own and carefully massages the muscles, all warmth and tenderness. For a while they do not speak, but simply sit side by side, touching everywhere, their heads bowed together.

“I thank you for that,” Thor says at last. “What did you say when we began—that we could give them peace, then let them go?”
“Yes,” Loki answers. “I did not know where we would go, who we needed to become, but I think it important that we did, and I will not mourn their loss. I bury them gladly.”

“As do I.” Thor cups his cheek, runs his thumb across Loki’s cheekbone. “I do not wish to see you wear another face save this one, that I love, and my sister’s, that I love.”

Thor reclines against the pillows on their considerably now less-than-neat bed, draws Loki into his arms. “I agree,” Loki tells him, then lets some teasing mirth back into his voice. “No more illusions. Though your hair truly was a thing of glory. Are you sure you don’t want me to make a potion that could—”

“I’m sure,” Thor says with only a hint of huffy gruffness, “that Thor is gone. And this one has much more critical concerns.”

“What concerns?” Loki wants to know, for Thor’s hand has gone to Loki’s neglected cock, his firm grip soon coaxing him back to full arousal. Loki arches against him, but Thor moves sideways, leaves Loki laid back on the pillows. Thor’s busy lips and tongue trail down his body, and Loki discovers that Thor still has enough hair to make fine handles for gripping and tugging.

“You may recall the morning when I managed to make you spend twice in my mouth in quick succession,” Thor says, addressing Loki’s cock, with pauses to lick. “I’m curious if we can get to three times, or even four. Shall we find out?”

* * *

They arise with only a few hours’ sleep, hardly a hardship after what they shared in the night. They bathe together, somehow fitting into a tub made for one, though they quite soak the floor.

There is an easiness to their interactions that is brand new, that has not been present even after all the tests they passed through before. At Loki’s suggestion, Thor does not put on his Midgardian garb but lets Loki wrap him up in loving magic, in dark traditional leathers like the Valkyrie wore, in sturdy boots after the Asgardian style, in unornamented silver vambraces.

Thor is immediately more at ease in such a costume, smiling at himself in the mirror, and looking so pleased and so edible that Loki then disappears the clothing with a wave of his hand and has Thor take him pressed to the cool tiled wall.

When they are ready at last, Loki dressed all in black, as is now his custom, they go to the town’s central tavern, where the Valkyrie arranged to meet them for breakfast.

She is waiting when they arrive, at a quiet table in the corner, the other tables set far back to give them space and privacy. A hot breakfast is already prepared, and she sits watching with amusement as Loki and Thor set upon the food with every enthusiasm.

“I suppose I won’t ask if you slept well,” she says, lips quirked. Thor has long been in communication with her, and she knows the truth of what they are to each other; it would not have occurred to his brother to conceal such a thing from a valued friend, and Loki thinks that she is quite unfazed. Indeed he cannot imagine what it would take to faze her. “You two eat, and I’ll discuss business. It will be easier on full stomachs, I think.”

Loki and Thor share a glance, then follow her instructions, methodically working to vanish their
food. The Valkyrie has a tankard of ale in her hand, for all that it is barely past the dawn, and she sips it contemplatively before she begins to speak.

“It was not an easy decision to make,” she tells them, “nor one that New Asgard arrived at lightly. We had days of debate, and at last, to make it fair and final, a ballot. The overwhelming majority went in to support Loki’s plan.”

Loki flinches, very much wishing that the plan need not be his nor bear his name. Under the table, Thor’s hand comes to rest on his thigh, reassuring, securing.

“Perhaps you are surprised, after all that we accomplished here,” she goes on. “It is not that we would wish for it to be unmade. We have worked hard, and we are a hearty people, and many have found love and contentment on Oblara that we could not have imagined after we left the Grandmaster’s ship.”

She lifts her stubborn chin. “We are survivors, and resourceful—Asgardians always are. But we do not recover easily from loss. You found me on Sakaar, thousands of years after my own sorrows, and still I could not drown my grief.” Another swallow from her tankard, reflexive, follows this declaration. “Losing Asgard was a tragedy made manageable when we all remained together. The first attack from Thanos broke us. And then, as we drifted through space without direction, knowing only fear and anguish, the Snap came and took half of us again.”

This drink is deeper, lasts longer. “I will not—cannot—recount to you in full what it was like for those already so bereft to watch their friends and loves and children turn to dust while we tried to hold onto each other. I hear the screaming every time I close my eyes.”

Thor’s hand tightens on Loki’s leg, and this time Loki knows it is his brother in need of comfort; he rests his fingers over Thor’s. Thor looks away, at the wall, at nothing, at the guilt he feels at not being with his people for this hardship, not being able to protect or help them or even be present to bear witness.

Loki has quite lost his appetite, but still he puts bites of buttered toast into his mouth so that he has something to do. It’s clear that they can say nothing in response to this, nor are they meant to. The Valkyrie speaks on.

“And so despite the new lives that we have carved out for ourselves, no one here is whole. We are missing too much, too many. If there is the chance to reverse what happened—even at the cost of what we have created—we wish to have it done. We understand that there is no way to know what will happen thereafter; perhaps another Ragnarok, more unavoidable losses. But if we are united with those taken from us by Thanos, we care little for the vagaries of another future.”

Thor’s hand is closed so tightly now it is almost painful, and Loki is holding onto him with the same force. He watches his brother take a sip from his own ale, watches Thor gather his thoughts. At last, Thor says, “If that is the will of New Asgard, we are glad to have you behind us.”

It is hard for Thor to express approval for a plan that he also wants no part of. Loki squeezes his hand. He looks across the table at the Valkyrie, her calm and no-nonsense expression, her neat attire, the sigil of her office. He cannot help himself: Loki is too curious.

“And you,” Loki says. “What are your own thoughts, when you do not speak for the people?” He cants his head. “It is possible that in another timeline we never come to Sakaar, and that you remain there.”

She raises her eyebrows, but it is a sign of how far all of them have come that she looks more
introspective than affronted to be asked. “I think that I have seen what the end of the universe looked like once before, and this time it looks worse,” she says bluntly. “We have done what we can here, but all worlds are falling victim to violence and madness. The situation is unsustainable. If a reversal means that I end up working for that bastard on Sakaar for the rest of my miserable days, that is an inconsequential price to pay. I was quite resigned to it at the time.”

Beside him, Thor nearly bites through his lip at the word “price,” and Loki swallows, his mouth gone dry. If she notices she does not heed them. “From what I am told, however, we are not yet speaking in absolutes,” she says. “You do not know if such a thing is possible?”

“Loki will uncover the way,” Thor answers, looking like he wishes he did not have so much confidence in Loki’s abilities, but increasingly resigned to it. Loki is overwhelmed with the need to kiss him.

Thor hesitates, then says, “There is something else I would like to discuss with you, Brunnhilde. Since New Asgard prospers—for that, I thank the Gods—I have also come here to ask if you might be persuaded to leave it until our plans are more resolved. I have been lax in my duties to the Avengers, and they could hugely benefit from your help. It is my hope, too, that your wisdom and experience will assist us in our other endeavors.”

Loki blinks at his brother, surprised by this request, which he had no knowledge of; the Valkyrie blinks also, though she hardly appears taken aback.

She grins crookedly at Thor. “You mean to take away my plow, and hand me a sword again?”

Thor nods, and she gives a delighted bark of a laugh. “Took you long enough,” she says. “I am a truly terrible farmer. I make for a better administrator, I’ll give you that, but New Asgard can do without me for a while—that was the point of the elections, of the council you wanted, hey?” She sets down her tankard, grinning now at them both. “I guess we’re getting the old team back together.”

Thor brightens—looks happier than Loki has seen him appear since the morning Loki awoke with a memory of the past. Loki quite understands the practicality of the arrangement: Thor has neatly arranged for a capable replacement that will enable him to spend more time with Loki without neglecting the Avengers, and the Valkyrie is certainly as wise as she is formidable.

But he wonders if it goes deeper than that: there are few enough people these days that Thor can confide in who understand their whole history. Just as Loki has come to dearly value Wong, and cannot imagine not having him to bounce ideas off of and speak of close-held things, Loki realizes that Thor, who was always at the center of a circle of bosom companions, longs for his friends. It is a trying time for all concerned, and Thor the last to reach out for support.

“Come on,” she says to Thor, as though she, too, is quick to parse this. “If you’re done stuffing your gullet, let’s go find me some proper gear. Race you to the armory,” she says, and then both of them are off like a shot, leaving Loki at the table.

He shakes his head, hides a smile behind his mug of coffee, and finishes his breakfast in peace.

* * *

The Valkyrie fits in seamlessly with the Avengers. It is as though she joined in the beginning.
Loki is only a little jealous at how easily she slips into the life of the compound, how readily she is embraced by the others, how well she does on heroic missions. He knows he had a very different learning curve, and he is grateful to have her here.

Thor is immensely cheered by her presence, going on long hikes with her in the woods that he returns from steady and thoughtful. Bruce is ecstatic to be reunited, talking up their Sakaarian adventures to anyone who will listen, and insisting that she take the room beside his. The old Revengers team is indeed back together and sharing an upstairs hallway.

Steve and Rhodey are glad enough to have such a highly skilled warrior to shore up their ranks; Rocket is thrilled to have found a drinking companion who can match him shot for shot. Wong is fascinated by her long and storied life, says that he would much like to write a book for his library about it. Unsaid is the reason why he does not write it—the expectation that the book would soon be undone.

Natasha and Loki invite her to join their sparring sessions, and it occurs to Loki as she fights with and alongside them that she is being trained by perhaps the two most accomplished female warriors in the galaxy.

The Valkyrie does not even pause to blink when Loki first shows herself in this body, but her behavior shifts at once. She flirts with Loki outrageously, putting even Rocket’s overtures to shame, but does so with a mix of such silky grace and suggestive obscenity that Loki is in a perpetual state of blushing about it. Thor is always there to watch their sessions now when he is permitted, happily taking up the part of a brute warrior for them to knock down. He jokes that he is also there to ensure that Brunnhilde does not carry off his lady, and it is only half a joke.

Natasha was right about being better in this form: Loki has learned to be quick and slippery and deadly, every strike unexpected by her opponent before it lands, and the afternoon when she manages to disarm Thor under her teachers’ approving watch is one of the finest she recalls in a long history of fighting.

Thor ends the session on his knees, with Loki’s blade at his throat, and Natasha wolf-whistles, calls time, declares the victor. It is a credit to Thor that he is unembarrassed, is thrilled at her performance, that the act of being bested by his sister is something that he proudly repeats to anyone who will listen for the rest of the evening, and that night in bed he begs that she best him again.

In the morning, Loki is still awake with Thor’s arms around her as sunlight begins to sift through the blinds.

When he stirs, and yawns, then sees this, Thor’s eyebrows draw together with worry. “Loki? Are you well?”

“Well enough,” she tells him. “I have been trying all night to find the words for how to talk about it.”

Thor sits up beside her in bed, rubs sleep from his eyes, then looks back with a sober expression. “You know that you can say anything to me.” He takes her hand. “Sometimes there are no right words. I beg that you speak whatever it is that you are feeling.”

She sighs, exhausted from lack of rest and too many mental gymnastics. “What your brother told you is true. There is no timeline where I do not choose you, Thor. And I am assured, that when you and he unite again, that you will know me as well. We are one and the same, after all. I do not worry about that.”

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“Then what is it that concerns you?” Thor may be somewhat mollified by Loki’s continued
assurances that in another future—any other future—they will come to something like this once more, but his mouth is a flat line. It is difficult for him to speak of what is to come, even now, and Loki knows that she will be of little help with what she has to say. The night has been an internal battle over whether she should say it at all.

“The—the matter of our joint venture,” Loki says at last. “I want there to be no secrets or lies between us, and the truth is that it was a highly specific series of events that allowed us to propose such a thing. I cannot promise you that I would come to the same decision again, or that we would be in a place where it was viable. Consider, say, that you are King of Asgard. It would be enough if we were able to be together somehow. You would not get a bastard on your sister.”

Loki expects this conversation to be another breaking point for Thor—expects rage, recrimination, tears, even violence delivered unto innocent furniture. But to her astonishment he continues to sit quietly beside her, holding her hand.

His voice is soft and level when he speaks. “And why not?” Loki opens her mouth, but Thor continues, “Of course, we would be married in such a circumstance; I’d not see anyone but our heirs rule Asgard after us. I ask that you do not use such crude language about a child born to us, who would be first and foremost a god, and the most wondrous being I can imagine meeting. But if it is Asgardian protocol and judgment that you fear, Loki, I promise you that I do not. Either we will rule together, or I give up the throne again, and happily. Those are the only alternate futures that I can permit myself to see, and not go mad from grief.”

She did not know that he considered this part of it so far into the unknown distance; she did not understand until now quite how badly he longed for what she could give to him, nor how much this promise of them meant to her until she hears him speak of their child, Thor’s face completely transformed. Her heartbeat quickens in her breast; her heart aches.

“Then I will cease my worries,” Loki tells him, “and trust in your conviction of what is to come, as you trusted your brother’s.”

Thor caresses her hand with his thumb in place of words. His mouth seems full of words that he cannot give voice to, and she struggles terribly with her own.

Loki would tell him this while there is still time: “I am sorry, brother, that it is not to be for us in this life. Truly, I am.”

“As am I,” says Thor. His eyes are luminous, wet. “She was so very beautiful.”

It would be better if he had reached into her chest and torn free her heart; Loki thinks that would hurt less. “She?”

“A dream I had some days ago,” Thor tells her. “It felt prophetic, but how can that be? We held the hands of a little girl between us. She had blue eyes and black hair—I was relieved to see that she took after you—and she laughed, and bid me to carry her upon my shoulders, and called me father.”

“It was just a dream,” Loki whispers, but she claps her free hand over her mouth to keep down a rising need to sob or perhaps to scream.

“I know,” says Thor. “It felt real—as real as my dreams of Ragnarok, only made of light and love in place of fire and death. But we know there are no more prophecies left for us here. I think the vision was a gift, from some kind god, or a taunt, from a cruel one. Either way, I was glad to meet her.”

“You did not say anything of this,” Loki says.
“As you said,” says Thor, gently, for both of them need gentleness here. “It was just a dream.”

She leans in against his chest so that his eyes, so sure and sad, are hidden from view. Thor’s arms lock tight around her, and Loki thinks that no force in nature then could break them apart.

Loki closes her eyes, the better to imagine it. “Tell me more about our daughter.”

It takes some time. Thor runs his hand through Loki’s long hair, once, twice, again. Clears his throat of unshed tears. “Her features were very fine,” he begins. “She seemed to smile often. She wore a blue dress—”

* * *

“Wong!”

Loki dashes to his friend’s side as Wong stumbles from the Sling Ring portal, looking dazed. At the end of the desk, Thor stands up quickly, ready to run for further assistance.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Wong tells them. “I’m just pissed off.” He regains his seat, then gingerly sets the antique pocket-watch in his hand onto the desk.

Loki sighs. “No luck?”

“I estimate I was able to travel back three days,” Wong says. “I put myself down behind the horse’s stable, and saw you at your dressage practice. That was Wednesday, yes?”

“Yes,” Loki exclaims, his eyes widening. Elation and fear course through his veins in equal measure. “Yes! My friend, you did it.”

“I did three days.” Wong rubs his temples, grumpy with what he views as failure. “I fast ran out of strength. Even that far was reckless of me. I was afraid that I would not make it back.”

Loki presses his lips. He does not remind Wong—for he wishes not to remind any of them—that in the case of their final plan there is no need to worry about a return trip. As soon as Thor and Loki’s past self succeed in destroying an Infinity Stone, there will cease to be a place here to return to.

“How long did it appear that I was gone?” Wong asks.

Thor is in charge of the timekeeping. “Twelve point four seconds,” he says promptly.

“I stayed at least two hours or more,” Wong says, “to regain strength for the trip back.”

“Fascinating,” says Loki, meaning it. Despite his ultimate reluctance to see their plan put to action, this is the biggest breakthrough they have accomplished to date.

For days, he and Wong have worked morning, noon, and night to alter the spellwork on the pocket-watch from the British Museum Library. It was an extremely delicate job, coaxing another magician’s magic into doing their bidding, especially with its master long dead.

The operation was often arduous and full of hair-pulling frustrations, so surgically exact that Loki actually found himself wishing Strange was here. But the watch was the only object in their possession already capable of harnessing time, and it had seemed the most logical jumping off-point.
Together, and trading off in shifts when the hours grew too long, they slowly bent and shaped and
remolded the watch’s capabilities, persuading it to travel not only a moment backwards and
forwards, but unlimited years. If their alterations proved correct, then it was only a matter of the
magician’s skill and will in using it to decide not where, but when he would go.

It was Wong’s idea to use his Sling Ring portal to facilitate the journey. Already that rip in the fabric
of reality defied normal dimensions of space, and he hypothesized that it might amplify the watch’s
power. By stepping through with the watch in hand, they would be repurposing the portal to fold a
different sort of distance.

Loki agreed. Though it was increasingly faded in his memory, he thought it very possible that the
portal he saw Thor walk through in the past was the same in shape as the one Wong generated.

And now, a success: a trip through time, at last. But as many problems present themselves at once,
and he and Wong sit across from each other at the table, the watch set before them, to puzzle through
it.

Thor quietly takes his seat again, opens up his book. It is a big, dusty tome of Jötunn folklore. Loki
tries hard not to think too much about his brother’s reading choices lest he lose all focus while there
are such graver considerations.

“The biggest problem as I see it,” Loki says, “is how we generate enough power to go back so far.
You are are a master-level adept, my friend, and if you could only go three days, what hope do we
have for the years we need?”

Wong nods. “The issue of enough energy also concerns me greatly. All the more so, because we
must be certain that the portal opens up exactly where it is intended so that Thor can walk through. I
had to course-correct several times, and improvise with spells I know to facilitate my landing. Thor is
not a sorcerer. He will not be able to do so.”

“Thor suggests that it is almost dinner-time, and perhaps these problems are better approached after
taco night,” says Thor, turning a page.

They both ignore him, as they have long grown used to Thor’s random asides. “We must divide our
resources if we are to succeed,” Loki says to Wong. “It is clear that one magician cannot accomplish
this alone. You are an expert in creating and maintaining a stable dimensional portal. Then I could
cast the spellwork that directs the watch as to when. That makes the most sense, since I know best
where I—that is, where my counterpart was, and when he could be approached alone. There is a
better chance my magic would be more precise in locating him.”

Wong leans forward just a little, but it is a posture that indicates enthusiasm—his eyes are suddenly
bright. “Yes,” he says. “Excellent. And if you were to use the bracelet we have in our possession, the
boost to your power would be considerable. It might be enough to ensure that the watch could reach
that far back in time.”

Loki nearly forgot about the bronze bracelet. He could kiss Wong on both cheeks at this bit of
problem-solving. He is loath to speak the next part, but it must be said: “Then Thor carries the watch,
charged with enough magic that he needn’t be a sorcerer to direct it. He need simply hold it as he
goes through the portal.”

“Oh, good,” from Thor. “Thor might be able to accomplish that.”

Loki shoots his brother a fondly exasperated look, then resumes ignoring him. “It could work,” he
says to Wong, hopeful and also near shaking at the idea of confirmation. “It might work.”
“Still there remains the problem of the portal’s stability,” Wong says. “If we cannot ensure that it is opens on the other end where it needs to go, Thor might end up anywhere in the world at that time—or on other worlds. Or he might never emerge if something goes wrong with the watch’s spell, or on our side.”

“Thor would like to lodge an objection,” Thor says.

“I know my limitations—now, after that test, better than ever,” says Wong. “It is impossible for me to guarantee the portal’s exit point if I am not traveling through it myself, and even if I were to follow behind him, I do not think my power alone would not be enough to sustain it that far.”

Loki chews on his lip. “You must not try. It was only Thor that I saw step through in the memory. And had others come with him, I’m quite sure I would have thought myself under further attack and lashed out.”

His exasperation then is almost too much to bear; they are so close, yet still so far away, and though he longs for a solution Loki also does not wish for it at all. His mind feels muddled and thick. Banging his head upon the desk is a suddenly enticing prospect.

“What if you had an anchor?” Thor asks.

It is one intrusion too far. “Brother, please, this is a critical juncture—”

“Loki.” Across the desk Wong is turning to face his brother. “What did you say, Thor?”

“An anchor. To make sure you were going to the right time and place.” Thor glances at Wong, then with more hesitation at Loki, who is staring; then slowly Thor gets to his feel. He approaches their end of the desk with his old folklore book in hand, places it between them.

“One of the stories I just read. There was a Jötunn who fell in love with one of the Vanir, and he with her. Their parents refused the union and would keep them apart. But his sister took pity upon her brother. The sister was a powerful magic-user, and she made for him two lamps of gold. So long as the Jötunn’s was kept always burning, whenever the Vanir lit his lamp, he would appear in her chamber, and thus visit his love. Now, it was an adventure for him to get the lamp to her in the first place, and later, when they are discovered, her mother smashes it, and he disappears, never to be seen again. I think it’s supposed to be a lesson on the inconstancy of the Vanir after they’ve gotten what they wanted, but I thought—”

Loki holds up a hand, lest his brother continue on to the moral of the story. His hand is shaking. “Thor,” he says. He finds that he cannot say anything else.

“It is a good thought,” Wong tells Thor. “Indeed, twinned objects have often been used to travel between long distances, though I had not thought of back in time. There is the difficulty of knowing where and when an object will exist in the past, and having its duplicate in the present.”

“It would need to be something powerful in its own right, to serve as such an anchor,” Loki says, each syllable feeling ripped from him. It seems the solution that they dearly need, yet still impossible. “We cannot simply light a lamp. That is the stuff of children’s tales.”

Thor leaves the study without a backward glance or another word. At first Loki thinks that he has so offended his brother in his desire to help that Thor has removed himself from the room. But they have come through too much for Thor to exit at moment like this.

So Loki waits, folding his nervous hands upon the table. His mind is racing. His mouth is dry. He feels flushed, over-hot, overheating.
“It is a good thought,” Wong says again, studying him. He pulls his chair up next to Loki’s so that they are sitting side-by-side. He pats Loki’s shoulder in a distracted, comforting way, then reaches for the book Thor was reading to examine the illustration on the tale. A Jötunn maid is bent faithfully over her lamp, filling it with oil to maintain its flickering flame.

“I know,” says Loki.

When Thor comes back into the room his face is pale but the set of his shoulders is determined. He meets Loki’s gaze for only the space of a breath, but it seems to Loki that the entirety of their year passes between them, and in his mind’s eye unfurl the hundreds of nights spent in Thor’s arms since the first night.

Then Thor sets a silk-wrapped package down upon the open book. The silk is sand-colored and extremely clean, indicating that it has not been handled often. Thor flicks back the fold.

“I thought that perhaps she could help,” Thor says.

Even fractured, the shards of Mjölnir have not lost any luster. Their jagged edges catch the light and send it back, glittering like treasure against the silk. With her handle gone and her shattered body, it is hard for Loki to look and not see death in the broken pile, not see their father and Hela and Thor’s face as he lost this part of himself. Loki swallows. Closes his eyes. Travels through time.

Then Loki opens his eyes. It happens as though in a dream: he and Wong stare down at the book, at the ruined hammer, and then they share a look of deep excitement.

“That’s it,” Loki says.

As though in a dream, or a premonition, or a nightmare.

What he was not given to see, when he saw this scene play out in New York as he lay on Strange’s parlor floor—what he did not see was Thor, standing to the side of the desk. Thor, providing the last pieces of the puzzle that they had sought everywhere else.

Thor, who is standing quietly with his head bowed, and a look in his eye like the world has already ended.

Loki is on his feet, and somehow his feet are taking him to Thor. He does not reach so much as collide with his brother, burying himself against Thor’s chest, hiding his face there, inhaling the smell of Thor instead of air. Loki is gasping for breath.

Wong need not feign his interest in Mjölnir’s pieces in order to politely avert his eyes from this display. “There is much power remaining, even in this state,” he tells them, when he draws back from a closer inspection. “Some of the runes are still intact.” With the clinical detachment Wong knows that they cannot muster, he lifts a shard to the light and examines it.

Thor lets out a small, shuddered sigh. Loki guesses that his brother has long wondered whether the sundered hammer also retained its loyalty to him alone. That no longer seems to be the case; that, or Wong is extremely worthy, which Loki would not discount.

“I understand that during the battle for New York, your counterpart would have been present, and carrying the same weapon?” Wong asks Thor.

“That is the case,” says Thor. His arm hooks Loki’s waist; his lips brush against Loki’s hair. “Could she serve to make sure the portal reaches there?”
“I believe so,” Wong answers. “Like calls to like, even across such a distance.”

Loki stops breathing entirely. Thor is saying, “I recovered what was left after Thanos. I knew in my heart that a reforging was impossible, but I would not leave her to erode in the dirt. I never thought the shards could be of consequence to anyone but me.”

“With an object of such immense utility and history, total obliteration is difficult,” Wong says. “The spirit of what it was still remains. That is why it is crucial that you—that you ensure that the Infinity Stone you destroy is truly gone. Else Thanos could still succeed, and all of this have been for nothing.”

“Yes,” says Thor. “I suppose we must discuss strategies for the Stones’ destruction, now that we have the means to get me there.”

The reality of it is too much, too much—

—for all that Loki has worked frantically and fervently towards this end, to have reached it is like stepping over the side of a sheer cliff face. He feels that he is falling, clings to Thor for purchase. He will fall without end from here. It will all be another descent.

“I’ll go and inform the others that our plan proceeds,” Wong says. “We will, of course, still need further tests, and, as you say, much talk of strategy.”

“Thank you,” Thor says for them both.

The door clicks gently closed.

Thor says, “Brother, we knew it was only a matter of time.”

Loki cannot let go of him. Cannot. Must he really let go? Time. Time. Time. Fuck time. Fuck the Norns and all the gods, fuck the Avengers, fuck Midgard, fuck Asgard and New Asgard and fuck Thanos most of all.

“Fuck,” articulates Loki.

Thor is startled into a near laugh at this response. “Was that intended as commentary or a request?”

Loki does not let go, but he draws back so that he can look at Thor. “How are you handling this so well?”

“Because you told me when we first learned of it that I must,” Thor tells him, tipping Loki’s chin up with one hand, “and because if I react as I would like to, I would level the compound and a large area of land around it, and that feels unhelpful.”

Indeed, when Loki has the chance to more closely examine Thor’s face, he sees his clenched jaw, the nervous twitch of muscle in his cheek, the lightning that threatens his eyes. Thor is barely holding himself together, but he is standing calm and still for Loki’s sake.

Loki kisses him, a crush of lips full of anger and despair but also, most of all—“I love you,” Loki says against Thor’s mouth. “I love you. I love you.”

Thor holds onto him, kisses him and kisses him, pulls Loki back into their present and keeps him there.

Loki stops falling, caught. But he won’t stop saying it. He won’t ever stop. “I love you.”
“You will again,” says Thor.

* * *

Dinner that night is a subdued affair at first.

It fast turns into a strategy session—could not be anything else. Loki wishes he could tune out of it, that he could grab Thor and wait it out with him upstairs in bed, but that is impossible.

They are essential, and the entirety of the plan if the travel is successful hinges on Thor. Loki would do anything to take that burden from his brother if he could.

He cannot. His head throbs with it. He feels like a piece of paper that is being slowly torn apart along uneven lines.

As always, Thor rises to the challenge, stays engaged in every debate, nods seriously in response to questions and answers and whatever it is people are saying to him.

It’s possible that Loki is, in fact, tuning out, despite his best intentions.

His brain is full of white noise. He may be providing a fine example of how to appear that you are paying attention while actually staring at the wall.

There are maps on the dinner table and plans being drawn up and Bruce has wheeled out his beloved whiteboard. The Valkyrie is already tipsy and Loki would much like to join her, but he cannot coordinate the movement between placing his hand around a cup and lifting it to his mouth.

It’s more than somewhat probable that he is losing his mind. He has done so before.

He begins to hear only static.

“Loki?”

His name. Fuck. He has the unfortunate feeling that it has been said several times. Steve waves a hand in front of his eyes and Loki has to tell himself not to catch Steve’s hand and break it. That’s not what he’s supposed to do.

Word. Say a word. They want words from him.

“...Yes?”

Yes. Yes is a word that works. He needs to focus. He’s important here. They’re all watching him.

None of them matter save Thor. They are nothing. Thor is watching him. Thor is always watching him. He should take Thor and go, leave them here to crumble into dust like all the rest.

A voice. Steve—he thinks it is Steve, but it may well be Rhodey—says, “I said, can you tell us how Thor convinces you in the past to help him? He’ll be working against the clock on this. Faster we can get him to move—”

“No,” Loki lies. “I’m afraid I don’t know the specifics. It was indistinct, but I know that in the end I agreed.”
Thor is looking at him again. Thor knows that he is lying. Thor is frowning. He hates it when Thor frowns.

“I’ve calculated the force that Stormbreaker would need to theoretically fracture a Stone, and run many simulations,” Shuri says, as though eager to move them to a more helpful line of inquiry. Oh. He hadn’t realized the Princess was present. Where is she? He does not see her in the room. Oh. The tablet set upon the table-top. Midgard has useful magic sometimes. Not often. Not enough.

“I believe it to be possible as a last resort,” Shuri continues. “I can’t say if the act would endanger Thor, but the effort it would take him would be extremely taxing.”

Thor says something to that, likely something brave and good. Loki is staring at his hands. Loki is not good. They have been lying to him. Liars, all.

Bruce is asking him questions about the Infinity Stones, keeps asking and asking. Finally Loki says, to make him stop asking, “The Mind Stone was far more powerful than even I knew. It transformed your Maximoffs and the one you call Vision. It gave them immense capabilities. I believe I—that is, the other me—will be able to use it to enhance my powers in order to destroy the Tesseract, and with it the Space Stone. Then Thor may try to destroy the Mind Stone if he likes. Better two Stones gone than one, to be safer. But it is unlikely that there will be time for that. As soon as the Space Stone is gone, all of this will cease to exist. And so will Thor.”

That sounded smart and not like his mind is melting and leaking out of his ears. Yes. They leave him alone again. When Thor goes through the portal Loki will be alone again and then he will have never existed here at all.

Incredible that someone so kind and attractive and monumentally solid as Thor could fade away into nothing. There is so much of him. Where will he go? He loves Loki. What happens to love when time stops? Where does it go?

What will happen to Thor? Will Loki, past Loki, not this Loki, no, the other one, the one he hates, the one they all hate, even Thor—will that Loki have to watch Thor vanish as though he never was?

Will it take a while, Thor going to opaque and then translucent, and then finally gone, or will it happen all at once? Even though Loki hates the other Loki he feels bad on this account. He would not want to watch that.

Luckily he will have ceased to exist.

Steve is whispering to Thor now. They’re whispering about him. Loki knows. It can be no one else. They must see him sweating. They’re all watching him again. More whispering. They still don’t trust him. He could destroy them all. Maybe that’s why.

There is a talking raccoon sitting on the kitchen counter-top drinking a bottle of sparkling wine.

Loki puts a hand over his mouth to stop himself from laughing. It’s the funniest thing he’s seen in his entire life. Thor bargained for Loki’s life and gave up most of his own for it but that wasn’t enough.

What a grand joke this has all been. He could have told Thor that they never really let you come back from being dead, that it was a farce all along. He would have warned Thor except he was dead at the time. Dead as a doornail, the Midgardians say, which is strange because neither doors nor their nails are alive or dead.

Loki was dead. Death was a void like the one he fell through after he found out he was a lie and he fell and fell until Thanos found him and hurt him. Then Thanos found him again and he was dead
again and then he was falling again and then—

Thor. Thor at his side, his arm around Loki holding him up. Thor is doing that now again. Time is an infinite circle and everything happens again and again and again except what has happened here which will stop. Thor will never love him like this again even though they have both lied and said that he would. Maybe it is the first lie that Thor ever told.

“Loki. You are burning with fever, brother,” Thor is saying. Thor is touching his forehead. The back of Thor’s hand feels cool even though it is Loki who is a Frost Giant. Some giant! If he had not been so small they would have kept him and not left him to be found by the enemy and raised as a lie. Thor says that he’s not a monster but Thor also says that he will love Loki again even though they’re going back to New York and Thor hated him there. No, Thor wanted him then but he lied to himself about it and so he is lying to Loki also about whether he is a monster or not. Maybe Loki learned lying first from Thor. “Let us go upstairs.”

