Before my time to go
by Ark

Summary

While racing to undo Thanos’s damage in the present, Loki makes an unexpected stop in the past.

Notes

A brief diversion before Endgame. Many thanks to ravenbringslight and yeats for reading first, and to cuppyren for the prompt. I’m on Tumblr if you need me. Title from William Butler Yeats, “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time.” For the Estate, with love.

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Then

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When Loki appears in his chamber, Thor leaps to his feet. But it’s the wrong Thor, too young, just easing into his prime, still untested.
Loki’s heart beats hard to see his brother look like that again. To see his brother. But it’s the wrong Thor.

“Damn, damn, damn,” Loki says. He half-bends at the waist, breathing fast, a sharp pain in his side as though he’s run for miles. Running for miles sounds like delightful sport in comparison to wrestling with thrice-damned time spells.

“Loki?” The fresh-faced Thor lowers Mjölnir, which was poised to strike the intruder. His hair is spun gold, worn over-long, his beard light upon his cheek. He eyes Loki—the rather disheveled state of Loki—warily. “What is the meaning of this?”

Loki means to vanish, but his magic won’t respond. He’s spent of power and far overdue a rest to recharge. He races through his options at speed, wonders if it’s worth trying to convince Thor that he is his old—young—self, having fun with a glamour.

That potentially could limit the fallout to the timeline; perhaps Thor might simply forget about this, one more off-kilter jest from his brother. But Thor, even with only a few centuries under his belt, is no fool, and something in Loki’s gut tells him what must be done is trusting Thor with the truth of it. Some of it, anyway.

“I’m time-travelling, brother,” Loki tells Thor, casual enough. “I’m seeking to undo irreparable harm. Tricky thing, that. It seems I went back much too far.”

The side of Thor’s mouth twitches, but levels as he studies Loki’s face. “You’re—you’re not lying. I can tell when you’re lying.”

“You can tell sometimes,” Loki begins, then bites his tongue when he realizes Thor is trying to goad him, and how quickly they fall into the same dynamic even with a thousand years between them. “No, I’m not lying. I come from a catastrophic future, Thor. If you want to assist me in preventing it from happening to the both of us, you’ll conceal me here until I’m strong enough to work the magics I need to reach you at the date I intended.”

Fucking time travel. Loki hates the messy, imprecise magic, hates how one thread out of place can alter everything that comes before or after. He thought he knew what he was undertaking, but proper navigation of the slipstream has proved far more difficult than he bargained for.

It must be that he casts a spell on Thor before leaving to wipe all memory of this accidental meeting. The Thor of Loki’s timeline would have mentioned encountering a time-skipping version of Loki in his youth—a Loki considerably (though finely) aged and still in the charred leather suit present-day Thor believed to be his burial shroud.

It was wrenching to convince Thor and the others that he was really dead at Thanos’ hand; but there was nothing else for it, and Thor will forgive him if Loki can fix this mess before it starts.

“I believe you,” Thor says at once. Bless him. Bless him and his spectacular naivete at this moment in time. Nothing has yet made this Thor question the certainty of his world. Yet his world is enchanted enough that the circumstances do not seem to faze him. “I will help all that I can, of course. But shouldn’t we involve Father and Mother, if it’s as dire as you say?”

“No,” says Loki. “No. We cannot.” His throat tightens with grief and guilt. Strange to think that both of his parents are so near, mere rooms away, alive and well—and that they both love their Loki unreservedly. He did not value such regard when he had it; only when it was gone did he realize what he’d willfully betrayed. He cannot think on it for long. “I have already disrupted the past far more than I should. And I must be certain not to meet the Loki that you know here.”
Thor nods. “The last part is easily done. You’re—he’s—he’s away studying advanced magics on Vanaheim. You—he—extended his stay by another week, and I’m half out of my mind with boredom, waiting for him to come back.” Thor offers a smile at that, and Loki is taken aback to see that the smile is almost shy. “Perhaps I willed you here, so much have I missed my brother.”

A shiver snakes up Loki’s spine. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Of all of the times— “Magic on Vanaheim, you say?”

“Yes.” Thor blinks. “Is that a problem? He’s not due back for some days.”

“I—” Loki turns on his heel and starts to pace. “I need to think through this.”

He knows then with total certainty where he is situated in the past. Knows without a shadow of a doubt, for the events that are to come upon his return to Asgard from Vanaheim are the most monumental and memorable of his life.

Can it be mere coincidence that he is here at this moment, this year, this day? Why now?

Is he meant to intervene?

Gods, if he did—if he had—that would explain several curious puzzles never quite solved. Why Thor was moved to act at last. Thor’s excellent counter-arguments to every issue and worry Loki raised. His total certainty of Loki’s response. His absolute conviction. Loki always wondered how Thor had been so unafraid.

It has to happen again. It must happen again all in the same ways exactly, for it is the depth of affection and attachment that he and Thor forge these days and years that serve as Loki’s counterbalance. This will be his salvation. Every time he strays too far from the path, every time he’s tempted to do the unforgivable, even the reason why he is trying to correct Thanos’ wrongs in the first place—all of it is because Thor comes straight to his rooms the night he returns from Vanaheim, takes Loki into his arms and—

“Fuck,” says Loki, still pacing. He scrubs a hand through his hair, pulls hard on a handful. He could make it all go wrong now, with a single misplaced word or action.

But if he says nothing of it, perhaps—perhaps Thor never will, either. This would explain so much. The paradox robs him of breath.

“Tell me how I can be of service, and you will see it done,” Thor says, watching Loki’s tread with concern. He squares broad shoulders, ever ready for action, ever the hero. He is all but insufferable at this age, too boastful and brazen, so self-assured that he can fix everything, that he is the solution to every problem.

Yet—can it be?—consider that it is Loki who provides Thor with the answer to the question neither of them could ask at this point in time.

Of service. How Thor looks saying that, golden and flawless and crackling with untapped power. Being near him electrifies every cell in Loki’s body. And suddenly Loki knows exactly how Thor can assist him. How Thor must have done, then somehow kept hidden from Loki all these countless years. Imagine Thor keeping such a secret.

On second thought, is not so difficult to imagine, given the secret that Thor is keeping right now. Then Loki is decided, though he wishes he felt as confident as he makes himself appear. How tenuous the reality of the past feels, ready to unravel should he set one toe astray. He stops, instead, and turns to face Thor.
“You are in love with your brother,” Loki says, matter-of-fact. There’s little use prevaricating here. Thor reacts as though struck from behind, his eyes wide with surprise and, in its wake, fear. To his credit he does not flinch nor protest; his jaw clenches, but no words emerge. “As luck might have it, he is in love with you. If you follow my instructions to the letter he will be in your bed before week’s end.”

Thor still does not move, though his cheeks are a fascinating shade approaching purple. He makes a few false starts before he manages, “I—I don’t—I don’t know what you’re—”

“Deny it all you like,” says Loki. The look on Thor’s face! Loki would enjoy this, even relish it, were events not so frightfully pressing. “Both of us know the truth. At this point in our lives we’ve been dancing around it for decades, trading yearning glances when we think the other isn’t looking. Thor, I know. I lived this all before.”

