Walked in These Quiet Hazes
by ratsats

Summary

Loki has spent five years avoiding death. He was successful. Alive once again, if also a lot lost, he seeks out his brother. Thor has issues of his own.

Takes place after the final battle against Thanos in Endgame. This fic is now complete!
Loki spots his brother among the debris in the desolate battlefield and a warmth settles in his chest, as if it has been missing in there for five years.

Along with, of course, the ever-unavoidable anxiousness that prickles his entire body, in these years, every time he's faced with the head of golden hair and piercing eyes (eye? didn't he only have one eye?), yet somehow, too, always soft like spring waters.

More so than ever, right now. Thor stands a little away from a person on the ground – is that .. Stark? - leaning with their back against some large break of building. More people are gathering around him. A woman is speaking to him and Loki thinks he might have seen that strawberry blonde hair before. A kid is crying, someone holding him. A lot of people are crying and Loki decides that he probably couldn't have chosen a worse time than now to appear.

But then, it's not as if there's a lot of choice involved with escaping from the claws of Death herself as to the exact time and place of the return.

He stays back, yet.

Thor isn't crying, drawing back further as the others are closing in. That irritating officer of theirs, the star-spangled one with an admittedly appealing backside, walks up to Thor's side, his eyes lost and looking all alone in the world despite the people everywhere around him. Thor doesn't look at him. His eyes are fixed on his friend on the ground – by now dead friend, it seems likely to be. He's wearing a slight frown.

The Captain surpasses him, putting a hand on someone's shoulder further ahead.

Abruptly Loki's brother turns his back to the scene, walking away in the opposite direction. Still not crying, Loki notes, following him from the shadows and safe in the distance. Only that frown. It must be difficult, too – they ought to be celebrating, having defeated Thanos finally (they defeated Thanos) yet they must have lost many more than a single man. Evermore the paradox of war.

Thor walks with steady steps. Knowing his brother Loki doesn't think he has any specific destination in mind. A new axe (which is beautiful if admittedly very large) hangs limp in his hand. His back is straight, chin held high but gaze somewhere else. It is odd to see him like this, beside himself as Loki has never seen him before, as if many more than five mere years have passed. But then, of course, that was all rather to be expected.
The changes in his appearance, Loki can't deny - it's actually kind of a look. He is loathe to admit it but though that mop of hair is for sure frustratingly neglected, it's.. well, his brother is an even more intimidating figure than usual. Not that he especially was lacking in that department but here they are.

Loki looks back at the gathering of people over his shoulder. He's still a good thirty-five feet away from Thor himself, hidden partly by magic shrouding him and partly by just the fortunate effect of lingering debris and dust in the air - it isn't hard to not be noticed. The others are further yet and Loki, deeming now a good a time as ever, speeds up his pacing. He nears the figure from behind and diagonally to the right, dropping any residue of shrouding magic.

His tongue feels heavy but he wills it to move. There's nothing to be scared of.

Maybe twenty-five feet away and slowing down his step, he calls out. “Thor,” he goes for but his voice cracks and is but a croak from disuse, barely audible. He grimaces, clearing his throat. That thing still isn't working properly. Figures, since he only just got an actual, physical body back. He wonders if the bruising is as fresh as the injury feels because he hasn’t had the chance to look in a mirror yet - not that he particularly cares for that. But he imagines it doesn't look especially inviting.

“Thor,” he calls again, voice carrying a little louder this time.

His brother stops, shoulders drawing tense. He doesn't turn and Loki pauses his movement, waiting.

Then Thor begins walking again.

“Thor,” Loki calls again and can hear the slight waver in his own voice. He walks faster, a good twenty feet out to Thor's right side to make himself visible in the peripheral vision (which eye was lost again? Is the new one working or is it just for show?) if Thor won't turn, himself.

Thor stops walking again and so does Loki, irritated with his own inability to just go to his brother already. But he can't help it – something in him is trembling like a damn child afraid in the night. He can feel his knees shaking and his heart beating in his ears as if he's scared, as if he would have to fear his own brother or something as trivial as this, announcing that he's back - that's a good thing, isn't it, it's good and well and Thor will be glad to see him. So Loki doesn't know why this is making him so damn anxious.

Thor still isn't turning to him and Loki sighs. He can hear the shiver in the release of air. He crosses his arms because his legs won't budge, for some reason.

His tongue feels suddenly too heavy to form any words at all and even the set of irritation in his face feels like it's trembling. Like his entire person, everything he thought was stable inside and outside of him is crumbling just from his brother's presence.

The warmth is still there, however. He clings on to it like to a lantern in the dead of night when all he really wants to do is run.

Thor finally turns to him. He's still frowning - that small, unreadable crease.

Loki's face feels like it shatters under his gaze and horrified, he thinks he might cry right then and there just by Thor looking at him. He can feel it threatening to burst from behind his features and for a terrible second he's absolutely sure he won't be able to hold it back. Just how embarrassing would that be. Then he gets it under control, setting his mouth in a thin line, jaw tight. If he says anything now it will break.

Thor only blinks at him. He cocks his head a little, staying where he is. It's unbearable quiet.
Loki almost wishes someone would turn from the gathering a little while away and notice them. Although they are likely too far by now for anyone to be able to make out that this is *Loki*, remember? New York? War-criminal, hated by all on Earth?

He finds himself wishing desperately for punishment, renunciation, for any old grudge to be enforced, *anything* but this quiet. He thinks he just might run, anyway.

But his feet are locked. His knees are shaking and he's afraid Thor can see it, by now. He tries to get it under control and he can't. He swallows, carefully pressed expression breaking off at the edges, desperate to keep it glued together on his face.

Then Thor takes in an abrupt breath, eyes flashing with something and turning away from Loki again. He is hit by fear like a punch to the stomach that Thor will simply start walking again. He has seen him, he has recognized that Loki is alive and here, he's *here*, and he doesn't care. He's going to leave Loki in this dusty field of death to find his own way because that is what Loki has brought onto himself, Thor doesn't care anymore, stopped doing so a long time ago, in fact. The last bridge to home burned - and it's all Loki's own fault. There's no doubt about *that*, at least.

It feels like being trapped on a sinking ship, cold waters flooding in from everywhere to the last haven in an endless and dark, unkind ocean - alongside a sharp, discordant spike of red-hot flaring anger.

But then Thor turns to him again, taking one, hesitant step closer. Eighteen feet. Thor opens his mouth but doesn't say anything.

His expression is crumbling, too, Loki realizes – just a lot slower than his own chaotic indecisiveness of a face.

Thor glances away, then back at Loki, eyes swimming a little more than moments before, frown a little less confused and a little closer to something Loki isn't sure he can name and also isn't sure he wants to be faced with like this.

“Thor,” he says again and it comes out as very quiet when he meant for it to be demanding. Thor twitches.

And then he begins to walk forward. Loki freezes in place, every survival instinct in his body screaming to run the other way but his heart *longing*. For warmth, for home, for something that isn’t just lonely and dark and cold and hazy. Some kind of belonging. He stands still, shoulders tense. Thor comes closer yet.

And then suddenly he's only a few steps away, and then right in front of him, and Loki feels like he's been frozen solid expect - he always is frozen solid underneath this skin he wears, isn't he?

Thor reaches a hand forward, tentative as if he's not sure whether it will meet anything. With good reason, too. Then his knuckles brush against a cheek.

He manages to catch Loki's gaze with his own despite Loki's seeking everywhere but onto his brother's face.

The trap has sprung, the cage is locked, Loki is caught and now he can't run. He can't move at all.

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Thor says, “brother,” with that hoarse rumble and soft disbelief and the shaking in the knees grows so bad Loki thinks he's going to just collapse right then and there.

He doesn't. Instead, he nods *(moving)* and somehow manages to plaster on a smirk that feels too
easy, so casual he thinks it might be the biggest lie he's ever told yet at the same time maybe the most honest he's ever been. He's not too sure. He reaches a cold hand up to his own cheek, clasp it on top of his brother's.

They stand like that for too long. Loki didn't know how he managed the smirk in the first place, and so he's not quite sure how he's supposed to wipe it back off – it stays put, way out of place and cracking at the edges just as the rest of him. He's afraid the fractures are bleeding into his eyes now, too. Thor's frown grows worried.

He glances at Loki's knees with a raised eyebrow, and surely he's been caught now, before lifting his other hand to his shoulder, dropping it there with a heavy thud. Loki can feel himself buckle a little under the weight before straightening again. It's surprisingly grounding. He finds that the smirk has disappeared while he was focused on the weight of Thor's hand and he's not sure he particularly wants to examine what has taken its place, instead.

“Maybe you should sit down,” Thor suggests and Loki finds himself nodding, allowing being led by his older brother's hands to a piece of cliff-jut a few steps away. He sits down on it, gingerly, taking careful movements with his legs so they won't suddenly betray him and give out to leave him sprawling in the dust. Thor is on his knees in front of him, his armor touching against Loki's shins and still looking at his face with those eyes, too intense. He keeps a grounding hand on Loki's right knee.

Loki doesn't understand what this is supposed to be about and fumes inwardly as his body betrays him outwardly. He is the one coming back - Thor was the one who was left behind to deal with Thanos, the end of the world and the loss of his people. He's the one whose knees should be shaking and yet, it is Loki having to sit down like some wimp, trembling out of his own skin and unable to pull himself together to anything even resembling coherent. Unable to manage stringing even a single word to speak aloud, he's the one with wet cheeks and wetter eyes and he doesn't understand.

This isn't even about him, nothing is wrong. All is corrected and back to how it was and yet he's so scared, or at least his damned body for some reason thinks he is.

He can't look Thor in the eye. Yes he can - but his face is melting, it feels like it's melting because he can't keep it on the way it's supposed to stay, it's like a wild animal has taken its place and is acting of its own volition. He looks up and Thor is still there.

In the end, it is Thor's eyes that get him back out of his own head. Both of them, and Loki doesn't know how that works because his brother only has one eye. But what he finds behind the watery gaze is so heartbreaking, so much and yet endlessly hollow and swimming alongside everything else that is just Thor, it is as if it gathers all the chaos in Loki into one, warm bundle that allows him to move again. Frees his arms from static so he can reach them out and put his hands on Thor's shoulders. Allows his face to form as he wants it to, to for a moment convey the exact right amount of sympathy and presence that he wants to give to his brother. In a set of the eyebrows, one corner of the mouth tugging a little, and his eyes shining the rest of it.

And then Thor is beside him on the rock, pulling Loki into a tight hug with his as ever strong, warm and overwhelming figure. Loki feels his brother's shoulders begin to shake, his eyes dampening Loki's shoulder through the tattered leathers where he buries his head.

Loki is surprised for a moment about his own non-reaction to the sudden closeness, Thor practically flinging himself like a scarf around Loki's neck, a neck that has been .. sensitive, to say the least,
especially since returning to an actual, physical body. For some reason, Thor’s head and arms being so close to it doesn’t trigger any real sort of reaction, which is fortunate. So Loki lets his own arms gingerly gather around his brother’s upper back, cold leather and colder metal. Holding him close with as much warmth as his own cold heart can muster, hoping it is enough.

He moves one hand to tangle in the golden carpet on his brother’s head, running his fingers through it and sorting out knots. He lets himself rest against Thor but keeps his eyes open, staring wide at the dark scenery in front of him. For some reason, his own racing heartbeat won’t slow down, either, embarrassingly insistent on reverberating through both their bodies. His hand keeps working in the wild locks, wild like the pale weeds that grew in the sand by the coasts at home.

The Captain finds them like that, eventually. Loki could’ve almost been afraid Thor had fallen asleep on him by that time if it weren’t for the steady flow of tears on his shoulder and the occasional hiccup.

“Loki?” the Captain calls as he approaches, sounding surprised but too tired to give off even a remote suspiciousness. His voice is harsh like he’s been crying, too, which is likely indeed.

Loki keeps at Thor’s hair as he nods, yet again on the quest to keep his face in an acceptably schooled expression. Not that anyone else here seems to be bothering with that kind of thing.