“That’s preposterous,” Loki tells him. His hands flex green with seidr. He has no intention of going upstairs, wherever that is. “You’re lying. I’ve never been ill a day in my life except all the times when I was dead.”

“Psychogenic fever,” Bruce diagnoses to the Valkyrie. “Triggered by chronic stress or exposure to highly emotional events.”

“Nobody asked you,” Loki snaps. Bruce is also a monster and he doesn’t want to be one either but when he’s not green he is gentle and sweet and like Thor and Loki is not that so Bruce is only half-monster while Loki is full-blooded.

“Or both of those at once,” says the Valkyrie. Oh, how Loki could hate her if he tried. He could break her apart into smaller and smaller and smaller pieces until there was nothing left. He sees the way she looks at Thor and if Loki weren’t here Thor would look back at her. Loki sees all, why won’t they understand?

Steve is sitting next to him all of a sudden. He speaks quietly, just for Loki, which Loki appreciates. “You know I’ve never lied to you, Loki. Never had any reason to. And I’m telling you, pal, you’ve got a fever, and you look—we used to call it shell shock. Let Thor take you upstairs.”

Loki returns the favor of Steve’s low voice by leaning in to whisper in his ear. “You only lie to yourself, Captain.”

What fun! Steve doesn’t have a follow-up to their game after that but now Thor is talking to someone else and it’s a conspiracy against him, Loki knows. He should disappear before this can go any further only he can’t.

“I cannot dampen his magic for long,” Wong tells Thor. This betrayal hurts. Wounds. Injures. Pains. Bleeds. He hadn’t marked Wong for a traitor but they are traitors and liars all. “We must have him rest and try to break this delirium. I know a spell for sleep that could—”

“Et tu, Wong?” Loki demands.

The raccoon on the countertop laughs at that and Loki laughs with him because really a raccoon laughing is a riotous sight. The raccoon is also wearing pants and a gun, which makes it all the funnier and patently absurd.

“Do it,” says Thor. In the end even Thor betrays him. Loki should have known.

When Thor stops loving him time will stop and the planets will stop revolving around the sun and the
sun will stop. The sun will shine on us again, he’d told Thor, but that was nonsense. Loki meant nothing by it. Had only hoped to make Thor feel better and to be honest he liked the poetic contrast since he was about to go into darkness because Thanos was going to make him stop forever.

No more sunlight, no more Thor who is bright as sunlight and as good. When Thor goes through the portal the sun will go out. It is dark already.

Darkening. Darker. Loki goes to sleep.

* * *

He is so, so hungry.

It’s the growl of Loki’s stomach that urges him towards consciousness. Once a ritual had called for him to go lengthy days without food, but this feels worse. He lifts heavy eyelids in order to request a sandwich.

Thor is sitting in the armchair by the window, reading his book of Jötunn folklore. The blinds are drawn, and Loki cannot see the time of day or seem to recall it.

“Is it time for breakfast or for dinner?” Loki asks his brother. His voice emerges thready. His mouth is parched, his lips too dry when he tests them with his tongue.

Thor’s head snaps up, and then he is crouching by the bed, taking one of Loki’s hands between his own, faster than Loki can get in a double blink.

“Loki,” Thor says, anxious gaze searching Loki’s face, hungry eyes—hungrier even than Loki is hungry—devouring him. “How do you feel?”

“Not my usual chipper self,” Loki admits. He aches all over, as though he has been running for miles and miles without rest. His skin feels clammy, his nightshirt clinging to his skin. A piercing headache is set up directly behind his eyes. “Mostly hungry. We need to stop waking up like this. It seems once again you have been roped into nurse-maiding me, though I do appreciate the bedside manner. Was it another premonition? I can’t quite—”

Memory is filtering back by degrees, hazy and full of holes. He remembers their breakthrough. Remembers following Thor with the intention to eat tacos and talk strategy. He remembers relief that at long last their search appeared over and an all-encompassing sickly dread at what lay before them threatening to flatten him completely. He remembers sweating, fighting for words, fighting with words—he remembers—

“What happened to me?”

Thor presses Loki’s hand. “Bruce says that there is a sort of fever that can be brought on by great stress. It is his opinion—though he reminds us he is no expert—that fevers are particularly threatening to Jötunn physiology. A high body temperature that might inconvenience a Midgardian quickly became dangerous to you, and advanced as fast. Your—reasoning—was first affected.”

Loki feels the blood drain from his face. “What did I do? Did I hurt anyone?”

Thor gives him an odd sideways look. “Certainly not. The danger was to yourself, that you would
use your magic and slip away from us. You were confused, disoriented. We thought it better to keep you asleep until the fever broke.”

“And how long was that?”

“It has been four days,” says Thor, and Loki starts at this, stares at him. “You got worse before you got better.”

Thor is trying to keep his face carefully blank, but Loki knows him far too well not to read between the lines. The dense shadows under his eyes are proof that Thor has been Loki’s obverse, and not slept much at all in that same stretch of days.

“I am sorry to have worried you,” Loki tells him. He cups Thor’s cheek with his free hand. “As though we needed further complications at a time like this. And so much time wasted.” Then he drops his eyes, drops his hand. He tastes bitterness, feels it. “How utterly pathetic of me.”

“What did you say?” Thor looks angry, but on Loki’s behalf—as though the words used against Loki are an affront to him no matter that they are Loki’s words.

“I broke, Thor,” Loki says, “and without even consciously intending to. At least a spectacular fit of pique would have been satisfying and more expected from me. No; I am weak, and broke under that weakness, made myself even weaker. I endangered everything.”

“You had worked yourself morning to night—sometimes until dawn—for many days,” Thor says. “You have borne the burden of searching for answers for months. You brought me back to myself when at first I could not accept the pain of what we must do. You bore that pain immediately and did not flinch from it. There is nothing that is weak about you, brother. You are stronger than I am.”

Loki does not know what to say to that, and Thor will be even more upset if he laughs in his face at the very idea of it. “I would have something to eat,” he says, changing the topic before Thor makes any more dreadfully misguided statements. “Then I would have you rest beside me, and give me the tidings you do not wish to give me.”

“How did you—”

“You are an open book for me to read, my love,” Loki says, and Thor’s expression then can be read as adoring commingled with tragic. Tragically adoring. “And because we both know what must be.”

“Food first,” says Thor.

He brings Loki soup and bread and cheese and fresh juice, then hovers until all of it is consumed. “The others are happy to hear that you are feeling better.”

Additional fevered memories are more readily available to Loki the longer he is awake. “I owe them all apologies for my behavior.”

“There is not a one of them that blames you,” Thor says. “All have been concerned for your health, and all contributed to your recovery. The Princess Shuri brought healing technology from Wakanda, and her own expertise, that proved a turning point.”

“Shuri is here?” Loki opens his mouth in surprise. Closes it.

“She insisted, and would not be persuaded otherwise,” Thor says, taking Loki’s empty tray and setting it on the desk. “She and General Okoye came to assist, and they remain for our final councils.” Thor returns to the bed and quite collapses beside him, with a sigh of relief that tells Loki
his brother has indeed not slept for days. Thor reaches for his hand again, turns it palm up and examines the lines there. “Your friends care deeply for you, Loki. Their actions speak to it, but they would say the same if you asked them.”

Loki has no ready reply to such a concept. “Soda?”

“I have seen to her care and exercise myself,” Thor tells him. “She is disgruntled every time I arrive and am not you, but she thrives.”

“Thank you,” Loki says. “I don’t know how I will say goodbye to her. In a way I am glad that she cannot understand.” His throat feels tight; they might as well have the rest of it out now. He lies down, turns over in bed, bids Thor to do the same and face him. “Tell me your tidings.”

Thor takes in a slow breath, lets it out on an even longer exhale. “The U.N. has voted, and gathered the responses from the worlds that we could reach. All are in favor of going forward with the plan.”

Loki nods. He nods so that he will not weep. The time for weeping will come again, he is sure, but it is not now. “There was not a single dissent?”

“No,” says Thor.

Loki nods again. “And when are we to try?”

“Wong recommended the time of the new moon. Something about the energies of certain planetary alignments. I expect you would better understand.”

Loki nods. All he can do is nod.

“It comes next week. On—on Thursday.”

“Auspicious,” Loki notes. “It will most certainly be your day to carry.” Less than a week. Less than a week until the end of the world. Until the end of them. He is nauseous with it, might tip over if he were not already lying down. He puts his hands on Thor for balance—feels Thor’s wonderful bicep, the exceptional bristle of his beard. If he could he would spend all the time between then and now touching Thor.

“Brother,” Thor says, then hesitates; then he looks decided, and plunges on. “So much depends on my success. If something were to go wrong—”

“It won’t,” Loki tells him, with far greater assurance than he feels. Thor cannot go into this doubting his role in it.

“But if—”

Loki says: “If something were to happen to you, the Avengers and the others here and the other worlds would regroup and seek some other solution, or resign themselves that nothing can be done about the Gauntlet’s damage. But we are bound by the terms you bargained for me, and if you meet some end, mercifully, I will follow, and not have to know this life without you. It is a comfort.”

“Loki.” Thor pulls him into a gentle kiss, soft and sweet and sad. “Loki. How I love you.”

“And how is that?”

“Without end,” says Thor. He touches Loki’s cheek with two fingers, silent while he traces out the lines of Loki’s features. Then Thor says, “You were asked in your fever what I said to your past self
that convinced you to help me. I do not know if you would not say because of your confusion, or for another reason; but I think that you do remember. Can you tell me, brother?"

“I would have lied about that whether I was in my right mind or not,” Loki confirms. “Because it is for us alone. It is simple, really, and should not surprise you. You will tell me—him—” It feels better to think of that man as someone else entirely. “—you will tell him about this.”

And he leans in and kisses Thor, with considerably more of a passionate bite behind it than the last kiss.

Thor is looking at Loki’s mouth when he draws back. “All of it?”

“All that you can manage,” Loki says. “The more details you provide, the more he will believe that it is not some trick or trap or test from Thanos. He will be quite skeptical in the beginning. But he will be persuaded—you are very persuasive, brother—and he will help you. What happens after that decision is made I know not, but I must believe that together you and he will not fail in the task.”

Thor nods, though his eyes go cloudy with lingering doubt. “We were—it was a low point for us,” he says, which is a diplomatic way of putting it. “And you had much at stake. We had already fought. I am afraid that I will not have the right words, and say something wrong that will offend you—him.”

“He will be surprised,” Loki says, which is a mild way of putting it. There is more that he would tell Thor, but he cannot, not yet—and since he does not wish for his brother to catch him in another lie, he tells the truth. “Even shocked. But in the end he will believe you. He will choose you, Thor.”

Loki takes Thor’s face between his hands, looks into those fathomless eyes with total conviction. “I will always choose you.”

“And I, you.” Thor leans in close, so that their foreheads touch. They hold like that a long time, eyes closed, breathing in each other’s air.

“What did you do while I slept?” Loki wants to know, wants to change the subject. “Save spending too much time staring at me and not sleeping.”

Thor relents into a little smile to hear it. “I am predictable,” he says. “Other than staring at you and not sleeping, there has been much talk of strategy. Some sparring, when one of our friends would manage to drag me from here, or Wong or Bruce or the Princess made me leave while they attended to you. Missions—the people most opposed to the our plan are the criminals who have glutted themselves on blood and gold, and do not wish to see a return to earlier days. There have been disturbances.” Thor threads a hand into Loki’s hair, and Loki imagines that is a bit of an understatement. “But mostly I have watched you, and read, when it was quiet.”

“Tell me a story,” says Loki.

Thor pauses, his cheeks pink; he flushes more to be asked such a request than to be asked to charge into riots and fires and bloody conflict. “A happy or a sad one?”

“All stories are both happy and sad,” Loki says.

“I have been reading many,” Thor tells him, knitting his brow in a manner that says he is thinking hard. “This one I read last night—I think I can recall how it goes. The King of Jotunheim had a daughter and no sons. As she grew, she proved to be very wise, and very strong, and very fair—the King adored her, as did the rest of the Jötnar. Tradition said that she could not become Queen without a husband. Yet she would have none. Every man who came to court her proved
Loki settles in against Thor, held in the warm circle of his brother’s arms, his head set upon Thor’s chest, where he can hear Thor’s heart beating.

Thor says, “Her childhood companion, who was now her advisor, suggested that they make a contest of it. All who sought to wed her would come, and challenge one another not only in strength but in wisdom, and the winner would win her hand. Seeing no other option, she at last agreed. Hundreds of high-born men from across the Realms poured in. The Jötunn Princess watched them from afar, and saw that none of them pleased her. She grew frightened of the teeming numbers, but her advisor assured her that soon they would be much reduced.

“Her clever friend called for a fearsome obstacle course to be built, one so treacherous and difficult to cross that full half the men departed after looking upon it, for they valued their lives more than this chance at a kingdom. The others grumbled and said it was unfair, so the advisor went first through it himself to show that it could be done. After that, many men tried; and many men were injured and maimed, and some did lose their lives. Only three others came through it, all of noble blood, all bloodied in the task: a Jötunn, an Asgardian, and one of the Vanir.”

Loki yawns, not out of boredom but of great satisfaction, burrowing further against Thor. “I know how stories like this go,” he says. “One of them is a worthy peasant who fooled his way into the contest, and will win, and then be recognized as a king’s lost son after all.”

“Do you wish for me to tell it?” Thor asks, mock-exasperated. Loki can hear the smile in his voice. “Right now there is nothing more that I want,” says Loki.

“To test their wisdom, the advisor arranged that each man should pass a day in the company of the Princess, to learn as much as he could about her, and she him; and then, from this knowledge, bring her a gift that would please her best. She did not favor any of them, but at last agreed: for he explained that it would test which man was more attentive, and sincere in his intentions, and which would love her most beyond the prize of her crown. This choice of the gift would matter far more in a husband, he said, than which was stronger or faster or of nobler status. So she passed a day in discussion with each, and thereafter they went to seek a gift.”

“The correct answer is usually salt,” says Loki. “Or am I mixing up my myths?”

Thor rolls over on top of him in one fluid motion, holds himself propped up on his elbows so that his weight is not too much. Loki, charmed by this development, is quick to wrap Thor in greedy limbs, while his brother laughs and says, “In this case that is not the right answer, though the Vanir did bring back rare and exotic spices as his gift, for she greatly enjoyed flavorful food. They arrived in a magical chest that always remained full.”

“I was so close,” Loki laments.

“The Asgardian brought for her a beautiful spear, chased in gold, that always aimed straight and true, for she was a skilled warrior in her own right. The Jötunn found for her an enchanted statue of a songbird, covered in sparkling gems, that always sang the prettiest songs, for dearly did she prize music.”

“Hmm,” says Loki. “All good choices. They must have paid attention. Who knew that a Vanir could listen to anything but the sound of their own voice?”

Thor tilts down to kiss his lips to hush him. Then he says, “All that night the Princess sat with her
advisor as they considered the gifts and the men. He made a case for each of them, presenting them fairly, in their best lights, and favoring none of them. He said that no one could make the final decision but she, and that she must trust her heart above all else. After that, even when she finally slept, her dreams were tormented, and she tossed and turned. She could not choose, yet she knew she must. By morning, at last, the answer came to her, and she was decided.”

“I’m on tenterhooks,” says Loki.

Thor studies his face, determines that for once Loki is not being sarcastic, kisses him again, draws back. “The next day the court was called to audience. Her father the King swore before all that the selection was hers to make, and that none would question it. The Princess stood to address her people, and then she announced that she would have none of the suitors.”

“Smart woman,” says Loki. “I did not expect this to become a tale of Jötunn female empowerment.”

Thor kisses him a third time toward quiet. “The court was in an uproar. The affronted suitors arguing, the King dismayed, the people buzzing with confusion. The Princess spoke on. She did, however, hope to take a husband, she told them. And she turned to her advisor, who stood always by her side, and asked for his hand.”

“Oh that is empowering,” says Loki, delighted. “More princesses should get to do that. It’s only fair.”

“Indeed,” Thor agrees. “Her old friend at once fell to his knees before her and kissed her hand. She told the court that he had revealed himself to be the bravest among them, risking first the terrible obstacle course to show others that it could be done. Then he had given her the rarest of gifts: the total trust that she alone knew her own heart, and the opportunity to choose a suitor who came from a place of love instead of greed. And in the last he had proven himself the most worthy, for he argued the cause of each man, faithful and unselfish to the last, though he had in secret loved her himself for all their years together, and she him.”

“I did like him,” Loki says. “I was thinking from the beginning that it should be him.”

This time Thor throws his head back in a laugh, and his whole splendid body shakes above Loki. Loki reels him closer, and Thor is distracted by the line of Loki’s neck into kissing it.

“And then what happened?”

“He accepted, with only joy in his heart,” Thor tells Loki’s neck. “Their wedding was a splendid affair that thousands attended, that was not forgotten for centuries. The three unsuitable suitors then in turn became the couple’s trusted advisors, for each man had still shown himself to be stronger and wiser than most. And the Queen and her King, when it was time for them to rule, were just and good and maintained every grace, and all was plenty.”

“I think you made up the last part,” Loki says. “There’s not nearly enough gnawing of bones for a Jötunn folktale.”

In response, Thor gnaws upon his neck, and Loki is surprised into a giddy shriek, then soon quieted by Thor’s gentler lips and silken tongue at his ear.

“Are you guys okay?” Bruce shouts through the wall. “Do you need medical assistance?”

“Never better,” Loki calls back, and means it.

Thor’s eyes are glittering. “Did you like the story?”
“I did,” Loki tells him. “Better yet, I love the storyteller. However shall I pay him for the service?”

“Brother,” Thor says, eager and restrained all at once, “you are so newly recovered. We can just—”

“Thor Odinson,” Loki pronounces, enunciating clearly. “We have five days left to us in this lifetime. If you think that I don’t intend to spend every conceivable moment that I can with you fucking me and me fucking you in some capacity—well. It’s like you don’t know me at all.”

“Loki Odinson,” says Thor to that, his sea-silver eye going to lust-black. “I know you well. At the end of those days you name, I intend to know you better than I know myself.”

“I love it when we agree,” says Loki.

* * *
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Loki must believe that they will find their way back to this in another life, or else meet in a place far away from life. Must believe, or his heart will eat him up until all that is left is dust.

Chapter Notes

All art by malefeministthor, the true hero of the tale.

I'm on tumblr, and I heart you.
With most major strategies settled and meetings with governing bodies behind them, the Avengers and their guests begin to settle their affairs.

Loki passes a cheerful afternoon in Soda’s paddock with Shuri. The Princess is an accomplished and most impressive horsewoman, and even Soda defers to her adoringly. They switch off showing each other tricks of the trade for hours, and showing off for each other.

At first their audience consists of Thor and Okoye perched watching on the fence, but soon they are joined by Rocket and Rhodey, and Natasha seems disappointed when she arrives just as they’re cooling Soda down.

This prompts the promise of a special sparring session to be held the next day before Shuri and Okoye depart for Wakanda—women only, you understand—a declaration that receives grumbling
The rest go up to ready dinner while Shuri stays to help Loki groom Soda and get her settled for the night.

“You said that you would spar with us?” The Princess asks, polite, patting Soda’s neck affectionately while the mare gazes at her as though she is quite finished with Loki.

Loki has forgotten that Shuri was not here—that he had not shared this part of himself with her. “Yes,” he says, wondering how Shuri’s incredible mind might best process it. “I am—I am two systems, run on one program.”

She smiles, tips her head. “Would you show me, Loki?”

“Of course,” Loki says. It is so easy to slip into this skin now, it is no thought at all.

Shuri does not blink; her wide eyes go wider, and her smile broader. She says, “Oh, but you must tell me more. I must know everything.”

“That’s rather a long story,” Loki says. She offers Shuri her arm, and the little Princess takes it. They stroll unhurried up the winding path to the compound. “What do you know about Frost Giants?”

* * *

Later that night, thinking about the earlier days of discovering herself that she recounted to Shuri, Loki says to Thor, “Do you remember when I first showed you?”

Thor is breathing hard, quite drenched in sweat, still buried deep inside of her. “Pardon?” he says, dazed from extremely taxing work. Full marks, however. She ruffles his hair.

“This form,” she says. “We were—”

“Barely a hundred years old,” says Thor. “Out hunting together. You declared that women were better with a bow, their fingers more deft, and when I turned to you next, you were you.”

A hidden layer of ice cracks in Loki’s heart. She scratches her nails down his back approvingly. “It took you so long to say anything,” she says. “I thought you might recoil.”

“I swallowed my tongue,” Thor says. “I was speechless. I had never seen a maiden so lovely. But if you recall, at last when I recovered my will to speak, I said—”

“’Our competition is already lost, sister, for I have no such advantage,’” Loki recites. She smiles, sharp-toothed, as she did then. “I beat you to every stag.”

“You did at that,” Thor says, admiring. His voice at her ear is a whisper, a secret. “How desperately I wanted you then and there in the woods.”

“Ha,” says Loki, much amused, and as moved. “As though you would’ve known what to do with me.”

“Only allow me to continue to demonstrate what I have learned since,” Thor says, his low tone turning into supplication.
She allows it.

* * *

The compound has never seen the like of this sparring session. They draw lots to choose teams, and Loki and Okoye are paired up against the trio of Valkyrie, Natasha, and Shuri.

Okoye gives her an appraising once-over sharp enough to cut glass as they choose their staves from a freshly purchased pile. But she offers no commentary on Loki’s appearance. “The others have been your teachers and teammates. Do your best to show me where their weaknesses lie with your blows, that I will best know where to aim my own. They will be doubly vulnerable.” She ducks her head. “You may leave Shuri to me. I taught her everything she knows. So I expect her to be the most challenging of the lot.”

Loki nods, and grins at that; to have one of the finest strategists and seasoned warriors on the planet on her side seems like a favorable start to the skirmish. They square off to test each other with a few practice hits before the engagement.

“I must say,” says Okoye, “when I was first told of your brother’s plan to return you, I was quite certain that I would need to kill you one day.”

Loki won’t let Okoye, or her words, get in under her guard, pushing back an aggressive attack. “You face said as much when we met,” she answers, and nearly gets an answering smile. “And what is your assessment now?”

“You seek to do the world—the galaxy—the greatest of good,” Okoye says, making Loki jump high as the staff sweeps down to try and catch her feet. “Should you succeed in bringing us back T’Challa, and restoring my kingdom to what it was before Thanos came—well. Were we still in this timeline, I would nominate you to be an honorary citizen of Wakanda.”

“High praise,” Loki pants, unable now to land even a single parried blow upon Okoye’s staff; Okoye spins too quickly out of reach. Yes, an encouraging start to the fight indeed.


“General,” says Loki, “I leave that to your expert opinion.”

“You will suffice,” Okoye says, and this time, Loki earns a fleeting smile that fast turns hard and unyielding as vibranium. Loki is so impressed that she tries her best to replicate this expression, and she thinks they succeed in making the competition uneasy before Rhodey, who is judging the match for fairness, even blows his whistle.

Loki glances once towards the stands where Thor sits between Rocket and Bruce, with Steve and Clint and Wong on the riser behind them. Rocket has an enormous bowl of popcorn balanced on his lap and is chattering away—likely trying to make and take bets, if one were to guess—but Thor isn’t paying attention to him. His eyes were on Loki from the start and haven’t left, and she knows they will not leave her for the entirety of it.

When Thor sees her looking he gives a little thumbs-up that would be adorably endearing if it were not so distracting. She loves him too much. If love alone were fuel for battle she would be unstoppable.
Luckily, she has Okoye, who proves to be a force of nature: a brutal, unsparing force. It isn’t easy—it’s far from easy—it might be the most involved and difficult fight of Loki’s life. Fighting her brother on the Bifrost was child’s play compared to this pack of unleashed Valkyries.

The real Valkyrie amongst them proves the hardest to take down, though the world’s deadliest assassin and the princess trained to be a warrior since birth give them—and likely Rocket’s betting pool—a run for their money.

Natasha and Valkyrie taught Loki all the finest moves she knows in this body, and they can anticipate most of them before they arrive, just as she knows their weaknesses. In the end it turns out that they have trained her too well.

Because Loki is paired up with a wizard of weaponry, and she can feel Thor’s gaze tracking her like lightning on her skin; if she is not unstoppable, she is indefatigable. When Rhodey calls the match for them, it is all that she can do not to ignite.

* * *

It’s difficult to say goodbye when Shuri and Okoye depart, for all of them must consider that it is a final departure.

Okoye is philosophical in her approach. When she grasps Loki’s wrist, and he hers, Okoye says, “I hope someday that we will fight again together.” Her grip is firm and sure. “Hopefully that, and I will not have to try and kill you.”

It’s said straight-faced, with clear, judicious eyes, but the hint of a smile turns her lips once more. Their shared victory unites them.

“That is a hope I hold dear as well, General,” Loki says.

Shuri throws her arms around him without reservation. “Loki,” she tells him softly, “you have been a good friend to me. Thank you for sharing so much of what you know. I wish there was some way for me to remember it.”

He is unused to hugging, and grips at her shoulder awkwardly, but does not deny that it makes him feel warm to his core that such a wondrous being would embrace him before all their friends. Only Thor was also on the receiving end of such a hug.

“You will not need any of that,” Loki says, standing back, but keeping his hands on her shoulders. “You have many years ahead of you for learning, and you will learn it all once more—from better teachers that you will fast surpass. Such greatness lies in wait for you.” He squeezes her shoulders, a bit less awkward this time, before letting go.

Shuri turns back and waves to them all on the lawn on her way up the Wakandan craft’s ramp; her brilliant gaze, usually so layered with grief, shows only courage. She disappears into the ship, and then they are far away in the sky, a point receding in the distance.

* * *
Loki and Wong sit across from each other at their desk in the study. Instead of the usual stacks of books and scattered, ancient objects, a chessboard lies between them. They picked it up their second time in Turkey, shortly before an embarrassing incident with a djinn they chose not to share with the others upon return.

Loki has won two games, Wong three, and they are on their sixth when Loki says, “You are the best friend that I have ever had.”

Wong’s placid expression does not waver, nor his eyes from the board. “If you think to distract me so that you can capture my bishop,” he says, “I see right through you.”

Loki, close to tears, instead finds himself grinning. “You always have, right from the start,” he says. “I could not have done this without you.”

“Certainly you could have,” says Wong, nudging a pawn into place to guard the bishop, “only at a dreadfully slower pace, and with far less fun.” The precious piece safe, Wong looks up at him. “It has been one of the great pleasures of my life to get to know you, Loki. After Thanos, I did not expect to be made useful in such a way, or to make such a friend. You proved me wrong on both counts.”

“You hate to be wrong,” Loki says, jumping his knight across the squares. There is a happy knot in his throat, if a knot in the throat can be happy. It can.

“I will make an exception.” Wong says, then tsks, seizing Loki’s vulnerable rook with his queen. “Clumsy. I would’ve thought with fifteen hundred years of experience you would be better.”

Loki barks out a laugh. “I’m letting you win. It’s the friendlier thing to do.”

“That is the first lie you’ve ever told me,” Wong says.

“Can I ask you something I have long wondered, Wong?”

“I don’t see how I could stop you. You only cease asking me questions when you fall asleep atop a book, forcing me to rescue it from callous mistreatment.”

Loki crosses his arms, examines the pieces on the board. “It’s terribly petty, I know, but—I must know. If I were to go one-on-one against Strange, who do you believe would win?”

“Strange was a meticulous sorcerer,” Wong says, looking unsurprised by the query, though he lets an eyebrow arch just a little to show what he thinks of it. “Very powerful, and well-studied. You are far more creative with your magics. More flexible. And you have, of course, the many years of experience. Not that it helps you with chess, though, I’ll note.” He heaves a sigh. “I suppose if you must beg this theoretical battle refereeing from me, I think that you would squeak by.”

“Squeak!” Loki’s great triumph is already diminished. “He has practiced magic for less than a handful of years!”

Wong smiles beatifically. “You asked for my opinion.”

“Some friend,” Loki grumbles. But he can’t maintain the disgruntled act for long. His eyes are shining again. “Truly, Wong. I never had such a companion, nor could I have wished for a better one. To be called your friend is a feeling so dear to me that I would carry it into every conceivable timeline if I could.”
“You never know,” says Wong, reaching across the table, first to pat the back of Loki’s hand, then to let his nimble fingers skip along the chess pieces. “The universe of magic is small, a spider’s web. Pull one line and it reverberates out along them all. You and I have shared so much, and mingled so much magic, that perhaps we have left an indelible imprint. It may yet echo back to us, wherever we are.”

“Was that your way of saying that we could meet again?” Loki says, his heart in his throat.

“Perhaps,” says Wong again, setting down his white queen decisively. “Hopefully I will find you better at chess. Checkmate, my friend.”

***

“May I sit with you?” Loki asks.

“It’s a good day for it,” says Steve, shifting over on the porch swing to make room, and folding up his newspaper. Newspapers are vanishingly rare these days; it must be from an older date.

While Midgard lacks much in contrast to Asgard when it comes to aesthetic opulence, Loki must concur that the porch swing is an ingenious invention. The wooden bench creaks unpleasantly beneath him, but the addition of his weight sets the rocker into slow and soothing motion.

The weather is very fine, with a low breeze stirring the grass, and the setting sun overhead leaving the air crisp and cool. They gaze together across the open field, at the trees where the first signs of autumn are starting to show in red and gold.

“What’s on your mind, Loki?”

“I feel I should apologize,” Loki says, lacing his fingers together in his lap, “for what I said to you in my fever.”

Maybe it would be better to say nothing: it has been some days, and Steve no doubt understands that he was far gone. It might be left well enough alone. But Loki has little time left in this life. He would leave no loose ends here if he can manage it.

Steve blinks at him, then turns back to contemplating the foliage, his brain working fast behind that strong profile. “Don’t see why you should,” he answers. “You were right.”

“But I—”

“I know you weren’t thinking clearly,” Steve goes on. “You said some things that didn’t make much sense. But when it came to me, you were spot-on.” He chews his lip in contemplation. “It’s me who should be thanking you, really.”

“Thanking me?” Now it’s Loki’s turn to blink.

“Made me do some thinking,” Steve says. “Not gonna pretend it’s easy when someone spells out something true about you that you try hard not to look at. No one loves that. But I’m glad you said it. I do lie to myself, and I spent a good deal of my life lying to myself, when being truthful might’ve gotten me what I wanted.”
“Your friend,” says Loki, gently. Even now it surprises him that his voice can emerge so softly pitched and without sarcasm, that he can be gentle and mean to be.

Steve nods. “My friend. Thing was, back when we were growing up, we couldn’t—it wasn’t the sort of thing you were supposed to even know about, let alone talk about. Bucky and me, I guess you could say we always just left everything unsaid, and that was okay for a while when we were kids. I used any excuse I could to avoid looking at it head-on. Then the war happened, and I wanted to say something then, but there never seemed to be the right time, and then there wasn’t any time at all. I used to figure, in the war, that we’d have years and years to figure it out afterward. But we didn’t get that.”

Here he pauses, glances sideways at Loki, doesn’t hide the flush that’s creeping up his neck. “Suppose that sounds awful strange to you, with all your years, coming from a place that’s not exactly Brooklyn.”

Loki is reckless with his thoughts and emotions these last days—it’s not as though what he says will matter much longer than the moment, but these moments matter in their way. So he meets Steve’s eyes and says, “It took Thor and I more than a thousand years to speak our truths, and we’re still learning what that means. By that measure you are very much ahead.”

“Huh.” Steve seems both surprised and relieved, the squared-off set of his shoulders relaxing. “Hadn’t thought of it like that.”

“I gather not.” They sit in what feels like comfortable silence for a time.

Then Loki hears himself say, in a flood of words he cannot hold back: “Perhaps you imagine that in Asgard we did not have the odd proscriptions Midgard places on acts of love. That is true in its way. Warriors lay with warriors as a matter of course; male and male, male and female, female and female; a visit to the brothel was considered the way to come of age—that, or chasing after, and winning, any willing bed-partner. Our songs and stories celebrate virility.

“But there we faced different proscriptions. Emotions were considered quite secondary to coupling. Tradition dictated everything. Prowess—conquests—flaunting desirability—these were deemed the most important factors. Playing your proper role and staying within your station was paramount over all. So that while I was never looked at askance for taking a man into my bed, I could not have shown the world there that I was also a woman. That would have been unfathomable.”