Now the flush drains from Thor’s cheeks, leaves him chalk-white. “You—he—Loki. He feels the same way?”

“Quite,” says Loki, then stops short. Suddenly he wonders how much is too much to tell Thor: *He feels as though he would undo the fabric of the universe for the chance to be with you.* He swallows that down. Some things do not change. *At this moment he is on Vanheim, soul-sick, half out of his mind with the one problem he cannot solve, which is his love and lust for you, and he is keeping himself away when all that he wants is to be with you for every grain of the hourglass, morning noon and night, he would never be apart from you if he but could—“Am I lying about this, Thor? You say you can tell.”*

Bold despite his bewilderment, too damned bold, Thor examines him now without pretense. There’s a light in Thor’s eyes that wasn’t there before—hope, treacherous and wonderful. At last Thor shakes his head: no, Loki is not lying. He moves for the closest chair and sits down heavily. He’s staring now, not at Loki, but at nothing. Envisioning another Loki entirely, perhaps. Then Thor exhales as though freed of a great burden: “I thought I was going mad. I thought I was mad.”

“The verdict is not yet returned on whether we are mad to be what we are to each other,” Loki tells him. In this he will not lie—but he cannot tell Thor too much. At least this Thor, like his own Thor, is incapable of shying from a challenge. “Our road will not be easy, brother.”

That gets Thor even more riled up, as expected, though he sores at Loki’s expression. “I know you cannot tell me details of what is to come, nor will I ask it of you,” he says. He’s always been so much smarter than he puts on. “I ask only this. In your present day, do we still—do we still love each other as you say?”

“We love better,” Loki says after a pause to consider how best to phrase it. “We have never known each other better.”

The light behind Thor’s eyes flares, dangerously close to the lightning he does not yet know is within him. “I will act as you say I should, then. I will follow your instructions exactly.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” Loki says. He tilts his head, lets himself fully drink this Thor in for the first time. Strapping and tousled and flowing with vitality. Delicious. He has little doubt, too, that his next step will prove effective—and he counts it a sudden gift to not be quite so burdened with morals as his good brother. “There is a way that you can help me leave this place, this time, so that I can continue what I’ve started. In the process I will explain how to bring about this week’s events for you.”

“Anything,” says Thor. Too stubborn by half, this Thor, but too excitable also, made malleable. “Say
what is wanted for and I will do anything."

“Take me to bed,” says Loki, and for an instant, Thor’s eyes are lightning. “I am in great need of magical energy to work the necessary spells, and you have it in abundance. I could siphon it from you, via other rituals, should you prefer; but sex magic is simple enough and expedient to that end. And I am by no means opposed to such a method of getting there.”

Thor blinks twice, but, Loki sees, he is not surprised. Startlement has disappeared now that Thor knows what he knows. He lifts his head and stares back at Loki. The glint in his eye is no longer electric—it’s hungry, and brash, and all too self-assured. “I hoped that you might be unopposed,” he says.

Now Loki is the one surprised. He bursts out laughing, any qualms about the subject at hand vanished. “Really, Thor? Really?”

“You do not hide the way you look at me,” Thor says, getting up and crossing to Loki without hesitation. He saunters. “At first I did not understand it, but now I know the reason. If you still love me in the future then you love me also here in the past.” A grin, a flash of white teeth. “Has your Thor grown maimed and slow, that you desire me so?”

“He is less of a cocky bastard,” says Loki without heat, “and all the more beautiful by the year, though I’ll deny ever saying that.” He grins back, and it’s hard to remember when he’s had more fun of late. If the fate of the universe weren’t at stake he’d stay here with this conceited, stunning, positively beastly Thor for days, take him in hand and show him all the things his own Loki couldn’t even dream of knowing yet. He raises his eyebrows. “And what of me, brother? Do you find me grown maimed and slow?”

Thor takes the bait. Thor is incapable of letting bait lie undisturbed. “I do not,” Thor says, with the sincerity of swearing an oath. He steps forward, cups a hand behind Loki’s neck, brings their mouths together. He is so, so eager—he trembles beneath his swaggering confidence, as Loki shows him just how well they fit.

For Thor it is a first kiss, and his eyes grow round; for Loki it is like tasting the sweetest of memories, and he closes his eyes to savor their spark.

This is not his Thor, not exactly, but he is part of who Thor will eventually become, and Loki adores him without shame. Nor does this Thor expect shame from him. This Thor does not know what Loki is capable of, what Loki will do, what Loki has done. This Thor loves and lusts after him with a kind of purity untinged by the events of the approaching years. It is an unchecked devotion that Loki does not miss—not that—but it is nice to see reflected back, if only for a little while.

Pure of heart but not of body or mind: Thor is already backstepping them to the bed, all frantic, pent-up longing fast risen to the surface. Loki cannot ruin Thor entirely for his younger self, so he only disrobes them with a quarter of the seductive flair he might enjoy on another day.

He has the advantage of centuries of experience in bed—moreover, centuries of experience in bed with Thor, which means that he arrives knowing every which way Thor likes to be touched, caressed, bitten, blown, tied up, flogged, taken—in short, he knows everything that Thor likes right then, and many more things that will take them a millenia to work out. It’s a giddy realization.

He knows just how to fuck Thor and how Thor prefers to fuck, and the possibilities are so endless that Loki decides to be generous and let Thor decide. This is, after all, a moment for Thor of life-changing importance, while it is for Loki an unexpected, if delightful, bend in the road—a brief pause along his way. Still, he knows this stop to be significant now, and he is glad of it.
“Do you give me permission, dear brother, to borrow from your power—to restore me to the strength I need?” Loki asks Thor’s earlobe, with a touch of his tongue to the soft fleshy round of it that never failed to make Thor groan and does not fail now. He’s ended up over Thor, straddling his thighs. Thor’s cock is so hard between them that Loki would fear he might come untouched, were he not intimately acquainted with Thor’s mind-and-body-shattering stamina.

“Take—take all of it, should you need,” Thor says, urgent and made of roaming hands. He’s gazing up at Loki with what can only be described as worshipful lust, wonderfully reactive to Loki’s every touch. “I want you to take all of it.”

Loki smirks for him on cue. “That’s rather the point,” he agrees, wrapping clever fingers around Thor’s more than impressive showing. “Do you think I can?”


“Just like this, then?” Loki asks, with a not-so-subtle shift of his hips. “Like this?”

“Please, I—please—”

Thor appears to be quite broken, like a Midgardian record with its needle caught, and Loki only just succeeds in not full-on beaming at this triumph. Loki cannot remember Thor saying that often, saying “please,” not at this point in his life. A rare case this is, but here they are, and here is Thor pleading as though his soul were in the balance. Loki knows what the hundreds of years of desire Thor thought unrequited will do to a person, so in the end he does not tease. He takes what he needs, and gives Thor the same.