“So it seems,” he attempts to say smoothly but ends up wincing at the croak that escapes him instead.

Thor takes a deep breath before straightening up, wiping at his eyes. He nods half-heartedly at his companion, not really looking at him and keeping his side turned. All this is so unlike Thor that Loki honestly considers if he might be drunk. Or on something. And also worries that the Captain will think Loki has bespelled him.

But it does not seem he thinks so.

“Most of the others are leaving,” the Captain says to Thor, glancing back at the gathering which, sure enough, is dispelling. “Pepper is taking Tony. I’m not .. I’m not sure what the rest of us are going to do just now.”

Loki isn’t sure who ‘the rest of them’ is but is very sure he will not be welcome with any kind of group of Avengers and/or friends.

And suddenly he’s so afraid again that Thor will leave. That he’ll leave Loki here on Midgard, alone (he should, he should because his friends are mourning and he needs to be there with them, you are not a child, you can take care of yourself).

But honestly, Loki has rarely felt as lost as he does right now and he isn’t sure he’ll ever get up from here again, if not for following Thor.

Thor nods again, frowning at the ground in front of him as if he seeks something important from it. It doesn’t answer him, anyway.

Then the Captain turns, walking back towards the others and Loki doesn’t even have the presence of mind to properly admire his ass.

He doesn’t come to the funeral. Obviously. Thor doesn’t invite him and nor does the Captain who is, as far as Loki knows, the only one of these Avengers who knows about his return. Besides, it's not
as if he wants to come. He just doesn't really know what else to do on that day, either. You'd think being dead for five years left a lot to be desired upon a return, but it isn't so. At least, Loki can't seem to find anything inside himself but that vague hollowness and then the overwhelming, childish desire to cling to his brother's side at all times.

But he doesn't. Cling.

Thor sleeps a lot in the days after the battle, staying in a hotel room that Loki got for them with the help of some simple identity theft and illusion-work. It is a city close enough to the location where the ceremony is going to take place in four days.

The first night, Thor goes out without announcing anything as to where or why and Loki stays back, trying to will himself to not care. Thor comes home again late, with the unmistakable stink of liquor clinging to him. He's carrying a duffle bag full of clattering glass soon revealed to be more bottles of the same (and a lot of those) and Loki doesn't know why it bothers him so that both the duffle bag and every bottle of liquor must be stolen, since Thor didn't have any money earlier for the hotel, when that is just the kind of thing Loki himself would do. Steal a buttload of liquor in a foreign realm and drink himself senseless. But not Thor, Thor doesn't steal. Thor is kind and warm and thoughtful and Thor doesn't steal from undeserving strangers, especially not on his precious Midgard.

Loki pretends to be asleep as his brother downs bottle after bottle, eerily quiet for someone so horrendously drunk (you would at least expect him to mutter to himself a little, but there is not a single quip) except for of course a lot of stumbling and clashing against furniture. When Thor finally passes out in the other bed Loki crawls out from under his own cover, still fully dressed. He locks the room behind him, just to be safe, before leaving into the night as well.

For some reason, he can't get himself to go even near any kind of bar or night-open store despite how well-placed a drink would be right then and there. Instead, he ends up on a bench looking over a lake in a park, lying there until the sun rises despite not enjoying neither the view nor being alone in the slightest.

The days following consist of much the same. Loki discovers just how bad a drinking habit his brother has truly developed and avoids interacting with Thor in any kind of state as much as possible. Or maybe it's the grieving, the processing, only right now. Maybe the drinking isn't really that bad.

He walks a lot. He discovers a library, one day, but finds that he can't really concentrate on any of the sentences. He watches Thor when he sleeps, sometimes, and doesn't sleep very much himself – when he does, he wakes gasping not long after, the feeling of an enormous hand tightening on his throat still lingering, still tightening and he can't breathe. As if the nightmare itself has the power to reach into reality and come true just because it scares him so. At least Thor sleeps too heavily in his stupors to wake from it.

Thor has nightmares of his own, though, and Loki is careful to leave the room every time before he can wake from them.

They talk a little when his brother isn't drunk out of his mind. It seems like Thor does try to stay sober, tries to keep to it. Maybe it is for Loki's sake or maybe not but either way, it mostly just means sleeping instead of drinking and then eventually caving in the evening, anyway. Loki doesn't mention it because he doesn't know what to say. He finds himself being .. uncharacteristically quiet for the duration of those four days, though maybe it isn't really especially uncharacteristic for him to be quiet in Thor's company, after all.

One uncomfortable night he comes back to the hotel room hoping to find his brother sober, just a childish wish that tonight is the night it will be true, but Thor is definitely not. His older brother ends
up clinging to Loki and spilling his guts, crying a lot, leaning against him too heavily and too close to his neck, admitting things he would never otherwise (Thor wouldn't) before finally vomiting all over the floor.

Loki leaves because he doesn't know how to deal with it. He finds a bridge a little way out of the city that was once a road but is now overgrown with weeds and grass. Under it, he sits undisturbed for some good hours pastime of bawling his eyes out.

He comes back the next day and the room is clean, not a hint of foul scent lingering. Thor sits on the bed with a guilty look on his face and is squeakily sober.

He wakes sober on the next day, of the funeral, as well.

Loki follows him there and Thor doesn't know it. No one knows, no one has to know. It’s only that Loki didn't know what else he was supposed to do, today - and for some reason, Thor going to see his friends makes him want to cling tighter. Undo all the last days of neglecting Thor and stay closer to him instead. Be a better brother and keep him close.

He watches them from afar as they perform the ceremony by the riverbed, shrouded entirely from sight with a spell. Pushing the bouquet of flowers out onto the water.

There's a jolt of loss, to his surprise, when he realizes that the red-haired spider isn't there.

Another jolt, this one of a slightly different character, when he spots Thanos’ daughter herself standing behind Thor, the scorned yet ever so cruel and creative Nebula. Thankfully, the distance and whole not-being-visible-to-anyone thing provide the safety that keeps Loki calm enough to not freak out about it.

The Hulk is there, too, by Thor’s side and is looking strangely .. not like the Hulk. Not as green, for one, more dressed in clothes than usual. A suit, no less. Loki figures the split personality finally must’ve found a way to merge into something more wholesome, which is applaudable, even if the product then is an honestly strange combination of Banner and Hulk and not quite either of them.

The ceremony is over quickly. Thor looks tired and raw as he rarely has but also strangely .. settled. Less rootless. As if the battle being over and the last few days of processing, however poorly, is slowly coming to piece together a more coherent picture of emotions inside of him. His gaze is more focused and clear than Loki has seen it since he first came back (which, on second thought, he's pretty sure Thor wasn't drunk back then, anyway), planted on the bouquet as it drifts across the water.

The friends and families turn to the house when it disappears from sight, going into the backyard where drink and food are displayed in plentiful yet humble and elegant arrangements. Loki follows, watching from the tree-line.

Thor goes to the drinks table immediately, the blow to Loki’s desire for his brother to stay sober softened a little by the Captain matching the bold choice of three-drinks-in-one-hand and one-in-the-other. He starts up a conversation with Thor. There’s a girl there, clinging to the red-haired woman - Pepper, the Captain had called her – who looks too young and out of place at gathering such as this. A daughter, likely.

The hawk is there, too, along with the family Loki had gotten to know rather well through the connection of their minds as partners. Maybe even clung a little too tightly to – once he'd seen a glimpse of the moments shared between the father, his wife and kids, Loki had gotten thirsty.
Wanting to experience more of that seamless love and care and belonging, if only through another's mind. A brainwashed, unwilling subject at that.

They are sorrowful, the family, but that very same sense of unity Loki had felt years previous is unmistakable if even stronger. So is the pang of jealousy which he can't quite help as it shoots through him.

There are more people, many of whom he does not know the names and his gaze flickers uninterestedly over them. All thoughtful, grieving faces, dressed in black.

Then suddenly there’s one that’s different. She has red hair and there's something about her, some feeling, so he fastens his gaze on her and - he flinches hard, an instinctual reaction to the strong, wild and way too familiar energy standing out from her in waves. It is no doubt intensified, uncontrolled, from her grieving.

To Loki’s horror, her head jerks at the exact same time as he notices her, her power shooting like hands out towards him. She looks straight at the forest's edge where he has gotten too close, too close, and on the wrong, exposed side of the tree line. But he’s still shrouded, his magic is working just fine, so why is she staring like she can see his every twitch of muscle? Why is her magic reaching for him, entering into his body and field, why is she walking towards him with such determination, leaving her friends behind to stand confused because they can’t see anything, can't see him - they can’t, can they?

For some reason, Loki can’t move. She only gets closer, still looking at him although his shroud is still in place. He drags its blanket tighter around his form but to no avail, because she sees straight through it, doesn’t she? It feels like it’s slipping, too, her overwhelming magic getting more smothering with each step and cancelling everything that is his power, rendering him completely helpless -- it's too familiar and he feels like he might throw up, like it's crawling in through his ears, mouth, nose, into his skull and tampering with his brain, playing with his thoughts and memories and he can’t do anything because he’s locked in place -

He doesn’t remember falling. Which doesn’t change the fact that he’s now on his hands and knees on the ground, vomiting onto the grass with tears prickling the corners of his eyes. His grip has slipped entirely on the shroud and he can’t get a hold of it again, it slips from his fingers like wet and flimsy seaweed, completely fallen away to leave him here, exposed and vulnerable on the ground. The suffocating energy is closer yet. Still there and too close so he vomits again, on his knees and bowed forward, desperate to brush his hair away from his face. It's sticky with sweat and his hands are shaking.

He feels a hand on his shoulder and flinches away - because it’s her and her hand is pulsing with the energy. He bites back another bout of nausea and is dimly aware of commotion around him as he can only sit there and clutch at his head. Eyes squeezed shut as if that will dispel the danger (there is no danger).

Then there’s a heavy, familiar (in a better sense of the word) hand on his shoulder and the faint scent of worn leathers and ozone. Something in him calms at it, leaning into the touch. Though the more he returns to his body the less he actually wants to open his eyes to the shitshow no doubt awaiting him. Which he has started, and at someone’s beloved family and friend’s funeral service no less.

His hearing is dulled as if something has been stuffed in his ears but he can hear her voice through it, deep and melodic as she speaks, I - I didn’t do anything.

There are other voices, many noises from many people, he’s pretty sure a few clicks of guns and weapons. A deeper version of Banner’s voice trying to calm it all down. And Thor - Thor is .. oh,
Thor is speaking to him but honestly, Loki is having a hard time focusing on anything at all with that energy still so close so he only clutches tighter at his head, attempting to keep the spreading migraine under control. He realizes he’s not really breathing. That can’t be helping things.

Thor is speaking with the woman, the girl? urging her to try taking a step back after apparently, she comes closer again and the noose closes further. Loki hears himself honest-to-gods whimper - he didn’t mean to, he didn’t - but then she does move back and in the space freed he can breathe a little easier. He realizes that maybe it’s not so much her energy smothering him, as it is his own sort of reaction to the otherwise so lovely memories associated with the specific signature. *Oh. How embarrassing. Well, it all is, anyway.*

He takes a deeper breath, with it taking in the sour scent of vomit. He feels shame curl in his stomach.

“Brother?” he can hear Thor asking, not quite as muffled as before. Once again, he's aware of the heavy hand on his own shoulder. Loki takes a shaky breath, giving a nod.

“Sorry,” he mumbles back. He releases the hands from his head, still bowed, dropping them into his lap and trying to sit a little straighter but feeling like his very spine is shaking the efforts futile. “I didn’t mean to - didn’t mean …” his words are slurred and he lets the sentence fade instead of embarrassing himself. Further, that is.

“It’s all right,” Thor responds, his voice kind and always that little bit rumbling but the hesitation in it is clear despite his choice of words.