Steve shakes his head. “But that doesn’t make sense.”

“I am glad to hear that,” says Loki, deeply, deeply glad. “It is a tricky thing to discuss with even Thor. For though he loves his sister just the same, he has no desire to navel-gaze Asgard’s faults, and to face how strictly we were made to play the parts we were born into without deviation. He did what he could in this lifetime. He made them free of the old ways. I think on Oblara those dictates are quite cast aside. But I do not think, Captain, that there is any world that does not suffer in trying to figure out how it is acceptable to love and to be. You should give yourself credit for knowing now so staunchly what it is you want, and being unashamed of it. Few enough are ever given that clarity.”

Steve sits breathing, processing. “I—wow. Never—never would have thought about it like that either.” He blows out an audible breath. “Thank you, Loki.”

“It is my pleasure to offer a different perspective,” Loki says. “I have often thought how much time you spend thinking on and caring for others, giving kindness, and seeming to expect nothing for yourself in return.”
“Yeah, I’m a regular saint,” says Steve, running a self-deprecating hand through his hair. He says nothing after, and Loki thinks that they have reached the end of their conversation—a satisfactory conclusion. He is glad that he came out to the porch with his apology.

When Steve speaks again, there is a note of trepidation in his voice. “I’m not real good at this,” he explains. “If my friend Sam were here he’d know just what to say. It’s his job. But I’ve watched him at it enough, and God knows I’ve been in trenches.”

Loki turns to him, silent, curious.

“What I mean to say,” says Steve, “is that I saw a look in your eye when you were sick that I’ve seen too many times before. If you—if you feel like maybe you can talk about it—what happened to you—well, I’ve got two ears that aren’t good for much else right now.”

What happened to you. Loki goes rigid with fear at what Steve thinks he can see. Can Steve really see? Fifteen hundred years. What hasn’t happened to him? He’s experienced everything, all. He’s loved and hated, often in the same breath. He’s killed and saved lives. He’s betrayed and been redeemed, again and again. He’s died and come back and died and come back and died and come back. He’s fallen, is falling—

It’s so easy to slip back into lying. It’s as comforting as an old worn cape kept at the back of the wardrobe for sentimentality. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean,” says Loki smoothly.

“That’s fine,” says Steve, not looking at him, not looking judgemental or bothered or anything but too terribly understanding. “Some things are real hard to say. But Sam would say there’s a kind of magic in saying them at all. You name something, call it out, tell someone else that it’s real, and it stops having so much power over you.”

Loki considers this. “Your friend must be an accomplished magician.”

Steve’s grin seems to stretch out all the way to the treeline. “He’d like to hear you say so.”

“I—” Loki bites his tongue, hoping that the pain will ground him, but it only leaves him feeling more unmoored.

He swore that he would never speak of this, but what does it matter if the world is ending? And what would it be for this not to have power over him in the same way, for it not to be a festering secret part of himself? What would it be to let this go free?

“You cannot tell Thor,” Loki whispers. “You must promise to never tell Thor.”

Steve puts a solemn hand over his heart. On anyone else the gesture would look mocking, but on him it has the air of sanctity and truth. “Captain-Sorcerer confidentiality. I promise you. Nothing you tell me will leave this porch swing.”

With a flick of his wrist, Loki erects a barrier of silence around them to be sure. He does not know how to start—does not know, and knows exactly.

“I betrayed my kingdom and my family,” he begins without faltering. Horribly, this is the part easiest to speak about. “In the midst of my betrayal, I learned that all I thought I knew of myself was a lie, and became resolved to act even more unconscionably. I tried to hurt my brother, my brother that I loved above all else. I thought that if I could eliminate him, the last part of me that cared would also be cut out, and I would be the stronger for it. It didn’t work, and facing abject failure and punishment, I willfully fell from that world, watching Thor shout after me in anguish as he thought me lost.”
“Well, there’s a way to start a story,” says Steve in a neutral voice.

“I wished to be lost, but instead I fell into a void between the worlds, and that is where Thanos found me. He—he had a great many ways at his disposal to break a person that he honed into an artform. He considered it his art, and practiced it until it would come to be that serving him seemed like the greatest kindness one could imagine, if only to make the rest of it stop. He found me, and he—”

And Loki speaks on, and on, while at his side Steve listens and never flinches, not even once, and they both look out across the field, at the sun slowly sinking beneath the umbrella of autumnal leaves.

* * *

“You seem peaceful this evening,” says Thor, as Loki lies encircled in his arms after a mind-blowingly spectacular bout, drowsy with bone-deep satisfaction.

“I’ve been getting into Bruce’s weed,” Loki tells him, then arches one eyebrow sky-high to show that he is joking. “Mmm. Perhaps it is because you just fucked me so well that I have quite forgotten all other things save your cock. Contemplating your cock alone would make anyone happy.”

“Is that so,” says Thor, his lips to Loki’s temple, and Loki can feel him smiling.

“It is the most resounding truth I know,” Loki says, his hand already reaching for Thor’s cock again. Thor sucks in air, over-sensitive and slick, but just as soon is responding to Loki’s curled, skillful fingers. Not for nothing is Thor accounted a fertility god and many temples raised in the very image of this cock.

“I want you everywhere tonight,” Loki says, no longer drowsy, but fully awake, and quite suddenly starving. It’s true that for a time Thor had succeeded in fucking all other thoughts from him, and he craves that continued escape, that respite. “In my mouth, my ass, my cunt, between my thighs, between my breasts. I want there not to be a single part of me that is not marked by you. Can you do that for me, Thor?”

“Do you mean that a challenge?” Thor’s expression shades equally famished as Loki speaks.

“Certainly not,” Loki says, still languidly stroking Thor’s now painfully hard cock. “Simply a request I hope that you may see fit to fulfill.”


“Let’s begin there, then,” Loki suggests. “I want to feel you so far down my throat that all I can do is choke to stay breathing. I want my jaw to ache with trying to stay open wide enough for you. Quiet my tongue and show me how it might be far better employed.”

“Loki,” Thor says, climbing over him, his eyes alight, and errant sparks flirting with his fingertips. “Loki.”

“I know well enough who I am, brother,” Loki says. “Now make me forget that I know anything but you.”

There is a reason why Thor is accounted a fertility god in several realms, and those temples to his
cock still stand for worship on some worlds. Loki is the high priest of those sacred mysteries, he thinks wildly, his last coherent thought before he can think, blissfully, of nothing more at all.

* * *

Taking leave of the rest of them is somewhat easier, though it hurts no less.

Rhodey is full of creeping doubts. “We still don’t know where Tony is,” he says on the night when he and Loki are called up to dinner preparation duty. “When Thor went to Titan to try and figure out what happened there, he said there was evidence a craft had crash-landed, then been fixed and taken off again. I know in my bones that he’s alive, Loki. What if he’s come up with some other scheme, found another solution, and we undo everything before he has time to tell us?”

A last-minute dramatic intervention by the missing Tony Stark has not gone unaccounted for—it is in the Avengers’ vast compilation of contingencies—but they fast approach the eve of putting their plan into action without any sign of him. Midgard has received no contact from Stark since the Gauntlet was used.

Loki sighs, flipping the salmon in his frying pan to brown the other side. “Stark is very capable,” he allows. “But I do not believe he would willfully abandon Midgard. We must consider that if he lives he did not leave Titan under his own power, or that some mission he undertook has led him too far away or into captivity. While we could wish for his counsel, he is not here.”

“I know,” Rhodey says. “I know.” He gives the salad-spinner a concentrated churn. After some moments of silence while he mixes oil and vinegar for dressing, he says, “Sometimes I think about what he’d say if he showed up right now and saw you in this kitchen as a member of the team.”

Loki’s spine straightens. “And what is that?”

“After we convinced him that you’ve been essential here, and that we weren’t all under some mind-control spell, I’m pretty sure it’d be something like, ‘I stand astonished, Reindeer Games. Now don’t fuck it up.’”

Loki smiles a little, then sores. “You think that he could forgive me for New York?”

Rhodey considers this. “Maybe not forgive,” he admits, ever honest. “But if you helped bring him back to a time where Pepper was alive, he’d say that he would be happy to forget.”

“Your leadership has guided us well in his absence,” Loki says. “You and the Captain found a middle ground that has saved countless lives since Thanos. I should think that his first act if he appeared again on Midgard right now would be to thank you.”

“Tony Stark is bad at thank yous,” says Rhodey, slicing onions for the salad, which perhaps explains the hint of tears in his eyes. “But maybe I’d get a hug.” And he surprises Loki with one, quick and fleeting and feeling, letting go before the fish can overcook.

* * *
Her last lesson with Natasha involves no staves. She perches on the end of Natasha’s unmade bed, watching closely as Natasha makes herself up in the mirror.

Cosmetics were hardly unknown on Asgard, but here they take on different connotations. Natasha’s dresser is spread with all manner of colorful pots and creams and powders, and her hands are expert on the instruments—the brushes and blotters and wands that seem to have no end.

“It’s sexist and ridiculous that we’re the only ones expected to slather this stuff on, of course,” Natasha is saying, “but since we can, and it’s our domain, we’ve learned to turn it to our advantage. Bat some over-long eyelashes at a target, and he forgets his own name long enough that you have more than enough time to kill him.”

Loki nods, taking in every brushstroke. As Natasha applies them, she replicates the same on her skin. Perhaps it is cheating to use magic, when this knowledge is so hard-earned, but she hasn’t the time to practice.

“Men are mind-numbingly predictable,” Natasha says, layering an array of iridescent color along her closed eyelid. “Try and tell them that and they get mad about it, which you also could have predicted.” She shrugs, starts on the other eyelid. “It’s why women make for better spies—why the place where I was trained took in so many of us. On Earth we’re still looked down on, and so the men never see us coming.”

“I’ve learned so much from you,” Loki tells her. “I wish I could have met you fifteen hundred years ago.”

“Being alive that long sounds fucking exhausting,” Natasha replies. “You get credit for sticking it out.”

She uncaps a lipstick in a golden tube, twists it to reveal a vermillion gloss, red as spilled blood. “This was given to me by one of the former directors of S.H.I.E.L.D., when I first joined up,” she says. She carefully colors her lips with the brilliant shade.

Then she turns from the mirror and approaches Loki on the bed. “Director Carter told me that during the war, it stopped being expected that women just wear modest makeup to make themselves pretty and cover up their flaws. They started using shades like this, like paint for battle, to show that they were warriors also.” She slides a hand under Loki’s chin, tilts her face up to the light. Loki parts her lips, feels the soft friction of Natasha painting a perfect bow.

“There,” says Natasha with warming approval. “Now you’re ready for anything.” Lipstick done, she heads over to her closet, starts to dig through the miles of different costumes there. “Let’s see what I have that’ll fit you and knock ‘em dead.”

That turns out to be a dress of striking indigo, tight around the bust and tighter at the hips. Natasha has chosen for herself a red dress three shades darker than their shared lipstick, with a low-cut bodice and a short skirt. They look primed for war indeed.

They go downstairs for dinner arm-in-arm, and the expression on Thor’s face when he sees her is that Valhalla has arrived early. All of the men and the Valkyrie scramble to stand up as they approach, except for Rocket, who topples and falls backwards along with his chair.

“So very predictable,” Loki murmurs into Natasha’s ear, and Natasha turns smiling to kiss her cheek.

* * *
Loki finds Bruce at work in his lab, still bent over formulations though it is far into the night. Loki taps on the door with two cups of tea in hand and is fast admitted.

Bruce accepts his mug with a grateful look, tips his nose toward the steam. “Chamomile,” he says appreciatively. “My favorite.”

“I pay attention on occasion,” says Loki. He’s long found Bruce’s busy laboratory to be comforting, with its boiling beakers, its flashing monitors, its alien devices spinning and beeping and ever-calculating.

There’s something familiar and reassuring about being at the center of so much ongoing activity—a sense of the room as being set on a perpetual quest, always discovering something new. It rather reminds him of his old potions-making chamber in Asgard, and the countless hours spent there trying to break down the secrets of the world.

“I’m guessing you haven’t only come for tea,” says Bruce, leaning back against a counter-top, so Loki assumes a similar position across from him.

“No,” Loki agrees, “though it occurs to me now that I’ve neglected to bring us biscuits, which was a major oversight.” He has a sip of the floral-tasting concoction. “Primarily I came to say goodbye to you, and to thank you for your kindness. You were the first among the Avengers to welcome me after my return, and by Thor’s account, you were instrumental in convincing the others that he hadn’t lost his mind in intending to bring me back in the first place.”

“I wasn’t about to forget what you did on Asgard, at the end,” Bruce says, not seeming put-off by this line of conversation. “If you hadn’t come for us in the ship, none of us would have survived. And then, if you hadn’t helped conceal the Hulk for the right moment after Thanos appeared, chances are I wouldn’t be here talking to you right now. You did all that and risked your own safety without a second thought after Sakaar.”

“You have my thanks for such generosity of opinion,” Loki says sincerely.

Bruce takes a long sip, clearly relishing the flavor. “Thing is, if there’s anyone here who might understand how people can change for good or ill, I think it’d be me,” he says, dry, both eyebrows up. “I flatter myself that I’m a pretty sound judge of character. But I’m even better at knowing what it’s like to have done terrible things and wish you hadn’t. Some people, they’re incapable of regret, and with it, growth, or have no interest in either. But that’s not you.”

The tea is a pale yellow in his cup as Loki examines it. He feels as soothed by these words as the calming draught.

“Now why don’t you tell me why you’re here past tea and thank yous,” suggests Bruce.

Loki looks up at him. Nods. “I have faith in the plan’s success,” he says, careful about it, “and complete faith in Thor’s ability to see it through. But if—theoretically—if something were to go wrong—if his mission fails—what would happen to this reality?”

It’s unfathomable to think about, so much so that Loki’s mind struggles to wrap around it. A world where Thor fails to destroy an Infinity Stone, and is instead somehow trapped in the past, while Loki remains in the future without him, would be the worst of all conceivable possibilities and probabilities. He shudders as the thought flashes across his mind anew.

“That’s impossible to say with any certainty,” Bruce says, “without knowing the ramifications of
how that failure plays out. Say Thor and the past Loki can’t destroy an Infinity Stone, but find a way to kill Thanos instead. This timeline still comes undone. If something happens to Thor in the past, like he gets captured or—or worse, by my calculations, we’d remain here in this timeline, but there’d be significant alterations due to the fall-out of him traveling back there and remaining.”

Loki rubs his forehead. “Theoretical physics was never my favorite subject thing to study.”

“That’s hard to believe,” says Bruce with a small smile. “It’s practically just like magic.”

“The point for me of most uncertainty,” Loki says into the quiet born of his hesitation, “that I have not shared with the others, is how I came to have the memory of Thor’s arrival in New York. There is precedent for premonitions, but waking up with certain knowledge of the past is not an experience I have been able to find replicated in any of our books.”

“There are still some things in the universe that science—and magic—can’t fully explain,” Bruce responds, adjusting his glasses from where they have slipped down his nose. “You’re living proof of that. So am I. And most days, I’m glad for the challenge. If we’d already figured everything out there is to figure out, where’s the fun in that?”

“Spoken like a man with seven PhDs,” Loki says. He puts down his tea, and extends an arm, and Bruce clasps his wrist, then pulls him into a hug before Loki can process what is happening. Bruce is terrifically strong, shockingly so, and the embrace squeezes all of Loki’s air out when he returns it.

So much hugging here. He’s had more hugs in the last few days than in fifteen hundred years of days—in more than five hundred thousand days.

He would reel at the thought, but Bruce keeps him upright. Who knew that even monsters could still benefit from an embrace? They do.

* * *

He hasn’t been able to find a moment with the Valkyrie alone to bid her goodbye, so when he comes upon her and Thor returning from a sparring session, sweat-soaked but in a cheerful mood, Loki figures it is as good a time as any.

When the intention of his address becomes clear, she asks that his lady-self deliver it, easily done; then the Valkyrie draws Loki’s hand to her lips and kisses it.

“You and I are not finished, I think,” the Valkyrie says with a suggestive lift of her eyebrow.

“Perhaps,” Loki agrees, aware that her ears are scarlet, “in another life.”

“I am standing right here,” says Thor. But he’s smiling—beaming, even, at the sight of them bent toward one another.

“Don’t worry, Thor,” the Valkyrie turns to tell him, with sideways wink for Loki. “We would certainly invite you to watch.”

Thor’s mouth opens but nothing emerges.

“And perhaps, if you were very well-behaved at watching …” Loki says to Thor, as she returns the
Valkyrie’s wink.

The women laugh together when Thor shuts his mouth, his face now far more flushed than Loki’s.

“In another life,” says the Valkyrie, pressing a kiss to Loki’s forehead, then going up on her toes to do the same for Thor. She is to depart that evening to return to New Asgard to pass the final days and hours with their people—now her own again, more hers on Oblara than Loki or Thor can lay claim to.

“Brunnhilde,” Loki calls after her, when she expresses the need for a well-earned shower and begins to head in that direction. “Can I ask of you a favor?”

She glances over her shoulder. “My lady?”

“If you could see two candles lit at the fountain where our parents stand, on Thursday,” Loki says, feels Thor’s arm loop tight around her waist. Why she asks for it—for luck, or a blessing—in truth, she knows not, but it is pleasing to think of the candles burning there, when she and Thor will be so far away, and then Thor so much farther. “I would be most grateful.”

The Valkyrie turns back around, and sweeps for them a courtly bow, so ancient that Loki is sure she never saw it performed in Asgard outside of plays. It is a gesture intended as serious and frivolous all at once, and Loki and Thor both smile to see it done.

“I will light the candles myself,” she says, and they watch her leave them behind.

* * *

For Rocket, Loki brings a bottle of Oblaran brandy to share, purchased at the market in New Asgard and saved for a special occasion.

The raccoon’s eyes light up at the sight of the distinctive bottle, and he nods to indicate that Loki can take the seat across from him at the kitchen table.

“Now we’re talking,” Rocket says. “You’ve been holding out on me.” He is engaged in the act of counting out stacks of Migardian money on the table-top, making neat piles by country and denomination.

Loki pours them two nearly-full glasses, to the sound of Rocket’s approving grunt, then sits down to watch the counting proceed apace. “If one were to inquire—”

“Tomorrow’s likely our last day on this blasted planet,” Rocket says, shifting crisp American one-hundred dollar bills into their own corner of the table. “If you think I’m not gonna live life to the fullest in every way I know how and some ways that I don’t, you’ve got another thing coming.”

To this, Loki can but nod. Rocket takes an experimental sip of the brandy, sniffing at it all the while, then swallows down half the glass on the next sip. “Not bad, not bad,” he allows. “Keep pouring.”

Loki complies, refilling Rocket’s glass, then has a drink as well; it burns in the best sort of way down his throat and all through his bloodstream.

Rocket’s gaze flickers from his glass to Loki’s face, as though it’s suddenly occurred to him to be
suspicious. His whiskers bristle. “What’s this for, anyway?” he says. “This stuff’s real expensive. If you came here to ask me to do something, buddy, you’re too late. I got all of tomorrow and the evening planned. ‘Fraid I can’t pencil you in.”

“Proper recompense,” says Loki.

“What?” the raccoon blinks at him.

“Proper recompense,” Loki repeats, “for helping to save my dead ass.”

“Oh.” This is met with a toothy grin. “Well. Never let it be said you don’t settle up your debts, then.”

“Much obliged,” says Loki, tossing back another swallow. He tops them both off again. Then he says, “You have been an excellent teammate to have, and a fine friend to my brother. He speaks most highly of you.”

“He does know me best,” Rocket agrees, preening. His expression sober a trifle, though there is nothing sober in the deep drink he draws off the glass. “Thor’s one of the good ones.”

“He is at that,” Loki says, and, spontaneously done, they clink their glasses together to the credit of his brother.

“He sure loves you,” Rocket says, reaching for a stack of Euro fifties next and keeping his eyes down as he counts them. “Haven’t seen anything like how he was before. Don’t think I will again.”

“What—what do you mean?” Loki says after a pause, his heart kicking up a sudden riot. He has another sip, then two more quickly following.

“Expect he didn’t tell you all the details,” Rocket says. “Don’t see the harm in telling it now. Thor and me, we went looking for your body after the Snap. He was in a bad way. Kind of freaking out about how he had to find you, if I’m being honest. You know how he can get with the dramatics.”

Rocket nods to himself, not waiting to see if Loki nods with him. Drinks more, his tongue loosening with every sip. “Anyway, we finally reach the system where the old ship was. Still a lot of space debris there. Hard to navigate. Spend a long time scanning for your body. No dice. Eventually I say, Thor, we can’t stay out here forever, and then—I won’t soon forget the crazy look on his face—he says that he will. Stubborn as anything. He says I can drop him right there in space without a suit or anything, because he did it once before and he survived. Says he’ll stay out there looking for you until he finds you, and I can go anytime I like.

“I say to him, that’s a bullshit plan, what are you gonna do, swim around in an airless vacuum, hoping he bumps into you? He ain’t thinking right at this point, you copy? So I tell him we’ll stay for maximum a week, and after that, he should resign himself that maybe it isn’t meant to be. He didn’t like that one bit, but he agreed to the week. So we kept searching and scanning. Last day of the week, where do we find your ass floating but in one of the most treacherous asteroid belts in the galaxy. Guess your brother likes to make things difficult, I say, and Thor starts laughing at that. After we found you he started laughing again.”

“I see,” says Loki, reaching for the bottle.

“So we go on a salvage mission to retrieve you—it wasn’t easy, so I’d thank you to give me a refill—thank you—and we finally get you back to the ship, almost becoming asteroid dust a few too many times for my liking. Then Thor does this thing where he just kneels on the floor by your body with his head down on your chest like he doesn’t care that you’re really, really super mega dead at this point. Stays like that so long it’s like he thought you might start breathing any moment if he
could just wait it out. I couldn’t get him to move for anything. Never seen its like.”

“And—and then what?” Loki asks, pressure on his fast-beating heart as though he can suddenly feel the weight of Thor above him.

Rocket pulls a thick roll of yen from a pouch on his belt, licks a finger-paw, and proceeds to flick through it. “He still wasn’t much for listening to reason, but eventually I got him persuaded that we had to put you in the fancy Wakandan freezer or you wouldn’t stay looking half so pretty. Space did a nice job of keeping you preserved, but the ship’s environmental and Thor crying all over you weren’t helping. So he stroked your hair back into place which was a sweet gesture and also extra fucking creepy, and then we put you in the freezer and froze you up real good. He spent most of the trip back to Midgard sitting next to your container in the storage room instead of helping me fly the ship, which was pretty shitty on a co-pilot level but what with the extenuating circumstances I forgave it.”

Loki drains his glass, pushes back his chair. “I—I have to go,” he says, his vision wavering with the threat of tears and a rush of adrenaline. “I just remembered that I have to—“

“Yeah, yeah, sure,” says Rocket. “Tell Thor I say hello and that he can give me proper recompense later. All this cash is getting to be a hassle, so you relate to him I’m that accepting both Visa and American Express.”

“Rocket,” says Loki, not daring to try and touch the prickly creature but hoping his expression is as heartfelt as he intends. “Thank you for your part in retrieving me, and for—“

“Damn right,” says Rocket. “Without my intervention Thor would probably still be kneeling there on the floor of that ship and you wouldn’t be looking pretty at all, let me tell you.” He jerks his furry chin to indicate the bottle of brandy. “You want any more of that?”

“It’s all yours,” says Loki.

* * *

“Whoa,” says Thor, when Loki discovers him in a hallway and shoves him through the nearest open door—it turns out to be one of the communal bathrooms—then throws Thor back against the wall and starts to climb him like a particularly muscular tree. “Brother, what brought this on?”

“You,” Loki manages, before he’s too busy attempting to memorize every single one of Thor’s teeth with his tongue. His hands are frantically trying to work Thor free of his clothing while alternating tugging at his own, with the result of getting nowhere fast.

Loki remembers that he is a powerful sorcerer approximately three minutes into the struggle. He breaks off from kissing Thor only long enough to curse and then banish their garments from existence, which is fine because he didn’t like that sweater anyway and also they have one more day and night left until the world ends.

Then Thor’s hands are all over him, extremely encouraging, Thor gets in the game immediately, Loki loves that about him—Loki loves so much about him—Loki particularly loves at this moment that there is so very much of him—

“Lift me,” Loki says, more of a command, really, and Thor obeys with his eyes going electric.
He lifts Loki with one hand under his thigh and the other under his ass, levers Loki’s weight into the air like he’s a sack of feathers. That shouldn’t be so arousing but oh, it is, and Loki goes back to kissing him, open-mouthed and with a lot of tongue and even more urgency.

His hand runs down Thor’s bared body—there has never been a body such as this—to where Thor’s cock is already pressing hard between them—there has definitely never been a cock like this since time began—and he magics his fingers good and wet so that he can coat Thor’s cock with slickness. He hates it when he has to stop kissing Thor but he has to communicate these things somehow.

“Ready whenever you are,” Loki informs Thor’s ear, before licking at the delicate shell of it.

“I will need to be certain,” Thor says, and then the hand on his ass moves and Thor eases two big fingers inside of him. Thor groans to find Loki slick to dripping around his touch—sometimes Loki truly loves magic—and Loki groans because two fingers larger than the average cock are plying him open.

“Lower me down on you,” Loki says, and Thor is really good at following orders today for he complies at once, drawing free his fingers and lining up his cock. It’s not an easy maneuver but Thor handles it with aplomb, and Loki helps by holding Thor’s cock in place as Thor enters him. Then he winds his arms around Thor’s neck so that he can throw back his head and not fall backwards, because he needs to throw back his head as gravity does its work and starts to pull him further onto Thor’s cock without either of them having to do anything about it.

Thor bites his lip—it’s harder to stay still like this, Loki thinks, than give into the rutting motion his body craves—because Loki is bent on taking every inch of him slowslowslow, and the way his hips lock around Thor’s body dictates as much.

Loki makes the trip so, so slow and also inexorable, feeling with each new breath how they are joined, watching Thor’s eyes all the while. It’s terrifically, terrifyingly intimate and exactly what Loki needs, and he tightens up on Thor’s cock as a reward for being perfect.

“Brother,” Thor says, low. He’s appreciative, and growing increasingly desperate, and hard and thick and huge within Loki, perfect, perfect, perfect. “Has something happened?”

“Dear me,” says Loki. “I thought we were, for all intents and purposes, quite married. Do I need a reason to have my husband fuck me in a shared bathroom?”

It’s the first time he’s ever said the word—out loud, that is—and Thor looks poleaxed by it. For a moment Loki thinks that Thor will drop him. But Thor’s grip only tightens where it binds Loki against him, he is holding on so tightly now that Loki can feel bruises blooming and already wants more of them.

“Your husband,” Thor repeats.

“Yes,” says Loki, skimming a hand up and down Thor’s neck. “If you see him, do tell him he should really get to fucking me soon, lest I grow bored and take another.”

Even said in jest, the words appear to awaken some of the berserker in Thor that Loki relishes provoking. Thor reverses their positions, slams Loki back against the wall while he thrusts in hard and sure, hard enough to set off sparks behind Loki’s eyes and also produce actual sparks, perhaps dangerous in the small confines of the bathroom but aesthetically delightful as they rain down sizzling upon them.

“You would drive any man to madness with your shifting desires,” Thor says admiringly.
“I lied,” Loki says. “I won’t take another husband after all. There is only the one that I want. Let me tell you about him. He is tall and broad-shouldered. His hair is painted with gold and they used bronze to make his skin, and all the oceans for his eyes. He is handsome enough that the cream of the youth of Asgard used to get into bloody pitched battles every night for the privilege of his bed. Ah. Ah, brother—! Once I saw a maiden nearly pluck out the eye of her friend in such a fight, but he rushed in to stop them.

“For he is also kind-hearted and good, so unbelievably good that animals sense it and adore him and follow him around, even raccoons. He is clever also, so much smarter than he likes to let on, because he is brilliant enough to know the advantage that comes with being underestimated. Yes, there, harder, if you please—oh—where was I? Very clever. I have never seen him faced with a problem that he could not solve, nor an obstacle he could not bend to his will or to his arm—and here I must go back to mentioning his arms, which are the finest ever wrought by the Gods, excepting of course the work they did with his cock. Oh—ah—yes, well done, it is exactly as I said. There are, at rough count, two hundred seventy-five songs extant about his cock alone, and I know every single one.”

Thor, who has been watching this recitation with the most serious expression Loki has ever glimpsed upon his face, while also fucking Loki expertly through it, is shaken by sudden laughter. “Loki—“

“You think to question my devotion? That is a bet that you will lose. I know every poem, every story, every myth, every song that has been sung about him—I only mention those about his cock because several of them are personal favorites of mine. Where was I? Yes—yes—he is courageous and witty and pure of heart and breathtaking to look upon and generous and so generous of cock—in summation, he is the best man that I have ever known and will ever know, and I won’t have any other for a husband.”

“I think that you must be feverish again,” murmurs Thor, but there are tears glittering on his cheeks.

“I have never been so clear-headed,” Loki says, “nor known more precisely what I want.” He wraps a hand around his cock and starts to time his upstroke to the gorgeous rhythm Thor is making with his hips. He tilts forward and swipes away the track of Thor’s tears with his tongue, tasting salt as fine as sea-spray. “Thor. Surely you already knew all of those things about yourself. I have only named them.”

“No one sees me as you do,” Thor says, fitting his forehead to the bend of Loki’s shoulder. “They view some part of me and think that it is all I am. Capable of bravery, perhaps. Experienced at battle. Tall.”

Loki smiles around a gasp. “Do not forget well-cocked.”

“With you I never can,” Thor tells Loki’s skin, “for I am never with you without wanting you. But Loki—what I mean to say—you are the only person who has seen the whole of me. Who well knows my strengths and faults, and yet would still know more, and learn what lies underneath.”

Thor lifts his head, and they stare at each other, silent save for the sounds of their bodies working in concert. Loki uses the hand not engaged on his own cock to brush his thumb along the curve of Thor’s beard, which is still salt-wet.

“I have been called many things in my time,” Thor continues, so quiet that even this close Loki can barely hear him. “No one has called me clever before.”

“The more fool they,” Loki snaps. “Who do they think it was led armies to victories that were called impossible? Who arrived without pause at the only way we had to stop Hela? Who was it who solved at last the problem of how to travel where we need to go in time? Who was it who found for
me the means of cheating death, against every odd, and through force of will and wit alone? Who—"

Thor kisses him quiet, thrusting with increasing speed, increasing need. “Thank you,” he breathes against Loki’s mouth. “I was not searching after flattery. I only—"

“Flattery nothing,” Loki says, his sweat-slick skin slippery on the tile as Thor moves against him. “Do you really think that I could love a man, and take him to husband, if he were not a match for me in every way?”

Thor spills inside him with a moan that sounds devastated by how fiercely his unraveling takes him. His motion slows to a stop as he holds Loki in place, shuddering, filling him. Loki is faced with the sight of Thor’s face as he comes apart and also alight with his favorite sensation to feel, namely Thor coming, and he makes haste to stroke himself right up to the edge. But Thor shows off those God-forged arms by keeping Loki pinned to the wall with one hand beneath him, while the other takes over on Loki’s cock. He’s holding much too loosely, and on purpose, too, while Loki squirms—

“Let me suck you,” Thor implores, which nearly does it for Loki just with words. “Finish in my mouth, husband.”

“If you insist,” says Loki shakily, and when Thor lifts him off of his softening cock and sets Loki down, Loki’s legs are shaky also.

“I do,” says Thor.

“Far be it for me to waylay you, then.” At that moment, Loki longs for many years more of life just so that he can keep remembering the sight of Thor dropping to his knees, the tile cracking under the speed with which he kneels. That almost does it for Loki once more. “I’m close, I’m so close—"

“You must wait for me,” Thor says, curling a too-tight hand at the base of Loki’s cock. Then he swallows Loki in a manner they’ve long since perfected but will always number among the most remarkable and mind-boggling things to happen to Loki in a history of extraordinary things.

Loki’s head thunks back against the wall as the hot wet suction of Thor’s lips and throat close around him. He pushes his hands through Thor’s hair to hold him at just the right angle because that is what Thor wants, that is what Loki wants.