He opens a channel between them, is met with a heady rush of Thor’s power streaming through his veins; at the same time he opens and readies himself with a muttered spell, long since second nature. Often Thor would insist on preparing Loki without magic, lavishing him with attention, with his tongue and lips and deft fingers, drawing it out—but they haven’t the time, and Loki is not in the mood for quite so many lessons. Still, this one he’ll allow—

He settles astride Thor and seats himself upon Thor’s cock in one smooth, practiced motion, taking all of Thor at once. Thor cries out in shocked relief, overwhelmed by the slick tight vise of Loki’s body. So astonished is he that Loki has taken him without preparation or protest that he goes silent, awestruck. Loki knows from vast personal experience and many conversations with Thor that it can be a struggle to fit the entirety of his enormous cock; Thor’s bed-partners at this time had oft been discouraged.

Loki tosses his head to hide his smile, raises up on his knees to find his seat again. Thor always feels good inside of him, too good, addictively good, spectacularly good; but here this Thor has the novelty of youth and unbridled enthusiasm, and Loki thinks he’s never felt Thor quite so hard.

“I’m showing off, a little,” Loki tells Thor (he’s showing off a lot). He reaches down to brush his thumb across Thor’s parted lips. “That maneuver took me at least a decade to perfect.” He rides Thor at a languid pace at first, letting them both sink into it, but Thor has always been a quick study where tactics are concerned. Soon Thor is thrusting up to meet him, hard and sure and fast, then faster.

His raw energy crashes through Loki with his exertion, floods Loki; already Loki knows he has more than enough magics restored to work the time spells again. Soon, but not yet.

“Lo—” groans Thor, losing half of Loki’s name as he arches into their motion. His hands smooth up Loki’s thighs to settle at his waist, after a considerable detour to grip and stroke Loki’s cock. Loki knows what he is after, and he indulges him, lets Thor demonstrate his impossible strength. Gives
over his weight so that Thor can raise and lower him at will, so that Thor can work Loki along his cock.

Loki tightens approvingly when Thor angles just right; he studies the perfect oval of Thor’s face with unabashed fascination. This face that he knows better than any other, even his own—especially his own, which is ever-shifting—but a face from a past so distant he could not have drawn Thor like this from memory.

Oh, well does Loki remember their adventures of the coming days; but he’d forgotten what the untroubled length of Thor’s forehead looked like, the lack of mingled creases of grief at his eyes and laugh-lines at his mouth, the taut skin of his body not yet bearing so many of the scars that will be carved into it.

Thor like this is something pristine: no innocent, a man who loves to bed and be bedded, but innocent enough in the ways of the universe. Ripe for the plucking, yet still unpicked. Loki finds that he has an urge to scour himself against this Thor, scrape off the dull layers of the last few tumultuous years on Thor’s sharp edges, the chiseled marvel of his abdomen and the cut handles of his hip-bones, wants to bask in the reverent way Thor looks up at him.

Yet it cannot be. It must not be. This Thor is not yet his to pick, and cut, and devour; that will come later. He need only persuade Thor of the potential of them close at hand, so that the rest of it will go the way that Loki remembers.

Loki leans down to kiss him, and as he does, he quickens their speed, rides Thor right up to the edge and then stills, leaves him there. When he pulls up, takes Thor out of him, Thor makes a muffled sound of anguish, and Loki smiles and licks it from Thor’s mouth.

He lies down beside Thor instead, and a firm hand on Thor’s shoulder fast reveals his intention. Thor is quick to comply, climbing over him and fitting between Loki’s legs at once, though he glances for permission before thrusting his cock back in. Once granted, he pushes in with some caution, only seeming to remember how Loki can handle him at the last, when a hard snap of Thor’s hips drives him home.

“Loki,” Thor breathes, exhaled against Loki’s neck. “Tell me how I am to approach you. I know already that I cannot be without this again, that I must go to my brother’s room the very night that he returns, and confess.”

“Yes,” says Loki approvingly, running fingers through the silk-soft curtain of Thor’s hair. “That is how it starts.” He wraps his legs around Thor, draws him yet deeper, and Thor’s eyelashes sweep a line across his cheek as he closes his eyes—perhaps to better picture how he is to present himself, as Loki guides him.

Loki gives him a map to that exceptional evening, tells him how to best respond to the younger Loki’s concerns, which will be rooted in self-doubt and incredulity that his most profound, most hidden wish is coming true. Thor moves inside of him, seeking, and Loki talks him through it, until they are, he thinks, at a near-perfect understanding.

Near-perfect. When the idea dawns Loki thinks upon it for a long while, letting the exceptional rhythm of Thor’s thrusts center him. He wonders if he should speak it at all; it feels like a betrayal of self, a secret the Loki on Vanaheim kept close to the vest and would be outraged to know shared.

But that Loki need never know. Loki is full-up with memory as he is filled with Thor’s cock, and he remembers: how caring Thor was their first night, how careful, how considerate, how his unexpected delicacy of approach had warmed Loki to the bone, Loki who was always cold. Not that this Thor
would be untoward or brutish otherwise, he has evidence enough of that right this moment, and yet —

“Be gentle with him,” Loki hears himself say to Thor. “You are his first, though he’ll not tell you that for another hundred years. Best to act surprised when he does.”


“Well, it’s hardly mine,” Loki reminds him, rolling his eyes and his hips for good measure, “and you are under no such injunction with me now. In fact, you might consider its opposite.” He tilts up, drags teeth on Thor’s lower lip to disperse some of the lingering astonishment on his face, and says, “Why not remind me what this body can really do? I’d like it if you fucked me hard enough that I still feel it when I’m a thousand years gone.”

Thor does not need to be told twice. Without pause for breath his hands move to pin Loki’s wrists to the bed, hands like iron, unbendable as a mountain. Loki flexes in their grip and discovers he could not break free without removing Thor’s hands to do so, and he grins, thrilled to discover that Thor can read him so well. He may not be this Thor’s Loki either, but that Loki is a part of him, and Thor has already guessed at what he likes.

Thor is indeed studying him closely. The next thrust is Thor unleashed—total certainty, zero restraint, his cock wielded as perfectly and mercilessly as Thor aimed any weapon—and this time, the caught moan of pleasure is from Loki, who is caught.

“Like that?” asks Thor, and he leans in to suck and bite his way up Loki’s neck as he thrusts again. Loki’s toes curl, and he does it again. Again. Again. Again. Norns, Loki asked for this, but he’ll more than feel it when he’s back in the future; he’d feel it for another thousand years after that. It is a good thing he cannot stay, he thinks then: how quickly they would consume each other like this.

“Like—like that,” agrees Loki.

“Tell me,” says Thor, as conversational as he can while driving Loki into the mattress and no doubt soon through it, “can your Thor still hold you down, brother, or have you grown too strong for him?”

“I’m a good deal sneakier,” says Loki, startled into honesty. “He has to be in top form to catch me unawares.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” says Thor.