“What are you doing here, Loki?” asks another voice, this one harsh and unmistakable for it has haunted Loki through his worst nightmares. Okay, so maybe not literally, there are worse things than this guy, after all, but he comes pretty damn close. The laughably so named ‘Sorcerer Supreme’.

Loki doesn’t know what to tell him, though, despite having plenty of insults ready on the go. He never meant to be caught, that’s the truth. But he was. He finds he can’t quite come up with a lie that won’t either immediately get him thrown into some prison or else be just as pathetic as the truth is. And then what is the point.

After a few seconds of not answering, Loki hears something powering up close to his head, sounding like Stark’s iron suit repulsors but that can’t be it. The sound isn’t quite right, either, this is somehow .. softer, more organic. Though by the sense of it also way more powerful.

Curiosity bests him to lift his head and he finds himself looking into a palm glowing blue and golden, attached to a woman he hasn’t met before. It’s her the power is emanating from - great power, currently conveyed into a photon blast aimed directly at Loki’s face.

For some reason, no proper remark on the absurd situation comes to mind. Not except for raising his hands, palms outward in what hopefully looks like a sincere display of surrender. There’s a lot of other people, too, standing ready to fight - which is a wholly unnecessary reaction of them, considering the fact that Loki doesn’t think he is currently able to get to his feet and has just thrown up all over their lawn.

To the woman’s right is Fury the director, that old friend, with a gun pointed at Loki’s face. Next to him is the hawk, with two guns cocked and loaded, and behind them, a bunch of people Loki doesn’t know (one with antennas, so that’s curious).

To the woman’s left stands Doctor Strange, for whom Loki doesn’t spare a second glance, the ass of America next to him. Right behind his shoulder stands a kid with brown hair who for some reason is,
apparently, equipped to be fighting an enemy on the front lines despite carrying no visible weapons or armour.

Then more people with unknown faces beside and behind him, a man with a metal arm, more guns pointed, a black-haired woman Loki recognizes from Shield, Hulk looking apologetic and puzzled behind them all. Beside him is the girl with red hair and nauseating energy (just energy, it’s just energy, it doesn’t have to be nauseating) and all the way to the left with her arms crossed (jolt) is Nebula. He decides to ignore her presence as much as possible.

Then, of course, there’s Thor crouching next to him, at whom Loki deliberately doesn’t look.

Further behind the frontline of warriors, by the tables with food and drink, he can see the families huddled together and out of danger yet straining to get a good look at what the commotion is all about. There are a few defenders in front of them, as well, dressed in funeral clothes but likely no less able to put up a fight. Not that Loki is especially looking for one. He would personally most like to crawl into the ground and disappear right now if it were up to him - but rarely is it ever.

“What. Are you doing here,” Strange repeats and Loki resists the urge to do something dramatic, like rolling his eyes and sighing, since that would hardly be an appropriate display of remorse for interrupting their mourning.

The magician holds out a hand in the silence, with a single gesture making the puddle of vomit on the grass disappear without a trace. Loki could’ve done that.

“Spying,” he answers, honestly, still not able to think of anything better. He keeps his hands up. Strange huffs.

“Planning something, then?” he sneers, and now Loki does sigh.

“Not at the moment, no.”

His voice is irritatingly hoarse and he clears his throat again.

“You were under Thanos’ command,” the woman with photon-blast-hands states with a sort of non-negotiability to her tone and Loki’s eyes wander back to her. Even if it weren’t true, he isn’t sure he would be able to deny her. But fortunately -

“Unfortunately, yes,” he agrees. “Not my best years.”

Everyone is silent, waiting. He blinks at the ground in an attempt at getting the blurry tinge to everything dispelled from his vision. Then he directs his eyes to the red-haired girl beside Banner - or, Hulk. Whatever.

“Your power is derived from the mind stone,” he states, locking eyes with her if only as an act of defiance towards himself and the creeping panic. She nods with a frown. “I do apologize for this overblown reaction,” he continues, not sure if that clears anything up for anyone. Probably not.

“Unfortunately, yes,” he agrees. “Not my best years.”

But then she takes a step forward and Loki’s every instinct takes over with a white panic, falling back from his knees and scrambling away. She stills. He blinks.

“If you could,” he croaks, attempting to get his spasming expression under control, “refrain from coming any closer I would - greatly appreciate it.”

She takes a step back, the puzzled eyes searing as if she’s looking into his very mind (she’s not, he would feel it if she were). Loki can sense Thor’s gaze on him and still doesn’t feel like returning it.
“Fury, this man isn’t dangerous,” photon-lady then says, more like a complaint than anything, and she lowers her hand. Everyone else keeps their weapons drawn. “Look at him.”

Ouch.

“Should’ve been there when he leveled New York five years back, Carol,” Fury responds, eyes fiery on Loki but tone conversational as ever. “I know he looks lanky, but the fella packs a punch if he wants to. Especially with an army on his back.”

“Doesn’t really look like he wants to, then, does it?” she mumbles, eyes narrowed and crossing her arms.

At which Thor sputters, “ah, hey - this is my brother we’re speaking of! He’s not going to do anything.” He turns back to Loki, a hand resting on his knee. “And I’m sure there’s a very good explanation as to why he is here, now. Right?”

Loki turns his eyes to the sky with a sigh. “There really isn’t,” is all he can think to say.

“Loki was there after the battle four days ago, too,” the Captain says. Fury turns to him with wide, accusing eyes but Rogers keeps his stand, gaze unwavering. “He and Thor were reuniting. I saw no reason to interrupt and figured Thor would let us know if there was trouble.”

“You -- you saw no reason -” Fury sputters, cutting it off in a huff of outrage. Then he sighs dramatically, re-holstering his gun and throwing out the other arm in surrender. “Fine! Fine, then, you take care of this mess if you’re so sure about that. Then I am going to get back to the funeral we’re actually here for.”

He pushes his way past the others and back to the house, angrily grabbing a drink from a table and sipping it while turned away.

Photon-lady, this ‘Carol’, frowns, looking after him. Her head snaps back to Loki, then back to Fury, and back to Loki - before she finally shrugs and leaves. Loki feels oddly discredited at it but then again, he probably isn’t looking his most intimidating right now. Which is a good thing, of course.

The Avengers left standing (that must be what they are, right?) are looking confused with Fury and photon-lady gone. The Hawk is unrelenting, though, guns still unwavering on Loki, who catches his gaze.

“You know I won’t hesitate,” Barton snarls and Loki, for some reason, decides to smirk in return. Which earns him a slap on the upper arm from his brother. His, as ever, bafflingly strong brother, no matter however much alcohol Thor has been pouring into himself over the last five years, and Loki exclaims an "ow!", turning to Thor and going to rub at the affected spot. Thor glares in response.

“Be civil,” he says. “You’re not exactly welcome, here.”

Loki shuts his eyes for a second, taking a deep breath and nodding. “Of course,” he manages, despite the words grinding in his throat. He hasn’t done anything wrong. Not right now, anyway.

“It’s good to see you alive and kicking, Loki,” Bruce-Hulk says, stepping forward with heavy thumps of his feet to stand beside the woman from Shield - Hill? - and the kid. There is great sadness in his eyes and Loki finds he can’t quite meet them.

“I am - terribly sorry, about this,” he says in response, still not looking Banner in the eyes but trying
to (and that’s what counts), hoping it comes off as sounding sincere. He thinks he does mean it. He’s never really sure with himself, anymore. “I never wanted to interrupt.”

Loki finally manages to meet the man's eyes but then they're studying him so intently that he has to look away again immediately. Banner sighs.

“I think it’ll be okay if you leave us,” he says to the group of people looking increasingly puzzled and restless. “Go back to the service, Thor and I can handle this. Maybe you stay, too, Steve.”

The group begins to disperse with the exception of Thor, Banner, the Captain, the Hawk (still with the guns raised), the magician and for some reason the unknown, brown-haired kid, who stays quietly in his place. In addition, to Loki’s regret, the red-haired girl isn’t making any move to leave. Two men, one of them the one with a metal arm, seem to falter when she doesn’t make to move, eventually deciding to stay as well.

“If he is truly dangerous,” the red-head says, still looking at Loki, “then I will stay. It seems the presence of my magic keeps him in check.”

Loki sighs heavily. Banner cringes.

“Thank you, Wanda,” he says. Ah. Her name is Wanda. “I don’t think there’s going to be any trouble, though. Is there, Loki?”

Loki goes for a smile but it doesn’t feel quite as cheeky as he would’ve liked. “I do hope not,” he answers.

There’s silence for a few seconds. Loki would be enjoying the situation present if it weren’t for everyone else looking so very sad beneath all the suspicion. It really doesn’t promise for any fun kind of show.

“Why are you here, Loki?” Thor finally asks, still on the ground in front of him. Loki looks at him briefly before closing his eyes again, scrunching up his face as the headache suddenly returns with full force. He pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Honestly, Thor, I really wasn’t - wasn't here to do anything,” he tries. Being sincere like this, it’s so unlike him, lately. Hard. He’s out of practice after spending five years exclusively lying his way out of the realms of the dead. “Just that I.. had nothing else to do. I was bored.” He looks back up at his brother.

Thor sighs.

“Maybe you should go back to the hotel,” he suggests.

“Do you think they’ll let me leave?”

“You can just go.”

Loki grimaces. “I don’t think it’s that easy. They might hunt me.”

“I have to agree,” Bruce-Hulk says. “If we just let him go, Fury will be .. well, you know, he’ll be furious. He’ll probably send Carol after him straight away.”

Thor rubs at a temple with his thumb, eyes growing dark. “Well then what do we do?” he grumbles. “We are here to mourn our friend - friends in plural, really. Not clean up after yet another mess of Loki's.”
Ouch. Ouch.

It’s true, of course. But Loki finds he can’t quite control the spasm of his face despite the fact, if only briefly. Then he sets it back in a carefully guarded - and some might say closed off but the point is that it feels safer - expression.

Thor sighs, closing his eyes. “I didn’t mean it like that,” he says. But he did. “Just that - it really isn’t the best time right now, Loki.” He opens his eyes again, trying to lock their gazes but Loki can’t quite find it in him to let him. “People are mourning, and you’re .. this is not a place for you.”

He doesn’t understand why it hits so hard when it is only the truth. He did just interrupt a private funeral service of a man who no doubt absolutely hated him. It is one hundred percent, fully and wholly, Loki’s mistake. Which the situation right now really, truly is neither the time nor place for.

Still, it feels as if everything is curling, tangling and knotting inside him at the words. Too hot, burning, in fact, and Thor is too close and this Wanda’s energy smothering, the Captain’s eyes boring into him and Banner’s smile too soft and sad. The Hawk’s hateful glare and those men behind the witch are looking at him, too, there are too many eyes on him and he was an idiot for coming here. He swallows back rising nausea, giving a nod in response but keeping his gaze locked on the grass by Thor's feet.

He wants to be angry. Something in him wants to react and throw fire in the face of this whole entire situation but he finds that he can’t quite manage to pull it forth. It is as if something colder, something darker is smothering it. It’s nothing new, of course, that’s just the way it is with Loki - either he’s burning or he’s drowning in icy water, and really there’s no in between but many, many illusions that will make one think so. Fire is a lot easier, for sure. But the cold will always win in a fight.

“Of course, you’re right,” he says, voice sounding oddly small and far away. “This was a mistake. I really am sorry,” he adds.

Then he pulls at the tendrils he has prepared in all haste, whispering the two-word spell and letting the flow of moving space wash over him. He can almost feel the ghost of Thor’s fingers grabbing for his arm, hear his roar echo through the haze as he realizes what Loki is doing - but Loki is gone within less than a second and his older brother never stood a chance.

One moment Loki was kneeling in the yard of a private home at a funeral he wasn’t supposed to be even at, that he should have never even gone near, and the next he’s back in the hotel room. It’s been cleaned up since they left.

He’s not sure why he went there except for it being the most recent location in his memory and imagination (which, honestly isn’t at its creative peak, currently). He already has everything he needs on his person, in the pockets of his jacket and in the subtler kind of pockets folded in the space between universe itself.