It only takes a few thorough thrusts from Loki, with Thor’s ingenious tongue and shrewd lips at work on him, before Loki is giving over with a body-racking sigh. Thor swallows so greedily that the only hint of Loki’s seed remaining when he pulls out is a pearl that paints Thor’s upper lip. Thor’s tongue soon chases it.

“That was cleverly done,” Loki pants, every nerve ending on fire, and Thor, because he is who he is, all but shakes apart again with the force of his laughter.

* * *

Loki’s last leave-taking still left among his teammates goes like this:

Clint Barton shakes his hand.
The Avengers order pizza for their meal the night before the final night. It is the only Tuesday left in the universe.

At this point they are as tested, trained, and prepared for the undertaking on Thursday as they can be, and the dinner is relaxed as they can make it.

It has the air of a party for a departing friend, which Loki supposes that it is. Wistful, and nostalgic, but hopeful for a more promising future: it is a party for departing from this timeline.

“You should’ve seen your face,” Natasha says to Loki, “when you first realized you had to eat pizza with your hands.”

“It’s uncivilized,” Loki sniffs, folding his pizza in half under Steve’s watchful eye. “Still, there’s a certain expediency to the method.”

“In New York,” Steve says, “we see someone using a knife and fork on a slice, they’re bound to get laughed out of the place.”

“That does not seem very civilized,” says Thor.

“Don’t recall anyone ever claiming New Yorkers are,” says Steve.

“Pizza nothing,” says Rhodey, cracking open a beer. “If we make it back to New York proper, first thing I’d want is a steak from Peter Luger. Medium rare, nothing fancy, just heaven on a plate.”

Steve grins. “That place is even older than I am.”

“Must be damn near ancient, then,” says Rhodey, and Steve, laughing, mimes being knocked out by a fatal blow.

“You’re thinking much too terrestrially here,” says Rocket, who is cradling a cup of the Oblaran brandy. “Pizza? Steaks? On Naxos IV they’ve got a restaurant where the pleasure robot waitstaff fulfills your every desire and every bite of the house special tastes like an orgasm feels, money-back guarantee.”

Bruce chokes on a bite of pizza, and Wong politely pounds on his back.

“So, outer space sounds okay,” says Clint.

Rocket nods. “Once waited five years on a reservation, but it was worth every penny, let me tell you.”

“Let’s pretend you didn’t,” says Bruce.

“Fascinating,” says Wong. “Is the food’s effect psychoactive or the result of an enchantment?”

“Don’t encourage him,” Loki says to his friend.

“You must encourage him if you wish to discourage him,” Thor advises. “He prefers to take the opposing action.”

“Pleasure robot waitstaff,” repeats Steve.
“Oh ho,” says Rocket. “Now there’s a tale worth telling.”

“Not unless you share that brandy first,” says Natasha.

Loki sits with Thor beside him, Thor’s hand on his thigh, listening to them banter, bantering with them. They recount stories from the last year and all their years before, memories both comedic and grave; they speak of missions that succeeded and failed; they put forth hopes and fears; they tease and compliment each other.

They are a team, cohesive. They are friends, all. There is chocolate ice cream for dessert.

* * *

“I am not going to say goodbye,” Loki says, “because it won’t make a difference to you, will it?”

Soda nudges at his hand, and Loki opens it palm up to give her the treat.

“But I am going to spoil you rotten,” he tells her. Her moon-colored mane and coat gleam from overly attentive combing. There is a veritable horse-feast piled up in her trough, slices of apples and carrot and raisins, melons and pumpkins and bananas all crowding each other for space.

She is inordinately pleased by this bounty, so much so that she does not startle when Loki throws his arms around her neck and holds on, he thinks, for dear life.

It’s perhaps ridiculous that here in a small stable smelling of hay and horse would be the place that he lets himself finally weep for all that he is losing. But this companion will not judge him, nor will she protest his anxiety and his terror and his grief.

How strange to think that he once thought himself quite incapable of most emotions. He wishes now that he could turn them off, like the handle on a faucet, but Loki’s feelings are a river, they are a torrent that cannot be held back.

The sobs flood through him until he is spent, he hopes, of tears. All the while the horse that Thor chose for him as his wedding gift stands calmly still, though sometimes she nickers, as though enquiring. It’s that thought that breaks him free from it at last, makes him smile; and Loki strokes her silver flank.

“You have been a good girl, Soda,” Loki tells her. “I could not have met your superior. There are none. I love you well.”

She blows out air through her nose and lowers her head, nudging until he gives up all the strawberries in his pocket.

* * *

Loki comes awake in total panic. He’s been trying not to sleep so as to have as many remaining hours with Thor as possible, but he must have dozed off unintentionally.
Thor’s arms are tight around him; they tighten at his indrawn breath.

“The day?” Loki manages to ask. His heart is beating wildly in his breast.

“Wednesday,” says Thor, softly, into Loki’s hair. “It is only Wednesday, brother.”

Only Wednesday. Their final day before the spell that they will attempt Thursday morning. Still, it is not Thursday yet.

Loki makes himself breathe out, then in, tries only to feel the reassuring heat of Thor’s embrace and nothing else. He makes a silent promise to himself not to close his eyes again until this is finished.

It is Thor’s idea that they spend the day away from the compound and everything else there, that they spend it out in the fields and hills and forest, and that they sleep—though Loki will not sleep—under the stars and open sky.

Some of their finest shared memories from youth, the most unsullied by later years, revolved around adventures through the wilderness and hunting trips taken together. Loki has no stomach for hunting any longer, but he finds the proposal of roaming through the wood with Thor wonderfully appealing. It will feel more natural to them than being shut up in a building with the trappings of modern alien life for distraction.

They take a tent and sleeping bags and supplies for cooking and for their meals, dividing the gear between them to carry as they ever had.

They set off in silence, and indeed, it is in silence that they remain for most of the day. When one wishes to show something to the other, it is said with looks and gestures.

In the silence there is a kind of peace that words can no longer offer them. They have said, thinks Loki, almost all there is to say; and so they are moved past speech into a place of being aware of one another in presence and touch alone.

Thor holds his hand as they walk, squeezing often, which means *I love you*. Loki has never felt so adored.

It is one of the loveliest days he has ever passed, alone with Thor and the birdsong in the trees, the fresh breeze rifling fingers through their hair. They leap brooks and climb trees like the boys they once were, in a time so long ago only the trees themselves might understand their age.

They gather edible plants and berries, making delighted and sour faces as a result of their tastings. They stand on high hills to see how far off into the distance they can glimpse. Thor picks for Loki a bouquet, adding a new wildflower whenever they come upon one as yet unseen.

The sun begins to set for the last time, and they stand together, arms around each other, to watch it happen. When the golden rays are fading into orange they break for camp, finding a grove not unlike the one much closer to the compound that has rather taken on some resonance for them.

Thor puts up the tent while Loki collects kindling and gets the fire started. It was ever thus. Time is a circle and everything that has happened will happen again and again, thinks Loki, only now he thinks it like a prayer.

They sit side by side, thighs and knees and ankles touching, to eat their hearty meal of fire-cooked stew and bread and the best berries from their foraging. Even when the both of them were too-proud princes they enjoyed such simple fare when they camped, so different from what was expected of them in Asgard. A shared wineskin is lodged between them, as always.
When they crawl into the tent it is not to rest. They fuck angrily at first, furious about it, and then, when that is done, they do so tenderly, their caresses made of sweetness. They have each other in all the ways that men and women and beings have given name to, and discover new ways that they name.

Time is a circle and their bodies are a circle, Loki thinks; what one receives the other gives back; what is taken is soon returned; they are a closed circuit, complete.

Afterward they lie awake, entangled, and it is the first time that they speak in words again.

Thor says, “I love you.” And then he says, “I know not else that I can say. It is all that I know.”

“I love you,” Loki returns. And then he says, “We needn’t say anything. Have we ever shared such pleasant conversation as today?”

In the darkness, he can feel, rather than see, Thor’s answering smile. “We have not.”

Loki nods against Thor’s chest, for the moment as content as this world can make him.

But then Thor says, “I am worried, when it is my turn tomorrow to convince another Loki, that words will fail me there. If I have lost the way to describe my love to you, how could I possibly convince him?”

Loki’s heart thuds hollowly. There will be no other time for it; there is no other time at all. It is time. He sits up all at once, and Thor, startled, sits up with him.

“Brother?” says Thor.

Loki casts a green flame to hover above them, illuminating the shadows in the tent. “You will tell him about this,” he says, as he said to Thor once before. But now Loki does not move to kiss him. He does not move at all.

To become his lady-self is simply a matter of slipping into another skin like changing a garment, both alike and equally comfortable. This feels like tearing off the garment, then tearing through the skin below, and casting all manner of confinement away.

The blue starts at his fingertips and runs up his arms, washes over his chest and down across his legs and dyes his toes. He sees the change before he feels it, and then the color races upward and closes over his head like sinking under water.

In the wake of blue comes white and gold in whirls and whorls that paint his skin with the distinct patterns that will spell out their truth when proof is demanded.

*Why should I possibly believe you?* Loki, sneering, will ask Thor in the past, and Thor will say, *Because you have shown me yourself.*

His horns are blue and black and gold and white. They curve upward from beneath his hair, small for a Jötunn but shapely in their bend. His hair is very long and very black. In the faint green light from the seidr his eyes show their red in contrast and he can see quite clearly now in the near-dark. He can see Thor as his brother watches him without breathing, as Thor is given this last secret that was Loki’s to keep.

It seems as though for a moment time, dreaded time, seems to suspend, then stop, as they look at one another and see at last what they are. Loki, a creature that once Thor hated, and Thor, a man now changed by love. Thor, a beacon of such light and good that Loki, found to be monstrous in any
skin, could not help but be drawn to him and transformed.

For when time resumes Thor is moving toward him, lifting reverent hands to Loki’s face. He dares trace there the raised curve of a circle that he must memorize to persuade another Loki and undo the universe.

Time is a circle and though this has not happened before it must happen again when Thor relates it to a Loki who will not believe him until Thor draws this circle again upon that Loki’s cheek.

“Oh, Loki,” says Thor. “Oh, my love, my love.”

Thor kisses his lips, and no shiver goes through him at their icy touch. He kisses Loki’s cheeks, his chin, he kisses Loki’s forehead and he kisses Loki’s horns, each in turn. He takes a long while kissing down Loki’s neck. He kisses over Loki’s collarbone and along both his arms, he kisses Loki’s chest and his belly and his cock. He kisses his cock again. He kisses Loki’s thighs and knees, his ankles, his heels, the arches of his feet. He kisses every toe and then every finger and every fingertip. He gathers handfuls of Loki’s hair and he kisses his dark hair.

Loki is trembling like the leaves they saw today trembled as they were caught by autumn wind. He cannot be cold like this, but still is he shaking. Spread out now under Thor, worshipped for every centimeter of skin and sinew, he is not breathing until he remembers that he must.

Loki is gasping for breath.

He pulls Thor down to him and then he takes Thor inside of himself. Imagine Thor being so hard for him like this. Thor could lie, the men of Asgard lie, but his cock does not lie. Thor comes into his untested body and Thor’s eyes are wider than the skies that he commands. “Loki,” he keeps saying, like he can see Loki anyway despite the horns and the blue and the circles, or maybe because of them.

“I did not know that it was possible for anyone to be so beautiful,” says Thor.

If it’s a lie it’s a good one, a lie that Thor has made himself believe. He is not lying, Loki knows; he can read his brother like a book, Thor is his favorite story.

Loki takes him deeper and deeper. Thor inside of this self feels molten and Loki will melt and love melting and be blended with Thor who is comprised of liquid heat.

He has never felt like this before and neither has Thor and they make up for lost time by unspooling it out and out and out until it hurts to be together as much as it will hurt to be apart. Only then do they go over the precipice as one body and when Thor is with him Loki cannot fall far, there is nowhere he will be lost now that Thor has hold of him and he has hold of Thor.

That is only the start of it for Thor cannot leave him after all, and so Thor stays within him and Loki’s hand has stopped trembling when he touches blue fingers to Thor’s cheek.

“Brother,” Loki says. Then he finds he must say it again. “Brother. Here is what has to happen. You must memorize the patterns on my skin, the shapes there, and use them to convince the man I once was of what we could be. Any other story that you try to tell at first will be discounted by him as a trick, or, worse, a mockery of how he has so long felt for you in secret. Only the knowledge of this will give him pause. For there is no other way for you to know these markings save that I showed them to you.”

“I have already committed many of them to mind,” Thor tells him, his finger silk-soft as it finds a raised ridge above Loki’s breast. “They are most appealing and unique; and as I told you once—it
seems a long time ago—I would not lose anything about you, but gain all there is to know, that I might love you more for knowing more of you.”

“You need to know them perfectly,” Loki affirms, his heart fit to beat out of his chest with relief and joy and agony and love, yes, love, love that defies all shapes and boundaries as it will defy space and time and come back to them again. “He will test you.”

“Are you saying that I must study you all night, Loki, learning with my eyes and lips and teeth and tongue and fingertips and cock—are you saying, brother, that I must memorize you in my memory, so that I could draw every inch of you in charcoal on paper, and recognize you even without sight?”

“It is a start,” says Loki.

They do not sleep that night.

As the rising sun heats the tent around them they lie curled up together, whispering of things both deadly serious and of light-hearted nonsense. Their hearts are not light but they are now unburdened.

Loki is still in his Jötunn form at Thor’s request. He has never stayed like this for so long. In the thick of the night after their bodies were spent beyond even their endurance Thor asked him softly respectful questions and Loki answered them.
“My sight is better, sharper in the dark,” he told Thor. “My sense of smell is reduced—not as needed when one is surrounded by frozen lands.”

“I am quite small, an anomaly, in the Jötnar scheme of things,” he told Thor. “I used to think it a failing that led to being cast aside and abandoned, but now I know that I was sized instead for you.”

“It feels—not strange to be like this, but new, and at the same time freeing,” he told Thor. “I never felt that my Aesir skin quite fit me right, and not knowing the cause, it made me uneasy from an early age. I always thought I was not quite right.”

“Again? What a wonder you are. Yes, brother, yes,” he told Thor.

By morning Thor is an expert in the art of Jötunn pleasure, his fingertips gently teasing the skin at the base of Loki’s horns while Loki all but purrs against him. But as the sun rises, Loki turns in Thor’s embrace, and says, “I thank you for being you, so that I could show myself like this.” He tilts in, kisses Thor for a last time with lips that speak of winter, then says: “Now I would wear, once more, the flesh that you first knew and loved me in.”

“I love you in every way that you are, Loki,” says Thor, and he presses their foreheads together, holds them like that while the shift happens. He never blinks. “I love you.”

“Again,” says Loki.

Despite their truly exemplary marathon throughout the night Thor is as eager as he presses his cock in as he was the first time they did this, a year and a hundred million years ago. They breathe their mingled scent and hardly move once they are together, enjoying the connectivity of it above all.

Thor’s hips make minute circles; sometimes Loki pushes up from the ground to meet him; but mostly they stay wrapped up in each other, close as it is possible for two to be, then still somehow closer, closer, their hands bound in up in hair, their lips sealed together, their tongues switching mouths.

They take their time. They stay like that a long time, all the time that is left to them on this day. When finally they exchange the last gifts of pleasure and a while after that must draw apart, it is almost enough. It is as adjacent to enough as they are capable of approaching in this lifetime.

So that when Loki says to Thor, “Are you ready,” not a question, Thor nods, and says, “Are you,” and Loki nods.

They dress and break down the tent together, methodical about it but neither working fast. Loki sparks the fire anew with the first incantation he ever learned and brews for them a pot of coffee while Thor makes sandwiches with the remains of last night’s bread and sun-warmed cheese. They eat their breakfast not sitting side by side on the log but rather back-to-back on the earth, tipping their heads onto each other’s shoulders to better examine the azure sky.

They douse the fire and bury the ashes. They pack their belongings, sharing the burden of weight between them. It takes a few hours to wend their way back through the trees and hills and fields to the compound. Thor holds his hand, often squeezing.

When they return all of the team in the compound is awake and showered and suited up and well-fed, but theirs are hardly the only sleepless eyes. Everyone does a lot of nodding and sometimes some back-slapping but they have said their goodbyes. They go about the last tasks that they can think of before it is time.

Loki shifts into a soft green and black tunic, mixed Asgardian style and his own, but does not bathe: he will have Thor’s scent clinging to his skin for as long as he is given room to breathe.
Thor asks Loki to clothe him in the black armor first made on a ship sailing through space, made for a nervous king to greet his wandering kingdom. Thor does not look nervous now, but determined; only Loki can see his nerves in the twitch of Thor’s lips, in Thor’s eyes that keep seeking Loki’s.

In their bedroom they avoid the memories on the bed by not looking at the bed and Loki thinks instead of how Thor carried him here the first time, holding Loki so carefully, as if at any moment he might break. Thor who had just brought him back from death. Thor who traded all his long years for Loki’s life.

They did not know, then, what a wondrous bargain was struck and that there was no price at all: the debt to be collected came later.

It is due. Thor retrieves Stormbreaker from her wall-mount. Takes the shards of Mjölnir from where he has kept them these last days: wrapped in silk and resting on the shelf full of Jötunn lore.

In their bedroom, Loki catches his brother by the shoulder and hauls him once more against the wall and kisses him past breathing, past thinking, past anything save lips on lips and heart to heart, and then they go back downstairs.

Everyone is, for lack of a better word, assembled.

“You ready?” asks Steve, and neither of them flinch. Both nod.

They all leave the compound as one unit.

The spells will be cast upon the stable, Soda safely relocated to an adjoining field and occupied with another trough-full of fruit. Bruce did so at Loki’s request, so that Loki would not have to.

Wong explained long ago that when casting a complex portal, it is helpful to tie the magic to a physical doorway for reinforcement. It is better to use the stable in case of an accident or a catastrophe—all events painstakingly trained and drilled for but not spoken of now.

The portal, and establishing the link to the other Mjölnir, will be Wong’s purview. Casting the enhanced spell on the pocket-watch that directs it to the precise time and place to go is Loki’s responsibility. As they walk he can feel the watch burning through his pocket like a brand. Thor takes his hand with the hand not gripping his axe.

The rest are there to act as back-up in case of disaster and for moral support. Loki can feel their strength around him, individual and combined, as they approach the stable, and it helps. It helps. It is strange to think that he ever felt that he was alone. He tries to remember what that felt like and he cannot.

Conversation is minimal, but Loki hears a throat cleared and then Clint says, “Listen, I—I know that this is really tough and we’re all freaked out.” No one disagrees; even heroes are afraid: especially heroes. “I just want to say how much this means to me. I know I’m just one man, but I think I can stand in for a good portion of the rest of the galaxy when I say thank you for trying. Even if it doesn’t work. Even if we fuck it up or someone else fucks it up. We tried. The idea that we’re gonna try has kept me going so many times when I wanted to give up. No matter what happens. Thank you.”

Bruce claps a hand onto Clint’s shoulder. Natasha touches his upper arm. Loki looks back at him, and they share a nod.

Loki squeezes Thor’s hand, and Thor squeezes back. I love you. I love you. It pulses between them. Everything else that needed to be said has been said.
At the stable the team takes up their positions, a half-circle behind Wong and Loki and Thor. Thor carefully hands over to Wong the pieces of Mjölnir, still cocooned in their sand-colored silk.

Then Wong turns to Loki. Before they exchange a word, Wong steps in and folds his arms around Loki. The embrace is warm and comforting and quiets a good deal of the shouting currently happening in Loki’s head. Grateful past the point of speech, Loki hugs him in return and hates to let go.

When they separate, they stand five paces apart, facing the doorway’s entrance. Thor stands beside Loki and can but watch. Six other eyes from their friends behind them are also watching.

They wait on Rhodey and Steve’s signal. Rhodey says, “No time like the present,” and Steve says, “Okay, we’re good to go when you are.”

Wong says, “My friend?”

And Loki says, “Ready.”

Wong extends his hands. The left, that bears the Sling Ring, is held up to the door in a fist that also holds the shards. His right hand works intricate patterns in the air around it.

As though from a distance, detached, Loki finds himself admiring his friend’s precise, painstaking magic. Wong never rushes, never makes a single mistake. He builds the portal from the ground up, threading spell after spell, interweaving many spells for stability. To travel a distance on Midgard is a simple thing. To travel to a point back in time is expert work demanding the truest of adepts. Wong is beyond worthy.

When he begins to tap into the energy generated by Mjölnir and seek her distant twin, Loki wishes that the others could see what he sees. The magics in play are incredible, invisible forces crackling from Wong’s fist into the portal and—Loki’s heart stops, then restarts, skipping a beat—the same power reverberating back to meet him in answer. Loki does not know if the rest of them can feel it on their skin, but the forces at work here are ancient, beyond antiquity, uncountably old. At his side Thor shifts his weight on his feet. Thor can feel it.

Sweat breaks out on Wong’s brow—the effort is enormous—but his extended hand, controlling the portal, does not waver. The structure gains in solidity and dimensions, its bright snaking light staking claims through the wood of the open stable door.

It seems to take forever and no time at all. Before Loki can begin to grapple with it, Wong says, “Contact established. The connection is as secure as I can make it.” Speaking is an even greater effort, so he only says one more word: “Loki.”

Loki looks at Thor. Thor is looking back at him. If Thor were to tell him right now to have none of it Loki would turn his back without a second thought and they could leave this place behind them forever, Loki thinks.

But Thor says nothing, and Loki could no more turn away than cease to love the man beside him.

Once more, Thor reaches for his hand. Squeezes it. Loki squeezes back.

Then Loki draws from his pocket the bronze bracelet. It’s a deceptive object to look at, simply wrought, an inch wide of metal that fits snug around the wrist. But when he slips it on, unadulterated power pools into his body like being plunged headfirst into a bottomless well of magical energy. Every time he might feel the least bit fatigued, the bracelet whispers, he can drink of it and be restored.
He can hear Wong’s evaluation of its abilities as though they still sat in their study: “Increases a
magician’s power exponentially, but at the cost that he can never use it more than once, and never
cast the spell it was used for again.”

That’s the real danger here, isn’t it. Either Thor will succeed and their world will end, or Thor will
fail and they’re all fucked to do anything about it.

Likely there are other objects and ways that could help them generate enough massed energy to try
something like this anew if disaster strikes. Yet if there are, those means remain unknown. And Thor
will have the watch with him. They have one chance and no others after that might be mustered fast
enough to make a difference. If they fail Loki can never try and open this particular passage through
time again. It’s a one-way trip for both him and Thor.

The intense rush of power makes him feel drunk on it, capable of anything. Maybe he should call
Thanos here right now and challenge the bastard and see how that goes.

Thor is next to him, and Wong on his other side. All of his friends—the people and the raccoon that
he adores—are flanked behind them. Loki will do what he has promised, even if his worst instincts
howl for him to surrender to them and do no such thing.

His hand bearing the bracelet slips into his other pocket, finds the circle of the pocket watch. Time is
a circle and it is encompassed here, it begins and ends. Loki draws it free and holds it in his palm.

For days he’s practiced charging the watch with lesser energies and distances in time to understand
the proper approach. Now, channeling power that feels nigh-on intoxicating, the distance back to
New York years ago seems a tiny jump, a mere skip through time.

It’s almost child’s play to tell it where to turn back to, to a moment when Loki was alone in New
York as he was so often alone. Loki could direct the watch to go anywhere, anywhen, and it would
obey. But Thor is standing beside him, and there is only the one place for it.

Thor. Look at Thor. His brother, his husband, the love of his life, the love of so many lifetimes and
Norns willing yet more. Thor, tall and strong and made of bronze and gold and good and wit and
bravery and loyalty and compassion and passion and love, above all things Thor is love and hope
and Thor loves him above all things.

Loki’s hand shows no outward tremor as he passes Thor the circle of the watch. Their fingers graze,
spark, kiss, speak, scream, sigh, worship, then fall away.

“It is ready,” Loki hears his voice, from miles away, tell Thor and in afterthought the rest of them.

Observe Thor, who now has the hardest part of all. Thor, who never flinches, who is afraid to leave
but not afraid for the challenge ahead of him. The rest of them need merely stand back and let him go
and let everything else unravel. Thor alone must go on, go forward, into a past he does not want in
order to give up the future and also to save it.

Thor stands ready also. Thor has gone past sadness and rebellion and negation; he is resolved
because he must be.

With the watch in his grip, he goes to Loki and kisses him. It is soft, so soft. Thor is cautious of
disturbing the magics that Loki must continue to maintain to see him through. It is but a brush of lips,
a prelude, a prologue promising more, rather than the conclusion.

“Brother,” Loki says to him, not caring who observes them, not remembering that there is anyone
else at all: “My only love. Thor. I will see you soon.”
He means it not in the way that Thor will go through the portal and find a man with Loki’s face. No, Loki must believe that they will find their way back to this in another life, or else meet in a place far away from life. Must believe, or his heart will eat him up until all that is left is dust.

He can hardly countenance that this is really happening. It feels like a dream. It feels like falling without end. If all fails true death will be a comfort if it means their reunion but he is so scared. Death was a void without answers. He will have to trust life.

“Loki Odinson,” Thor says, and his hand comes up to Loki’s neck, securing him. Then Thor’s hand goes to his cheek, tracing there a circle that is invisible but also real, a circle that is there under Loki’s skin, wrought in blue and white and gold. “I have always been yours.”

Thor drops his hand. His gaze sweeps the ring of their friends around them, and he nods to each in turn. Then he lifts Stormbreaker, laying her weight across one shoulder. The fingers of his other hand close tight around the watch. He walks to the portal on steady feet.

At the gateway Thor turns back. “I love you,” he says to Loki, and before Loki can say “again,” Thor steps forward and is gone.

* * *
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Time should stop almost immediately.

Chapter Notes

And we're back! Thank you so much to everyone for reading and for your comments and feedback. You—yes you—number among my favorite people.

The gorgeous art here is by malefeministthor, a sorceress of sketching.

I'm on tumblr at et-in-arkadia, possibly crying and/or contemplating a gif of Tom Hiddleston.

Time should stop almost immediately.

Based on the theories worked out between Bruce, Shuri, Loki, and Wong, if Thor is successful in destroying an Infinity Stone, the reverberations and unmaking of this timeline will be close to instantaneous with his crossing through the portal. Wong stayed two hours in a much closer past and it registered as mere heartbeats here.

All of them are prepared for the end of everything when Thor vanishes and Wong closes the passage behind him. They are braced for impact as though the quinjet is going down.

Two seconds pass, then five, then ten, twenty, thirty, impossibly, a full minute.

Loki stares, disbelieving, dazed, drained. He becomes aware of just how much magic he channeled through the bracelet and how much he used from his own reserves, and he feels his knees go out. He goes to his knees in shock.

Dimly he is aware that Wong has also sat down heavily on the ground beside him. Two minutes. It must be two minutes now. Hours for Thor. Hours gone and yet still they are here. Loki chokes on a sob of panicked grief and swallows it before it can escape his mouth, his dropped jaw.

“All right,” Steve says. “We’ve drilled for this.”

They have, for many conceivable outcomes, though in truth Loki thinks no one really believed they’d be put into play. Thor does not fail. Thor could not in this.

Rhodey and Bruce go to help Wong, while Rocket, Clint and Natasha move on quick feet in opposite directions, to scout the compound and lands for signs of anything irregular: an attack, evidence of new magic, indications that anything has already shifted in the timeline.

Steve crouches next to Loki. “Can you stand on your own?”
Miserable, bent under the tripled pain of loss and terror and uncertainty, his magics terrifically reduced, Loki shakes his head.

“Leave me,” he tries to say. He will stay here at the door that Thor went through—that he sent Thor through—until time snaps like a cut thread. The possibility of anything else cannot even be looked upon.

Five minutes. Can it really be five? Rhodey and Bruce are supporting Wong between them back to the compound.

Loki left it behind with Thor beside him and their friends around them with the intention of never returning.

“That’s not gonna happen,” says Steve, though he’s as gentle about it as he can afford to be. “Loki. We have to regroup.”

Steve, Loki thinks, is nearly as strong as Thor as he slides an arm around Loki’s back, under his arms, and hauls him up into a fireman’s hold. Steve is his friend but Loki would hex him to get free if he had more magic left.

“Thor,” Loki protests. There are tears of confusion and frustration streaming down his cheeks. “Something has gone wrong.”

“We don’t know that,” Steve says evenly. “But you know how much crap Thor would give me if I left you out here unprotected. C’mon.”

The truth of it is the only reason Loki sets one shaky foot in front of another and lets Steve half-drag him up the sloping pathway.

Loki can barely see for tears. His mind is a whirlwind, then a sucking whirlpool of despair. Thor would not fail. Which can only mean that he—the other Loki—has somehow failed Thor and all the rest of them.

Loki was so sure, so certain, that in this even his past self would not prove treacherous. He remembers distinctly, in the memory, wholeheartedly agreeing to help his brother with the mission before the memory cut short.

The astonishing revelation of their relationship by Thor—all that Loki had ever wanted and not allowed himself to want—coupled with the added bonus of thwarting Thanos’ greatest ambition, was an irresistible prospect. He can still recall feeling it like a rush of unbridled glee.

But what if—what if had gone wrong? Or, far worse, what if Loki had only felt the first part because afterward his past self gave back into the horror eclipsing him, and did something to delay Thor, or flat-out betrayed him? Or what if all along this was a trap as Thor himself and Natasha and some of the others long suggested, and they fell for it—sent back Thor, the most powerful warrior among them, sent him and all of his bravery into certain doom?

Loki feels his knees buckle anew, and at the same time, he starts to struggle in Steve’s grip. “Go back,” he says. “Go back. We have to open the portal again and help Thor. We have to help him.”

“You know as well as I that isn’t possible,” Steve says, and though his face is a determined mask there is sadness in his voice. “We reconvene to look at our options. Gotta put our heads together.”

“I’ve lost him,” Loki whispers, the pain of it so gut-wrenching that dying felt far easier. “I can’t, Steve, I can’t. I can’t. I can’t live here without him.”
“I get it,” Steve says. “I promise you that we will do everything that we can. It’s still only been—at most, a few hours for Thor? And Bruce said exact calculations weren’t possible. We need to—we need to give him some time.”

As Steve guides Loki into a chair in the living room, Natasha and Rocket and Clint return from scouting the perimeters. Wong is scowling from the couch at Bruce, who keeps insisting that they should check his blood pressure.

“I’m perfectly well,” Wong snaps. He looks over at Loki, the scowl fading, but Loki cannot bear to meet his friend’s concerned gaze. Loki looks away, looks down at his hands, twisted together and too pale in his lap.

“Okay,” says Rhodey. “Backup plan delta-three. No signs of imminent threat. Let’s get Wakanda on the line.”

He’s standing by the enormous television on the wall, tapping codes into its wall-panel. The panel fills with light and soon shows them a white-walled meeting room accented by chrome and sleek furniture, a round table and chairs of thick glass enclosed by polished wood.

At the table Shuri sits next to a striking older woman in the full ceremonial dress that denotes Wakandan royalty. Okoye stands to the right of Shuri’s shoulder, spear at the ready.

“My friends,” says Shuri, her expression neatly composed, though Loki knows her well enough to hear the disappointment and the worry in her voice. She bows her head to indicate the woman beside her. “My mother, Queen Ramonda, acting regent of Wakanda.” Ramonda nods gravely. Shuri hesitates. “I will say that—that I did not expect to see you again so soon.”

“We’re at a delta-three stage,” Rhodey tells them. He checks his watch. “Thor went through the portal sixteen minutes ago. We’ve seen nothing here that indicates danger in retaliation to the compound, or signs that something else could have come through when that door was open. Natasha?”

Natasha has a laptop balanced on her knees, her fingers flying across the keyboard. “No reports from the existing news outlets that there’s anything out of sync beyond the normal. No contacts from responding governments to indicate they’ve seen any shifts that could indicate a rupture in the timeline.”

Queen Ramonda’s sharp gaze sweeps the lot of them. “It was my understanding that your Thor was to act as fast as possible to destroy an Infinity Stone. How long has it been for him?”

Your Thor. Loki has a vague notion that he might break his own wrist from the pressure he is currently exerting upon it.

Bruce says, “A little over ten hours,” at the same time that Shuri says, “A day.”

Silence falls across both rooms. Bruce pushes his glasses up his nose, puts his hands in his pockets.