Quite frankly, Loki cannot recall the last time he was fucked like this or if he has ever been fucked like this. In the years of Thor’s bluster and ego, it was Loki who was less experienced, always less sure, ever trying to catch up and too proud to tell his brother all that he wanted. He’d kept so much hidden, and Thor had let him hide, and they were both of them in the wrong.

They’d loved each other well enough, to be sure, deep enough that it was both a fatal wound and the reason to survive it. But they hadn’t understood each other, not for a long, long time, and the tempered, thoughtful Thor waiting for him far away wouldn’t think to use Loki’s body in such a manner.

Loki loves him all the more for having changed, for Thor’s generosity of spirit that welcomed Loki, changed, back into his arms after the loss of their home. Still, though. Still. For a moment, he gets to have what he’d never imagined paired—the hard-won depth of his own experience, and Thor, raw
and reckless and \textit{cocksure}, molten heat over him and on him and in him.

“I intend to have you spend without the need for a hand on your cock,” Thor tells him then, somehow quickening his phenomenal pace. He’s coated in sweat, all those too-strong muscles shiny with exertion, gleaming; were Loki’s younger self to step into the room right then, Loki thinks that his heart would stop on the sight alone. If this Thor worships his Loki, the Loki on Vanaheim tips over into fanaticism where Thor is concerned. Loki knows he is not much removed from that state even now, but there’s certainly no reason to make Thor aware of it. His head is big enough already.

“A neat trick,” Loki hums, affecting a yawn, “and a boast. I don’t think you mastered that with me for quite some time.”

Thor gives a little grunt at this challenge, redoubles his efforts, which strictly going by the laws of physics shouldn’t be possible, though laws of physics and Thor are often at odds. By now the power coursing through Loki is beyond what he needs to make several more time-jumps, if the next one proves another error.

Every thrust from Thor is like being plunged into dazzling light, and though Loki does not drain him of his strength entirely as Thor had offered, he takes much more than first intended. A new plan is taking shape in his head, slow to form in the primordial force of their fucking, but Loki has long excelled at multitasking.

Then Thor’s hands tighten around Loki’s wrists, and his cock thrusts just so, and Loki gives him his victory—Loki unlocks for him, comes hard as Thor’s insistence demands, striping wet between them. It’s glorious, being electrified by this Thor, and Loki feels quite renewed; but as Thor gives a cry of triumph and follows after, burying his face in Loki’s neck and his cock as deep in Loki as he can, Loki knows that this is enough for them, that this is finished.

Too keenly then does he miss his own Thor, Thor who will not take his pleasure now if his eye is not on Loki’s eyes, his mouth on Loki’s mouth.

They lie tangled for a good while. Thor seems dazed, then rather stunned, by their event; and Loki is surprised to find he feels soft-hearted about it. He strokes Thor’s damp hair back from his brow, allows Thor to trail fingers across his skin. Thor is quieter in the aftermath, more introspective, far more attentive, in the way that Loki knows will one day be his true nature.

Thor’s fingers falter at the dip where Loki’s neck meets shoulder; he pulls them gingerly back, his eyes narrowing. “Someone has hurt you,” he says, low and fierce in the same breath. “I was distracted, and did not see this before. Who dared lay hands upon you?”

It’s all that Loki can do not to flinch and give himself away. He worked hard to heal the worst of the damage, but Thanos’ Gauntlet left a mark that would not fade for any healer’s skill. He sets his jaw, his determination, and says, “It’s nothing. I told you, brother, the future needs fixing, and that is my intention.”

“Tell me who the villain is, and I will hunt him across the Realms, and make for you a goblet of his skull,” says Thor with such over-the-top braggadocio that Loki must bite his lip not to laugh. Thor takes a breath, calming somewhat, then continues in a more persuasive cant: “If he does not yet live, take me to him in a time before he knows you. Loki. Give me his name. If I kill him now, he will never hurt you, and the future you seek to prevent will not come to pass.”

It’s tempting. It’s damnably fucking tempting. Only picture this wild insolent Thor popping in on Thanos and tearing him limb from limb. It’s fucking brilliant. It’s the first real smile Loki’s let turn his lips since he looked up at his brother’s side and saw Thanos’ ship blacking out the stars.
It’s dangerous. It’s too dangerous, too many unknowns, too many variables tossed like stones into
the relentless river of time. Thanos still might be more than a match for Thor. If Thor failed, then
what? If he succeeded, then what?

Too many incalculable repercussions. Too many ripples. Trying to cut off Thanos at the root is not
the answer. Something—someone—even worse could grow up in his place. And everything would
be altered; Loki would not be able to return to the time that he knows, to the life and love he has won
back, even if he is unworthy of both.

But that, too, is a tempting thought, and it takes every ounce of willpower to shove it away from him.
Why not just forewarn Thor? Why not tell him enough to head the worst of it off at the pass? Why
not tell him everything? I was born a Jötunn, they never told us, they hid it from us, but I’m still your
brother and I’m incapable of not loving you though I’ll try, Thor, I will—it won’t be enough to stop
us in the end—but be wary of me, I’m bound to go the wrong way, pull me back before I let myself
fall, brother, please—

For too long Loki is fraught with possibility: imagine Thor knowing of Loki’s capacity for betrayal
in advance, Thor growing wiser more quickly, Thor persuading his Loki that there is no reason to
resent him, that nothing will ever divide them.

Imagine Thor crowned king without incident, Loki bright-eyed and happy as it happens. Loki
serving as his indispensable right arm, the power behind the throne that Thor shares with him gladly.
See, there, how Frigga and Odin are smiling at them, how proud they are, how alive. Thor is never
cast to Earth and Loki never falls and Hela never comes and Asgard thrives, Asgard is whole and a
shining beacon in the sky—

“You cannot tell me,” says Thor slowly. Sadly. His eyes, both sea-glass blue, are reading Loki’s
frozen face. “It would change too much.”

Loki nods. Too much. Everything. Even could he somehow guarantee perfect success in vanishing
the wrongs of their past, what would be lost is the Thor who awaits him. Thor, with laugh lines and
shadows of grief around his eyes, Thor who lost an eye so that he might see. Thor worn down by
time but refined by it, honed into a man now more brave than brash, kind where he was impatient,
Thor who knew all that Loki was and loved him still—who loved him better—

“I have to go back to him,” Loki says. “All that matters is that he is there now, and it is within my
power to keep him there, and change what happened.” He leans over to press a kiss to Thor’s
forehead. “And you have your Loki, and your news for him. I envy you the coming days. They were
amongst the best of our lives.”

Thor looks as though he has a good mind to argue further, but at the last, he also nods. “If you are
the Loki who awaits me,” says Thor, “I must let you go, for I want nothing more than to meet you
again.”

Loki is struck silent. At last he pulls a sideways smile: a jest, a joke, nothing serious to see here. It is
his best and worst defense. “Some advice. If you thought to flatter me, best do it before we fall into
bed, not after. It improves the mood exponentially.”