He’s just about to leave from there when he spots something on the desk by the window, glistening as the sun peeks out from under the skies for a moment.

A golden buckle, from Thor’s boot - must’ve broken off at some point when he no doubt stumbled into something in a drunken haze. The maid must then have found it on the floor, placing it on the desk rather than throwing it away. Understandable, as it is rather valuable material, gold from the now long-gone mines of Asgard themselves.

The value of the metal isn’t why Loki picks it up, though, stuffing it in his pocket before teleporting
away. He leaves the shared room and sunlight behind in favour of something colder and perhaps more appropriate. He goes north.

Chapter End Notes

If you enjoyed it, please do tell. This is the first thing I'm sharing ever so I'm also feeling a little vulnerable with it. Just, no need to ROAST me ... please <3<3

My native language is not English - please do shoot a message if there's some grammar or something that's off.

Thank you for reading, you lovely you!
I Melt in Seas of Winter

Chapter Summary

Loki might be falling apart, a little bit

(keep in mind that this is still all his perspective and thus not necessarily reliable, at all.)

Chapter Notes

So, I was debating whether I was gonna make it a series, let the first chapter stand alone as its own oneshot thing and then this one and the following chapters would be, like, a SEQUEL and not just a continuation ... man, I still can't decide. Posted the chapter and changed my mind and made it a series and then changed my mind again. I apologize if you were there for it and confused - I was, too, at least!

enjoy♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He can recall many hunting trips in the mountains and forests of Asgard.

Sometimes they would be out for days at a time, sustaining themselves on plants they were sure weren’t poisonous and all game they managed to haul in. Which was rather a lot as they were all skilled with their respective weapons but then, they also had the most notoriously round-bellied food enthusiast in all the land with them, so it was all well.

He doesn’t think very much about these things. Actually, he likes to not think very much about most things, in general. The point is only that he’s no beginner in neither hunting nor the carving out of a catch. Most of the animals here on Midgard’s Fjäll are not too different from a lot of the ones he grew up with and he learns quickly from the books he's acquired, otherwise.

He doesn’t go for the wolves. He feels a trembling in their collective consciousness as their numbers dwindle with each hunting season and his heart aches for them. Then they begin to seek closer and closer to his residence with each day.

At first, he shoos them off, sending them on their merry way with shouts and hisses - he’s not about to let them eat his hard-earned food and besides, he’s not interested in the company. Then he realises he’s been sending out unconscious waves of his own magic, reaching for the packs and families like a beacon calling for their attention. He didn’t mean to.

The wolves keep coming no matter and if he doesn’t like it, he eventually begins to let them, anyway. They don’t eat his food, as if just being there to soak in the rays of magic he can’t help but
pour out is all the nourishment they need.

Emotional states will influence magic like that. Warp it, in his opinion. He doesn’t like not having proper control. He doesn’t like that even if he does manage to reel the unconscious call in during the day then whenever he goes to rest in the night, his magic will betray him again and snap back out to reach for the souls nearest. As if he is most lonely when he sleeps. He doesn’t want company.

That’s why he went to the mountains in the first place, to escape all that. It’s worked out fine - he’s many miles from the nearest town in straight flight and rarely does he ever visit it. Only to get the books, at the beginning, or some food if his supplies are low. It seems every time he does go there the people will try to start conversation with him, at least after he’d been a few times. They want to learn things about him, who he is and where he lives. When he’d answered ‘in the mountains’ once, he’d immediately regretted it. That rumour spread quickly throughout the small village, word of the strange man who lives all alone in the fjäll. Musings of how in the worlds he manages to survive out there and in the winter, no less, and doesn’t he look so thin, wouldn’t he like a nice, wholesome meal at their house and then he can tell them all about himself.

Once, he made the mistake of interacting with more than five words, his guard weak and so starved of affection that he let a girl initiate a conversation. It was fun and nice but - then she wouldn’t stop asking questions, she wanted to know where he lived exactly, was it true it was in the mountains and how can you live there, she wanted to come home with him and see it because she lived with her parents and they couldn’t go there. But he couldn’t answer and he couldn’t take her to his place, his place -- they were in a bar, his hand was up her thigh and hers under his shirt and touching his stomach with soft fingers, slightly rough at the tips from manual labour, but he had to go, get away. So he left her there without another word, practically ran out.

He’s seen her a couple of times, since, and she won’t look at him. Which is good, of course.

He couldn’t have taken her to the, at the time, snowy slope with his ramshackle of a shed on a little terrace in the mountainside, in front of which carrots and cabbage and potatoes and berries grew in frozen ground, sprouting in a desolate land where no such thing should be possible. Into his home, his, with the single, moth-eaten mattress on a rusty metal-frame from war-times. The books littered in a corner, a portable stove on the ground and the fold-out table on the wall. The clumsy wooden footstool he’d made himself. Cold, cold floors and a tattered ceiling that can barely keep out the rain. Not to mention the seven-hour hike to even get there at all. He couldn’t take her. Upon first arriving, he’d hidden and protected the place from hikers with shrouding and repellent spells but the entire area is preserved, anyway, and it’s rare that any humans dare cross the law for some unexplored terrain.

He’s proud of the place, no matter how sparse, but he wouldn’t want to show it to anybody. It’s private. They wouldn’t appreciate it.

The seasons passing is a beautiful sight from the terrace. The snow colours everything in icy nuances except for the dark green pines further down, the rest almost too bright to look at, especially when the sun is out. Every time spring comes, he’ll sit for hours just watching it all melt away. Summer is beautiful with life humming but still, he welcomes the cold, longs for the snow to return every time autumn begins.

It is much like Asgard, in fact, except for in the night when there is only a single moon to shine. This makes everything darker than it should be. At least the stars are bright up here.

He’d expected to be found right away. Someone would show up and drag him back to some Midgardian prison establishment - because if he hadn’t been making trouble before, surely he had to
be looking suspicious after running from his latest fuck-up of an idea. He honestly couldn’t really find it in himself to care. They could take him if they wanted to. Still, he’d taken the precautions with casting spells to hide both sight and energy signatures just in case. And then no one had come; the autumn had turned winter and the winter spring and no SHIELD helicopter, no photon-lady, no flying iron armour came, and no -- no one else, either.

He’s pretty sure he’s been here for a little over three years, now.

His magic is not what it used to be, not what it was in the beginning. It’s been weakened like that for a long time but especially here it seems to have dwindled further. Sustaining the crops has gotten more taxing over time and often he has to rest for long periods after working with them. In the beginning, they were plumb and colourful when ripe, his magic still obeying him for such simple tasks, but now they’re only getting more and more tasteless, paler, smaller.

It’s not the first time in his life it has been like this, the magic drained just as he feels, only now he feels sort of .. resigned to the fact. It doesn’t really matter, anyway.

He catches game and grows the crops as well as he can, eating the bland potatoes and melting snow to drink, getting it from the fresh springs outside of winter. Sometimes, he still uses what little extent he has of magic to reach out and feel the nature. He enjoys the way it thrums quietly with subtle, soft life, the way it doesn’t respond or demand anything from him. He stares at the landscape or his dirty walls. He bathes in the freezing lakes of glacier-melt, without soap to not contaminate the water.

Maybe he would’ve fixed the ceiling at some point if he had the energy but honestly, he just doesn’t care a lot. As long as his bed stays dry. It’s not easy for him to get cold.

Sometimes he’ll get sick, though, and then the cold becomes unbearable. He’s not sure what the biological reason is, but it’s always been that way with fevers. He lies shivering under the blankets from his bed and even though his skin is burning, the cold seems to be seeping into the very marrow of his bones.

He thinks it’s been a little over three years because the winter is at its peak again, and it was autumn when he first came here.

The snow lies thick outside on one such night of feeling like death itself as he lies on the mattress and waits for light and warmth to return. Everything hurts and throbs. The tears rolling down his cheeks dry into icy streaks and he would’ve been embarrassed by them if he weren’t so completely and utterly alone.

The crops stopped growing a while ago - he doesn’t have the energy to cause them to, anymore. He’s not sure when the last time he hunted was. The wolves have stopped coming, too.

In one hand, a fist held against his chest, lies a small, cold and golden buckle. He clutches it tight but doesn’t direct a single thought towards it. Just holding it; like most nights, lately.

In the morning, when light finally begins to colour the oppressive darkness everywhere he manages to his feet, staggering to the small stretch of porch outside his door. There’s a canopy over it and so it’s free of snow if still a little damp. Everything is, here. He has three blankets, though, and wrapped in all their woollen layers he drops down at the edge of the wood, pulling his knees into his chest and leaning against the post next to the steps. He sits there half asleep as the sun rises in East, behind the house but colouring the scenery in his view.
He’s very cold, still. It’s been a while since he slept properly.

He doesn’t do much, that day. Goes to urinate at one point - it’s very yellow against the snow, and when was the last time he remembered to drink something? He’s inside the house, a little bit, but mostly he just sits by the pole, looking over the slope. Maybe he naps a little; he’s honestly not .. all too aware that day. But he does enjoy the sun on his face as it travels in its path over the sky, and he’s not as cold as he was in the night.

He already dreads the next one approaching as the sun begins to set in early evening.

When she first appears, he’s absolutely sure it’s a dream or a trick of his mind. It sure wouldn’t be the first hallucination. Her figure fades into reality further down on the slope, blurry at the edges and bleeding into the landscape. He watches her curiously, his eyelids halfway open.

Her eyes are on him, too. Her hair is light and tinged red with the last of the sun behind her. She’s wearing a long, bulky jacket as if tricks of the mind need jackets to stay warm. He’s seen her face before, he realises.

She stops in front of the porch only maybe ten feet away, and he begins to doubt the initial conclusion as to her nature. She looks too realistic, too detailed and solid to be a dream. Then again, dreams do tend to be manipulative like that; but he can feel her, her energy, if only barely with his own being in shreds as it is.

It’s strange how the realisation that she must be, in fact, a real and actual person here on his hillside doesn’t really unnerve him that much.

“You look even worse than the last time I saw you,” she says. Her voice seems shrill in the middle of his for so long undisturbed whisper of a quiet. Her arms are crossed. "And that's saying something."

He narrows his eyes at her.

“Who are you,” he says; because he can’t remember her name and doesn’t want to call her photon-lady. His voice, at least, isn’t as hoarse as it probably could be, seeing as it hasn’t gone unused all the time. He’s developed a habit of talking to himself, sometimes, whenever thoughts seem to want to boil over in his head. A nice distraction, or method to sort it out.

“I’m Carol Danvers,” she says. “We met at Tony Stark’s funeral. Remember?”

He chuckles and it sounds too small, breathless, even to his ears. “I remember,” he says. “Such a lovely time.”

She blinks, looking at their surroundings; the house, the pines to one side, the mountain wall. “Have you been hiding out here for all three years?” she asks. So he was right about that.

“I think so,” he says. His head is still leaning back against the cold wooden pole, his knees up and arms wrapped around his stomach under the blankets, and he finds he doesn’t really have any desire to move. He’s shivering again with the sun setting. There’s a vague sense of alarm, a cry in the back of his head that someone is *here* but it’s just not loud enough to take special notice of. Feels far away, somehow.

“Why did you remove the shrouding?” she asks.

That’s what Loki calls it, the spell. She must’ve been talking to someone who knows that name for it, or she’s just very intuitive. Also, he didn’t remove it.
“I didn’t remove it,” he says.

“Well you weren’t on our radars anywhere for years, then suddenly you were fading back in. I could spot you from the air. I could swear there used to be nothing in this location.”

He frowns.

“Howse radars?”

“SHIELD’s,” she says, repositioning her feet in the snow. It creaks under her boots. “I was entrusted with the job of looking for you back then along with Doctor Stephen Strange, but he - thought it would be better if I went alone.”

“I thought Shield was gone,” he says in response.

A corner of her mouth quirks upward. “Not with Fury still around.”

There’s quiet for a moment.