Shuri clears her throat. “Doctor Banner and I are a bit divided in our calculations of the time differentials,” she explains. “It is impossible to know for sure, and both of us may be incorrect. Likely the correct answer lies between the two.”

Rocket crosses his arms, expression as stony as his furry face will allow. “You’re saying you don’t know how long he’s been gone for? What kind of two-bit operation is this?”

“Rocket,” says Steve warningly.
“No, this is bullshit. The best scientific minds of our generation can’t figure out if my friend’s probably alive or dead by now?”

“Most of our models estimated the time it would take to destroy an Infinity Stone based on the data and theories we have available,” Bruce says. “After which—”

“It wouldn’t have mattered,” Clint finishes. His expression is as worn down as Rocket’s, for other reasons; unlike Shuri, he makes no attempt to conceal the shattering depths of his disappointment.

Too many people begin to speak at once. They raise a cacophony in his head to echo the brutal screaming in Loki’s heart.

“Thor isn’t dead,” Loki manages beneath the noise. “He isn’t.”

Rocket rounds on him. “Sorry, pal, but you’re not exactly an unbiased voice of reason when it comes to him—”

“Loki,” Wong says, with a glare at the raccoon. “You had best tell them.”

“Thor and I are bound,” Loki says, every word a deeper stab-wound. “It was part of the conditions that brought me back. If he were dead you would know, because I would be dead also.” It seems a blessed relief now, the prospect of that joint death. He would welcome it. Anything would be better than this terrible ignorance, this horrific not-knowing. This lifeless existence without Thor.

“Oh, how romantic,” Rocket snarls. “Guess we should just sit back and wait to see if you keel over, huh, so we can know if we’re totally fucked or not?”

“Rocket, that’s enough,” Rhodey says. “If you’re not going to productively contribute you can leave.”

“You’d all like that, wouldn’t you?” Rocket says, and he sits down in the middle of the floor. “I think I’ll stay right where I am with an eye on Juliet over here so’s I can know when to properly start mourning Thor.”

Steve says, “Loki, if that’s the case, then at least we know what we’re working with. Thor is alive. There’s been some kind of complication on that end. We’ve planned through this, even if we didn’t want to have to use those plans. I need everyone to pull together and try to think clearly. We can’t let this divide us now.”

“Plan delta-three calls to wait twenty-four hours before alerting the United Nations that there is the distinct possibility of mission failure,” Okoye says calmly from the screen. “Is that your continued assessment, Captain Rogers?”

“For now, yes.” Steve nods. “We have to give Thor room to operate. Any number of things could’ve happened. It’s not fair to him, and to everyone we’ve promised the possibility of a solution, to make that kind of call yet.”

It has been perhaps twenty-five minutes since Thor turned away from telling Loki that he loved him and disappeared. It feels like twenty thousand years.

“And when we’re at twenty-four hours,” says Clint, careful now, “how long can we estimate he’ll have been back there for?”

Shuri and Bruce share a quiet exchange of glances. Bruce nods, and Shuri says, “Over a week.”
“And under a month,” from Bruce.

“Fuck,” says Clint. Natasha bites her lip.

“Thor is extremely capable,” Wong reminds them. “It is possible that he and the past Loki have taken the Stone or Stones into hiding, or set out for somewhere better capable of facilitating their destruction.”

“Seems to me,” says Rhod, “that it makes more sense if we start preparing for any fallout that might come about based on Thor being back there for so long, rather than speculating. Things could shift here when we least expect it.”

“Exactly,” says Steve. “We need to be ready to—“

Loki puts his head in his hands, can’t listen any further. It’s too much. It’s too much. It’s too—

“Are you dying right now?” Rocket demands. “Is Thor dying?”

There’s a moment of total freefall where Loki knows that if he had enough magic left, he would eviscerate the raccoon where he sits and find his destruction satisfying. It’s a vicious and cruel thought of the sort he has not felt in a long while, but with Thor not here to keep him moored how quickly he is out to sea.

Thor. Rocket’s anger only springs from his own love for Loki’s brother, his own anxiety and his own disappointment at not being reunited with those that he lost. Loki takes a deep breath and stops thinking about violence. He wishes that he could stop thinking entirely.

“No,” Loki says through gritted teeth. “I am not dying. I will be sure to alert you first if I am.”

Rocket makes a sound like “hmmp,” but he looks somewhat placated.

“We are agreed to wait twenty-four hours before informing the U.N.,” Shuri says. “If Wakanda can be of assistance, you must let us know.”

“Thank you,” Steve and Rhod say together. The screen blinks out.

Loki is able to muster some surprise when Clint crosses the room to stand beside his chair. “You look like shit,” Clint says conversationally.

“I feel it,” Loki agrees.

“I figure you and Wong have earned some downtime,” Clint continues. “The rest of us did a lot of standing around today while you two did the heavy lifting. Don’t see why you need to be here while we go over the contingencies again.”

“Clint’s rarely right,” says Natasha, with a sideways smile for her friend. “But he’s right about this. We may have need of magic soon, and neither of you seem like you could so much as light a candle right now.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Loki says, at the same time that Wong says, “Fire magic is the most elementary of disciplines.”

Natasha rolls her eyes. “Okay, not literally. You know what I mean.”

“I’m gonna call it,” says Steve. “Wong and Loki, you two rest up as long as you can.” He shakes his head when Loki starts to speak. “We’ll alert you if anything changes, or we need your input. Fact of
the matter is, we need two capable sorcerers more than we need you here in the state you’re in.”

Loki wants to protest, and nearly does again; but there’s no denying his teammates are correct in assessing their state. And for all that he wants to be here in case there is any kind of sign or signal, he thinks it will be a blessed relief to be away from the voices, the noise, the arguments. Their own raw emotions grate like salt on Loki’s ever-widening wounds. Yes, to be alone for a while with his dismay will be better.

Loki nods. After he does, Wong echoes the motion. Loki gets the sense that if he had fought to stay Wong would have backed him up, and he sends a tiny pulse of magical energy—the equivalent of a friendly pat on the back—in Wong’s direction. Wong smiles a little after he does that.

“I’ll help,” Bruce volunteers, looking like he still intends to corner them with a stethoscope.

They’re strong enough now to walk unsupported, and they follow Bruce out of the room. When Bruce would head for the staircase, however, Loki draws back.

“I am sorry,” Loki says. “If I go back to that room I will not be able to rest.”

Everything will smell marvelously of Thor, of Thor and Loki’s scents intermingled, of the both of them together. Loki will have to look at the bookshelf of Jötunn lore, the spill of Thor’s armor from the closet, their armchairs, the floor, the walls, their bed.

There is not a surface of the bedroom that is not charged with memory and so much emotion that even just thinking of the sheets and pillows and bedspread—the neat bed that they had made together yesterday before setting out to camp, in what was intended to be the last time the bed was made—has Loki swaying on his feet.

“Not a problem,” says Bruce without missing a beat. “Let’s use one of the guestrooms down here.” He leads the way to the back of the compound, opens the door on a small sterile room, drab and boring and perfect. “Is this okay?”

“Thank you, Bruce.” Loki means it as he walks past him and heads straight for one of the room’s two twin beds. The twin bed is another welcome boon, that he will not have to stare across the vast empty space of a mattress where Thor should be beside him.

Loki perches on the end of the bed. When he sits down he suddenly feels ten times as heavy. Feels old, feels every one of his many years. “Wong?”

“Yes, my friend.”

“Do you think—could you work a version of the sleeping spell you used when I was fevered? Not so deep a sleep, please—but I am not sure I will be able to shut my eyes otherwise.”

“Certainly,” says Wong, coming into the room to sit on the bed opposite Loki’s. After a moment Bruce shuts the door and follows, takes the singular chair by the small window.

The quiet that descends when Bruce closes the door washes over Loki and feels as good as anything can feel now. “Thank you,” he tells Wong. Rage and fury and fear and even grief are hard to hold onto as exhausted as he is; Loki finds himself longing for oblivion, for as close to an exit from this now-futile world as he can manage. He is so tired.

“Ms. Romanoff erred,” Wong says, rolling up his sleeves. “I could still light a great many candles, and the spell for sleep is not a complicated one.”
“Loki,” says Bruce in his softest of tones, “I know you don’t need for me to tell you this. But I believe that Thor can do whatever that he sets his mind to. I’ve witnessed it often enough. And I think I know him well enough to say that the last thing he’d want is to see you tearing yourself apart on his account.”

Yes, Loki wants to say: you are right, and I hope for nothing more than that my brother succeeds in unmaking the universe when I am asleep so that I needn’t ever wake up here again without him.

Instead Loki says: “You are correct. That is why I agreed to rest. Else what you describe is quite inescapable.”

“We’ll figure this out,” Bruce says earnestly. Loki is glad that he does not promise that they will find a solution or even come to comprehend what has gone wrong, for that would be a lie. But Bruce’s words have a reassuring effect nonetheless. Thor would be glad of that.

“All right,” says Wong.

Loki lies down on the bed, boots and all, then tilts his head to look at Wong. He almost hesitates and does not speak, but nothing matters anymore. “Will you stay until I have gone to sleep?”

It is a request he has not made in more than a thousand years. It is as though he can see Frigga sitting upon the chair pulled up by his bed, her fingers soothing his brow, pushing back the hair made damp in the sweat of his frequent nightmares. She smiles at him.

“I will,” Wong and Frigga say, and Loki closes his eyes.

* * *

Loki dreams that Thor is standing beside him, all towering strength and beauty, his face shifting: he is a boy, he is a blooming youth, he is a handsome man, he is a man carrying the weight of sorrow, he is an Avenger, he is a king, he is a lover, he is a husband. His hair is shades of flax that brighten and darken, and grow and recede; his eyes are blue; he is missing an eye; his eyes are blue and amber. He takes Loki into his arms.

In the dream—and perhaps in waking life—Loki cries out, tries to hold onto Thor, but Thor keeps changing under his hands, Loki cannot keep him, Thor runs like water through his fingers. Yet Thor can touch Loki. He kisses the crown of Loki’s head.

“I failed you,” Loki tells him, still desperately trying for a grip that will keep. “I am sorry, I am so—”

Thor puts his hands on Loki’s shoulders and stills this speech, this time with a kiss to Loki’s mouth.

“Brother,” Thor says. His expression has been serious, even severe, but now he smiles. “Wake up.”

* * *

Loki awakens with the distinct impression that he has forgotten something important.
He wakes up in a darkened room, on a small unfamiliar mattress. Wong is fast asleep in a twin bed that matches his own a few paces away.

The knowledge of what happened and what did not happen hits Loki with the impact of a Midgardian train, but he makes no sound for fear of disturbing Wong. His friend had indeed stayed until Loki found his rest, and after.

The persistent feeling of having neglected some crucial duty wraps itself around his brain while he lies still thinking what it could possibly be. The Avengers have no new need of him, else he would have been roused earlier. He gropes after the clock on the bedside table, finds that it reads near 4am. Thor has been gone in the past for many days. Unthinkable.

If it is not Thor, and not the Avengers, what else here concerns Loki? What is he overlooking? There are so few things that are truly his—

“Oh,” Loki exclaims before he can stop himself. “Oh, no. No.” He sits up with all haste, throwing back the quilt someone draped across him. He bites his lip so as not to speak again and risk waking Wong, moving from the bed and out of the room on silent feet.

The compound is dark, for which he is grateful; he is in no mood for conversation or questions; he takes the halls at a dead run, and when he slips out the front door, he runs even faster.

His breath is burning in his lungs by the time he reaches the right field. It has only been the space of the day and half of the night—he knows that she is fine—but his guilt is all-consuming when Soda whinnies excitedly at him from where she stands alone, tied to a fence-post.

She is unused to being on her own without regular visitors and care, and the illusions of other horses that Loki summons to keep her company. Though she still has water in her trough, her food is long since gone.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Loki tells her, untying her with all haste, and trying to stroke her in five of her favorite spots all at once. “I forgot, it’s unacceptable that I did, and the rest forgot—we’ve had a day of it—forgive me—”

She stamps her foot in annoyance, but noses to search for treats; when Loki’s hands prove empty, she snorts and tosses her head.

“You’ll have all that you could ever want to eat at the stable,” he says, and then, not wanting to pull her by the rope she’s been tethered to all day, he climbs up onto her back though she lacks saddle or bridle, and guides her with his knees in the right direction. She takes off at a gallop, thrilled to be free again, and they streak across the fields together. Anyone watching from a window at the compound would see just a flash of silver and black as they go by.

Loki dismounts at the stable door, which still stands open from the morning. The sight of it makes his breath catch.

Here Thor had stood and looked back at him before walking into the unknown. Loki should have abided his first, most selfish instinct, he thinks—he should have taken his brother and taken them both far from here.

If he spends too long thinking about where Thor could be and what might be happening to him Loki will go a kind of mad from which there is no return, so he tries to focus on the immediate concern of Soda.

He fills her trough full of feed and treats, and while she hungrily eats, he uses a soft brush to free her
of the day’s dirt and dust, and carefully picks each hoof clean of debris.

The night is cold and growing colder, so he throws the softest blankets over her back, and spends a while speaking adoring words to her flicked-back ears until she is visibly more relaxed and growing drowsy.

Her stall is clean, but not, he deems, clean enough, and so Loki grabs a pitchfork and begins to muck it out. He is halfway through filling it with fresh straw when Soda neighs.

It is not a sociable neigh, nor one demanding further attention. It is a warning, clear as crystal that shatters when next she squeals in full alarm. Loki’s head snaps up—

There is no sound to be heard now within the confines of the stable. By the doorway, Soda is reared back, frozen in midair on her hind legs, her forelegs extended as if to strike. She does not move; it is as though she is a statue of a horse. Loki can see her bright eyes, caught still rolling with fear.

The air feels thick and heavy and slow; it is like breathing in molasses, like trying to walk through it, but Loki finds that he can breathe and walk. His hands tighten on the pitchfork, a hundred lessons from Natasha and the Valkyrie and Okoye making him shift his grip upon it, as he tries to reach Soda’s side.

It is as though time has paused around her, has her caught in amber, and his first thought—a rush of both comfort and dread—is that Thor has at last succeeded. Time is stopped, and will soon begin to unravel; it is good. He knew that Thor would persevere.

But time, though stopped, shows no signs of coming apart. With the sound of Soda’s warning still ringing in his ears, Loki keeps his hands on the pitchfork while he works on interweaving a defensive spell upon it. If only his magic were not so drained. He cannot manage much, but it will have to do. He begins to feel telltale pricks of energy gathering around him on his skin, and he gets his guard up, ready to face the unknown with a modicum of the courage his brother had displayed.

When the portal opens at the stable door it is like no magical passage that Loki has ever seen before. It is a flare of color and light, a gateway cut easily through the fabric of time and space as though both are comprised of silk and as easily sliced.

Loki can feel enormous power—power beyond anything that he has encountered, or dreamed could exist—emanating from it, but there is such a signature of familiarity that for a brief, brilliant moment while his heart beats out of control, he lets himself imagine that it is Thor who is opening the door.

Then Loki watches, unmoving, as a figure strolls through and into the light.

It is worse than a nightmare, for nightmares are not real, and this—this is real.

Another Loki looks back at him, and it is like staring into a mirror, a mirror cracked and warped. His hair is long and stringy, his eyes stark and sunken in a sallow face. A cruel smile, lacking mirth, soon twists his flat lips.

On his left hand he wears the Infinity Gauntlet.

It is the Gauntlet Loki saw on Thanos, one of the last sights he saw before he died, and yet it is different: smaller, unembellished, as though hastily forged. But there is no denying what it is. All six Infinity Stones glint in their settings, and they cast an unearthly glow around the other Loki.

The other glances around himself with avid interest. His eyes take in Soda, frozen in mid-air, the little stable, Loki with his pitchfork aimed to kill. His poisonous smile grows wider.
“Hello,” says the other Loki. “How much I have looked forward to this meeting. I did not expect to find that you’d been made a stable-hand.”

Loki, clawing his way out of the greatest horror he’s ever known, at last finds the means and will to speak. “Where is Thor?” he demands. “What have you done with him?”

The other Loki makes a tsking sound, as though greatly disappointed. “Predictable,” he says, wrinkling his nose. “It’s disconcerting to look at you and know that’s what I could become.”

Loki will throw himself at this monstrosity, armed with a pitchfork against the Infinity Gauntlet, if it means an answer to the question of Thor. “Our brother. Where. Is. He?”

“Ah, yes. Our dear, dear brother.” The other rolls his eyes, seems amused by Loki’s bristling bravado. “Let me see. What did I do with him, or is it when did I do it? Time is such a funny little thing when you are wearing this.” He flexes the hand wearing the Gauntlet, then leans down and reaches through the portal behind him. Then he drags Thor’s body through it face-down, casts him onto the straw. “Here he is. I found him.”

Loki’s cry is wrenched out of his throat, and he throws himself to his knees beside Thor, uncaring of anything else. The universe could stop right now and he would not notice. He turns his brother over in his arms with hands that shake so badly they are barely usable.

He never thought to see Thor like this again, thought that there would ever be another chance to touch him, to hold him. When he feels that Thor is breathing shallowly, his chest rising and falling beneath the jet breastplate, Loki gives over to choking sobs and rocks Thor against him.

His brother is worse for the wear, his leathers blackened and scorched in some places, much-bloodied in others, though Loki can see from the lack of wounds that the blood is not Thor’s. The blood that is Thor’s oozes from a deep, dreadful gash across his forehead, and Loki frantically wipes the red from Thor’s soot-darkened face with his sleeve.

He tries to staunch the bleeding, first with his sleeve and then with all the healing magic that he can summon, but it will not knit closed. Loki tilts in and while he still can, he kisses Thor’s warm lips, his cheeks, his hair despite the blood and filth. This is no fairytale, and Thor’s eyes do not flutter open.

Out of the corner of his eye he can see the other Loki regarding them with intense curiosity. “Bravo,” he says. “Quite the display. I see I really have become a romantic in my old age.” Loki snarls up at him—shows his teeth—and the other Loki laughs, a sound like nails raked across slate. “Set him down now. He’ll be fine. I only gave him a little tap on the head.”

Lovingly, gingerly, Loki lowers Thor back to the ground so that nothing else will befall him, and he gets unsteadily to his feet to face his nightmare, putting himself between the fell vision and Thor.

“You struck him with the Infinity Gauntlet?”

“I’m afraid I didn’t have a choice,” the other Loki says, his eyes burning against his paper-white skin. “He wouldn’t stay down. You know how terribly stubborn our brother can be.”

Even though he will never be fully freed of this part of himself, Loki had forgotten the full extent of the state he was in during the battle for New York. The other Loki is hunched over, malnourished and much too thin, his gaudy costume hanging from his scarecrow frame. His hair is unkempt, his skin pallid, but his eyes are the worst of all, full-up with madness and viciousness, ringed by bruise-like shadows, knowing no kind of rest since Thanos found him.

Loki abhors the sight of him, with a hatred greater than any he has ever known—and in the same
breath he finds himself oddly moved to pity. He knows this man, knows everything about him, knows his pain and torment, would help him if he but could.

Knows him well enough to be afraid of what the other is more than capable of, of what he surely intends.

That he somehow bears the Gauntlet is unfathomable. A monster is wielding the power over life and death and time and space and the very nature of reality. How could this have come to pass?

“All in good time,” says the other Loki, then raises an eyebrow at his surprised expression. “You think that I, too, cannot look at you and know what you are thinking? You may be playing at reformation and turned pathetically soft here, but you are still me.” He examines the Gauntlet in the faint light as one might admire well-groomed nails. “You will answer my questions. I can compel the truth from you, easily, but that seems like much less fun. If you can’t trust yourself, who can you trust?”

Loki grits his teeth and bides his time. The longer he has to examine the other, the more a chance may arise to find a moment of weakness. He cannot hope to challenge this man physically, or with magic; all of the gaps in the other Loki’s armor must be of the psychological kind—must be rooted in head and heart. He gives a curt nod.

“Better. You’ve remembered your manners.” The other Loki’s eyes flick to Thor on the ground, then back up to meet Loki’s gaze. Their green is a sickly color made worse by the unhinged glimmer behind them. “Our brother had some interesting tales to tell me. Very interesting. He seems to be
laboring under the impression that you are quite married.”

Loki nods again. “We are sworn,” he says, unflinching. “Our vows were our own.”

“Fascinating,” says the other Loki. He begins to move in a slow circle around Loki and the prone Thor, forcing Loki to turn with him to keep him in his line of sight. “How did you do it? I must know.”

Loki’s brow furrows. It is an unexpected question, and an intimate one, but what can he expect to keep from himself? “Thor put forward the idea, and I—”

“No, no.” The Gauntleted hand waves through the air dismissively. “I mean, how did you trick him? I’ve gone through many possibilities, of course, but now I have the source, and I simply must know. An artifact akin to the Mind Stone, to control him? A love potion of a strength to affect even one such as he? Did you change his memories—give him false ones? Tell me, and remember that I will know if you are lying.”

For a long time Loki simply stares at him. His heart, he finds, is aching, with something that could be sympathy. “There was no trick,” he says.

“You expect me to believe that?”

“Thor brought me back from death,” Loki says, “out of love for me. It was he who confessed it first, and he who first kissed me here, on these grounds; then we both gave voice to what we had kept hidden and kept ourselves from sharing. Here, in this timeline that we found ourselves, it was inevitable. And it has been wonderful, despite the trials of the world that we live in, and the suffering of many worlds. Each day with him proved better than the one before it.”

The other Loki is silent, walking his circle, then continuing with it once he has drawn a full circumference. At last he says, doubtful—and yet Loki can hear how much he wishes to cast that doubt aside— “You did not deceive him?”

“I have never been more my—our—true self than here,” Loki answers. “He loves me. He loves—he loves us. He loved you as you are right now, but had not the words to tell you then.” He tips his head, grows daring. “Just as you love your own Thor, desperately and in secret, consumed with what you believe cannot be.”

The other halts, his cheeks a furious red, and looks as though he is considering lashing out; but Loki stares back at him without blinking.

“I know, of course,” Loki says. “Of course I know.”

“He had so many stories to tell, and with such conviction,” the other Loki muses, turning away. “I wished to believe him. I played along as though I did. But I could not be sure—” He stops, drops the line of thought, finds another. He turns back. His eyes narrow. “You showed him our Jötunn form. You are madder than I am.”

Loki lifts his shoulders. Does not deny it. “I did. He asked once before, and I refused him. Then it came to pass that I knew such knowledge would work to convince you—or at least make you pause long enough before you tried to attack him.” Loki glances over, must soak in Thor sprawled unconscious but still breathing. Still breathing. “And by then I trusted him enough to know it would not matter save in ways that mattered very much to me.”

“He claims to have loved you in that form,” the other says, and for the second time Loki hears wavering doubt and hope in his voice, the weakness that he is looking for.
“Come and see,” Loki suggests. He taps a finger against his forehead. “Unless you are afraid?”

“I wield the Infinity Gauntlet,” the other Loki sneers. “I fear nothing.” But the curiosity is too much for him, the longing is, just as Loki guessed, for after a moment’s hesitation he steps over Thor and approaches.

This close, he is like unto a mirror broken and fit back together by inexpert hands, he is like Loki seen drowned under water, he is Loki after being kept starved and beaten and tortured in a prison of Thanos’ making.

“If you try and fool me, I can reduce this universe into naught but ashes,” the other says, and Loki only just manages not to laugh, or smile; his hatred for this creature is fading into an emotion approaching fondness.

What a dramatic little idiot he had been. Dangerous, yes, but lost and misguided and desperate for direction. Loki reaches for his hand, then presses the other’s palm to his forehead.

“There is no deception,” Loki says.

He shows him the entirety of the final day with Thor. Wandering through the woods, watching the sun going down with their arms around each other, Thor presenting him with a bouquet of wildflowers. In their tent under the stars, the merging of their bodies without end, until Loki cast a green light and revealed the last part of himself. He shows Thor’s reaction, the way that Thor kissed every bit of him there was to kiss, the way Thor’s mouth and body worshipped this new, old skin.

He shows him Thor saying that no one is so beautiful as Loki.

He can feel the tension in the other Loki’s hand, hear his sharp intake of breath, but Loki is not finished with him yet. He grasps for the other’s wrist, secures him, holds him tight. He shows him how it started, shows him every exquisite mind-and-body expanding night with Thor in their bed. He shows him Thor in the mornings asleep and peaceful, shows him what it is like to sleep in Thor’s arms at night. He shows him Thor laughing, Thor weeping, Thor looking at him every single time as though Loki alone hung the moon and bid the sun to rise.

He shows him their vows, he shows him Thor gifting Soda in the woods, he shows him Thor beside Loki on a couch while the Avengers laugh and drink magicked Asgardian mead around them. He shows him Thor loving their lady-self as fiercely and without boundary as he loves all of Loki’s forms, he shows him Loki standing strong and assured as she came into herself and learned to be loved by others in that shape. He shows him Thor in New Asgard, wearing different faces, wearing the face that this past Loki sees when he closes his eyes. He shows him Thor carrying him through the rain and all the thunder and the lightning Thor’s love and grief had summoned, shows him Thor pressing him into the earth and Thor saying “I love you,” and Loki saying, “You will again—”

The other Loki wrenches himself away, stumbles back. His mouth is open. His eyes are wild.

“There’s a good bit more,” Loki says, “should you like to see.”

“It cannot be,” the other Loki whispers.

“It is your future,” Loki corrects, “should you want it to be.”

This earns him a wan look, both eyebrows up. The other seeks to tamp down on his reaction with a sly smile. “Why do you think I am here?”

Loki shrugs, as though unconcerned, as though he’s hardly thought about it. “I figure you are bent on taking over the galaxy,” he says lazily. “Everything’s in chaos over here, so many worlds that
might quickly fall to your rule. That’s what I would have done.”

“I considered it,” the other Loki agrees. “And, as I’m sure you’re well aware, found such a notion terribly pedestrian. Where’s the thrill of conquest over hollow people? Who desires to be worshipped by broken worlds? What glory is there in that?” He makes a fist with the Gauntlet, then opens the hand with a flourish. “The Infinity Gauntlet, however, could easily fix those ailments, and enable me to ascend in any fashion that suits me, wholly unchallenged.”

Loki feels himself growing cold again, wary, worried. “You cannot exist in this timeline without creating a massive paradox,” he says. “Even now you only prevent one because you are pausing time itself.”

“Very good,” the other Loki agrees. “Yet you risked doing the same to the past by sending your doting husband back through time—yes, yes, I know you justified it by reason that he would fast undo the future and vanish. But he did not do so, did he?”

When Loki says nothing, the other grins in a discomfiting way, a shark’s smile upon meeting a school of fish. “For all your finely laid plans, you failed to take Thor’s nature into account,” he says. “All I needed to do, once I had the whole narrative out of him, was convince him that there was another option, and that option meant that he might win the chance to come back to you. He is quite besotted, you see.”

“At the time I thought him to be bewitched; now you show me otherwise; either way, the results were the same. I told him that rather than destroy the Infinity Stones, we had really better collect them and make a Gauntlet for ourselves. Then we would have the power to destroy Thanos and prevent your dire future Snap from occurring, but with the Gauntlet in hand, he could do whatever he liked, including returning to said dire future to reunite with the brother he loved so very much, and that he might even see fit to resurrect anyone else that was missing.”

“Thor wouldn’t agree to it,” Loki tries, but the words are no sooner out of his mouth than he hears them to be false.

“He is a fool,” the other Loki says with a nod. “A fool for charmingly sentimental reasons, but a fool nonetheless. He has an outsize opinion of his own capability. He has proven himself enough that he is quite easy to persuade into thinking that he can do anything, especially those things that seem most difficult. He was like clay in my hands. How badly he desired the solution that I presented.”

Loki sighs, scrubs a hand across his forehead, through his hair. His gaze tracks back over to Thor, collapsed in a muscularly noble heap of love and honor and loyalty. Loki should, he thinks, have seen something like this coming.

It’s as though he can hear Thor’s voice at a distance, hear him as he spoke their first day in the grove, as he explained why any price was worth bringing Loki back to him: While there remains some chance that we may be together, I will always pursue it.

I will always choose you. Both of them had said it often. But oh, Thor, Thor. Not like this.

“His greatest oversight was believing that I would help him to assemble the Gauntlet, and then stand back and allow him to be the one to use it,” the other Loki says. “He was not thinking it through. If he had, he would know that the wielding the Gauntlet inflicts considerable damage. He would not have been able to enjoy his perfect future after all.”

“The same will happen to you,” Loki points out.
The other’s smile widens. “Are we not already damaged, brother?” he asks, and Loki shivers at the word. “What is one more wound now to me?”

“There are other ways for us to live,” Loki tells him. “You have seen them now.”

“They intrigue me,” the other Loki agrees. “Yet I think that in my own time I would have less success. You say that Thor loves me as he loves you, but just a little while ago my Thor kidnapped me from an airplane and tossed me around quite convincingly. I do not think that we could have kissed and made up.”

“You underestimate yourself,” Loki says from experience, “and him. You can still unmake this timeline, and when you return to your own, take that knowledge and—”

“I did not come here to ask for your advice,” says the other Loki. “This Gauntlet was won too dearly, and I intend to use it as I see fit.”

“What do you mean?” Loki asks, and then, by the way the other’s expression changes into a hardened mask, wishes that he had not. Unbridled madness is easier to look upon than that blankly awful face.

“You wouldn’t know how it goes, of course. Of course. We did not know, Thor and I, until we visited Vormir, and were told what we must do.”

Apprehension curdles in Loki’s belly so intensely that to this he can say nothing.

The other Loki says, “I will start at the beginning of our quest. We had quite the far-ranging adventure. First Thor had his friend the dwarf make us a Gauntlet of our own, which Eitri was glad to do when he heard how the other Gauntlet came to be. Most of the Stones we were able to collect without too much difficulty—a skirmish here and there. We had in our grasp already the Mind Stone and the Space Stone. Thor knew how to obtain the Reality Stone, and the Power Stone we won with the assistance of some rather entertaining aliens. Thor managed to convince them of the necessity of his plan and impress with his uncanny knowledge of them. One of their number, a green-skinned lady most unfortunately related to Thanos, revealed to Thor the location of the final Stone. The Soul Stone was on Vormir, you see, but it was not retrieved so easily. There was, you might say, a price.”

Loki feels his fingernails cutting into the skin of his palm as his hands ball into fists. “I do not wish to know it,” he says then, with total certainty.

Harsh laughter from the other Loki is an obscene sound to hear, alike to his own and yet twisted, corrupted, every note off-key. “I am sure that you do not,” he says. “Yet it is only fair that you know what you have done. The price, you see, in order to obtain the Stone, was to sacrifice someone that you dearly love. Need I continue?”

“No,” Loki says. “No.”

“She volunteered,” the other Loki says, his eyes ablaze, wet now with tears that begin streaming down his cheeks like an afterthought. “As soon as Thor told her all of it, she insisted. A small price to pay, she said, if we could save billions; and anyway, Thor was convinced that he could as easily restore her once he had the Gauntlet. Of course, Odin would have disagreed, so he was not consulted. Yet even for all of his courage Thor could not do it alone, and frankly neither could I; so in the end we kissed her cheeks and threw our mother to her death together.”

Loki tastes bile in the back of his throat; he wants to retch; he retches. “Say that you are lying. You could not have done such a thing. Even you could not have.”
“You know that I am telling the truth,” the other Loki says. “In your soul you can feel what it was like, for you did it also.”

Loki covers his face with his hands. The other says, “I tell you this because I wish you to suffer as I have suffered. I have already restored her to her rightful place in the past and removed her memory of it. It was as easy as blinking after I put on the Gauntlet. To have her missing from Asgard would have disrupted events too dramatically. She will still fall to Malekith’s treachery, as Thor informed me, but even I cannot prevent that if I am to keep this future intact.”

Loki no longer knows what to do with his hands, how to make any part of his body respond correctly. His adrenaline is spiked, his heart beating so hard that he can feel it knocking against his ribcage. His hands are shaking, his knees are weak. He leans against the half-forgotten pitchfork for support.

Tears run down his cheeks with a rapidity that says they will never stop and bile is lodged in his throat. He is so, so tired. He is ready to stop trying. He knows himself defeated.

“Have done and kill me,” Loki says. “I cannot bear more of this. Give me leave to say goodbye to my brother, and I will not try and stop you.”