Thor does not smile. “I mean it,” he says. “Do not mistake me. I love my brother with all that I am.
But you—you are something else. Loki is—”

“A bit of a prat,” Loki drawls, indulging in a full-bodied stretch. “Spoiled, uptight, a know-it-all, too
proud by far. Short-tempered. Hedonistic. Somewhat oily. Given to fits of pique—”
“—complicated,” finished Thor diplomatically, refusing, for once, to rise to the bait. “But he is also brilliant, and courageous, and more perceptive than anyone I know. Uncompromising, yet giving. The greatest sorcerer of our age, one day, Mother says. He’s extraordinary. Graceful and strong and eloquent. He sees what I cannot see, speaks the words that never come to me. Makes me ache with laughter and far more, for he is so lovely that I—”

“Flattery before bed, Thor, not after,” Loki reminds, cutting in gently but firmly, speaking to mask the riot in his heart.

Thor gets the message, swallows the rest of it. “I’ll remember.”

Another puzzle long unsolved: he is instantly this age again, for an instant, wondering why Thor could possibly be drawn to him. Full of doubt and dismay at the prospect, terrified that Thor would fast realize his error in choosing Loki. Anyone would want Thor—everyone did want Thor—but Loki, second-best, with his peculiar ways and the haughty persona he drew around him like armor, how was it that Thor had come to love him? Surely Thor was mistaken, and would soon recognize his mistake and leave Loki behind.

If only they’d been able to speak such truths to one another from the start. But Loki knows himself, knows how he would scoff and snort to hear Thor’s catalogue of praise at this point in time. He does not tell Thor to repeat it to his younger self.

Instead, he lets himself relax into the warmth of Thor’s conviction; and he and Thor speak through how it will happen once more. Thor’s Loki will at least be more than ready to hear his brother’s declaration of love. Loki knows how it goes from there.

* * *

Now

* * *

They are drowsing in their bed on the_statesman_ when Loki feels magic close at hand, the wards he weaves to alert him crying out all at once. The hair on the back of his neck stands up, and he tenses in Thor’s arms, which prompts a sleepy query.

“Get up,” Loki hisses. “There’s something—”

Then Thor is instantly awake and on his feet and on guard; the gold-bronze patch to mask the ruin of his eye is still in place, after Loki’s assurance that it suited him. Loki throws an illusioned approximation of clothes on them, throws the sword beside the bed into Thor’s ready grasp.

For his part, he rigs up a net of magic, poised to let it fly the instant the intruder shows themself. Together, he thinks, as he and Thor trade looks of grim readiness, they are a match for anything.

The air contracts, then explosively expands, and Loki shields his eyes from a flash of light that feels too much like Thor’s lightning. Thor, too, seems to recognize it, though he steps forward, not back, and Loki wants to shout at him to stay where he is.

A man is bent over, breathing hard, and as he straightens the defensive spells die on Loki’s tongue. He’s facing the strangest sight he’s seen in a lifetime of strange sights—a doppelgänger of himself,
near-identical, save that the other’s leathers are blackened with soot and ashes, and his hair is in unfortunate disarray. Most of the stains on the outfit were made by blood.

“What the fuck is this,” says Loki.

It’s like looking death, his death, in the face, and he raises his hands once more, readies spells of greater incapacitation. Then he sees that Thor, unaccountably, has lowered his weapon and is staring at the figure with an inscrutable expression.

“Hello again,” says Thor. “It’s been a thousand years.”

A wry smile from the other, and he says in Loki’s voice, “I can still feel it.”

Then Thor, the fool, is smiling also, and he throws down his sword. “I was wondering when I would see you. When my brother took to wearing your suit I knew it would be soon. I thought perhaps you were trying to prevent Ragnarok when I met you, but we have come through it.”

The false Loki shakes his head. “Ragnarok could not be reversed,” he says. “There were far too many elements in play to change that story. I am sorry.”

“What the fuck,” says Loki.

Neither of them are looking at him. Thor paces closer, until he’s near enough to touch the thing masquerading in Loki’s shape—which—which he fucking does. He lifts a hand and cradles the man’s cheek, and when he does that the Not-Loki closes his eyes and leans into the caress. It’s a touching moment to observe, and it feels like Loki has lost his grip on reality as he watches it happen.

“We haven’t much time,” Not-Loki says to Thor. “And time is resisting my meddling. The jump here was far more difficult than I’d warranted. I don’t think I’ll be able to do it again if this fails.”

“Then we will not let it fail,” says Thor.

All at once Not-Loki throws himself upon Thor, wrapping his arms around Thor’s neck, and Loki, who has been waiting for the creature to attack, curses and has both knives in his hands in the next breath, will throw them and—

—and they’re kissing, deep and passionate and heartfelt, Thor’s hands tangling in Not-Loki’s hair as they cling together.

Loki stares at them, now definitely losing his mind, some detached part of it observing how sublime they look, how desperately in love. It’s like staring at a mirror reflection of himself and Thor he never expected to see, nor would he have known that they looked like that together without the benefit of being removed from the situation entirely.

“Thor,” Loki tries when they break apart, but his brother is resting his forehead against Not-Loki’s, staring into his eyes, while Not-Loki gazes back in rapturous adoration.

“I can’t believe you knew, all these years,” Not-Loki says. “You kept our secret. Through it all—through everything—you’ve known that one day we would come to this. Even when I tried to kill you, even when I fell, even when I seemed to be dead, you knew we were not finished.”

“You told me how we would love in the future,” says Thor. “So I waited for the future to arrive.”

“Okay,” says Loki, stamping his foot to make them acknowledge that he still exists, which he has
begun to doubt. “Okay, me. Do you want to enlighten us even a smidgen?”

Not-Loki spares him a glance. The reaction Loki gets is halfway between exasperation and impatience. It’s rather withering, really. Does he usually look so sour-faced as that? “I’m you, one point seven hours from now. One point six. We don’t have time for this.”

“Right,” says Loki, annoyed at the way Thor’s hand is curved just so at the small of the other’s back. “Give me one reason why I should believe a word you say, imposter.”

“Thanos,” snaps Not-Loki, succinct.

Loki shuts up.

“What’s a Thanos?” from Thor.

“Someone who need not worry you,” Not-Loki assures him. He kisses Thor again, distracted by his proximity, as though he cannot help himself, and against Thor he is all softness. But when he turns back to look at Loki, his expression—his uncanny, too-familiar expression—is hard and unyielding. “Give me the Tesseract.”

“I’m sure that I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Loki tries, nervous now.

If this is really him, then of course he hears the lie; if it is really Thanos they are to encounter in an hour, then it is Loki’s greatest terror bearing down upon him. It can only mean total catastrophe if this copy of him has flung himself into time; he must know, as Loki knows, that there is no way back out of it.

“The Tesseract was lost with Asgard,” Thor tells Not—all right—Maybe-Loki. He tries to deliver the news gently, and both Lokis flinch at their deceit.