“They have your energy signature,” she explains. “Stored in their database since New York.” He nods. Figured.

His gaze wanders to the scenery behind her, going a little out of focus in all the white and red and blooming dark. Then her voice snaps him back to the present, and he isn’t sure how long he was gone. Probably not that long.

“So you didn’t retract the spell on purpose,” she’s saying.

With a sigh, he extends his magic to feel for it, check its status. If she must insist. The energy in his veins is inflexible like leather but stretched so thin and feels almost see-through. It doesn’t want to move, but he makes it.

He comes back to with her hand on his upper arm keeping him upright, probably, since he’s leaning rather heavily into it. He flinches when he recognizes the sensation - a hand, someone’s hand, someone close, too close - and it retreats. He blinks the white noise from his eyes to refocus on Carol Danvers who is now right in front of him, crouched on the porch and looking at his face.

“You’re right, it’s gone,” he says and it comes out a croak. He readjusts to once again lean against the pole, dragging the blankets tighter.

She narrows her eyes.

“It must have slipped,” he explains.

She’s quiet for another moment.

“There’s a village of surviving Asgardians only a two-day hike from here,” she then says. “Do you know that? Down by the coast.”

He thinks he probably did know that, but hasn’t thought about it for some time.

“Oh,” he says. That feels like a good in-between kind of answer.

“Your brother is there,” she says.

That he doesn’t especially feel like answering. In his pocket lies the golden buckle, burning against
his thigh, which he ignores.

“I’m thinking I’ll take you to him,” she says. “You look like you could need some … heating up. For one thing.”

“I’m fine here,” he says even though he knows very well she won’t let him stay. That’s why the shrouding was there in the first place; to keep people out, so stupid of him to just let it slip like that. It wasn’t even hard to keep up. The spell was already cast and only needed maintaining, and that is just about the easiest, least demanding task ever.

“You don’t look so fine,” she says. He can feel himself scowling but his eyes are still only slits as if the lids can’t be bothered to stay open all the way. “That’s because I’m sick. Those things pass.”

“Mh-hm.”

“Also, it’s none of your business.”

She ignores him, leaning back from crouching to sit down on the porch, her head swivelling up and around as if inspecting the canopy.

“It’s a nice place,” she says. He snorts, looking back out onto the landscape of sky and descending slope.

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

She goes into the house and he tenses. He doesn’t want her in there. She comes back out and doesn’t say anything about it, which is even worse.

“So, am I going to carry you?” she asks instead, and his gaze snaps from pretending to look at the scenery, back to her.

“You are not going to carry me.”

“Then do you want to walk? I’m not so sure you’ll be able to stay on your feet for that trip. Not to mention how long it’s going to take.”

“I don’t want to go at all.”

Her arms are crossed again but her expression is almost soft. She looks at him for a moment and he feels small, exposed under her gaze.

“Is there anything here you want to take with you?” she asks in that non-negotiable, obvious kind of way as if there simply was never a question as to whether they were gonna go or not.

He scowls for a few seconds. Then he drops it with a sigh. There’s no point. “The blankets would be nice,” he says.

She nods. “Good thinking.”

Then she goes to kneel next to him, saying, “I’m going to pick you up, now,” and he draws back a little, quick to free an arm and push at her hand. She lets him move it back a few inches.

“Can’t we.. can’t we take a ship? One of those … airplanes?”
“I’m not going to leave you here to get a quinjet,” she says. “Your brother would kill me if I let you freeze to death, besides, you’d only try to escape in the meantime and I imagine that would be disastrous for everyone.” A pause. “It’ll be fine, Loki,” she adds, softer and with a small crease of her forehead.

“I can’t freeze to death,” he mutters as she wraps an arm behind his back and the other underneath his knees, picking it all up in a bundle, him holding the blankets tightly together at the ends in front of his chest. He can feel the muscles of her arms through the fabrics, and pressed against their strength he becomes aware of just how diminished his own feel.

She’s glowing as they take off, the same as her palm did back when it was raised to his face in Stark’s backyard. He can feel her energy thrum but is astounded, again, at how far away and dulled it feels with his own so incapacitated. He closes his eyes against the wind.

He doesn’t remember falling asleep but apparently he did because suddenly he’s waking back up - and how unfair is that, he can almost never sleep when he actually wants to but five minutes in the skies with this lady and he’s gone with the wind.

Not to mention how unsettling it feels. He’s in the arms of a stranger, completely at her mercy having been unconscious for who knows how long. She might have - might have looked at his face without him being aware of it, while he was unguarded, or, or something, he just doesn’t like it.

They’ve landed, he notices as he comes to. That must’ve been what woke him. Or maybe she woke him. She’s kneeling with him still in her arms, now, sitting him in the snow (the layer not quite as thick as on his slope, they must be further down in altitude) to lean against, that’s what it is. Bark, against the back of his head. The blankets are getting cold underneath him, snow seeping through and dampening the fabric.

She’s in front of him. Shakes his shoulder a little.

“Loki,” she’s saying. “Wake up.”

He sighs, heavily, choosing to obey just because it’s easier and opening his eyes. She’s looking into them, both hands on his shoulders now. He doesn’t like the weight of them and she’s too close. Maybe it was a good thing he was asleep for the entire trip of being pressed against her body if even this feels like too much.

“We’re close to the town,” she says, getting less muffled with each word. “New Asgard. I was thinking we’d walk the rest of the way if you’re up for it. It’s not far.”

He doesn’t answer. He takes a deep breath, or tries to, suddenly feeling very lightheaded. He nods, with his eyes closed for a few seconds.

Then he pushes one hand against the ground to get to his feet, allowing her hand under his arm to assist. It is indeed very helpful as he comes very close to falling more than once.

Once up, he supports himself against the tree, catching his breath. He would wish she could have waited until he was feeling at least a little better with kidnapping him. Although he had of course been sick this time around for .. how long? .. a pretty long time, already. Maybe interrupting it now was a good thing.

The blankets have fallen to the ground, and she picks one up to drape around his shoulders, stuffing the other two in a bundle under her arm. He gratefully takes hold at the ends of the woollen fabric, keeping them pulled together in front of his chest and the blanket from falling off.
Her arm gathers behind his waist as he starts to move. When he puts weight on his right foot, though, something moves inside it with a soft and sickening crunching sound, and he hisses in pain, drawing it back up. Right, that still hasn’t healed. He didn’t think it was possible for him to actually sprain an ankle simply by tripping and falling but there you go.

He’s careful with it as they move on, only putting the briefest, smallest possible amount of weight on it and using his companion as a crutch to lean against. She doesn’t protest the role.

“They’ll have seen me landing, most likely,” Danvers says as they walk across the rather desolate land clad in darkness - what would be grass, normally, but is now a field of white. It's the place their father left them, before Ragnarök, he knows. It looks very different like this.

“But I haven’t told them I found you,” she continues. “Wouldn’t want to get his hopes up in case it didn’t turn out to be true. Besides, making an entrance can never hurt.”

He could’ve chuckled at that but his mouth is honestly feeling kind of dry. He has the thought that he should be resisting this whole thing but the world is just a bit too hazy for him to really care, so he keeps walking. Towards the dark sky over a darker sea.

They quickly reach far enough for a fisherman’s village by the coast to come into view. Before, it was hidden by the field in front of them, the edge of the cliff, but now it’s suddenly very close and only separated from them by a small slope; a mild incline down. Far to the right is an asphalted road, running down the decline of grassy terrain and into a part of the town like a bay or harbour. The two people stand closest to the left outskirts, the houses and sheds here thinning along a cliffside reaching abruptly down to the coast below, out of view. There is only a small stretch of snowy grass between the pair and the nearest houses.

They make their way down the incline despite his suddenly very stiff limbs, leaning heavily on Danvers to avoid putting pressure on the ankle. So strange that it hasn’t healed yet. It must’ve been at least a week since he injured it.

They reach the bottom, moving across the snow in a both nicely so and excruciatingly slow pace.

Suddenly, a figure appears between the two nearest houses; and another, smaller; and then a third, bigger. The first one stands like paralyzed. Everything feels oddly numb.

The figure begins walking towards them, quickly, too quickly. It stops on a mid-point between slope and houses, waiting as Loki keeps moving.

He stills to stand, still leaning on Danvers, in front of his brother. His face is hard to read, but that might just be that blurry tinge again.

“Hello, Thor,” he finds himself saying. The other just looks at him for a few seconds.

Then Thor says, “You look like hel,” and his voice is gruff and warm. Familiar.

Loki doesn’t answer. He chuckles a little, he thinks. His ears are feeling strangely sort of muffled.

“Where have you been?” Thor asks, and his voice sounds so close to something breaking Loki almost wants to run.

“I found him up north, not very far,” Danvers says, and Loki realizes he’s gone a little too long without answering. Not that he was doing anything else important, in particular. It’s just a little hard to focus. “Living in the mountains.”
“You were - did you -- all along?” Thor sounds almost breathless.

Again, Danvers answers for him after a little too much time has passed, with a shrug, “that’s what he says.”

Then Thor’s hand is cupping his cheek and he doesn’t remember detecting the movement.

“I’m a little .. sick,” he says, as a way of explanation, but it sounds breathy and pathetic even to his own ears.

Thor nods, slowly.

“Maybe you should come inside? Get warm,” he says, still holding their eyes locked. Loki realises he can feel himself shivering. Or trembling, maybe.

He doesn’t really want to come inside but also doesn’t think he has a lot of choice in the matter if being here at all is any indication, so he opts to stay quiet.

Thor places a hand between his shoulder blades, moving to his side to guide them both towards the houses. Loki has to switch hands with keeping the blanket held together, in order to reach up and hold Thor’s shoulder for support as Carol Danvers lets her arm fall away.

“What happened to your leg?” Thor asks, voice sounding strange. Strange how Loki isn't sure.

“Sprained it,” he mumbles.

They walk in quiet the rest of the way.

Between the first houses stands the Valkyrie and Bruce Banner. He’s still green and big. They both smile at Loki and he can’t really figure out how to do the same with his own face.

“Good to see you again, Lackey,” the Valkyrie says. He gives her a nod.

Thor leads him in through the door in a house right by the cliffside. The waves crash against the coast further down, but they’re at least thirty feet above it. The others don’t follow inside.

Thor leads him through another door, into a room with a bed stationed by the wall. It looks like Loki’s own bed but a lot nicer, cleaner a version. Loki realises he’s stopped in front of it and Thor is looking at him again.

“Thought you might like to sleep.” he says. He’s frowning. Loki sits down on the edge of the bed, still holding the blanket wrapped around himself.

Then Thor is kneeling on the floor in front of him. “You could start by taking off your boots,” he says, going for a smile but it looks half-hearted. So does Loki’s attempt at returning it, he imagines, but he does try. Thor unbucks the locks on one boot, pulling it off, then the next. Loki grimaces when the smell hits him - he honestly doesn’t remember the last time he took those off, having slept with them on, even, in an attempt to keep his feet warm. Or maybe because he was just too lazy to take them off. Thor doesn’t as much as twitch, which is impressive.

“Lie down, Loki,” he says, and Loki hesitates for only a moment before doing so. He keeps the blanket wrapped around himself, still, and Thor throws another, heavier one on top of it. There’s a
soft pillow under his head. It’s nice. It smells good.

He isn’t aware of much else before it all fades away into unconsciousness.

Chapter End Notes

More on its way. Thank you for reading <3
Tell the World About Us

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for every comment left on the last two chapters. It's incredibly encouraging, not to mention so very interesting to hear your thoughts.

Here's another chapter. Hope it is to your liking 😊

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He wakes at one point and doesn’t know where he is. It’s dark, pitch black, but everything smells different than he’s used to. The bed feels different, the placement and size different, and his breathing speeds when he finds that he can’t dig out the necessary memories to make sense of it all.

Until there’s a warm hand on his shoulder, a rumbling half-whisper of words he doesn’t really absorb, but that isn’t what matters, anyway. He recognizes the presence, the scent, the sounds. He asks his brother for light and Thor turns on something -- a lantern, Loki thinks but keeps his eyes closed to it, not wanting to actually see anything but just needing it all to be there. Then he falls back to sleep.