“Kill you,” says the other Loki, studying his face like it is a particularly intriguing book. “Why should I kill you?”

Loki blinks at this. “The paradox is too great. Thor could risk visiting the past when he was hidden and unknown to his former self, but I know you are here, and the two of us coexisting in the present is not tenable.”

“Certainly it is not.” The other Loki tilts his head, birdlike. “I am injured at how little you know me, brother.”

“I know you all too well,” Loki says bitterly.

“Yet you have not learned your own lessons,” the other Loki says. “Did I not hear you tell me about what is in my heart—how much I love Thor, and how I do not let myself love him, and hear you say that he feels the same way, even in my time?”

“I—” Loki starts.

“Do you think, Loki Odinson, that I could see what you showed me, and possibly desire anything else?” The other Loki reaches out, jabs a Gauntleted finger hard beneath Loki’s collarbone. Loki’s entire being reverberates with the impact. “What use is ruling the galaxy here if Thor will despise me for murdering you, spend all his time trying to stop me—how terribly dull. How boring. How beneath me. I am yawning already. You know me. You best of all. What is it that I truly want right now? Why am I Thanos’ pawn in New York? Why did I let go on the Bifrost? What is my motivation?”

“Thor,” Loki answers. It is always Thor.

“Thor,” the other Loki agrees. “It is always Thor. And if I am ever to have him, I cannot destroy you. I can only hope to become you.”

“I do not understand,” Loki says. “You took the Gauntlet—”

“I had to take it from him, before he could put it on and botch everything,” the other Loki says. “I had to come here, and test you, to find out whether the stories that he told were true or not. They are
true. This, then, is the future that I choose. I choose Thor. And I choose you.”

Loki looks at him more closely. Above the bruised skin his eyes are bright, but not with madness, or perhaps it is madness of another sort: his eyes shine clear and unwaveringly focused. Beneath that pale cheek Loki can see the sharp lines of a face he knows—a face that is his own, no longer a stranger’s.

Loki manages to astonish them both when he lifts a hand, cups the other Loki’s chin, then catches him by the back of the neck. He touches their foreheads together.

“Brother,” Loki breathes.

“Listen closely,” the other Loki says, and he does not pull away. “I intend to undo what Thanos has done. The effort will cost me. With what strength remains, I will return to my own time. I will leave for myself signs—a premonition, Thor told me, and a memory—of how this will all come about again. Then I will instruct the Gauntlet to make me forget that any of it has happened, and to destroy itself, and return its Stones to their previous locations.”

Loki’s jaw works. He gapes at him. “Surely not all of that is possible.”

“I wield the Infinity Gauntlet,” the other Loki says for the second time, drawing himself up proudly, and not a little haughtily. “I command all time and space, death and life, and reality is a simple thing to bend; time is yet simpler. There is nothing that is not possible.” Then his wry lips turn in their first genuine smile since his arrival. “We already know we are successful. Time is a circle, brother, and all of this has happened before; you already saw the premonition, recalled the memory, that I have yet to leave for us, and all of it will happen again to me in my future, which is yours.”

He turns on his heel, so that Loki’s hand falls away; then he kneels down beside Thor, and passes the Gauntlet over the bloody gash across his forehead. It dwindles down into a fine silver line, a scar still present but almost indiscernible. He leans in and kisses Thor’s brow, then lets one finger draw a wistful curve along Thor’s bearded cheek.

“It will be some years before I can touch him like this again,” the other Loki says, staring.

Loki moves closer to them both, lays a hand on the other’s shoulder. “It will be worth it.”

“Whyever would he cut his hair? Was it for a bet?” The other Loki shakes his head mournfully. “I asked him, but he would not tell me. I could bring it back, you know. Should you like.”

Loki laughs—it feels good to laugh—but he says, “I like him just like this.”

“Very well.” The other Loki gets to his feet, smoothing down his robes. “This has all been most entertaining, but before I save the galaxy, I have one more errand to see to. I hope you will excuse me.”

“Where are you going?” Loki asks.

The smile he receives is sharp-toothed and the most genuine yet. It reaches up to the other Loki’s eyes without a hint of subterfuge. “To kill Thanos.”

“Oh,” says Loki, delighted. “Can I come?”

* * *
Loki stirs to awareness because someone is chewing on his hair.

He pushes up on his elbows, tries to move away, and Soda nips at him.

Awareness—but an awareness he scarcely can begin to believe—awareness floods him, and then Loki is more awake than he has ever been.

He is lying, in yesterday’s clothes, upon the straw-strewn floor of the stable, with his horse contentedly munching upon his spilled hair, trying to provoke a response.

Otherwise Loki is quite alone. He’s on his feet in seconds, pressing Soda’s nose in the fondest of thanks; and as she whickers at him, Loki takes off through the open stable door.

His path toward the compound is half-physical, half-metaphysical. He runs, but he also folds the ground beneath him with magic, and he arrives within seconds. He can hear a great buzz of noise emanating from within, and he throws open the front door, wrenching it from its hinges but not considering that anyone will mind.

The ground floor of the compound is packed full of people and joyful exclamations. Everywhere that Loki looks is another person that he does not know, nor recognize, until someone that he calls a friend turns up to embrace them.

They are all of them returned.

In the front hallway, Clint is collapsed with his arms around his children, who frolic merrily in his grasp. The smiling eyes of Clint’s wife track Loki as he goes by.

In the kitchen, he encounters Wong shaking the hand of Stephen Strange, again and again and again, to be sure. Beside them, Rhodey and Bruce are piled upon Tony Stark, hardly letting him or the tawny-haired woman in his grasp breathe or get a word in edgewise. They are a mass of arms and legs swaying and hugging. A young man nearby is babbling excitedly into a cell phone. “I’m fine, Aunt May, I’m here, I’m really back—"

“Loki!” Wong calls after him, but Loki cannot stop.

“Are we all aware that Loki just ran past like he has a season pass to the place?” he hears Tony Stark say.

In the living room, Natasha is laughing with her head thrown back, flanked by Wanda Maximoff and a maroon construct of a man with the Mind Stone centered on his forehead. “Loki!” Natasha exclaims, but he does not stop.

In the corner of the living room, Steve Rogers has his arms wrapped around Bucky Barnes, and is kissing him soundly. Sam Wilson is positioned before them grinning and taking selfies with the kiss as a backdrop.

There is no sign of Thor.

“Loki!” Steve shouts as he dashes past, and Bucky turns to look also. “Loki, what happened—?”

“Thor,” Loki manages, before he is taking the stairs three at a time. He bursts into their bedroom, almost evaporating the door, but all is silent and bare within.
He turns on his heel and is back downstairs so quickly that he may have teleported to get there. He
witnesses the exceptional sight of Rocket blowing his nose noisily as he dangles off the limb of what
appears to be a sentient tree.

Loki’s panic is growing to outpace his euphoria. Could the other Loki, even after all the rest of it,
have played him falsely? Could something have gone wrong? For all of the other Loki’s assurances
that he could wield the Gauntlet to this end, what if Thor—

No. No. It does not bear even thinking. Loki tears through the rest of the compound, throwing open
doors, visiting empty labs, the too-quiet gym, the darkened basement—nothing.

The sound of happy reunions radiates from the ground floor and follows him through every room.
Loki finds himself back at the front door, ready to search the grounds—

—and then he knows.

It’s the fastest he’s ever run. Sprinting across battlefields of war in his youth with an enemy at his
back was done at a more leisurely pace. He hits the treeline within minutes, his feet seeming to carry
him without direction; they know exactly where to go.

In the heart of their grove, where Thor had told Loki how he won him back from death, where Thor
had carried him through a storm and laid him on the earth, Thor is lying sprawled amid the grass and
wildflowers. He appears to be fast asleep, and he is the single most beautiful thing that Loki will ever
have the pleasure of discovering with his own two eyes.

His eyes sting with tears at the sight, his pulse racing at such a clip that for a moment all Loki can
hear is the furious rush of blood past his ears. He goes to his knees beside Thor, panting, gasping for
breath, his head dropping to his brother’s chest, to feel the stunning way that Thor’s body is warm
and solid and real.

Thor does not stir beneath him—not until Loki moves to cradle Thor in his arms and kiss those too-
loved lips with the fervor of having escaped the impossible—with all the enthusiasm of being
improbably alive.

And because Loki’s life is a fairytale, a thing of wondrous enchantment, Thor opens his eyes.

Thor’s eyes go very, very wide, and his hand has a tremor to it as he weaves his fingers through
Loki’s hair and holds there, as though equally desperate to assure himself of Loki’s solidity. His
other hand goes to his forehead, feeling after where the Gauntlet’s weight landed, and finding there
only the fine thin line of scar.

Loki can’t stop kissing him—Loki will never, ever stop kissing him, not ever again, not for anything
—but at length Thor tugs gently on his hair, is murmuring words against his mouth, and Loki leans a
fraction of an inch away.

“Brother,” Thor says. The scar draws tight as his forehead furrows in confusion. “Is this Valhalla?”

“It is better,” says Loki.

Thor sits up at that, takes in their surroundings, his flummoxed expression shading into urgency.
“The other Loki. He has the Gauntlet. We must stop him before he—”

“He is stopped,” Loki says, reaching for both of Thor’s hands. “He stopped himself. We went on a
short journey, he and I; and then he brought back what was lost here, and he resumed his place in
time.”
He tells his brother as much of it as he can, talking fast, as emotions crowd their way across Thor’s spectacular face that Loki will never cease to gaze upon now. He never will.

Thor’s hand tightens on Loki’s as he speaks, a convulsive flex of fingers. “Say that part again.”

“He held Thanos down with the Gauntlet,” Loki repeats, with relish. “I drove in the knife.”

There is a flash of lightning behind Thor’s eyes, and then he nods. “Would that I had been there. I swore to myself and to Asgard’s dead that I would deliver the blow.”

“I regretted not being able to share it with you,” Loki agrees. His lips curve a smile, nearly fond. “I was certain to give Thanos your regards.”

“It is hard for me to believe that it is done, and we are here,” Thor says. “I fear that the Reality Stone is being used upon me, and all will vanish from breath to breath.”

“I intend to spend the rest of my life convincing you that this is real,” Loki says. “I will work every day to persuade you, brother.”

Thor untangles their fingers at that, pulls Loki into his lap. He presses his forehead to the dip of Loki’s shoulder. “Then you can forgive me?”

“Forgive you,” Loki echoes.

“The moment the other Loki suggested that there might be another way, I leapt to believe him,” Thor says. “I would have given anything to preserve the Stones and this timeline for even a little while longer. While we collected the Stones—it was many days and many trials—I could close my eyes at night and know that still you lived here, and it was almost enough.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” Loki says, ducking his head to kiss into Thor’s hair. “Save that you risked handing over the entire galaxy to an unstable megalomaniac out of love for me.”

“He was not so bad as that,” Thor says.

“Out of love for you,” Loki agrees, “he was not.”

“He pretended at indifference,” Thor says. “Kept himself away and aloof. Yet whenever I told stories about what had happened between us—and I spoke of us often, for myself as much as for him—he listened. Sometimes he asked me pointed questions, as though trying to catch me out on a lie, but I believe that I passed those tests.”

“Questions?” asks Loki.

“Questions I could answer in my sleep,” says Thor, raising his head. “The places on your body where you are most sensitive.” He licks the soft bud at the base of Loki’s ear and Loki shivers all over. “What your cock looks like. I offered to draw him a picture from memory and a hundred thousand hours spent contemplating that same question.”

“How perfectly vulgar of him,” Loki says

“So too were the details of my answers,” Thor says, and Loki laughs, leans in for a proper kiss.

“It was difficult,” Thor admits, sobering, when at last they break apart. “He was so like you in some ways, and also could not be more different. And—the pain he was in was extraordinary.” He brushes a thumb across Loki’s lips. “You did not tell me how you had suffered, and I was too blinded by
anger and grief to see it back then for myself.”

“It was a long time ago,” Loki says, his voice gone quiet.

“It was yesterday for me,” says Thor.

“It is finished,” Loki says decisively, and after a moment Thor nods.

Then Thor looks away from him for the first time since waking here. “Loki,” he starts. “Mother—”

“I know all of it,” Loki says, resisting the urge to clap a hand over Thor’s mouth to stay his confession. “She was restored in the past. She lived yet longer as we knew her.”

“It is the worst thing that I have ever done or will ever do,” Thor says, “though she asked us to do it. But I do not wish to speak of that. I will never speak of it again. No, what I wished to tell you is that we had many words, she and I, and she—she gave us her blessing.”

Loki’s jaw loosens; his heart lurches. “You and she—you—you—”

“I told her,” Thor affirms. “I could not have kept it from her even if I had wished it, and I did not wish it. She guessed at once. Whether it was from her own intuition, or her magic, I know not; perhaps it was both. ‘A mother knows,’ she said. She had many queries about the person you are here, and when I told her all that you had done since before the Snap and after, she was unsurprised. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘That sounds like my Loki.’ She asked after my intentions, as though I were any other suitor vying for your hand, and I said to her that I loved you more than my own life and indeed my own unmaking, and that we were sworn, and bound; and she was glad.”

“Thor,” Loki whispers, hardly able to shape the name he knows better than his own heartbeat, “Thor, I—”

“I must have it all said and done,” Thor tells him. “She was glad, and said she had long ago guessed at such a life for us, and that her only regret was that she would not live herself to see it, nor to hold our children in her arms. ‘Say to your Loki how much I love him,’ she said, ‘and how happy I am for you both.’”

Loki is weeping, not seized with furious grief as so many days before this day had bid him to weep, but with a sort of soul-deep sorrow that feels rooted in relief and release. Thor joins him, and they wrap their arms around each other, they tie all of their limbs into knots, then sprawl together across the earth and greenery and stay like that a long time.

“Tell me a story,” Thor says, his lips pressed to Loki’s cheek.

“The would-be King of Jotunheim was found to have lost his kingdom after overreaching himself in his vain youth,” Loki says without pause, holding onto as much of Thor as is possible to hold. “He journeyed long distances without purpose or end. One day, he caught sight of the most beautiful being he had ever glimpsed, a man bathing in the wood, and was determined that no one else should have him, that he alone would win him.”

As a prince, he could easily have commanded such a thing to come to pass; but now he was only a man, without a crown or its great power. And so he realized that it would be better to present himself to the man as a companion than as a would-be conqueror, and conceal his identity, and to his delight he was duly accepted as such. He discovered it was much, much better to be a friend than a conqueror.

Far did they roam, having many fantastic adventures, and engaging in many battles, and slaying
many monsters, and passing all their time in sympathy together, until they were as close as any two could be. So that one night, over their wine-skin, the beautiful man spoke more of his past, which had remained a mystery. He revealed that he had once been due to inherit a kingdom, that of Asgard; but his ascendance to the throne was conditional upon his successful marriage, and his betrothed since birth, a prince like himself, had been cast out of Jotunheim and vanished. When that happened, the Prince of Asgard also lost his place, and he had gone forth, hoping to find the man he was to marry so that both of them might seek again their former glory.

The Prince of Jotunheim was struck to stunned silence to hear this confession, and stayed up all the night, while his companion slept beside him, brooding upon the impossible chance and conditions of their meeting. When the morning came he was at wit’s end, and when his friend opened his eyes, he told him the truth at once, expecting shock and recrimination but unwilling to deceive him any further.

‘I knew you on sight,’ replied the Prince of Asgard, ‘for I used to gaze upon your portrait day and night; what I did not know was if I could love you.’

The Prince of Jotunheim was dazed to hear himself unmasked, that he had indeed never been masked; but he could only ask, then, after the Asgardian prince’s verdict on the matter of their love.

‘I love you more than the sun has heat, and with more certainty than the stars are bright in the sky,’ the Prince of Asgard told him.

The Prince of Jotunheim’s heart fair melted to hear it, and never had he been happier; he kissed his love, and proposed that they return at once to sue for their kingdoms, which they might unite together.

‘That is our future, perhaps,’ said the Prince of Asgard. ‘But now we are free, and without bonds or crowns. That was the way that I knew you first, and so this is the way that I wish to love you now.’

His eyes were the blue of sapphires, if sapphires were born in the depths of the sea. ‘Why do you think I bathed where you were sure to see me?’

And the Prince of Jotunheim laughed at that, and laughed, and laughed; and he agreed to forestall any talk of royal crowns and kingdoms for some time, so well was he contented to stay with his love in this life that they had made. ‘I beg only that you will answer me one more question,’ he said.

‘What is that?’ asked the Prince of Asgard.

“Marry me,” says Loki, his head propped on his hand beside Thor in the grass. “Marry me before we set out to adventuring again. Marry me beneath the sun and all of the stars as our witnesses.”

Thor, who has been smiling, goes silent and still beside him. “Loki?”

“The story is yours to finish,” Loki says. “I cannot answer for him.”

“Yes,” says Thor, surging close to kiss him, running fingers through his hair, pulling Loki against him. “He said yes.” He is kissing Loki’s lips while still trying to speak, as though an inch apart to properly form words is too far to go. “He sang it. He shouted it from treetops. He recruited birds to carry the message. He—”

“And what became of them?” Loki wants to know.

“They chose not to return to their kingdoms, but to create their own,” Thor says. “Their lives belonged to them now.”
Loki closes his eyes. Holds on and is held. “Did they live happily ever after?”

“They lived together,” Thor says into his mouth. “That was enough.”

* * *
By the time they reach the compound, the details of what might be desired in a wedding are hashed out between them.

They decide that it should be a small affair. So much will still be unstable on Midgard that they hardly want to cause a distraction. A short ceremony, surrounded by what friends are able to attend. They would have dancing and feasting, as was the tradition on Asgard, but they agree that no other Asgardian traditions need be kept.

There are so many other things that Loki knows he should rightfully be thinking about:

While those lost from Thanos’ use of the Gauntlet are returned, restoring order cannot be so easy as the reappearance of vanished people. The same bureaucracies and infrastructures remain broken down; in some places, the added influx of citizens—the return of old leaders, old enemies, old lovers—may cause yet more violence and unrest. It is, unfortunately, to be expected, and the same scenes will likely play out on many, many worlds.

But on the smaller scale, Loki tells himself—the scales that matter most—personal alleviations of grief will make life bearable again for most.

He should be thinking through all of these things, grappling with how difficult the future will still be, how great the challenges that lie ahead.

All that he can think about is that he asked Thor to marry him, really marry him, and Thor said yes, and they fixed on a day a few days from now, and they will be married then.

They are alive, and that is Thor’s hand in his, and there is a braided loop of grass around Thor’s finger because Loki did not have a ring.

If the sensation of receiving all that you ever wished for was sustenance, Loki could live on it forever.

When they return against all odds to the compound that is packed full of their friends and their loved ones, Loki leaves Thor to answer the Avengers’ questions while he excuses himself: first for a quick
soak in the tub in the most well-earned bath of several lifetimes, and then to complete an important communique.

He goes to Bruce’s lab, where an intergalactic messaging system is rigged up between the good doctor and the Valkyrie on Oblara.

After some time—there must be much celebrating there—she responds to the hails, smiling bold above the collar that bears her rainbow insignia of office.

“My lady,” she says to Loki. “Word of your deeds has already reached us.”

“Much exaggerated, no doubt,” Loki says, though she finds herself smiling back.

“The bards are at work on the songs as we speak,” the Valkyrie affirms. Her eyes are sparkling. “I trust that you and Thor will visit soon to hear them sung?”

“We will at that,” Loki promises, surprised into a blush when she remembers all else she and the Valkyrie swore to share in another life that is now extended into this one. “We will. As to a different matter—”

She takes Thor aside when she returns to the ground floor, draws him through the kitchen with her eyes as bright as the Valkyrie’s had been. They find an empty meeting room, and Thor reaches for her at once, but she leans away before he can kiss her too dearly and distract from the message that she bears.

“I was able to persuade the other Loki to an act, before he set these other events in motion,” she tells Thor. “He could not undo every natural death that came about before or after the Gauntlet; those are not so simple to reverse as those that the Snap took. Worlds still grieve for many who are gone, as they ever will. But I did convince him that there were some few whose taking was so unjust it would surely not trouble the Norns if they were returned.” She caresses Thor’s cheek with the back of her hand. “I have spoken with Brunnhilde on New Asgard to confirm it, and they are there. They live, Thor. Your Heimdall and Volstagg and Fandral and Sif and Hogun. They await you.”

Thor sits down all at once, as though his legs cannot hold him. “What?”

Loki perches on his knee. “If you would have them see us wed,” she says, smoothing Thor’s hair back from his shocked face, “you had really better go and fetch them quickly. We have only a few days before our friends here will begin to disperse.” She follows the path of her fingertips with kisses. “And I expect you will take a day or so in carousing with them. You’d best be on your way.”

Thor’s eyes are electric, then filled with tears above the lightning. His expression is one of such giddiness and elation that he can hardly speak, can only wrap his arms around her. “My love—” he tries, then visibly pulls himself together. “But I would not leave you—”

“Stay, then,” Loki hums. “I intend to draft Wong into helping me with flowers and decorations. You can carry and hang them. Perhaps Natasha will assist me with wedding costumes, and you can be our model. I expect we will spend a great many hours in considering the fit and color of various pieces of clothing, while you—”

Thor stands up, hefting her against him in one arm, kissing the words away, then gently setting her upon the meeting room table-top. “All right, all right, I’m going.”

“Indeed,” says Loki. She smiles, sly. “Tell Heimdall that I am fair glad to hear of his return, and you may tell the others that I suppose it is better for them not to be dead.”
Thor laughs. “I will bring them your best wishes.”

It has been a long time since she saw Thor look this happy, look this unburdened and untroubled. Though she thought such a thing to be impossible, it makes his beauty double to an extent that he renders her breathless. Loki tucks the sight of it into her memory; she hopes that this will become Thor’s standard instead of an exception.

When he is almost at the door a thought occurs to Loki. “Thor!”

He glances back at her at once. “I think that I would very much like for there to be honey wine and proper mead for our friends to drink at the wedding,” she says, “if such a thing could be arranged.”

“I will take Rabbit with me,” Thor says, grins. “And let him loose in New Asgard’s marketplace.”

“That will do,” Loki allows. “That will more than do.” She watches him go, and for the first time since the morning that she awoke with a memory of the past—a memory left there by another Loki, for the benefit of them both—there is no twinge in her breast to witness Thor walking away. She is more certain of his return than she has ever been sure of anything.

Wong is happy to assist with floral planning, and Loki only gloats a little to have pulled her friend out of his tête-à-tête with Stephen Strange. She and Natasha stay up far into the night, designing and imagining outfits that Loki magics out of thin air for them to consider more closely. The next day Steve and Bucky, who are quite joined at the hip, offer to make the drive together to retrieve whatever supplies are needed.

While Steve is on the phone, calling around for open shops, Bucky turns to Loki. He extends the hand not made of vibranium, which she accepts, shaking firmly.

“Steve tells me I have you to thank for the way he greeted me when I came back,” Bucky says. He hasn’t blinked once to see Loki saunter into the kitchen in a dress and a pair of Natasha’s three-inch stiletto heels that Natasha bet she couldn’t wear for longer than an hour and Loki is suffering for the sake of said bet.

The lines and shadows on Bucky’s handsome face suggest that he has seen so many unexpected sights in his lifetime that she is simply one more, and since he has deemed her no threat, he smiles warmly at her.

She sees at once what Steve likes about him—well, beyond those eyes and the jawline and the hair and the muscles. He is haunted, but foremost he is thoughtful and cautious and considerate, and Loki finds herself smiling back as warmly. She feels a sort of instant kinship.

“Steve more than knew his own mind where you were concerned,” Loki says. “I only nudged.”

“Well,” says Bucky, raking back his long hair with one hand, “whatever it was, it worked, and you’ll find I’m grateful.” He leans in closer to Loki, out of Steve’s hearing range. “Was thinkin’ of starting our own club. A sorta solidarity thing, for when all these do-gooders get to be too much.”

He’s joking, Loki thinks—well, half-joking—and so she tosses her head on a laugh. “A meeting of ex-villains,” she says. “It’s not a bad idea. Count me in.”

In truth, if his offer is genuine, it is not a bad idea at all. She found confidants in Thor, in Wong, in Natasha, in Steve—but even they do not know the darkest things that she has felt and done, the acts too abominable to speak to such well-intentioned ears. Bucky looks as though he will more than understand—looks as though he has his own wealth of stories to tell, and that he knows how to keep things said in confidence to himself.
Beyond this sympathy, Bucky is on the receiving end of as many furtive glances from the Avengers who do not know him as Loki once was, a feeling she remembers well. The more she thinks about it, the more she figures that they have in common: found and saved by the men who loved them first and best, determined to be better and not defined by what they were before.

“We’ll get secret decoder rings,” Bucky tells her, just as Steve approaches and slides an arm around his waist.

“What’re you two whispering about?” Steve asks brightly.

“It’s better that you don’t know,” Loki says to Steve, as serious as she can manage.

“Highly classified ex-villain stuff,” Bucky supplies. “You don’t have the clearance.”

“Ooo-kay,” from Steve, now looking as though he truly does not wish to know, but pleased enough to find them so engaged. “You ready, Buck?”

“Born ready,” says Bucky, taking Steve’s hand. He winks at Loki on their way out.

There’s a clatter as a seat at the countertop is drawn back, and Loki turns to see Rocket’s arboreal friend climbing up to sit. Aware of the high esteem that Thor holds him in, Loki stops by the counter on her way back upstairs.


“I am Groot,” Groot says. Loki studied the Flora colossus language on Asgard in her youth, and though she is rather rusty, she can recall enough to understand his words. Good afternoon. “I am Groot. I am Groot.” I hope it was okay to stay here. I do not like Rocket when he is shopping.

Loki grins. “Oh, of course,” she says. “Please let me know if I can do anything for you.”

“I am Groot,” he says, reaching for the pile of old magazines piled up on the counter, and beginning to flick through an inane one about celebrity gossip with an expression of intense interest. Thanks. He nods in her direction, looks back up briefly. “I am Groot?” May I say that you are very pretty, for an Asgardian?

“That is kind of you,” says Loki. “I am not entirely Asgardian.”

This captures more of Groot’s attention, his gaze going back and forth from the magazine to Loki’s profile. “I am Groot?” No?

“I am also a Jötunn,” Loki tells him, realizing as she speaks that it has been a long time since she discussed this part of herself with anyone who did not already know—and to someone with the wherewithal to know the reference.

Groot runs his twiglike hands over his branchlike arms, mimes shivering, his wooden lips making a chattering sound. He blinks at her curiously.

“Yes,” Loki says, laughing. This feels excellent to laugh about. “A Frost Giant, that’s right.”

“I am Groot,” Groot says, unconcerned, turning the page to the next story about a celebrity baby scandal. You are very pretty, for a Jötunn.

“Thank you,” says Loki. “When you see Rocket again, tell him I said that you should teach him how to deliver a compliment.”
“I am Groot,” Groot agrees. *It will be the first thing I tell him.*

“Loki?” Bruce appears at the kitchen doorway. “Thor’s on the line for you from Oblara.”

Her knee-jerk instinct—terrific fear—will be a hard one to unlearn after so much turmoil. But she schools her expression when she responds. “Is something wrong?”

“I think you’ll find that everything is right, as far as Thor is concerned,” Bruce says, leading the way upstairs to his lab.

Thor is preposterously drunk. He is so intoxicated that Loki can practically smell the mead rolling off of him from across the universe. Behind him come the raucous sounds of much revelry: shouting, laughter, loud music-making, roars for additional drink.

When Loki appears in front of the viewscreen, Thor’s flushed face lights up beyond the brightness of even lightning on his skin.

“Brother,” Thor says, for Loki is returned to that shape in a bid to escape Natasha’s cursed shoes, which do not fit these feet. “Brother, I miss you. I love you. I love you and I miss you.”

Despite himself, Loki relents into an indulgent smile. “You have been gone less than twenty-four hours.”

“An agony,” says Thor, with a hand over his heart. “I know only pain.”

“Yes, there does seem to be an awful lot of screaming around you,” Loki says.

“We are celebrating,” Thor explains, slowly, so as not to slur his words, “our impending marriage. My friends insisted.”

“So they did not denounce you for tying yourself to me,” Loki says, trying to sound casual about it, but giving voice to a nagging worry that has not left him.

“They owe their lives to you,” Thor says, managing to speak these words a tad more clearly. “All of our toasts have been in your honor. Many toasts. Many, many toasts. Many—”

“So I see,” says Loki, raising his eyebrows, but lets go this last bit of fretting doubt with a grateful exhale.

Volstagg staggers into view, throwing one meaty arm around Thor’s neck, pressing a full flagon into Thor’s hand. “Loki!” he crows when he sees the screen. “Come, you are missing the party of several centuries.”

“I think I will sit this one out,” Loki tells him, deeming it not worth the effort to explain to Volstagg in this state that he cannot simply step through the viewscreen.

Then they are all of them crowding in around Thor, all of those old, familiar faces, laughing and red-cheeked and calling congratulations and talking over each other. After a few minutes they seem to forget Loki is there, sharing out commentary amongst themselves.

“Unexpected,” Lady Sif is saying to Hogun, “and yet somehow not,” while Hogun nods in sage agreement.

“I told Thor, when he was just a lad, that one day I would stand with him at his wedding to a beautiful princess,” Volstagg says in an aside to Fandral. “Loki was there, and he became so angry
with me that he turned my favorite hunting dog into a snail for three days. Now I know why.”

“But when did Loki grow to be this attractive?” Fandral asks Volstagg too loudly. “Of course, I could have told you it would be so. One time when we were youths I said to Thor that Loki might be most fetching in a few years. We were walking by a river while I described Loki’s best attributes, and then Thor pushed me into that same river. It makes sense now.”

Heimdall alone is sober as the day he was born, watching Loki through the viewscreen with his exceptional eyes. He nods, and Loki, his heart so light that if it could slip free from behind his ribcage it would float away, nods back.

“My friends,” Loki says to the happy faces on the screen, and finds that the address is true: they are, of course, Thor’s friends first, but each of them is so well-known to him, and it is so good to see them whole again, that he feels nothing save affection, and their affection in return. “I trust I will greet you soon on Midgard?”

“We will see Thor escorted to his vows with a full Asgardian honor-guard,” Fandral tells him, no doubt already envisioning his own ceremonial costume.

“More like delivered,” says Hogun, clapping a hand to Thor’s back so enthusiastically that his brother takes two unsteady steps sideways. “We will be carrying him, since he has a good deal more to drink before the night is through.”

“A goodly idea,” says Volstagg, and he moves to throw Thor over his shoulder as though he were no more weight to bear than a tavern-maid. “More drink!”

“More drink!” Sif echoes, taking up the cry.

Thor lifts his head from where he is dangling halfway down Volstagg’s back and cranes it to see the screen. “Loki! I love you!” he calls, and then he is borne away.

This leaves Loki alone and facing Heimdall. They have not shared space since the last, desperate moments on board the Grandmaster’s burning ship, and Loki cant his head to clear it.

“I hope very much that you will attend,” he says to Heimdall.

“Considering that this is a union I saw approaching for centuries,” Heimdall says, with one eyebrow elegantly arched, “I would be unlikely to miss it.”

“Thank you,” says Loki sincerely.

“Your parents would be proud of the person that you have become,” says Heimdall, expression impassive, yet softened now at the edges, like a stone worn down by water and time. “I am proud of you, Loki.”

Loki’s throat works, but no sound emerges. He finds that all he can do is duck his head in acknowledgment of the words, speak a single word, which is “Heimdall.” Heimdall nods again, and then he turns on his heel and follows in the direction Thor was carried.

Bruce comes back into the lab a few minutes later, to find Loki still staring at the now-blank screen.

“Loki?” Bruce is quickly at his side. He must have spotted the tears standing in Loki’s eyes, and now he misinterprets them, responds with the same worry Loki evinced earlier: “Is something wrong?”

“No.” Loki looks at Bruce, and he smiles. The tears do not fall. “As you said. Everything is right.”
That night as he readies for bed, there’s a knock on the door. Loki returns his toothbrush to its holder and pads on bare feet over to answer it, glad that he’s not yet changed save the removal of socks.

Rhodey stands with Tony Stark beside him. Rhodey has a large box in his hands, and Tony is trying his damnedest to appear entirely unthreatened by the sight of Loki and then entirely unsurprised by the fact that Loki is a person who can appear without shoes.