“That is not the case,” Maybe-Loki says, glaring at Loki as though he hadn’t done the exact same thing. “He has it hidden in an extra-dimensional pocket. He took it from Father’s vault.”

Thor’s mouth drops open in surprise, then a confusion that threatens to turn fast into anger.

“Oh, are we saying Father now, one point five point five hours in the future,” Loki sneers at the other.

“We are,” Maybe-Loki says, maddeningly unruffled. He looks up at Thor, takes his face into his hands before Thor can work himself up into outrage. “Brother, listen to me. It was wrong not to tell you, but we thought only to keep it safe. There is no guarantee it would have been destroyed on Asgard—it is older than Asgard—and we knew it must not fall into the wrong hands. Thor, are you listening? It must not. That is why I’m here.”

So Thanos got his claws on the Stone after all, despite Loki’s best efforts. He cannot imagine what could have possibly moved him to offer it up; he quite happily would have died first than see Thanos succeed in constructing his Gauntlet. That was his contingency plan: die, and have the Tesseract remain undiscovered forever. It would be a sort of poetic justice, considering the plans he once had for it.

Which means it wasn’t his own life that was threatened. Which means Thanos does something to Thor, that Thanos dared touch Thor, vile purple hands on his brother—

Maybe-Loki—okay, okay, he’ll acknowledge that it’s him, no other monster would know about their secret pocket in space—Future-Loki watches him work through it, and he gives Loki a small, short
”The Tesseract,” Future-Loki says again, and this time Loki produces it without another word.

“Loki,” Thor sighs, but at least he no longer looks mad about it. What a nice little speech the Future-Loki had prepared. Loki supposes it’s close enough to the truth of the matter: they did take it to keep the Stone from Thanos, and also—they needn’t tell Thor—because it was endlessly fascinating and gorgeously full of potential that demanded further study. They could not just leave an Infinity Stone locked away in a dark vault. They are not their father.

Future-Loki steps away from Thor and plucks the Tesseract from Loki’s grasp. “What now?” Loki asks him.

Now that he’s accepted this visitor is a real thing that is happening, his suspicion fades in the bizarre sympathy of gazing upon himself. It’s a prospect as fascinating as the Stone. Imagine him, taking the heroic role—playing Thor’s part, sacrificing all. But as he watches the other turn back to Thor, sees how he looks at Thor, Loki can see—he understands at once—that it is a sacrifice sought for one reason only.

“I’m going to destroy it,” Future-Loki says steadily. “If it is gone, Thanos need not seek this ship, and he will never be able to assemble the Gauntlet. Even if he still comes, events will play out differently now. My future cannot be your own.”

“You’re not strong enough to destroy it,” Loki says. It’s a limitation he’s all too aware of. They’re good, but they’re not that good.

Future-Loki is done interacting with him now. He stands with the Tesseract in one hand and the other holding Thor’s; he brings Thor’s palm to his cheek and presses against it, an echo of how Thor had greeted him mere minutes ago. “Alone, perhaps not,” he says, mostly to Thor. “But as it happens I have a great deal of Thor’s power at my disposal as well. I borrowed it a long time ago.”

“Thanos is the name you would not give me,” Thor says, so soft that Loki must lean in to hear him—lean in and try not to feel like an interloper between his hour-older self and his brother.

“It is for the better that I did not,” Future-Loki answers. “For I made it back where I most wanted to be.”

“I promised you a goblet of his skull,” says Thor, sounding dashed with regret.

“And, once more, the fuck,” says Loki. “We were doing so well being on the same page there for roughly twelve seconds.”

They’re ignoring him, lost in misty-eyed gazes. “Perhaps one day, my love,” Future-Loki murmurs. “Not today.”

Thor looks as though he is being torn apart between them before he tilts in to kiss the Future-Loki. It’s a much softer kind of kiss than the first, lingering and sweet, and Loki wants one also; but he makes himself stand silent.

Because Thor is saying, “I must let you go, again,” but he makes it a kind of a question—wanting to hear another answer provided, though he knows that he will not.

“Would you wish to keep us both?” Future-Loki asks, indulges in the arch suggestion, and when Thor’s cheeks pink Loki laughs along with his other self—that is precisely what Thor wishes. “I would stay if I could, brother. But I am staying. In a manner of speaking.” With a bitten-off sound he
slips from Thor’s hold.

Loki can feel a sudden surge of magic in the air, frighteningly potent—his magic, he knows now, coupled with Thor’s. The Future-Loki’s hand on the Tesseract begins to glow, and sweat breaks out on his brow; undoing an Infinity Stone, if it can indeed be done, will be the most daunting task of their lives.

And as soon as it is done—if it can be done—this other Loki will be undone along with it, this Loki come from a future that will no longer occur. Really, it’s admirable. Loki marvels that this is himself.

The effort is already trying. The Future-Loki’s hands are trembling. But both of them can feel the hairline cracks that begin to grow. Loki watches him pour more energy in to exploit them, until like limitless water pressed against a dam the shell of the Tesseract shatters in a rain of sparks. Staggering, heaving air into his lungs, Future-Loki now holds in his palm the naked Space Stone. His wan face, veins stark against the skin, is reflected in its iridescent light.

“She help you,” Thor says, offering his hand again; but the other wheels back—stumbles over behind Loki, as though to keep him like a shield from the sight of Thor.

Loki understands: difficult enough to do this, but nigh on intolerable with their brother so near, the temptation to go to him like a magnet ever seeking its opposite.

Loki wants to say to him: stay, we’ll use the Stone to get far away from here, we’ll use it to defeat Thanos if he comes, we can finish him off together. We can remain with Thor together. I’ve never known anyone like me. But he presses his lips and says nothing. If the future that this Loki has lived is so dire that only the elimination of an Infinity Stone will suffice, there is nothing that Loki can—or should—say to dissuade him.

“You have done your part already, Thor,” Future-Loki says, strained, from over Loki’s shoulder. He is staring fixedly at the Stone and not at their brother. “When I am gone, you can tell him—me—tell me what transpired between us in the past. There is no need for secrecy anymore.”

Loki spins to face him. “Show me. We need not lose anything that you have learned.”

Future-Loki shakes his head. The Space Stone wobbles in his hand, then vibrates promisingly. Terrifyingly. “What happened to this ship an hour from now is not something I would have you carry,” he says. Sweat is running down his face in rivulets too much like tears. “I am glad to erase it from us. And memories of the past are imperfect; I could not give it all over. Some of them are mine alone, though some, I suppose, should be yours also. Yes. There is something you should see—”

His hand, badly shaking, lifts toward Loki, and Loki, unmoving, unafraid now, nods. The other presses his palm to Loki’s forehead; a surge of heat and light nearly forces Loki to his knees. So much raw power travels the circuit of Future-Loki’s body that the memory is fair blasted through Loki’s skull, and he sees—

“Loki is complicated,” a fresh-faced, shiny-limbed Thor is telling his other self, as they lie with limbs intertwined, quite au naturel. “But he is also brilliant, and courageous, and more perceptive than anyone I know. Uncompromising, yet giving. The greatest sorcerer of our age, one day, Mother says. He’s extraordinary. Graceful and strong and eloquent. He sees what I cannot see, speaks the words that never come to me. Makes me ache with laughter and far more, for he is so lovely that I—”

Loki is thrust from the view as fast as he was plunged into it, and he glances between the Future-Loki and his brother, understanding and not, jolted to his core by the scene. Thor’s words—those
words of praise from a youthful Thor’s mouth—rock him back on his feet. He’d long wondered, he’d always wondered, what could possibly have led Thor to choose him, wondered when Thor would realize his mistake in loving him and leave him behind.