At another point, he wakes up to a quiet room. It takes a moment to remember where he is, but he doesn't freak out about it this time. There’s something soft underneath his sprained ankle, keeping it elevated, and he blinks his eyes open to find Thor in an armchair by the bed, asleep. The warm glow of an oil lamp on a bedside table casts a dim light onto his face, slack and partways hidden by strands of sand-coloured hair. Loki closes his eyes again.

His dreams are tranquil, odd mixes of colour blurring in a tapestry of indefinable shapes until something will form - a featureless face twisting in a grimace, all wrong, mouth hanging open and to the side. It draws out until it engulfs everything, something else forming inside; a newborn cow, slick and screaming as it shivers, limbs twisting and stretching until they no longer as much as resemble limbs. Its eyes grow wider, opening and deforming into something else, something new - new faces, too many faces. They're in the room, he's sure of it, and they're looking at him. They're laughing, loud and raucous and he tries to hide inside himself but it doesn't bother them because they see through everything. They laugh and they laugh and they keep laughing as he's nowhere and everywhere and so far from everything, all at the same time.

When he wakes next, he’s alone. It takes a long time to claw his way back into consciousness, sleep pulling back against it. He does fall asleep like that, he thinks, reawakening what feels not long after. Though who knows. He manages to open his eyes.

The oil lamp is no longer burning. Instead, a pale and soft light casts from a small, rectangular window near the ceiling. It's the only window, leaving the room dim and making it feel a little like a cave, but he likes it, it feels calm and secure, like the forts of covers and couch cushions he remembers hiding inside for childhood games. Can almost hear his mother's voice calling from the door, muffled through walls of sheets,
'Loki? Is there a Prince Loki in here?'

giggling, silent shushing.

'How about a Thor? Are there any princes in these quarters at all, or shall I find someone else to gift their dinner?'

After a few minutes of staring into thin air, he decides it’s time to take a little responsibility for himself. Even if he isn’t quite sure why. With a sigh, he pushes to sit, shifting his legs to hang over the side of the bed and in the process knocking over the pillows that had been stacked underneath his foot. Downturned, his ankle throbs with heat, but the fever from yesterday at least seems to have gotten better. He’s not as bone-cold.

Still, when he moves to stand he takes the heavy blanket from the bed with him, wrapped around his body. Everything throbs and aches once up.

When did this all start to get so bad?

He tries to be quiet as he limps towards the door, albeit with some difficulty, pulling it open to look into an empty living room sort-of-thing. There’s a sofa by the wall to the left, opposite the door, a small kitchen further ahead. He leans against the frame for a moment to study the floorboards, the ceiling, the empty mugs on a table by the kitchen. The clothes strewn about. Except for the television, it looks like Thor’s quarters back in Asgard - at least, minus the tapestries and high ceilings; the tall windows and curtains and furniture with golden embroideries. It’s .. the use of the space looks like Thor.

Loki makes for the front door. He needs air.

Outside is quiet, too, the air salty and damp from the sea blowing in. He's emerged on top of a cliffside, the waves crashing below and facing the endless sea and sky. It’s a cloudy day, piercing grey, which is beautiful out here; who would’ve thought there could be so many nuances to the in-between not-colour?

He can see flickers of movement on the harbour down by the water to the right, people readying their boats, carrying supplies across the asphalted roads. Snippets of conversation are carried with the wind to him.

Listening like this, he becomes aware of other voices, closer by and a little muffled. He turns to identify the source, spotting a shed a little away. The one he slept in lies desolate and lonely on the cliffside while this other one is further from the coast, the first in a cluster of houses indicating the edge of the village.

He walks towards it, keeping the blanket pulled around his shoulders, and has no trouble discerning his brother’s voice as he gets closer along with some other familiar ones. Bruce Banner’s. Then the Valkyrie speaks up. There are more but they’re too muffled and quiet for him to recognize if he knows them.

He stops outside the door. His entire body is protesting from being upright. He pulls the blanket a little tighter, putting his hand on the doorknob and turning it.

The room's occupants swivel to face him when the door creaks open. They're seated around a rectangular, wooden table that someone in the village probably made. Otherwise, the place is sparse; dedicated for meetings, likely. There’s a small kitchenette by the wall opposite the door with one of those coffee machines and the scent of the ground beans lingers in the air.
“Hi,” Loki says, stopping in the door to lean against the frame. His eyes travel over the faces. Carol Danvers is there, Bruce and the Valkyrie, Thor and, to his surprise, Captain Rogers of the Avengers, as well. Thor’s back straightens in his place seated at the end of the table furthest from the door.

“Loki,” he greets, only a swallow betraying any unease. For whatever reason he might be uneasy today. “You’re up.”

“So I am.”

There’s quiet for a moment. Loki pushes from the door-frame, limping to the other long side of the table and sitting down. The seats next to him are unoccupied. Roger sits at the end closest to the door and the Valkyrie diagonally across from Loki. Next to her is Banner, who’s got two empty chairs to his left and then Thor. Carol Danvers sits on Loki’s side of the table, two empty chairs away on his right.

“It is a lovely village,” Loki offers. “How many people live here?”


A little over a thousand.

“Do you want some coffee?” Banner asks. Loki blinks.

“Sure.”

The big green man-thing gets up and tramples to the coffee machine. It's right behind Loki, and he finds himself getting uneasy with someone there, out of his field of vision. He can’t resist the urge to turn a little in his chair to watch Banner out the corner of his eyes.

After some seconds, he’s handed a steaming mug of the black liquid, letting go of holding the blanket together to receive it with both hands. He holds it to his nose, sniffing. Has seen people drinking this before but never tried it. He likes the scent of it alright.

He takes a sip and grimaces. It’s .. fine. A little bitter is all. He takes another.

“So this thing I’m interrupting looks like a meeting of some kind,” he then says, looking back up from the mug. “What, pray tell, is the topic?”

Valkyrie is the one to answer.

“A bit of everything,” she says. “Coordinating the village. Organization of the Avengers initiative, keeping it all running smoothly. And then we were, were just talking - about ...” she trails off, narrowing her eyes as if she’s not quite sure what words to choose next. Banner sits back down with a sigh.

“We’ve been trying to figure out how to get back the people we lost,” he says. "For years. We know it’s … ambitious, but we have to try - brainstorming, you know.” He takes a sip of his coffee. “Tried travelling in time for their past selves a few times but, well ...” He trails off.


“You know about that?”

Loki shrugs. “It only makes sense,” he says. “To remove elements of consciousness that would
otherwise affect and react in response to their surroundings.. within such an intricate system as reality it would completely disrupt the logic of the given dimension. It would inevitably become unstable, can really only disintegrate from there, and the people you bring back will disappear as suddenly as they arrived. Correct?”

“So you’re feeling better than yesterday,” Valkyrie mutters.

“That - that is what happens, yeah,” Banner agrees, nodding. “How’d you know?”

Loki raises his eyebrows. “I’ve been studying reality as an art form for little less than a millennium. You’d think Time, and messing with it, would have come up at some point.”

“That’s fair,” Banner admits with a shrug.

Then Rogers speaks, and Loki turns to him. “We meet every once in a while to catch each other up, further new ideas,” he says. “In the hopes of finding something useful, eventually.”

“Then where is that magician you’re all so fond of?” Loki asks, eyebrows raised and sipping his coffee. “Isn’t time sort of his favourite topic?”

“We’ve been trying to come up with something for years,” Rogers replies, in that curt and pretentious way he speaks. “As Bruce said. This was just a spontaneous gathering for those who had the time.”

Loki cocks his head, for a second or two letting his eyes deliberately flick across the meagre number of five, then back at Rogers. He lets a smirk grow just enough to be noticeable. “So you’re giving up, but slowly, is what you’re saying.”

Roger’s expression tightens. “No,” he says. “We’re not. That’s why we’re here.”

Loki gives a small shrug, returning his eyes to the coffee, cupping the mug with both hands and letting the heat spread through his palms. He’s liking the thing better with every sip.

“Where have you been for all this time, anyway?” Rogers then speaks again, voice harder. “You know, running off like that created a lot more problems on top of the ones we already had. Not least for Thor.”

Loki’s gaze has snapped back up to him. “You didn’t have to make it into a problem,” he says. “You could’ve just let me be.”

“Loki,” Thor says from his end of the table, and Loki’s turns to glare at him. How dare he? It’s the Captain who’s being an insolent prick but of course, of course, Thor is going to blame Loki.

It doesn’t seem Thor had planned anything more to say as his mouth hangs open, no words escaping. Loki decides to keep his own from running any further and snaps it shut.

“Maybe Loki can help,” Danvers then says, voice sober and neutral, looking at the Captain. “Maybe he has some new ideas he could bring to the table. If he wants to, of course,” she adds.

He’s not so sure he does.

He wants to make a dramatic exit and storm out, so he grabs the mug in one hand to take with him, scraping the chair back. But the moment he gets to his feet he’s already swaying, and he has to shoot out a hand to steady himself on the table. He spills a little coffee. That’s a shame.
Thor stands as well, not moving from his place, and Loki shoots him a dark glare before limping to the door as hurriedly as he’s able.

Nobody follows, to his luck, despite that damn injury making it laughably easy. He shuts the door and walks away in a straight line ahead, not sure where he’s going. Not sure why he’s even here at all.

He ends up along the steep cliffside, away from the houses. It gets steeper the farther he gets and eventually, he has to sit down, too breathless and exhausted to walk any further. He wants to keep going but he can’t. His magic isn’t working. If he did try to get away, they would just track him down again - or, more likely, find him before then, passed out in an unceremonious heap some feet up the hill.

He realises he left the blanket back in the meeting room as the snow begins to seep through his clothes. Damn.

Speaking of clothes, he'll need some new ones. The ones he's wearing are all worn a lot thinner and are much dirtier than he’d realised. He feels a surge of embarrassment when he manages to focus on the world outside of his own head for long enough to notice how bad they smell.

A creaking of the snow alerts him of someone approaching, and he turns to see his brother walking up the hill. He’s wearing a heavy coat and a thick woollen scarf. With a sigh, Loki looks back out toward the horizon.

“You should have worn some shoes,” Thor calls, and Loki looks down - oh. His feet are bare and colourless in the snow. He's not sure how he's failed to notice until now.

Thor drops down a few feet away, with a thump.

“I don’t know how you do it, Loki,” he says, rubbing at his upper arms to create friction heat. “Aren’t you getting cold?”

“A little,” Loki says.

“Here,” Thor says after a moment, and Loki turns to see him unravelling the scarf, then handing it towards him. “For your feet. Wouldn’t want you to lose a toe.”

Loki hesitates, then takes it. He wraps it around the icy feet, being careful with the ankle. It feels nice. Even if he doesn’t think it’s possible for him to actually lose a toe from cold.

They sit in quiet for a little while like that, looking at the sea. It is eerily similar to the last time they were here, or at least somewhere in the vicinity, watching as their father fell apart into a mist of golden light.

Thor is the first to speak up.

“I’ve stopped drinking, you know,” he says. Pauses. “Or, most of the time, anyway. Stopped entirely for a while. It’s not - it isn’t .. a problem, anymore.”

He sounds guilty, kind of. Or maybe it’s shame.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Loki replies. Thor didn’t really have to tell him, though. It’s obvious just from the way he carries himself, the way his eyes are less dull.

“Valkyrie has been a great help with it,” Thor continues. "She’s doing really well. I mean - it’s been
eight years since you last saw her. A lot has happened.” Loki can feel him looking but doesn’t return the
gaze. “She’s queen, you know.”

That gets his attention. Loki’s eyes widen, and he turns to look at his brother. “You married her?”

What else has he missed?

But Thor blinks, drawing back a little. Then his expression breaks in a startled laugh.