It’s been harder for the Avengers who knew him as he was in New York but missed this year. They trust that he is not an active danger, by the fervent testimony of a half-dozen of their teammates; and they are well aware that it is through the actions of Loki and the past Loki that they are returned.

That’s gone a considerable distance towards persuading them that he’s not about to turn coat and do something villainous. Well, that and all the activity around the fact that he and Thor are intent on officially marrying and desire their involvement. It’s hard not to love a wedding.

But Rhodey and Tony will be leaving in the morning. The situation in New York remains too unstable; Queens is still declaring itself independent; the presence of Iron Man and War Machine is requested by two dozen city officials, and the Mayor and the Governor, and Pepper Potts, returned to help resettle Stark Industries affairs, and they can’t delay any longer.

Rhodey has already apologized several times for missing out on the ceremony—Loki knows that he wishes he could stay, but is unwilling to leave Tony’s side at a time like this. Loki assured him that he and Thor would come to the city as soon as they were able, to share that steak dinner Rhodey spoke so hungrily about on the night the Avengers thought they dined together for the last time.

So Loki blinks, curious, at the sight of Rhodey and Tony in his doorway, but steps back to let them into the room.

“I know we already had our goodbyes,” Rhodey says. “We brought you a little something.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Loki says, though he flushes with pleasure. He won’t pretend like presents don’t number among his favorite events to occur. He accepts the box as it is handed over. “I will wait until Thor is returned, of course.”

“Yeah, this one isn’t off your registry,” says Tony, jamming his hands into the pockets of his suit pants to occupy them. “This is all Rhodes’ idea. Oh, and my design. And my production. And my genius. Really, I think I outdid myself this time—”

“Tony,” says Rhodey, rubbing his forehead where both amusement and frustration are creased. “What he means to say is this isn’t meant to be a shared gift. It’s for you, Loki.”

“Ah,” Loki says, wishing this did not make him turn an even darker shade of red. They aren’t giving any indications of leaving, so he gestures at the box. “Shall I?”

“You shall,” Tony says.

Loki walks over to the bed, sets down the box, and removes the lid. He shifts tissue paper aside and then, slowly, he draws out a garment in one piece. It is dark green and darker black, layered in a pattern that suggests scales, the thin gauntlets on the wrists a flashier gold. It is like no material that
Loki has ever seen before, both light to the touch and entirely unyielding, somehow a suit of armor made out of satin. He stares at it, his eyebrows knit.

“It’s your costume,” Rhodey says, his face splitting into the grin he was trying to hide until Loki opened the box. “Erm. Combat suit.”

“If it wasn’t clear,” Tony says, “this is your ‘welcome to the Avengers’ moment. I know that you joined up proper when I was off starring in lost in space, but we thought we’d make it official.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Loki says. For once in his life he feels speechless.

“It you don’t like it, we can do a redesign,” Tony says, and he strolls over to Loki’s side and starts pointing here and there, naming features. “But I gotta say, when I’m good, I’m good, and I’m always good. You’ve got the next-gen fabric—bulletproof and fireproof as I can make it, won’t rip or tear for anything. Keeps you nice and breezy, too, a person needs ventilation. The gauntlets have a few tricks up their sleeves, but I’ll leave you to figure those out. It’s more fun that way. A hint would be they shoot lasers.”

“This is a wonder,” Loki says, and Tony Stark smiles at him for the first time without reservation. “I love it. Thank you, Tony. Rhodey.”

“What’d I tell you, Rhodes,” Tony says. “We were right to go with that much green.”

“We don’t have a name for you yet,” Rhodey muses. “Give Tony time and he’ll come up with something.”

“It’ll be better magic guy name than ‘Doctor Strange,’ anyway,” promises Tony, and Loki grins with teeth.

Loki refolds the suit with all care and puts it back into its box. When he does that, Rhodey crosses over and gives him a hug.

Then Tony holds out his hand, and Loki shakes it. Both of their expressions go solemn as it happens.

“Welcome to the Avengers,” Tony says. He lets go, appears less solemn. “Now don’t fuck it up.”

“What?” Tony demands, as Loki and Rhodey lean into each other, doubling over with laughter. “What’d I say?”

* * *

Ten minutes after Rhodey and Tony’s departure, there’s another knock on the door. Loki is sitting on the bed, staring at the suit; he is glad to still be dressed.

“Come in,” he calls, expecting it to be Rhodey or Tony with a parting shot they forgot to impart.

The door opens and closes behind Wong. Loki is fast on his feet, drawing him further into the room and offering an armchair while he claims the other. They have sat like this often before, speaking long into the night, on evenings when Thor was away on a mission, and they left to their research. It seems already like years ago, not a space of days.

“I am glad to see you,” says Loki, who is always glad to see Wong. “There is something I wish to
ask, and thought to do so tomorrow, but here you are.” He chews his lip, surprised to feel nervous, but the day has been one of heightened emotions, and he feels overwhelmed by how much he is feeling, overcharged. Wong waits patiently, head canted to the side, letting Loki work through it.

“I have been reading about Midgardian wedding traditions,” Loki tells him. “In some cultures, it is the custom to have one’s friends stand with them, with those standing closest to the couple reserved as a particular honor. It would—it would please me to no end if you would be the one to stand beside me.”

“I should rather think so,” Wong says, but he is smiling wide enough to remove any sting from the mocking lilt of his voice. “Just how many best friends do you have?”

“Well, with that business settled,” Wong says, and he reaches into his robe, and removes a wooden box polished with lacquer. “On to why I am here. A small gift for you.”

Loki had not thought it possible to feel more overwhelmed, but he is fast disabused of this notion. “You have agreed to the only gift I’d ask of you.”

“You should think more broadly,” Wong sniffs. “Presents are one of life’s purer pleasures. They bring out the best in both giver and recipient. Few things are so balanced.” He lifts his shoulders in a shrug. “If it makes you feel better, this one comes secondhand and already much-used.”

Now inordinately eager to know the box’s contents and discover what Wong means, Loki takes it when it is passed over. Inside, wrapped in a silken cloth, he finds a Sling Ring.

It gleams bronze in the light, its emblems indeed worn down with use but retaining their aura of mystery. Loki can feel the power and potential pulsating from it in waves.

“This one was my own,” Wong says, and only then does Loki notice that it is gone from its customary place on his belt or on his left hand. “I can be issued another; but it seemed to me, that with its history, it rather belonged with you, and to be kept in the home that you will share with Thor.”

“But I,” Loki starts, so deeply moved that he knows not where to begin. “I am not a Master of the Mystic Arts—”

“You are not officially sworn into my order, no,” Wong agrees. “Yet if you cannot lay claim to that title, who can? You are more than worthy of wearing it, Loki, and even Strange approved the idea, though it took some persuasion.” Now Wong is beaming, leaving it to Loki to imagine how that conversation had gone. “If you will not take it otherwise, do so on my behalf. I do not know where you and Thor will choose to live, or how far away you will travel—but whenever you return to Midgard, you will have no excuse but to open a portal at once, and join your old friend Wong for a game of chess.”

Loki closes his fist around the ring. His chest feels tight. “Then let it be my most prized possession.”

“Of course, those games you will inevitably lose,” Wong says, patting the hand that holds the ring. “But I will still be glad to see you.”

* * *
When a knock sounds again ten minutes after Wong leaves, Loki begins to suspect a conspiracy.

He opens the door and Natasha walks in, a large paper shopping bag in hand.

“This is too much,” Loki tells her. “You all—you really should not have—”

“Sure we should,” says Natasha. “You only get married once. Well, I mean, on Earth you can get married plenty of times, and lots of people do, but you only get married for the first time once.”

“But I—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Natasha says. “Really. Don’t. And mine’s only a tiny little thing. Where I come from, how we were trained, you don’t carry anything more than what you need, and you don’t get sentimental about it.” She reaches into the enormous bag, only to withdraw a slender gold-colored cylinder that she tosses to Loki, leaving him with no recourse but to catch it lest it fall.

It is a tube of lipstick, and when Loki uncaps it, she sees that it is the same vibrant hue that Natasha painted her lips with once before, the blood-colored shade passed down by Director Carter. She walks to the mirror to try it on, noticing only when she faces her reflection that she has shifted without conscious intention—just slipped into the body that suited her better right then without pause.

“Now you’ll always be ready for every sort of battle,” Natasha explains. “Also, if you twist the tube to the left, there’s a nasty little quick-trigger knife surprise. Rigged it up myself.”

Loki bursts out laughing at this unexpected addendum. “Oh, I adore you.”

“Feeling’s mutual,” says Natasha with an ease that shocks and warms Loki to her core. Then Natasha reaches into the bag again, and Loki understands the reason for its size—she now grips in her hand a proper arrow, made of dull black metal, heavily fletched. Natasha holds it out, and Loki takes it.

“This is from Clint,” says Natasha. “He’s real sorry to be missing the wedding, but I think he’s earned the right to sit on the beach with his kids for a few weeks.”

Loki inspects the arrow, recognizing it as one from Clint’s quiver but puzzled as to what she is meant to with it. “If I might ask—”

“Comes with a message,” Natasha says, hands on her hips. “He says it’s the arrow that he’s never going to kill you with.”

“I see,” says Loki, and she lets one fingertip touch its sharp point. The odd gift oddly makes her feel as happy as the rest—is all the more poignant—and she sets it down atop the dresser where it can remain in her line of sight. “Will you tell him how much it means to receive it?”

“Sure will,” says Natasha. She extends one hand palm up, wriggles her fingers. “Now pay up. There’s no way you lasted more than an hour in those heels. Bruce found them hidden under a table in his lab.”

Loki groans, caught, but she fishes for her wallet and its reserve of Midgardian money and counts out the bills. “I made it forty-five minutes,” she gripes. “I’ve been tortured by professional torturers that were kinder than those shoes.”
“You and me both, sister,” says Natasha, tucking away her winnings, then going up on her toes to kiss both of Loki’s cheeks in turn. “You and me both.”

* * *

Like clockwork, ten minutes after Natasha is gone, Bruce appears in the doorway. Loki has left the door open.

“May I offer you something to drink?” Loki says, gesturing to the collection of bottles he and Thor have amassed. “No? Do you mind if I have one? It’s been an unexpectedly busy evening.”

“Go ahead,” says Bruce, and Loki mixes himself a strong refreshment, settles back into his armchair.

“I’m afraid I’m not very good at gifts,” Bruce says, shifting from foot to foot. “I can never seem to choose between one thing and another. So I kinda piggy-backed this one. Just helped buy it and pick it up.”

Loki gestures to the chair that Wong had so recently occupied. Bruce perches on the edge, then digs into his pocket and draws out a small red velvet pouch, which Loki accepts—he’s learned at this point that it’s better not to protest.

He unknots the hastily-done bow that binds the bag and tips its contents into his hand. A dozen tubular beads fill his palm, silver and sleek, each etched with a different rune, a different blessing. These were made as reproductions, by well-meaning Midgardian hands after a Viking affectation. No active magic is embedded in them save the faintly charged significance of the runes, which will bestow their meaning on any object that calls them regardless of skill and intent. But the beads are lovely, of pure metal and hand-beaten and engraved, and they feel cool and comforting in his hand.

“Brunnhilde said they’re supposed to be for your hair,” Bruce provides helpfully, tilting forward a little. “That they’re traditional.”

Bruce’s expression is such an anxious composite of hope and doubt that Loki does what he can to set him at ease.

“They’re exactly right,” he tells Bruce. “Just what I was missing.” He closes his fingers around the beads to better learn their shape, then opens to look again. “Thank you. Thank you both.”

Loki does not volunteer what Brunnhilde may or may not have told Bruce: that this is the sort of gift that would be given by the women of the family—a mother, bestowing her great-great-grandmother’s beads, or an aunt or older sister purchasing a new set to denote a family’s change of status. Loki thinks on the latter option and smiles to himself.

He knows from her own telling and from artistic representations that Frigga wore golden beads in her hair when she married the King of Asgard. But he is not his lady mother, and neither is he wedding a king.

The runes in his hand hold many meanings: friendship, strength, loyalty, success, truth, passion, creativity, health, honor—his lip turns up to see it: fertility—safety, prosperity, harmony. He reads them all, can feel them all inscribed against his skin. They sing softly to him.
“Please tell her, and know yourself, that I appreciate this beyond measure,” Loki says.

Bruce blushes rather prettily. “She did all the hard work. I played fetch.”

“You did what you have done all this year for me and in years before for your friends,” Loki says. “You took care of us.”

If possible, Bruce turns an even more charming shade of rose-pink. “I—”

There comes a rap on the half-open door, and both of them look up as Steve pokes his head in.

“Sorry,” Steve says. “Must’ve gotten the timetable wrong.”

“Do come in, Captain,” says Loki, who was half-expecting him at this point but not wanting to presume. “May I offer you a—”

Steve is followed through the doorway by Sam Wilson and Bucky Barnes. They flank him. The three of them together aren’t exactly threatening to look upon, not that—but they’re rather imposing, with their tall lengths and their broad breadths, their cutting gazes and metallic arms, their sculpted shoulders and chiseled jaws. All of this abundant musculature and beard growth is softened by civilian clothes, Midgardian jeans and t-shirts and simple sneakers.

Loki is a good deal more intrigued than alarmed, and across from him Bruce sits back in his chair, content to observe. Bucky shuts the door firmly yet discreetly.

They aren’t here to waste any time or engage in idle chatter: this is a sort of mission. Steve looks at Loki, his expression serious—leaning towards solemn, as Tony’s had done.

“What we have on offer isn’t exactly what you’d call a proper present,” Steve starts. Then the three men are all speaking in concert.

“It’s more of a principle,” Bucky says.

“It’s a concept rather than something with a bow,” says Sam. “We figured you had enough gift boxes tonight.”

Loki sneaks a sideways glance at Bruce, finds him just as curious and perplexed.

“Certainly,” Loki allows, trying for a kind of neutral. He has precisely no idea what they are talking about.

“What we’re extending is an invite to the team,” says Steve.

“The thing you need to understand,” says Sam, “about what we’re saying here. We’re not in opposition to Tony and his people anymore. I’d think we’re all past that now, aren’t we, one big happy dysfunctional super weird family again. What we mean by the team—”

“What we mean,” says Bucky, “is that we’ll always give you the benefit of the doubt. You screw up, and we’ll ask why. We don’t blame you first thing. Second thing, maybe. But never first. We won’t presume.”

Steve’s eyes are on Bucky, heated, then back to Loki. “That’s right. What we mean is that we trust you, Loki. We know you. Anything goes wrong—”

“And first the fuckers have to deal with us,” finishes Sam. “The general fuckers that we expect when something bad happens. Second, we figure out whatever’s going on with you, or, like, who
you pissed off. I can picture that being a long list of humans and aliens and what have you. Complications happen. Life is complicated.”

“Some people,” Bucky continues, “they’ll take any evidence at face value. They rush to judge. When we say team—”

“We’ll believe you before anyone who speaks against you,” says Steve. “If we need to contain you, we will. But not before we’ve believed you.”

Bucky looks at Steve moon-eyed, and Steve gazes back. Sam grins and grimaces and manages to barrel between them before kissing can start back up again. Sam puts out his hand.

“Welcome to the team, I hope,” Sam says to Loki. “Cap thinks awfully good things about you, and you did help reconstruct me from dust, so I’m inclined to think we’re getting off on the right foot.”

Loki stands up quickly to accept Sam’s hand, then shakes Bucky’s, then Steve’s. Steve nods encouragingly before he lets go.

“Gentlemen,” says Loki, “this is more than I ever expected. I will do everything in my power to maintain the level of trust you are extending to me. And I pledge in return to uphold the same principles—to always give you the benefit of the doubt.”

To have such allies ready to support him at a moment’s notice is a dazzling prospect. That they would include him in their tight-knit cabal is every bit as exciting as receiving a suit to be recognized as a full-fledged Avenger.

Smiling now, Steve claps a hand to Loki’s shoulder, then turns to regard Bruce. “The same offer is there, should you want it,” Steve says, and Loki starts to wonder if Steve truly misremembered the gift-giving timetable or if they came early to intercept Bruce as well.

“O-oh,” Bruce stammers, then gets to his feet. “I don’t know that it makes so much sense for me. The Hulk, when he’s in control—he can get up to any number of things that aren’t worthy of that kind of trust. You’d have every reason to doubt him.”

“But not you,” Loki says, before Steve can, and Steve gives him a surprised but pleased glance. “Never you.”

“Well,” says Bruce, blushing prettily again. “My thanks. That means a lot to hear.”

“That’s the team,” says Bucky, with an approving nod at Loki.

“Think about it,” says Steve to Bruce. “You don’t have to give us an answer right away.”

“But don’t tell Tony Stark,” says Sam. “He’s not invited at current.”

“Some of us have some Tony-related issues we still need to work through,” Bucky tells them.

“Oh, I have issues with Stark, is that what you’re trying to say?” Sam raises his eyebrows. “That’s hilarious. That’s so funny that I’m laughing internally—”

“Glad we could have this chat,” Steve says, beaming, as he shepherds his bickering best friends out of the room. “Loki, congratulations from all of us.”

“I’ll also be on my way,” says Bruce. “Figure we’ve kept you up long enough.”

Loki walks him to the door. “I’ve never had a better reason to shirk a proper bedtime.” He lets a
hand rest on Bruce’s upper back in parting, marvels at how easy it is to touch him, how casually a gesture between good friends is given and received.

“Goodnight, Loki.”

Loki is left alone after a whirlwind of visitations. The silence of the bedroom feels strange following the march of activity. He stops by the dresser on his way to bed to look upon the arrayed gifts: a suit for avenging, a well-used ring, a tube of red lipstick, a black arrow, a handful of silver beads. A promise of trust from Steve and his team, which is now Loki’s.

It is such a wealth of treasures that Prince Loki of Asgard or Loki Laufeyson of Jotunheim could never have imagined. But those two are gone, buried deep, and Loki, late of Midgard, thinks himself then the richest man in the world.

* * *

Thor is climbing over him, covering Loki’s face with kisses, making his eyes fly open. He smells heavily of mead, and is much disheveled, and quite impossibly gorgeous.

Loki slips his arms around Thor’s chest and pulls him close, as though the mead were the finest of perfumes. On Thor’s skin it is.

It is still dark outside the windows. “Thor,” Loki manages between fervent kisses, “I did not expect you until morning.”

“A change of plans,” Thor explains. “I could not stay away. One night without you was a night too many.”

Loki smiles, pleased, but he lifts an eyebrow. “Your companions?”

“Installed in the downstairs guest rooms,” Thor tells him. “They will likely sleep for many hours. Sleep has not numbered amongst our recent activities.”

“Do I want to hear about those activities?” Loki asks.

“Not until such time as you’ve had some mead yourself for fortification,” Thor says, mouthing at Loki’s ear, and Loki laughs. “But tell me of your own adventures.”

Loki recounts what has passed since Thor’s departure, and when he speaks of the gift-giving, Thor’s expression becomes so fond and happy that Loki keeps pausing in the telling to kiss him.

“They are good people, our friends,” says Thor. “We are lucky.”

“They are,” Loki agrees. “We are.”

“Stark never made me a battle-suit,” Thor says.

“It shoots lasers,” Loki says in a perfect imitation of Tony’s drawl.

“Would you stay, then?” Thor asks, tilting Loki’s face toward him with a finger under Loki’s chin. “After we are wed in name. Shall we remain on Midgard?”
“I’ve only been an official Avenger for a few hours,” Loki says. “Surely some years are expected, or I’d have to return the costume. There is still much work to be done.” Thor lets out a held breath, and Loki knows then how badly his brother hoped for such an answer; pride and love flare in Thor’s eyes. “And after—we will see where we wish to go when and if we arrive at such a time. You spoke once of establishing a school.”

“I did,” says Thor, “though at the time it seemed a distant dream.”

“Our dreams are manifest, brother,” Loki says. He kisses Thor while he vanishes their clothing so that they are skin to skin, their preferred state. Thor smiles against Loki’s mouth and starts to move over him again, this time with pressing intent, but Loki stays him with a hand over Thor’s heart. “There is one thing I would speak of first.”

“Speak on,” says Thor, “and quickly, for every moment that I am not inside you I know only anguish.”

“Well, we can’t have that,” says Loki, losing his train of thought in another ravishing kiss. When he comes back up from air, he sobers, and says, “The other Loki. He knew of the bargain you struck to bring me back—I showed him. I do not know whether he changed those conditions when he restored all else. Perhaps he did, and found a way to extend our years again.”

“Loki,” Thor says, stretched out on his hands and knees above him, boxing Loki in with the delicious cage of his body. “I care not.” The teasing is gone from his expression. “We who thought all of our time would be taken from us. Does it matter now if we have fifty years, or five hundred? Could we ask for anything more than what we have?”

Loki considers this, moving to bracket Thor with his thighs. “No,” he says, the answer coming swift and decisively. He is surprised to find that every part of it rings true. “No. It does not matter one bit.”

Thor ducks down to kiss him, licks into his mouth, sure and sweet, and Loki runs his fingers through Thor’s hair to find a better grip. After some time he tugs hard enough on Thor’s hair to disengage him, though Thor’s teeth drag on Loki’s lip in protest, unwilling to relinquish him.

“Come now,” Loki says. “Tell me more about your state of anguish, and I shall strive to work its cure.”

* * *

On the morning of their wedding, Loki awakens not to nerves but to a profound feeling of relief.

He and Thor have been as good as wed, by their own exchanged oaths, for the greater part of the year. He feels no sense of nervousness in one more contractual step that will bind them, and indeed, it is lovely that Thor was long anxious and excited for their union to be as official as they can make it in the eyes of others.

His brother was always the more traditional one, respecting the solemn nature of ceremonies, appreciating that there could be a proper order to things so that not all of the universe be given over to chaos. For Thor, Loki is more than glad to do this.

But that morning, as he opens his eyes, Loki realizes how much it means to him, and he recognizes how deep his sense of relief runs.
All his life until this new one, he expected to be called to watch Thor wed. He long dreaded the day and despised the very concept—Volstagg’s hunting dog receiving an unfortunate outburst of rage about it, as he was reminded—but now the day is here, and it belongs also to Loki. Thor will indeed be wed, and Loki will be the one to take his hand.

He was the one who asked this time, after all.

He lets himself lie still with it, lets himself believe that it is fully real, lets himself feel the wash of joy and hope and happiness that floods him. Such emotions were once so distant, so unreachable, suppressed further out of fear that they made him vulnerable to attack; but here, at last, Loki is safe.

Thor’s arm is curved around him, Thor’s face pressed to the back of Loki’s neck as he sleeps, and Loki cannot remember when he last felt so clearly or keenly or with more truth.

An hour later this idyll is disrupted by the arrival of Brunnhilde and Natasha, who barge into the bedroom without knocking. Thor is still asleep, a lucky thing, for Loki thinks that they would have discovered them in another state entirely otherwise.

As is, poor Thor is startled to consciousness by the Valkyrie dragging him bodily out of bed. Loki is quick to magic some clothes upon them both—though of all their friends Brunnhilde and Natasha number among the least modest and the least likely to be impressed by what he and Thor have on offer.

“Eh eh,” the Valkyrie tsks, when Thor offers a sleepy protest. “You’ve already violated the majority of Asgardian traditions in the run-up to this thing, but I’ll be damned if you deprive Loki of proper attendants on his wedding day. Get out and don’t come back until you’re ready to marry him.”

“Loki, I—” Thor protests, scrabbling at the carpet, but Brunnhilde is already yanking him all the way out of the room by one leg, and Loki is laughing too hard to be of much help.

Brunnhilde shuts the door, dusts off her hands with a satisfied expression. “Now then,” she says, grinning. “Where were we?”

Never were there a pair of unlikelier handmaidens, but they take to the role with relish. Natasha goes to the closet and retrieves Loki’s clothes, hanging them up and starting to inspect for errant creases that need ironing, while the Valkyrie runs him a bath.

Loki only tries to protest the once. “Truly, you needn’t—”

“Argue with me about it tomorrow,” Brunnhilde hums, pouring in scented oil by the tap. “Wouldn’t say I’m one to stand with traditions, but there’s some that exist for a good reason.” She bares her teeth at him in a smile. “Because they’re fun. Now into the bath with you before I deposit you in it myself.”

He’s quick after that to comply. She helps wash and comb out his hair, as a true attendant would a prince of Asgard; as a true sister would in Asgard. Loki’s eyes sting with tears that are easy enough to mask under the fall of water.

When they return to the bedroom, Loki enveloped in a robe, Natasha cracks open a bottle of champagne fetched from the reserves purchased for the party portion of the day. She pours them out three tall glasses which they clink to Loki and Thor’s health.

Loki lets his hair dry while they chatter around him of the other parts their friends are playing this morning: Steve and Bucky and Sam are setting up chairs in the barn where later all of them will feast together. Wong is busy with the last arrangements of flowers. Bruce is slated to help Thor get ready,
assisted by Rocket, who is unlikely to help save for the drinking part, and Thor’s Asgardian companions, who will also help with drinking.

When his hair is dry, Brunnhilde goes about braiding it after a considerable back-and-forth with Loki as to his specifications.

In Asgard, the symbolism of hair on a wedding day mattered far more than costume, and though Loki has foregone ceremony elsewhere, he opts for traditional braids such as his mother wore. He describes them to Brunnhilde, and she expertly works at the intricate style, weaving throughout the beads that she chose for him.

Meanwhile, Natasha frowns at his nails, buffing them round and smooth, and slathering him with too many creams to name. She is pouring them all a second round of champagne when a knock sounds on the door.

“If it’s Thor, go away,” Natasha calls.

“It is not Thor,” says a well-loved voice. “May we come in?”

“Of course,” Loki says, thrilled, and the doorknob turns under Shuri’s hand.

Instead of the Wakandan finery donned while she held a place of ruling authority in her brother’s absence, Shuri wears a sleek copper-colored dress that Loki is sure is of her own design. She nearly looks her youthful age, sorrow smoothed from her brow and her eyes unerringly bright—only the penetrating intelligence there reminds that she is far wiser than her years.

The Princess smiles broadly as she slips into the room with Okoye behind her. Okoye is for the first time in Loki’s experience not dressed for war: she still wears red, but the color is found on her chic wrap dress, gold jewelry winking at her ears and wrists.

“This is an honor and a pleasure,” Loki tells them. “I did not know if you would be able to attend.”

“Try and keep us away,” Okoye says.

“It was the least that we could do,” says Shuri, “for two great heroes of Wakanda.”

Loki receives a flurry of cheek-kisses, unable to get up with the Valkyrie’s fingers still flying through his hair. He grips their hands happily.

Shuri unslings a large leather bag from her shoulder and removes a chrome case. “I have been researching Asgardian weddings,” she says. “I was told that you and Thor are not following many of the abiding rituals.”

Loki nods. “We are not in Asgard, and many of those traditions do not translate so easily,” he explains. “We agreed to have a quick exchange of vows, and to pass the time with our friends in celebration.”

“I thought that perhaps your wedding gift might prove useful in one aspect,” Shuri tells him, placing the box in Loki’s lap. “So I am bringing it to you early—since I could not be here when the others gave you theirs.”

“Ah,” says Loki, feeling his cheeks heat, and smiling beneath the flush. “So it was an international conspiracy.”

Four pairs of eyes are staring at him expectantly. He undoes the latches on the case and flips up the
lid. There, suspended in a cushioning foam, are two matched knives—long enough to fight properly with, short enough to fit into wrist-sheaths. Their handles are of dark polished wood, unadorned, for the blades are the masterpiece: perfectly balanced, sharp as death, and gleaming the unmistakable gleam of vibranium.

“I made them myself,” Shuri says proudly, looking from Loki’s stunned expression to the weapons and back.

“And I tested them,” says Okoye. She folds her arms across her chest, speaks what must be a profound understatement: “They cut well.”

Loki is well aware of how precious and priceless a gift he has been given. The metal is the stuff of legends—has sparked wars in its name and brought about lasting peace when it is wielded by just hands. He dares to touch the edge of one blade, feels it ready to slice through skin and bone at the slightest pressure.

“They are extraordinary,” Loki says softly. He knows Midgardians well enough now that to refuse such a present, given from a place of love, is considered a great insult. But this is beyond his wildest dreams of the tools he might be entrusted with.

“Jealous,” says Natasha, with a low whistle.

The brilliance of Shuri’s grin could power an entire city. “I read that Asgardians exchanged rings on the hilts of ancient swords,” she says. “Neither you nor Thor seem like the sort for swords, and I thought that these could be substituted, should you like.”

“It’s true that we hadn’t planned for that particular observance,” Loki says. “In truth we have planned very little about this. But the gift is most welcome, as is the idea. Thor will love it.”

“I’ll update him,” Natasha volunteers. “Have to say I’m curious as to how the other half is living.”

She’s back forty minutes later, considerably more intoxicated than upon departure. Loki is dressed and submitting himself to final inspections under the critical gazes of Brunnhilde, Shuri, and Okoye. He raises an eyebrow as Natasha collapses into an armchair.

“Thor’s Asgardian friends are … fun,” Natasha manages at last. “Think I’ve found my new drinking buddies.” She pours herself another glass of champagne regardless. “He’s down with the whole daggers thing,” she tells them. “He was psyched about it.” She has a sip, pausing for dramatic effect, then says, “He looks good. Really good. We did good.”

Loki does not doubt this for one moment—well does he know every inch of his brother, as well as his own aesthetic sensibilities—but he smiles to hear it, only a little pink-cheeked. If he’s hot under his dress collar, well, it’s his wedding day—he’s allowed.

“I cannot thank you all enough,” Loki says. “This has been one of the better mornings of my life.”

“Wait until the evening, ey,” winks the Valkyrie, and the rest of them laugh; Shuri giggles.

“We’ll leave you to a little peace and quiet,” says Natasha. “I need to get ready, and then I need to have a few more drinks downstairs. Rocket is bartending.”

“Hmm,” says Loki to that, and the Valkyrie slings an arm around his neck.

“Don’t worry,” Brunnhilde assures him. “I’ll go make sure your bridegroom’s still standing for the main event.” She kisses his forehead, just below the first row of braid, then lets him go. The rest of
them follow her out with many backward waves and blown kisses, and then Loki is alone.

The bedroom looks like a small cyclone hit and blew past; discarded cosmetics and combs and glasses and bottles are scattered about, but Loki ignores it all as he steps over the clutter to examine himself in the full-length mirror.

He has always been a vain creature, and his own vanity sings at the sight of him. He cuts a fine figure indeed, the intricate black braids and silver beads out of an ancient Asgard contrasted with his modern slim-fit three-piece suit, immaculately cut and tailored by magic.

The suit is a striking blue: Jötunn-blue, precisely, to be precise—it is the exact shade of the skin that he wears under the skin that he wears now.

Likely only Thor will guess its significance at once; that is well, for its significance is for himself and Thor alone. The suit’s color is a tribute to his heritage and to all that has passed between them; also, it looks fantastic, if he does say so himself.

Loki examines his reflection from every angle, but his attendants have more than done their job: his skin glows, his shoes gleam, his hair is a masterpiece, his suit falls with nary a crease. He nods, once, watches the mirror image nod back.

Then Loki opens the top dresser drawer and removes two tapered candles, both a creamy white. He lights each with a thought, naming Frigga and Odin as he does so, then bends his head and closes his eyes. He speaks the words of an Asgardian prayer that humbly beseeches blessings from one’s ancestors. It is, perhaps, the first time that he has humbly asked for anything. He stands with his head bowed while the candles burn down.

There’s a tap at the door, and Loki—while not exactly nervous—feels the butterflies in his stomach flutter to life. “Come in,” he calls, and blows out the candles.

Wong sticks his head around the side of the door. “We’re ready, if you are,” he announces, efficient as always, and only after the message is delivered does he give Loki an evaluating once-over followed by an encouraging nod. “You’ll do.”

“I am most reassured,” Loki laughs, but he is, by Wong’s mere presence. He indulges in one last lingering stare in the mirror. “It’s hard to believe that this is really happening.”

“It better,” Wong teases. “I’ve been picking wildflowers in the forest for two days. Someone had better be getting married today.”

“Have you seen Thor?” Loki asks, casual as he can. He flicks at an imagined piece of lint on his cuff.

“I have,” Wong says, not fooled for a moment, and not giving anything away with his staunchly neutral expression. “He’ll do.”