“That was the most important part of it, where we’re concerned,” Future-Loki tells him. “That is all you need to see. What I discovered was this: there is no past nor future to prefer save this one. There is no better place for us than to be with him here.” He cannot look at Thor, and Loki cannot look away from his own face, twisted with the anguish of too much magic, soothed only by memory. “Take care of him, Loki Odinson, as I would have.”

“Thank you,” says Loki, only half-jarred to his core by this naming. Thanks seems insufficient. It is. So he gives what he knows the other needs, for there is little time left. The Stone is rocking violently in Future-Loki’s hands, on the dagger’s edge of a precipice with both of them about to go over. The battle is epic in scope to Loki’s sight and all but invisible to their brother, and so: “Thor. Come here.”

Thor, who had been wavering, unsure if his presence would help or hurt after the Future-Loki fled from him, rushes forward.

Loki steps aside, and Thor takes his place, and the Loki struggling with infinity gives a sob, ecstatic and agonized, to find Thor in his line of sight again.

He reaches one-handed for Thor, and Thor tries to reach him; but he is alight now, lit up with a lightning even Thor cannot breach. “You are so beautiful here,” the Future-Loki says. His voice is cracked, a whisper electric. “Every year, all the more beautiful.”

Thor’s eye is wet, but his mouth twitches as though it is a joke between them. “I thought you said you would deny ever saying that.”

“I lied,” says Future-Loki.

“I couldn’t tell,” says Thor. “I can only tell sometimes.”

The Stone shows fractures fine as spiderwebs, then deeper gulls. The Future-Loki is nearly too radiant to gaze upon. “Do not mourn me, Thor. I am still standing next to you. Brother, know that I will always—”

Loki is blown back hard against the wall by the force of the Stone’s eruption. He feels the heavy impact of Thor thudding into the ground nearby. Every chord along the magical spectrum is in roaring chorus around him, rife with the reverberations of the Stone’s unmaking.

All at once it is silent, and he and Thor are alone in their cabin on the Statesman.

They lie where they land for a long time. Then Thor crawls over to him and takes Loki into his arms. By mutual wordless agreement they wait out the next hour, then the next, and the one after that. Outside the viewport the sky remains an unbroken field of stars.

* * *

“The thing about time-travel,” Loki tells his rapt table-mates, “is that you can really only go backwards. The future isn’t written yet. It doesn’t exist. The past is still there, and it can be manipulated; but once you commit to doing so, you are leaving the present you know behind. It will
now inevitably be altered by whatever you do, and you cannot hope to regain it.”

He and Thor are sharing a sequestered table and a round of ale in the Statesman’s mess hall (the Grandmaster’s neon sign designating it ‘Party Time Room #3’ was scrapped) with their trusted companions. The ship, on high alert for days spent speeding from their point in space toward Earth, is at last slowed for a thorough maintenance check.

The drinks seem necessary, after sleepless nights working at full tilt; they are not off their guard, but there has been no sign or signal of any peril since the Tesseract was taken out of the equation. Loki has begun to cautiously hope it will remain that way, at least for another week or so before the next threat to the galaxy reveals itself.

Now, their friends are overdue a more detailed explanation for why Thor and Loki raised the alarm they did. Thor asks him to explain, and Loki has never passed on an opportunity to spin a story.

He tells a version of what happened—enough truth that there are no lies involved—but he selectively edits, crafts something spare: A Loki from the future got assistance from Thor in the past and fended off disaster in their present. The end.

Everyone decides another round of beer is called for after that.

“I’m going to order more drills for the warriors,” says the Valkyrie, frowning at her glass. “We may have side-stepped one fate, but that doesn’t mean the danger’s over.”

“Hulk ready,” the Hulk opines. “No drills.”

“Fine, then, you can help with the training,” says Brunnhilde. “We’ll begin at dawn.”

This gets a big green fist pounded on the table. Their pint-glasses jump. “Hulk sleep in.”

“Additional drills are a wise measure,” says Thor, smoothly interjecting. He’s going to make for a magnificent king. “You and I can work out the scheduling later, Brunnhilde.”

She looks somewhat mollified, then inclines her head toward Loki. “What I don’t get is why this other Loki took the long way around. Why not just surprise Thanos when he’s in the bath and cut off his head?”

“That’s what I said,” says Thor.

“Too many unknowable outcomes to account for,” Loki explains. “Best to return to what he knew—to what he believed he could do here.”

“And he did not tell you what fate it was we must escape?” asks Heimdall, his eyes that see too much turned on Loki full force.

Loki shakes his head. Takes a drink. “No,” he says. “But it was horrific enough to warrant his decision to eliminate it, and his own timeline, in the process.”

There’s no way that even Heimdall can be aware of the silent dialogue he’d held with his other self, the knowledge gained that Thor was in the balance, the bruising at the Future-Loki’s neck both he and Thor had noticed. Loki cannot guess with certainty all that occurred, but he can sketch out enough in theory not to want to fill in too many of the blanks. It is also his intent to never apprise Thor of what he has speculated. The Loki of their averted future seemed keen that Thor never know.

Thanos slaughtered by halves. If he’d taken the ship that meant half or more of the souls on board
ship were murdered in cold blood. Then Thanos did something to Thor, something so awful that
Loki gave over the Tesseract to stop it, and then, at some point, the Gauntlet was wrapped around
Loki’s neck—

Yes, he more than understands why his counterpart had chosen to dive through time, though there
would be no resurfacing if he succeeded.

“Hey, man, I think it’s really nice what that guy did,” Korg puts in. “Don’t like the idea of time-
travel myself. I tend to get motion sickness on long trips.”

“I, too, think that it was nice,” agrees Thor.

But he isn’t looking at Loki. There’s a faraway look in his eye, and though his hand rests on Loki’s
thigh under the table, Loki feels a swoop of doubt in his belly.

Things have been moving so fast they haven’t been able to address what happened, not really, but
the ship’s lull means some much-needed downtime for them as well. Normally Loki would be
looking forward to nothing more, yet as they leave their friends behind after a final round, each
passing second seems to thud home with greater anxiety and dread.

It’s no better when they’re together in the cabin with the door sealed shut behind them. Thor says
little—he keeps staring at nothing—and so Loki is hardly going to be the one to chatter on one-sided.