“No, no - I didn’t marry her,” he sputters. “It’s not like that - we’re, we’re only friends. I mean, I’m
not king. I gave her the throne.” He shrugs. “She was better suited for it, anyway. And I had other
things I’d rather do.”

Loki can feel himself frowning. “Did she want it?”

“I didn’t force it on her,” Thor says. “I asked, of course. She said yes.” He smiles, and it looks self-
deprecating. “She was doing most of it already, anyway, you saw how I wasn’t very .. at the time
…” he grimaces. “She’s doing a remarkable job of it, anyway.”

Loki looks away again.

“What other things, then?” he asks, studying the hazy line where sea encounters sky.

“What?”

“You said you had other things to do.”

“Oh,” Thor says. “Yes. I was in space.”

“That’s vague.”

“No, I - you know what I mean. Have you met Peter Quill?” Thor asks. Loki frowns. “Rocket, the
rabbit?”

“I don’t think so. Also, that’s a ridiculous name.”

“I didn’t mean it like ‘Rocket the Rabbit’, just that he is a rabbit.”

“Not getting better.”

“Fine, so you don’t know them. How about … Gamora, then?”

Loki twitches before he can stop himself. “I know of Gamora,” he says after a pause.

“Yes …” Thor pronounces slowly. “Well, I was helping Quill search for her.”

Loki turns to look at his brother again. “Why?”

Thor appears to be studying him rather intently, for some reason. Then he blinks, snapping himself
out of the stare. “They’re together, in … love, I think. She was brought back with the time travel,
along with Thanos. The stones’ presence stabilized her being there for some time, is the theory, but
then she left or something, suddenly she was gone. So Quill wanted to look for her, see if she was
out there - then we learned about the timelines collapsing and, well .. she’s one of the people we’re
trying to bring back.”

Loki nods, keeping his opinion of bringing her back to himself. “Who else?” he asks.
“You were there at Tony Stark’s funeral,” Thor says, looking away. “Agent Romanoff, too. Natasha.”

They’re quiet for a little while again.

“You do look better,” Loki says, just to acknowledge what his brother has managed - but Thor snorts.

“You mean my body,” he says with an insincere smile directed at the horizon. Loki very nearly rolls his eyes. Of course, that would be Thor’s main focus - he has always been irritatingly vain when it comes to his body. In actuality, insecure, so careful to keep it perfectly sculpted and in shape, to accentuate his natural build and make it as impressing as possible. Which didn’t exactly make Loki more satisfied with his build, if Thor, Thor, didn’t think he was impressing enough as was to be satisfied.

He appears to have lost weight since they last saw each other, especially around the stomach which is probably good for his internal organs and all that, and which also isn’t curious in the slightest if he’s no longer binge-drinking - but that wasn’t the point.

“No,” Loki says, sighing. “I meant more as … in general, better. Like you’re better. You look like it, or - seem like it. Whatever.”

“Oh,” Thor says, smile dwindling to something a little embarrassed, maybe. “Well .. yes, thank you. I am better.”

Loki can’t help an old surge of jealousy shoot through him. Back in the hotel room, he’d thought that he would be the one to help Thor out of his grief. He was back, now, and he was going to make things right. He would finally be a brother worthy of the title.

Instead, he hid from every chance he had to step up, leaving Thor to deal alone (again) and, ultimately, ran off.

And Thor - Thor got on just fine without him.

“I am better,” Thor repeats, adding this time, “though I’ve missed you a lot.”

Loki swallows. He can feel pressure behind his eyes fixed on the sea and doesn’t want to acknowledge it. He can’t think of anything to say, not anything appropriate to the situation, anyway, and stays quiet.

After a little while like that, Thor speaks up. His voice is gentle.

“Maybe we should go inside,” he suggests. Loki realizes he’s not really breathing and stops doing that. But he doesn’t move to stand, either. He doesn’t know what to do with himself at all.

It was so easy, all this, back on his mountain slope - there, he didn’t have to do anything. Nothing at all. There was nobody there to scold him for sitting too long in the snow, no one to shake their heads at him when it caused a very predictable bout of cystitis. No one to talk to, to be held accountable to, to be obliged to take into account or respond to.

“Loki?” Thor asks, and Loki sighs, pulling his knees further into his chest. Resting his face in them, as if he can hide from sight that way. He closes his eyes. Even better.

The tension doesn’t leave him, though. He’s painfully aware of Thor’s presence by his side despite doing his very best to fade away into nothing.
Eventually, Thor puts a hand on his shoulder and says “you’re very cold, brother”, and Loki finally obliges with an irritated “fine”, getting himself up and brushing snow from the clothes. He hands Thor back his scarf and doesn’t look him in the eyes as he begins walking down. Not the blue nor the … orange one.

Back in the house, Thor sets the coffee mug which he apparently had the presence of mind to bring back onto a table, holding the door open for them both.

“Do you want a shower, maybe?” he asks. “There’s warm water.”

Thor leads them through another door, into the bathroom. He places a towel on the closed toilet lid, instructing Loki in how to use the knobs, one for heat, one for pressure. Then he leaves, shutting the door, and Loki locks it.

The pressure can be turned up high, as can the heat, and Loki finds he doesn’t want either. He takes off his clothes, throwing them in a bundle on the low wooden bench in the wall. It feels exposed, being entirely naked like that, in the middle of the white room and knowing that someone else is right on the other side of the door. Loki tries to ignore all that entirely, anything below the neck, holding one arm tightly wrapped around his middle as he adjusts the knobs with the other. Doing so until the water is nicely warm, a soft stream on the skin of his hand. Then he goes in, shutting the curtain and letting the water flow over his hair, shutting his eyes.

There’s a knock on the door, and he realizes he’s been standing in the same spot for a long time. His legs are aching, shaking a little. He shoots a hand out to lean on the wall.

“Are you all right?” he can hear Thor call from the other side.

Loki clears his throat. “Yes.”

There’s a pause. He moves from under the stream to let it fall on his sternum instead, brushing wet hair away from his face and wiping off the water.

“Have you found the soaps?” Thor calls.

He hasn’t looked for them.

“To the left.”

Loki turns his head and spots a small indent in the tiled wall, a little shelf with a plethora of different bottles. He picks three different ones in bold colours. There are pictures of flowers on one of them. Upon opening it, a nice, mild smell wafts to his nostrils. That one is for the hair, he reads on the back but decides to just use it all around.

He cleans through his hair several times, applying soap and rinsing out, repeating, and repeating again, unable to shake the feeling that it’s still dirty. After five times, he stops, rationalizing that logically speaking now it must be good enough.

He notices that his fingers have gotten wrinkly from the water and cuts off the stream. The towel is large, and after drying off his hair and body, he wraps it around his shoulders. He should really brush his teeth at some point, soon.

Thor sits on the couch when Loki re-enters the living room. It doesn't look like he's doing anything.

“I don’t think you’ve ever showered for quite this long before,” he says with a try for a smile.
Loki frowns. “I wasn’t that long.”

“It’s been an hour and a half.”

Loki blinks. “That is .. lengthy,” he says, slowly. He glances at the door to the bedroom to change the subject. “Do you have any clothes I could borrow?”

Thor cocks his head. “What’s wrong with your own?”

“My - my magic isn’t at its best.”

“That’s why your foot isn’t healing,” Thor concludes. Loki shrugs.

Then Thor seems to remember himself, getting up with a “right, one second” and disappearing into the bedroom. Loki sits on the other end of the couch in the meantime. Through the single layer of fabric of the towel, he can feel his tailbone jutting uncomfortably against the otherwise supposed-to-be-soft cushion, and he finds he can’t quite reposition to make it comfortable.

Thor returns with something similar to what Loki was wearing before but a lot less gross - pants, something long-sleeved and a sweater, underwear and socks. So far, it seems the remaining Asgardians have taken in a standard Norwegian way of dressing, or at least both Thor and the Valkyrie are in similarly simple clothing.

Thor puts the bundle on the couch and Loki lets the towel drop to his waist in order to pull on the shirt, doing so quickly and following the movement of the towel as it falls so his chest won't be exposed. He can feel Thor’s eyes on him and his own cheeks heating, and he doesn’t feel like talking about it. He avoided the bathroom mirrors for a reason.

He doesn’t think Thor has time to notice the scarring in Loki’s middle, in the dim lighting and with his fast movements.

He pulls on the boxers with the towel still around his waist, which isn’t easy, and it very nearly falls off him entirely a few times. Then the pants. Comfortably covered, he looks up at Thor with a raised eyebrow and his brother clears his throat, averting his gaze. Loki pulls on the sweater.

“That’s why your foot isn’t healing,” Thor concludes. Loki shrugs.

Thor makes ‘bacon and eggs’, saying it as if they’re really only one word, and Loki tries, he really does - but just the smell of it makes him nauseous. Sitting at the table, he manages a single bite before he has to pause, holding a fisted hand to his mouth to stop nausea rising further.

“Have you had breakfast yet?” Thor asks.

Breakfast. What a weird concept. He hasn’t been doing that ‘structured meals’ thing in a while.

“Not yet,” Loki says, looking at his hands.

Thor stays quiet, no longer looking at him.
He tries for another bite when he doesn’t have the patience to wait any longer, not to mention having to endure that expression on Thor’s face. The moment it hits his tongue, though, it feels as if the food sends little shocks through his mouth, salivary glands going amok as his body prepares to bring it back up the moment he’ll swallow, and he has to spit it back out onto the plate. He keeps his gaze down, can feel it hardening on the table. Can’t even eat a single plate of food.

“I think - I need to sleep,” he mutters. “Can I borrow the bed? Just for a little while.”

He doesn’t look up. Eventually, Thor mumbles a “sure” in reply. Loki gets up and flees to the bedroom.

He lies facing the wall, knowing full well he won’t be able to escape to sleep. After a little while, he hears the front door go, followed by quiet in Thor’s absence.

It gets dark outside the small window, though in all honesty, he doesn’t really notice. He hears the door in the living room open again, some bustling around. Thor’s voice, and someone else, too. He tunes it out.

The door opens, later, and Loki lies for a moment debating on whether to pretend to be sleeping or not. He turns, sitting up.

Thor stops in the frame. He clears his throat.

“You can sleep in here if you want, tonight,” he says. “I’ll take the couch.”

“You don’t have to,” Loki says.

“No, I know, it’s fine. Val is here and it’ll probably get late, anyway. Do you .. want to come out and join us?”

“I’m okay. Tired.”

Thor nods, slowly. “Alright.”

“Thank you. For the bed.”

“It’s no problem.”

Thor hesitates in the door instead of leaving. His voice is quieter when he speaks next.

“Loki, do you .. is there something I can do?” he asks. Loki finds himself unable to keep looking at him and averts his eyes. He shakes his head. When Thor still doesn’t move to go, just standing there, he lies back down to face the wall.

“I did miss you, brother,” Thor says behind him. “And I’m glad to have you here. No matter what you may be thinking.”

Then he leaves. Loki’s heart races because he knows Thor speaks the truth. He also knows that truth can shift so very easily and quickly. And if there’s anyone who’s bound to oppose, dismember and finally antagonize anything of sincerity, then surely it must be Loki.

He falls asleep hours later, after the last voices from the living room have died out and the soft glow shining under the door gone. In the dark, he feels a little less exposed.
Start with sleep, end with sleep. A nice circle.

Thank you for reading - it means so much to me <3<3 Do feel free to leave any thoughts and commentary down below, I love it.

Taking it a little slow with the plot and pacing, trying to follow a tempo I feel is natural and realistic, you know. There'll be more characters the further we get, by the way - for example, more Valkyrie, Steve and Carol in the upcoming one. Planning on some more Bruce further on ahead and no doubt a lot of others, too :-)

Next chapter on the way.
Golden Seams

Chapter Summary

Another day in New Asgard. Brunnhilde is a boss queen. Carol and Thor and Steve and Bruce are cool. Loki is still a mess. He's also cool, but he's a mess.

Btw, Steve Rogers never went back to Peggy in this story. I mean I understand why they made that choice but as the saying goes .. ahem, I've elected to ignore that decision.