“I guess there’s only one way to get a good look,” Loki allows. “I suppose I will have to go marry him.”

“I am relieved on the flowers’ behalf,” says Wong. He pushes open the door, and Loki whistles at the sight of his friend out of his Order’s robes for once, in a neat dove-gray suit and red tie. Wong rolls his eyes, but grins nevertheless, and he offers Loki his arm.

They descend the staircase together. In the kitchen, the friends he asked to stand with him are waiting. Natasha is a knockout in a figure-hugging strapless dress—a bold green in Loki’s honor.
Shuri has the chrome case tucked under her arm, newly made the designated ringbearer. Steve looks ready to grace the cover of a wedding magazine himself in a dark navy suit, his blond hair combed back and his eyes alert.

Loki had hesitated, asking Steve to join them, wondering if he asked too much—but the Captain accepted at once, and with all enthusiasm.

“You look great,” says Steve warmly.

“We do really excellent work,” agrees Natasha.

“Finally,” says Shuri, practically wriggling with excitement. “Let’s go.”

They leave the compound behind them and head for the open fields. When they pass by the stable, there’s a hail from within, and Rhody steps out in a smart tan suit. He leads Soda on a gold-colored rope—she’s been groomed to within an inch of her life and wears a garland of flowers around her neck that she keeps trying to eat.

Loki hastens toward them both, pulls Rhody into an embrace. Then he strokes between Soda’s ears when she chuffs at him. “What—?”

“Decided I couldn’t miss it,” Rhody explains. “Tony can do without me for another day. He’s a big boy.”

“Walk with us,” Loki entreats, and their expanded party continues on. Loki thinks about how the last time he left the compound with his friends behind him and followed this path, it was with the horrific knowledge that he was letting Thor go, letting everything go.

He expected that wrenching day to be his last here, and to be retreading these steps with such different purpose makes his chest feel too small, as if there isn’t enough room for all that he is feeling.

They go past the stable, leaving it behind, aimed for a further field that borders the wood. There under the widespread branches of a Norway maple tree Thor is waiting for him.

Seeing him, even from a distance—Thor’s tall silhouette and the gleam of his hair—is more than enough to set Loki’s heart racing and make his mouth go dry.

They had decided that the ceremony was secondary to the celebration and that it should not last long enough to call for chairs, so their additional guests—Okoye and Wanda and Vision and Sam and Bucky and Groot and Strange and, newly arrived, Jane Foster and Darcy Lewis—are ranged in with the crowd around Thor.

As Loki and his party pick their way across the yellowing autumn grass, Loki can see that Sif and Fandral and Volstagg and Hogun wear formal old-fashioned Asgardian dress, while the Valkyrie and Heimdall make for quite the sight in contemporary Midgardian finery. Bruce’s suit, a wine-dark crimson, is only a little rumpled, and he stands with pride by Thor’s left shoulder, while Heimdall is at the right.

Thor looks like what he once was: a dashing prince out of myth and legend, so heart-stoppingly handsome that no one could mistake him for anything save the hero of the story. His squared shoulders go on for kilometers; his smile is even wider. When they get close enough for it, his gaze seeks out Loki’s and doesn’t leave him again.

Loki went back and forth in choosing how to clothe Thor for this particular adventure. He knew that Thor would be satisfied wearing something out of Asgard, of a familiar armored fashion. But they
spent more than a thousand years burdened under buckles and breastplates and greaves, and there is no war here for them to fight.

Thor adored their newfound home, and so in the end Loki dressed them both in Midgardian style. As he takes in the results, he praises himself for the decision. He praises himself at a terrific volume inside his own head.

Thor’s black one-button suit is tailored perfectly and fits him like a glove; the glove-like fit means the enormous strength of his arms is barely contained. The shape of said arms straining against the fabric needn’t be so attractive, but oh, it is, it is. His black lapels are sharp and pointed, and over a crisp white shirt he wears a slender silk tie, also black. His hair is somewhat tamed, his beard new-trimmed, and his eyes—one summer-storm blue, one amber-gold—are fixed unerringly on Loki. Loki could eat Thor up with a spoon and still be left starving for him.

_This is your husband_, a whisper tells him, once his brain has recovered somewhat from rejoicing upon the divine image before him. _This is your wedding day. That is his hand reaching for you. Take it. It is yours to have._

The two parties meet beneath the branches, and Loki slips his hand into Thor’s.

_You are stunning_, Thor mouths. His eyes, taking Loki in, go round with appreciation. _I love you._

Loki, only a little speechless, or perhaps it is breathless—Loki squeezes his hand to say it back: _I love you._

Rocket clears his throat, and all eyes—save Loki and Thor’s—glance in his direction. He wears a raccoon-sized tuxedo complete with a bow tie, fur combed, his fingers steepled together as though in grave deliberation.

When Rocket found out that he could be ordained as an officiant via the Internet, he argued and pleaded and wheedled to be the one to marry them until both Thor and Loki were glad enough to agree in order to hear the end of it. At least he swore to keep the ceremony brief, as per their wishes, and Thor asked him to try and keep it relatively tame, considering that Shuri was in the crowd.

“Dearly beloved,” says Rocket in deep, self-important voice, “we all know why we’re here, and I’ve been told not to dawdle, so let’s get this show on the road. Who’s on bondage duty?”

So much for tame. Everyone laughs, and Loki finds it is wonderful to laugh, releasing the last of his incredulous tension that this is actually occurring.

Heimdall and the Valkyrie step forward. “I believe you are referring to us,” Heimdall says, amused, as he pulls a length of white satin from his pocket. Solemnly, he binds their clasped hands together, and then the Valkyrie ties off a firm, final knot. Only the Asgardians are aware of it, but on Asgard, this handfasting alone would be enough to signify them as wed in the eyes of the Norns and the Gods.

“Great, great,” Rocket continues. “On to the most important part. I’ll make this quick and painless.” He levels his gaze on Loki. “Do you?”

Loki looks up at Thor’s face, where all that he can read is love—love that transcends time and space, that defies both, love capable of transforming the nature and course of the universe.

“I do,” Loki says.

Rocket nods, turns to Thor. “Do you?”
“I do,” says Thor, before the question has settled on the air.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” says Rocket. “The rings?”

Heimdall returns first to unbind their hands. Then Shuri opens the case and removes both vibranium knives and two small gold circles. She places the knife in Loki’s right hand blade-first, gingerly, to avoid any accidental cuts, then balances one ring on the knife’s handle.

Loki keeps his hand steady as he extends it toward Thor. “I, Loki Odinson, offer you, Thor Odinson, this ring as a symbol of my—of my undying fidelity, and of my eternal love.”

Thor’s eyes are blazing at Loki’s word choice as he picks up the ring; he is so incandescent that Loki-half expects sparks to fly from his hands as Thor slides it down his ring-finger. Then Shuri repeats the process with the second dagger.

As Thor presents him with the ring, Loki’s vision threatens to blur. “I, Thor Odinson, offer you, Loki Odinson, this ring as a symbol of my undying fidelity, and of my eternal love.”

Loki takes the ring with all care, treating it like the precious, impossible, wonderful object that it is, and when he puts it on, he lets out a caught breath.

He realizes that he stopped breathing while the ring came toward him; only with the weight and warmth of it on his hand does he inhale freely again.

Not gasping for breath, no—the air in his lungs is fresh and sustaining; he could run for miles, he thinks; he could take wing and fly. He reaches for both of Thor’s hands, clasps them.

“They move for each other as one. Thor’s arms wrap around Loki’s waist, and Loki throws his arms around his husband’s neck, and then they’re kissing. They’re kissing and kissing and kissing, hot and deep and meaning it, while their friends keep cheering and clapping and someone magically-minded—it’s probably Wong beside him—summons up a shower of flower petals.

“Okay, we get it,” says Rocket at length. “Save some for the honeymoon.”

Laughing, they break apart, relinquishing each other—briefly—to a dozen other congratulatory embraces from the crowd.

Thor is back by Loki’s side soon enough, tangling his fingers with Loki’s, and they set off together to lead the procession toward the barn that will host their party.

“I guess this means that you are stuck with me,” Thor says.

“I am afraid so,” says Loki with a heavy sigh. “I am resigned to it.”

“Good,” says Thor, and he squeezes Loki’s hand: I love you. “Because I intend not to let you go again.”

“Where we go, we go together,” Loki agrees.

“That is more than enough,” says Thor. “I only have one more thought that troubles me.”

“What’s that?”
“Are we allowed to delay our own celebration because the sight of you in that suit is driving me mad?”

“How mad?” Loki wants to know.

“I nearly ruined everything when I first saw you,” says Thor, “by causing a thunderstorm that would have flooded all of Midgard.”

“How excessive,” says Loki, pleased and preening. He hums, considers. “I don’t think we can get away with a delay. But we’re certainly allowed to end the party early.”

“Say, in an hour?”

Loki laughs. “We are only going to be married once, Thor.”

“No,” says Thor, as though that’s a reasonable response. “I think I will marry you right here, every five years, with all of our friends who can attend, for as long as we are able. Will you?”

“You are mad,” Loki says appreciatively. “Will I what?”

“Keep marrying me,” says Thor. “Never stop marrying me.”

“If you insist,” Loki says, squeezing Thor’s hand: I love you. “And I don’t have anything better to do.”

* * *

The party in the barn is a raucous, joyous occasion. Loki floats through it like a dream. He dances with Thor—their first dance, just the two of them alone together, caught up in each other’s arms. They look, Loki knows, rather magnificent together.

He dances quite a bit more with Thor. He dances with many of their friends. Then everyone seems to be dancing at once, bumping elbows on purpose.

Alcohol flows like a river and toasts are made, then more toasts; wildly inappropriate speeches are delivered by Wong, and then by Natasha, and then by Volstagg, and then by Sif, and then by Rocket, who gets his mic turned off.

When he thinks on the party later all that Loki will distinctly remember is laughter and warmth and music and affection surrounding him from every direction.

Whenever he starts to fear that none of this can be real, or that all of it will be inevitably taken from him, there is Thor’s hand on his, grounding him in the present.

When they run out of food, there is pizza ordered. Later there is an alarmingly large cake.

Loki spins across the packed earth dance floor in his husband’s arms. He never wants to leave this place, this moment, and yet the end can also not come quickly enough. Then somehow it is far after dark and the whole lot of them are bearing him and Thor on their shoulders back to the compound, laughing and singing. When your friends are superheroes it’s easy to be carried.

They are left in the hallway by their bedroom, the swaying mass of party-goers melting away into the
shadows, leaving only a few lewd suggestions shouted in their wake.

Then Thor is lifting Loki into his arms, Thor is kissing his mouth. Thor carries Loki across the threshold and kicks the door shut soundly behind them.

* * *

Thor carries him straight to bed. He only sets Loki down when they’re a foot away from the mattress. Loki sways on his feet, full-up with champagne and bliss.

“My husband,” Thor says, and the way he says the words makes Loki’s skin goosebump with pleasure.

“Yes,” Loki agrees. He holds up his hand with the ring as though to prove it to them both.

“Let me look at you properly,” says Thor, his hungry gaze raking Loki head to toe. “You always manage to astound me, Loki.”

“I am glad you like the suit,” Loki says. “Help me with my hair and you can take it off of me.”

Thor turns him around at that, gently, and yet with haste—starts at once to work on unraveling Loki’s braids. Thor is quick about it; lust compels him, gives him great speed; he is only slowed by bending to press kisses above Loki’s collar again and again.

He exclaims at the runes on the silver beads, moves to set them one by one on the bedside table, as though to keep their blessings close this night. At last Thor can run his fingers through Loki’s hair, which is beset now with waves.

“Did I earn my keep?” Thor asks, lips trailing the column of Loki’s neck.

At Loki’s nod, Thor slides his arms around Loki, leans hot against his back, chin hooked over Loki’s shoulder to watch. He starts to undress Loki like that, one button at a time, focused yet increasingly stirred as more of Loki’s skin is bared. When Thor unzips Loki’s trousers and urges them down his hips, he can feel the line of Thor’s cock against the small of his back, hard and long and perfect, and all at once Loki is in no mood to tease.

Loki turns back around, palming Thor’s cock through fine wool and eliciting a groan. Loki is still in his blue vest, his shirt open from throat to navel, and he knows then exactly what he wants.

“Fuck me first like this, brother,” Loki murmurs. “Just like this. Don’t undress any more than you need to.”

Thor licks his lips; he hesitates for only a half-second: “But the clothes—”

“Magic-made,” Loki says with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I could remake them tomorrow should you like. Tonight I want you to fuck me until your arms split the seams of that jacket and then I’m going to tear it off of you.”

With a half-articulated growl, Thor pushes him back on the bed and crawls over him, and Loki realizes how much Thor was restraining himself when the restraint evaporates.

Loki only just manages to speak a spell that slicks Thor’s fingers before they’re sinking inside of
him, moving with calculated, superb deliberateness to set him off. Thor seems determined to make Loki gasp and gasp, and when he succeeds, he smirks in a way that is much too appealing, especially considering the added dazzle of his still-buttoned jacket.

Then Thor takes back his fingers and undoes his pants only enough to draw out his cock, following Loki’s instructions not to undress.

“When we were young,” Thor says, stroking his cock with his still-slippery hand, “before you ever took a lover, I used to dream I’d be the first to have you. I had a lot of romantic notions then, and the only way I could let myself think such things was with what I thought was honor attached—I imagined that we two lay down on our wedding night.”

Loki bites his lip and spreads his legs to hear it; Thor enters him, urgent, relentless, as though he cannot wait another moment. The friction of his clothes against Loki’s skin—the sight of Thor still in his black wedding suit, fucking in, ruining their immaculate lines, makes Loki toss his head, already halfway to incoherent.

“I thought about how slow and careful I’d need to be with you,” Thor says between messy, open-mouthed kisses and bed-shaking thrusts. He is anything but slow and careful now; he is desperate, fierce, driving his cock into Loki again and again and driving Loki absolutely delirious with need. Loki scratches sharp lines down his back in encouragement. Loki scratches and scratches until Thor grabs hold of his wrists and pins them down above Loki’s head, which was really what Loki was getting after. He struggles with Thor’s deliciously immovable grip.

“In all my dreaming I could not have seen us like this, as we are now,” Thor tells him. “I lacked imagination. How strange it seems, to have wanted you blushing and virginal, when there is nothing about you that can be tamed. All that remains unchanged about my fantasies is you calling me husband as I take you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Loki pants. “You’re going to have to work a little harder for it.”

“I have barely begun,” Thor says. “I am going to fuck you so many times this night that I promise you, Loki, you will lose count.”

“Such declarations,” Loki purrs. “Such boasting, Thor.”

Thor grunts, finds a new angle of attack, and Loki laughs and moans some more underneath him. Loki’s hard cock rubs against Thor’s jacket, an arousing tease of sensation. But with his hands trapped he can do little to find relief but push up with his hips, taking Thor further and trying to increase the friction on his cock.

“I would touch you, I would,” Thor tells Loki’s neck, smiling as he feels Loki try for more contact. “But you told me I had to split this jacket, and I intend to follow orders.” He pushes Loki’s hands further above his head, straining the reach of both of their arms and making the suit fabric stretch dangerously across his biceps.

Then Thor sets such a pace of deep and thorough thrusts—and must exert himself to keep Loki pinned down as Loki fights him ecstatically—that it is not long until the fabric comes apart in four or five places with a hiss of parting wool. Thor is sweating from such dedicated activity, and from still being almost fully clothed, so Loki takes pity on him, twists one hand out of Thor’s grip.

He grasps Thor’s suit-collar and his shirt beneath it—the tie was lost on the dance floor—and tears the lot free with a show of strength that Thor rewards with a rough, glorious thrust. Buttons rain down on them as Loki tosses the fabric away, revealing Thor’s gleaming arms and chest and
abdomen and reminding Loki that he was mad to ever allow them to remain covered.

He palms Thor’s ass, appreciating the shape of it under wool, then vanishes the trousers from existence, along with the last of Loki’s own clothes. Enough pictures were taken this day for them to remember what they wore; right now Loki needs to feel all of his husband’s skin against him.

Thor murmurs contentment at the sudden increased contact. His fingers tighten around Loki’s wrist, and he moves up to capture Loki’s mouth in a searing kiss.

“I love you so much,” Thor says when he draws back, pulls back with his hips and then reseats his cock while Loki gasps for it. “So much.” Thor rests his forehead against Loki’s, looks into his eyes as he does so again. “I can scarcely believe we are here.”

Loki has been trying to shake free of the same lingering, gnawing doubt. Luck was never on their side before, it’s true, but not everything must stay the same course. They did not.

Perhaps luck is theirs now to keep for a little while. Perhaps there is no such thing as luck.

Both of them paid dearly to be here—paid prices both personal and shared, were prepared to relinquish the most precious thing they had: each other.

Can debts ever be fully settled? Happily ever after is the way that lazy writers end stories because it doesn’t exist. They can be happy, they are happy now, but they will not always be. Their story continues after the coda, and they will know challenges and conflicts, struggle with grief and changes, fight some days and make up again, make love like this thereafter to help heal the wounds they will doubtless inflict.

Loki is not so far-gone that he imagines their lives will go on from here unafflicted. There will be pain and loss, doubts and agonies, days of fear and dread. And oh, there will be joy and laughter, victories and unparalleled rewards, days of such rapturous delight that they will feel dizzy to be alive.

For Loki belongs to Thor, and Thor to him, and nothing now can remove that certainty that they have sworn. Someday they might be forgotten to history but they cannot be erased from it. Time has a memory and it will remember them. They are indelible within its circle. This moment is recorded, the next is, the one after.

Loki kisses Thor’s mouth. “I can,” he says in answer, smiling. “We earned it, brother.”

He uses the advantage of Thor staring at him rather teary-eyed to flip them over, upending Thor onto his back and moving to straddle his hips and sink down on his cock.

Thor groans his appreciation when Loki starts to ride him, wild with euphoric freedom, driving himself down again and again until Thor cries out and spills his seed so far into Loki that he thinks of his other form, and of other promises and dreams.

Loki draws slowly off of Thor, but before Thor can reach for his cock it is not there to reach for. She sits astride him while Thor’s eyes, already dark with his release, go wide with adoration.

Thor lifts a hand to her cheek and she leans into it, lays her smaller hand over his. It is not that she feels more tenderly as a woman, no; but there is something about this shape that makes it easier to express such things; it is more permissible, perhaps, another blessing and curse of this sex.

“Wife,” Thor murmurs, his voice full of welcome. His wonderfully resilient body begins to stir already beneath her, and he sits up, holding her more firmly against him and bowing his head to kiss her breasts.
She pushes him back down after some minutes of this, and Thor examines her face, confused as to whether he should reach for her again. Loki lays a finger, soft, over his lips.

“It occurred to your brother that he had not yet the time to find you a proper wedding-present,” she explains. “And now he absconds responsibility and leaves it to me to tell you what we have resolved.”

Thor’s brow furrows, but he stays obediently silent under her finger, under her hips.

Loki says, “It will, of course, be some years yet, if we are to stay here. First we must survive our time given to avenging. But I should have listened better when you told me that your dream of what was ahead for us felt like prophecy. Now I have come to believe that it is. We are promised a child, you and I, if we live long enough to meet her.”

“Loki, I—” Thor can only swallow. “Loki.”

“She will not be born into royalty,” Loki goes on, smiling a little at the expression on Thor’s face, as though she has handed over the moon gift-wrapped. “She will not be a princess, thankfully for her. Her life will be her own from her first day to do with as she pleases. But she will be the heir to the legacies of Asgard and Jotunheim, and we will teach her about both.”

“Already drafting up her plan of study,” Thor says, his hand raised again, palm cradling Loki’s cheek. “I will teach her to ride as soon as she is able, so that she might escape from it.”

Loki opens her mouth, then closes it. Outrage is not the proper response to Thor’s teasing, not here, not tonight, not about this. Instead she lifts an eyebrow. “You will teach her to ride, when I am the superior—”

Thor pulls her down, laughing, kisses her breathless between the laughter. “We will teach our daughter together,” he says, his fingers stealing between Loki’s legs to work so persuasively that she chooses not to pursue the matter.

Instead she does as her other self had done, moves astride Thor’s ready cock until she is flush against him, then takes him at a pace born of pure exhilaration. He thrusts up into her, so eager to share this latest dance, plying her will those skillful fingers until she is undone, and he with her.

Afterward she lies with her head upon his shoulder while he touches all of her that he can reach. “This form is more resilient in bed,” Loki tells Thor, “but I will return to the other. I fear if you fuck me this night as many times as you bragged that you would, the result would be our plans proceeding a good deal more quickly.”

Thor turns his head, kisses her temple. “I’d leave here with you tomorrow, if that were the case, should you prefer it,” he says. “We could go to some safer world. We could go to Oblara, that our daughter might know what is left of Asgard.”

“One day, perhaps,” Loki answers. She runs a hand through his pillow-mussed hair. “I told you—we have some years yet to aid Midgard. I am going to look fantastic in that Stark-designed suit, even better than your broth—”

“Ohem,” Loki says, stretching his arms to show off their broader musculature. “Quite enough of that.”

Thor grins at him. “Only you could have a battle of vanity with yourself, my love.”

“Yes, well.” Loki doesn’t deny it. Loki bites the closest part of Thor he can reach, which turns out to
be the meat of Thor’s shoulder. Then he urges Thor’s thighs apart and slides between them, his cock pressing hard against Thor’s belly. “Seeing as how you’ve had me twice and deserve a bit of a rest,” Loki continues, leans in to kiss and run his teeth along the cords of Thor’s neck, “I think it may be my turn, don’t you?”

“Oh,” says Thor, as Loki moves down the bed, down his body, skipping Thor’s cock entirely as he spreads Thor’s legs to expose his tightly furled entrance. He drags his tongue across the sensitive skin, loving how Thor tenses and then goes slack, as though his bones have turned into water. “Oh, Loki, Loki.”

Loki, an expert in Thor-speech, translates that as both agreement and invitation, and he starts to tongue Thor open for him. He takes his time—time, they have time again—and it is a treat to coax such shameless sounds of pleasure out of his mighty brother. It is a triumph indeed to make Thor’s thighs, which could crush worlds, quiver in place while the bed frame threatens to give way beneath them.

Thor is storm-charged like this, his requests bleeding fast into incoherence, his hips so responsive to Loki’s every incursion that Loki must plant a firm hand across Thor’s belly to keep him down. Loki only relents into easing one oil-slick finger into Thor, then two, because Thor is pleading for fingers by then.

“Tell me what you want,” Loki says mild as he can, adding a third finger and crooking the lot just so, so that Thor kicks out and then he grinds his teeth, desperate. In truth Loki is just as desperate, but he’ll not say so, not when it is such fun to take Thor apart piece by piece.

“More,” Thor tries. “More, more—”

“Use all of your words,” says Loki, for he may be reformed now and in love and quite thoroughly married but he is still Loki; he will always taunt Thor. He twists his fingers, and a sudden current of electricity sparks from Thor’s hands as he arcs off the bed.

“I want you to fuck me, husband,” Thor says, only just managing to ball his hands into fists and extinguish the lightning. “Hard.”

“Well said,” Loki murmurs, and despite himself, Thor gives a shaky laugh. Loki draws out his fingers. “Get onto your hands and knees.”

Thor’s eyes flash at him, his great stubbornness that was once arrogance warring with his lust and the not-so-secret part of him that thrills to submit to Loki’s authority—on rare and unforgettable occasions. Soon enough he is obeying the injunction, turning over and positioning himself as ordered.

“Good,” Loki tells him, for Loki is no longer a severe commander; he strokes Thor’s flank, bids him to relax again. “You are so lovely like this for me, brother. Only for me.”

Thor gives a nigh-on unintelligible response, and Loki slicks his cock and pushes inside him before his brother can gather his wits for a retort. Thor is always tight, unbelievably tight, so much so that when they do this Loki is more often delicate in his approach, keen to feel his every inch accepted in increments. But Thor said hard, so Loki thrusts in with a forceful snap of his hips, giving Thor all of his cock at once.

Thor only just swallows a shout. He canters his head back, and through clenched teeth he says, “More.”
“Greedy and impatient,” Loki muses, on another vigorous thrust, then another, “but it’s our wedding night, so I suppose I will forgive you.”

Now Thor shakes his head. “Punish me,” he suggests.

Oh, fuck. “Oh, fuck,” Loki says, pulling out and slamming back in with all enthusiasm, all restraint lost. Thor takes it without protest—wants it—begs for Loki to do so again.

Loki gazes down at the fine play of muscles across Thor’s back, the run of sweat across his skin, his tensed jaw, looks at the slide of his own cock, thick with heady arousal, watches them both as he starts to fuck Thor with more and more vigor. Since Thor asks it of him, his motion becomes strict, demanding, and Thor chokes on a caught moan.

Once, a long time ago, and not so long ago, Loki would have relished doing just this, dreamed of it in his darkest dreams. Would have savored having his brother so exposed, so vulnerable underneath him, would have wallowed in taking him like this, fucking him this relentlessly, would have gloated as he speared Thor on his cock. Loki would have used him cruelly, to make some point or win some advantage or another, and it would have been—it would have been something very different than this.

He is different now, and Thor is: he does this at Thor’s behest, for Thor’s pleasure, which Loki values above all other things in this maddening universe.

So he fucks Thor as Thor asks him to, but he also takes Thor’s cock in hand, stroking him in time, just as Thor likes; and he stretches out across Thor’s back, skin to skin. He’s close to Thor’s ear like that, and into Thor’s ear he pours words of love.

Thor exclaims at the contrast—Loki’s sharp thrusts, his soft words—and comes undone beneath him, the intensity of it crashing through his body with such ferocity that Loki must follow thereafter.

Thor given over is so arresting to witness, to feel, to instigate, that Loki is only capable of delivering half a dozen more rigorous, ruthless thrusts before he spills inside him.

His last act is to angle Thor’s hips downward so that he can take Loki’s seed even deeper, and Thor obediently collapses to his elbows. Loki would admire the gorgeous picture that his brother makes if he weren’t so busy feeling lightning-struck about it, pleasure singing through his veins and his mouth full of Thor’s name.

They lie facing each other when they are through, breathing to regain their breath. Loki’s fingers twine in the short hairs at the back of Thor’s neck.

“I love you,” Loki says. He said as much and many more things moments before, told Thor’s ear that, but it is better to tell Thor’s eyes.

“Again,” says Thor.

Loki bites his tongue, on an old instinct, but Thor is smiling at him, clear-eyed. “I mean, I want you to fuck me like that again tonight.”

“Greedy and high-maintenance,” Loki notes. He kisses Thor anyway, smiling back against his mouth.

Thor, however, next has Loki up against the wall, Loki’s arms and legs wrapped around him and Thor not even trying to muffle the echoing thud of them as he thrusts. The walls vibrate with their motion, the floor begins to shake, but they forget to care. Their friends will forgive them the
disturbance this one night.

So long as the foundational structure of the compound remains intact—and Loki only worries about it once or twice when he’s pinned to the wall—they are unlikely to be disturbed.

Then Thor has him bent over one of their armchairs; then the other armchair; then Thor has him on nothing at all but the tremendous strength of his arms and the prodigious balance of his legs, holding Loki against him in the middle of the room and lifting him up and down upon his cock.

All of this is highly impractical considering the big empty bed at the ready, but Thor is clearly keen to demonstrate flexibility and creativity, and Loki gives him points for both, in the few moments of respite when his scrambled brain tries to unscramble and produce speech beyond gasps and moans.

Then Thor is bearing him back to bed, and Loki gasps, “A—a moment. Just a moment.”

Thor lays him down, lies beside him with one arm and one leg thrown across Loki’s body, his head upon his hand and the expression on his face so mischievous that he must have learned it from Loki. “Surely you are not tired already?”

“I did not say tired,” Loki says. “I said a moment, only.” He feels his fast-beating heart start to slow, and he also feels each and every delicious ache he’s earned this night. “We are not so young as we once were.”

“We have not been young in a long time, Loki,” Thor says, sounding glad for it. He sweeps Loki’s sweat-damp hair from his forehead with one finger, then traces the finger across the faint lines on Loki’s brow. “I look forward to nothing so much as growing even older with you.”

“Oh, yes,” Loki says with a roll of his eyes. “When I am wrinkled and grey-haired I will, apparently, have reached peak desirability for you.”

“There will never be a moment when you are not desirable to me,” Thor says. He moves back over Loki, studying him intently. “When your hair is no longer black it will be the most exquisite silver, and if there are lines around your eyes they will be from laughing with me for so many years, and I will want you as much as I do now.” Thor comes into him again, gentle and deep, links them together. “I will want you more, I know, for if we are old it will mean that we have lived against many odds, and accomplished much, and grown wise.”

“Some of us will grow wise, at least,” Loki says, as he matches Thor’s attentive motion, as he pulls Thor close to kiss him. “Some of us may prove hopeless in that regard.”

“And which of us is which?” Thor wants to know, his smile pressed to Loki’s cheek.

“I suppose we will have to wait and see, husband,” says Loki.

* * *

They spend six years on Midgard helping to knit its lands back together with the Avengers. After, with their friends’ assistance and resources, they open a school on Oblara, three days riding distance from New Asgard. Close and yet far enough away.

The school is small at first, a handful of teenagers sent by curious New Asgardian parents who
remember Thor and Loki’s names fondly. It fast expands on reputation, as their students graduate and go out into the worlds as unparalleled sorcerers and unmatched warriors.

Soon enough there is an intergalactic clamor to gain entry. They build a bigger building. They build several buildings. They build an immense sparring ring and a state-of-the-art gymnasium. They build a paddock to teach riding and a large stable for horses, Soda preeminent among them. Soda is adored by a dozen teenagers, then many, many dozens for many years.

The waiting list to secure a place grows so unwieldy that Rocket tells them there is a black-market business dedicated to simply getting a promising application submitted. He does not tell them that he started the business. As supply-master at the school he has some pull, it’s true, but not quite as much as they let him believe.

In the early days the division of labor is simple enough. Thor trains the young fighters; Loki teaches the magic-users; when a pupil is gifted in both they study under each of them to learn the dual disciplines.

As the student body balloons, there is a need for reorganization. They bring on new faculty and support staff, add advanced courses, begin to offer a wider range of education. There is more to life than combat: they build an arts and music building for the galaxy’s would-be bards; they build an enormous recreation complex; Loki builds a theater.

Then comes the year when Loki is spending far more time in planning and administration as anything else, and when Thor casually suggests, then goes on to insist, that Loki take the title of headmaster, Loki only argues with him about it for another year before accepting the inevitable.

When Loki returns to their rooms the night the announcement goes out, Thor has already made him a plaque for his desk.

Their friends visit when they can, no few roped into teaching a specialty class concerning their unique areas of expertise. Some take to teaching as Thor and Loki have, and stay for much longer. Tony builds a lab there with an eye on Bruce’s retirement. Shuri visits for a glorious season to see it built to her exacting specifications, and helps Bruce introduce science into the curriculum as another branch of magic.

Steve and Bucky pass two years with them, teaching tactics, and the class is so popular they record it to be replayed every year thereafter. Heimdall will not remain in one location, busy traveling to places that he has only seen from afar, but his guest lectures become the stuff of legend, and it is hopeless to get the students to attend any other class when he is in residence.

Thor’s Asgardian companions remain in New Asgard, but they are at the school so frequently that they have a house all their own that becomes a makeshift tavern upon their arrival. As such the older students are always begging for them to stay on, and the visits become lengthier each year. Each year Brunnhilde turns down Thor’s pleas to remain as armsmaster, but Thor assures Loki every time that she is close to acquiescing.

Loki has his own recruitment woes. Wong grows their library from a singular bookcase into a three-story marvel. He tells Loki, over ever-victorious chess matches, that he will consider the offer of staying on permanently one day. Perhaps if Loki can ever beat him.

Rhodey has one of the more successful visits during his tenure teaching military history. He falls in love with an Asgardian and takes her back to Midgard with him, though they return often. Natasha complains that she has no such romantic success and no time for more school, and her stays are often brief. But she writes a textbook on stealth and fighting technique that becomes required reading, and Loki catches her smiling sometimes when she spots a student with their nose in her book.
Clint comes with his wife, on the occasion that all of the Avengers and the Asgardians visit together:

Loki and Thor name their first child, a black-haired, blue-eyed girl, after Frigga.

End Notes

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