As they undress for bed, part of Loki insists that he’s wrong in his assumptions, and that any moment
now Thor will turn and reach for him and take him with the same enthusiasm he always does. But
Thor does not, and that insistent voice shuts up, cowed, afraid.

Instead they lie side by side unspeaking. It’s the most idle they’ve ever been in bed, and Loki has the
sheet drawn up to his neck in a two-fisted clutch. His fingernails dig into his palm even through the
fabric.

At last it is unbearable. He must speak, and be damned, because he cannot endure this. It is better to
have it said so that Thor can know that Loki knows.

“You wish to be with him,” Loki says into the suffocating dark. “You wish that I were him. I
understand, Thor. You needn’t pretend.”

The mattress dips as Thor turns on his side to face him. “What?”

“I said I understand,” Loki repeats. His teeth are grit. It’s most wretched because he does understand.
“He was the superior version. Heroic, and self-sacrificing, and you shared a visit with him in the past
that was obviously extremely impactful. I would have switched places if I could have, you know. I
thought about it. If it were possible I would have. I saw how you looked at him. I know that I—”

“Loki,” Thor interrupts, “brother, stop this. I’m sorry if I have seemed brooding, but you are wrong
in what you say.”

“Hmph,” says Loki to that. “Unlikely.”

Thor sits up in bed. The sheet slides down his bare torso in a way that is not at all enticing. At all. He
scratches his head, takes a breath and lets it out, then does that again, as though unsure how to start.
“You are him, and he you, in every way that matters,” Thor says. “He was you a mere hour into the
future. All that he did, you would have done. You did do. I want to be with you, and you are him.”

“Well, that just about clears everything up,” says Loki.
Thor has a grip on his upper arm now and is pulling Loki to him. Loki is too tired to resist. So he sits staring at Thor with his arms folded across his chest in a posture that feels petty and defensive but, fuck, he’s much too exposed. Thor has seen every part of him, has seen multiple copies of every part of him.

“You say that you would have switched places to let him remain with me, and still you claim that you are somehow unworthy of his actions,” Thor says. “Loki, can you hear yourself? He was clear that what he experienced was something he did not want either of us to have to live with, even in memory. I think he would have said that you are the better version of you, for never having met that future.”

Loki rubs his eye with a knuckle as he thinks about this. “But in the past,” he points out, frowning. “He—he got to love you first. I will never have that. What you shared with him then is not ours.”

“That is true, somewhat,” Thor allows. “But you must understand how it was for me at the time. That Loki appeared like—like a vision. Like a ghost. I often wondered if he was a dream, or an illusion, or a meddling God, telling me all my dearest wishes could come true. His advice was what I was desperate to hear, and his visitation was—pleasurable. But it only served two purposes for me: to let me know it was safe to love you—you—then, and to let me know that whatever befell us, I would love you again. To love you better, as he promised. Here. Like this.”

“But—”

“When I saw him manifest here, I was relieved, for I have long dreaded his tidings, and wished at last to hear them,” Thor says. “It was good to have it confirmed that I had not imagined him in the past, created him of my own arrogance. And it brings me joy to see you in any form. Certainly I loved him, as I love you, and it fair ripped my heart out to watch him undo himself for our sakes. I offered what comfort I could while he was with us.”

Loki sits with this new knowledge, puzzling through the labyrinth of it. Then Thor raises his gaze, fixes his eye on Loki unblinking.

Thor says, “But you are my Loki. He had another Thor, somewhere else in the future, who was also unmade by what he did; and though I am not that Thor, I can tell you, if he was lacking his brother, he was glad as he came undone.”

That’s enough. Loki isn’t—isn’t a monster, and he’s hardly even ashamed of the half-sob of relief that escapes him when he flings himself against Thor. Thor’s arms circle him as though they needn’t be made to let go again, unbendable as a mountain. For a moment they simply hold on, and Loki rests his head on the curve of Thor’s shoulder and closes his eyes and tries to breathe all of Thor in.

At length Loki recalls the last few strained days. His head comes up, and his eyes narrow. “You haven’t touched me, or really looked at me, since it happened.”

“Ah.” Thor releases him—somewhat—he keeps hold of both of Loki’s hands. He has the grace to sound chagrined. “I admit I have been much distracted by one part of it, and distraught that I’ll not be able to discover the answer. It has consumed me.”

Loki raises his eyebrows. “And whatever might that be, brother?”

“While he was with us—you—he—that Loki called Odin our father, and called you Odinson,” Thor says, squeezing Loki’s hands as he says so, so earnest and so serious now that Loki must do all that he can to keep his face neutral. Dear, predictable Thor—he might have known his brother would be hung up on such details. They fascinated Loki also, to be honest, though he has a good deal more
insight into the matter than Thor does. “What I cannot work out is what could have transpired, in so little time, to provoke such a change of heart. I did not know how best to ask you.”

Loki thinks on it for a long while. He exhales to shift the dark hair that has fallen over his eyes. To answer or deflect? Days ago he would have deflected. But he is not the same person that he was then. They are in the future.

“Easy enough to answer,” he says to Thor. “First, there was no change of heart. He was stating what I lost and recovered, that our family is mine and always will be. As for the name itself, I imagine that was intended for you.”

“For me?” By the stillness in his chest, Thor’s breath has gone shallow.

“Yes,” says Loki, before he can go back. “He knew, as I know, that we keep your name—not our father’s—as though it were our own. He was reminding me of that, and informing you. It must’ve been part of what happened to him, that he felt the need to let that little secret out into the world.”

“Little secret,” echoes Thor. He looks as though he’s taken a blow to the head from the pommel of Heimdall’s sword.

“Not anymore, I suppose.” Thor can’t tell the way that Loki’s heart is beating, can he? Surely he cannot hear the chaotic noise that it is making, frenetic pulse thrumming past Loki’s ear. Thor is just sitting there, gazing at him, single eye unblinking, golden eyepatch gleaming. “Anyway,” Loki starts. This was a mistake.

All of a sudden he is upended, flat on his back with Thor straddling him and his wrists pinned immobile to the bed. “I was once told I’d need to be in top form to catch you like this,” Thor says, right before he’s kissing Loki hard enough to change the temperature around them as the air frissons with electricity.

Thor is a wonderfully unyielding weight above him. Loki only struggles enough to test the bonds he never intends to escape, and then, satisfied that he is caught, cants his head and grins. “Full marks.”

“Loki Odinson,” says Thor. “My Loki. I love only you, and I intend to spend what days are given to me showing you just how much.”

“As I love you,” Loki says. His smile widens as he pulls Thor down into another kiss using his legs for leverage. It’s a sneaky maneuver perfected a while ago—he cannot remember when.

Perhaps it does not matter when, exactly, things come about; or why; or how; perhaps the most important element is where they are headed:

“Well, brother,” says Loki after they come up for air. The smallest sliver of breath permitted divides their mouths. There is nothing left between them but skin, soon to be merged as they were the first time, the thousandth time—as they will, with a little luck, find themselves ten thousand times more. “What shall we do next?”

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