Chapter Notes

Hello! Welcome back!

Before we start, I feel like I need to say: there'll be some eating related issues in this one. Malnutrition is tricky, and not getting adequate sustenance for a prolonged period of time can really mess with the brain. I wanted to address that, seeing as Loki hasn't been eating and all that.

It isn't like the focus. Really, it's just another aspect of his emotional state and such a tangible way in for me to portray the whole situation. The fact that he's been so far from physicality like that, just not alive enough to care to eat, almost translucent; but now he's with real people again. In the real world, in a real body, having to actually respond to and interact with his surroundings.

Anyway, thought I'd let you know. I hope you enjoy the chapter. It's a longer one, I think? I'll be finished editing the next one soon, too :-)

Oh and also, there'll be some explanation of how he came back in this one. I considered cutting it out, making it less .. like, less head-on explaining. But I kinda wanted to get the chapter out. And it might not even get better from changing it entirely, so. Hoping it's alright.

Thank you for reading! <3

He doesn’t wake from any nightmares in the span of hours he does manage to sleep. Which is comforting, considering Thor and the Valkyrie are likely both sleeping right next door, separated from him only by a thin wall.

True enough, when light returns in the window upon dawn and Loki tiptoes to the door, pulling it open without as much as a creek, there is Thor on the couch and Valkyrie on some spare mattress on the floor. Another involuntary, and irrational, stab of jealousy at the friendship they’ve obviously
developed in his absence. She was the one who helped Thor with the drinking, he’d said. Was there. Being actually helpful.

Loki knows he’s caught when a floorboard creaks under his foot, almost free from the house with one hand already on the knob to the front door. He doesn’t hear anything move behind him but can feel eyes on his back and stiffens. It’s not like he’s doing anything. Somehow, it still feels as though he ought to apologize promptly and go back to bed.

He turns to face the Valkyrie sitting upright with her head cocked and eyebrows raised.

“Sneaking off?” she asks in only a half-whisper, too harsh in the quiet, but fortunately Thor doesn’t stir. You never know with him; one time he might be sleeping light as an assassin and wake at the slightest gust of air, the next he wouldn’t be roused if the palace was burning. Still, Loki is not one to judge as he’s much the same. Brothers, after all.

“No,” he whispers back. He’s aware that he’s looking terribly guilty, standing a little hunched, hands out from his body as if ready to grab something and run, so he adds, “it isn’t as if I could get very far, anyway.”

She narrows her eyes in thought for a few seconds. Then shrugs. “That’s a fair point.”

Valkyrie keeps looking at him as if expecting something.

“I just want some air,” he eventually whispers resignedly, dropping his shoulders.

She hesitates, then nods. He doesn’t wait for her to lie back down to pull open the door and flee outside.

He finds his boots by the door. They’re pleasantly smell-free from the air and low temperature, so he pulls them on, fastening the buckles and doing his best to ignore the uncomfortable pressure on the injured ankle.

It takes a while, with his slow progress of limping along the cliffside and lines of houses but eventually, he reaches the foot of the decline. He steps onto the asphalt of the harbour, separated from the sea with only a little vertical stretch of rock foundations. He stands there in the quiet for a little bit to enjoy the breeze tinged with sprays of seawater as he gets his breathing back under control.

He continues to walk, going left. Behind what looks like a small church and past it, to move along on a stretch of cemented ground following the coastline.

It deteriorates further ahead, the road, becoming raw cliff and rocky coastline instead. In that pleasant distance and separation from any houses or civilisation, he sits on a piece of the black rock with his back against the cliffside rising in a massive wall, on top of which Thor’s shed is located somewhere. He drops his head back to rest on the cold rock, closing his eyes and listening as waves rumble in from the sea to crash against the shore.

He has a vague sense of deja vu when he hears something close by and blinks his eyes open to spot a figure on his right, walking along the same path as he did. Loki recognizes her just as he did back on the slope.

The village is still mostly quiet, though he’s heard a couple or more boats take off, maybe to go fishing for the day or reel in their nets. He has yet to meet any of its inhabitants.
Carol Danvers reaches the end of the cemented road and begins climbing over the rocks. It takes her laughably less time than it did him, only maybe five seconds later settling on a flat surface a few feet to his side. She leans back against the cliff wall as well, with a sigh, facing the ocean.

They’re quiet for a little while. Loki is aware of how tense he is; he doesn’t know what she wants. Then Danvers speaks up.

“I was raised in Beverly, a town north of Boston,” she tells him. “America, up north.”

Loki knows where Boston is. He stays quiet, waiting.

“We lived not far from the coast,” she continues. “Whenever we had time off, my brothers and I would go there to swim - sometimes we’d end up just sitting in the grass and watch the shore.” In his peripheral vision, she smiles quietly. “I always thought it was the most beautiful of places. The colours, the salty wind, the way the sky seemed to stretch over everything, endless.”

She pauses. “It’s just the sea, you know,” she says. “There are a lot of those around the galaxies. But it really is incredible just how different shores can be, I mean, Beverley was way different from this. It felt like this beacon, while everything here is so wild. The air is ... it’s different.”

Loki keeps his gaze unmoving, locked onto the waves. He’s still not sure if she has any intention behind the sentiment, any intention despite offering something up for conversation in spite of the risk that she might not get anything back. Something personal like that no less. Leaving herself vulnerable. He can feel his own anger rising in his chest - what does she expect him to do with that?

But furthermore, and deeper down, he admires the bravery of it. Or maybe, really, the way she seems to be self-contained even without his acknowledgement in the silence. No need for bravery. As if she’s fine, as if her world won’t crumble if he doesn’t give something back.

“It’s not so different from Asgard,” he finds himself saying out loud. She doesn’t move or respond in any way to indicate she heard. He clears his throat a little. “Depends on where on Asgard, of course. Just, Norway .. at least up here, there’s a lot of similarity.”

His face feels tight like it wants to lock down on itself, disappear into its own skin. It feels like too much to share even that little bit of information, like she can guess all his thoughts and secrets just from that. Rather to the contrary, though, she seems wholly unaffected by his words, and so Loki finds himself feeling like he’s not saying enough, like he’s boring her and maybe he should be quick share more.

“That must be comforting,” she speaks before he can, looking too relaxed against the cliff. “If it resembles home a little.”

Loki tries to subtly mirror her dropped shoulders, the way her hands rest effortlessly limp over her knees, her face set in something calm and bordering indifferent.

It’s hard; he’s become too nervous throughout these later years. And he used to be so good at all this.

“It’s okay,” he says.

“Is that the reason you chose to go here? Norway, the mountains, I mean.”

“That was a bit of a random decision, really,” he lies. “I’ve always liked cold climates better.”

The last is true, but he doesn’t doubt for a second that she sees straight through the first. He could’ve gone anywhere, here; Russia, Alaska, Finland, Iceland; he could’ve gone off Midgard, if he wanted,
and he’s not under any illusion that she doesn’t know it. Better than having to say it out loud, though.

Quiet for a moment. “Thor said your father picked this place out before he died,” Danvers says. Her voice is softer. “For the new settlement.”

Loki bites his tongue for some seconds. Then he drops the attempt, telling her, “he’s not really - wasn’t my father,” and isn’t sure why he feels the need to say it. It’s not like he especially cares what she thinks, anyway.

“Okay,” she responds, nodding slowly. “Were you adopted, then?”

He shrugs in dismissal with a mumbled “you could say that”, hoping she’ll let it go. He made his point. But instead, she turns her head to look at him curiously, as if trying to scrutinise his thoughts out from his expression. He keeps his own eyes fastened on the shore, imagining with no little amount of bitterness how it must all explain rather a lot to her.

The way she’s looking at him as if she can now see it, everything falling into place. Because of course, that’s what’s wrong, why his presence skews the world wherever he exists: he doesn’t actually belong anywhere.

Eventually, he snaps, “what, did Thor fail to mention we’re not actually family?” and looks at her. Her eyebrows shoot up.

“Can’t say it’s come up,” she says, “and definitely not put like that.”

A mirthless huff of a laugh escapes him and he shifts his gaze back to the sea. When he speaks again it sounds frustratingly sour.

“Yes, well, we were raised together, anyway. To be kings, they said,” stop talking “- even if all along, only one of us was ever meant to,” he continues. “Not that I particularly wanted to sit on some oversized stone-chair all day, for the rest of my life.”

His gaze is hardening on the waves. He’s over all this.

Danvers cocks her head. “The queen, then - Thor’s mom as well, right? Was she your birth mother?” she asks, and Loki feels a little like shouting at her because he doesn’t want to talk about this, but it’s there alongside a sinking feeling in his chest which overpowers most else. So he sighs, dropping his gaze to study the black cliff under his boots.

“No,” he says. Then adding, just because he couldn’t leave that as it was, either, “still, she was very kind. A very kind person.”

The following quiet is almost suffocating. In it, he struggles to not begin scratching frantically at his arms, his hands, his legs; just to be doing something. He ends up crossing his arms to keep them contained.

“My father used to beat my two older brothers,” Danvers then says. She’s looking straight ahead again. “He was .. a prick, a damn prick.” A pause. “My mother died when I was young, don’t remember much about her.”

“What about your brothers?” Loki finds himself asking.

“One died in the military,” she says. “The other is alive, but it’s .. complicated. He’s not too happy with me. I kind of abandoned anything to do with that family as soon as I got the chance, was gone for a long time.”
“Where did you go?” Loki asks, and it’s .. not only out of politeness. He finds that he can’t remember the last time he ever just talked like this with anyone but Thor, recently, or Frigga, earlier. It was never really a thing he did much, not his strong suit to converse in such a casual way, without hidden agendas or political games at play, one on one, being honest. Or maybe people just didn’t want to talk to him. That could be it.

“I joined the airforce,” Danvers says. “That’s where all the crazy started happening, after a few years. Absorbed the core of a lightspeed engine, was brainwashed for six years living with the Kree to join their forces. I’ve been spending a lot of time regaining the memories they took. Turns out my mother was really Kree, so the engine actually only amplified and activated genes I already had.”

Loki would offer platitudes, or maybe sympathies, but he’s not really sure which ones or how. Most such things don’t ever actually offer anything of value, anyway.

So again, there’s silence. He’s not as tense, he notices, as he was when she first sat down.

Danvers says after a while, “Thor has said a little about how you came back to life, back then after Thanos,” and Loki looks at her. “Maybe you could come to the meeting later today, explain it in more detail? If you want.”

He feels a tired smile tugging his lips. He’d tried explaining it to Thor back after the battle and since, in the days following, because Thor had asked. It did never really seem like he actually absorbed anything. The copious amounts of alcohol he was consuming had no doubt not been of any help in that department. Admittedly, it had still all felt very blurry and incoherent to Loki himself, at the time.

“Sure,” he says in response. “I can do that.”

When Danvers proposes they go back, he manages to stand on his own despite his legs aching with the effort. This is what happens, anyway, when you fail to eat for long enough - he just hadn’t realized it’d been so long.

He’s already dreading the prospect of having to try again, nausea from yesterday still like a ghost in the roof of his mouth. But he’s not on his own, anymore, and that means having to do stuff that you don’t care about it or want to. He can’t sit on the porch for days at a time, anymore, waiting to eventually wither away. Away to nothing, to fall apart and blow like ash with the winds. To be spread across the icy mountainside, nameless and faceless, a story forever secret and untold, and only ever his.

He’s not on his own, and that means having to do things you don’t want to do -- like walking up a hill and feeling utterly and absolutely pathetic beside someone in much better shape than yourself, for example, someone healthy and not borderline-dying.

He has to sit down halfway up, his face hot and breaths almost wheezing, dropping with a thump to the ground in the middle of a step and with no trace of elegance whatsoever. He doesn’t say anything to Danvers, figuring she can just go on ahead if she wants to, and also because he’d just rather not speak aloud right now. Acknowledge the fact that he can’t walk up a hill.

This is what happens, it’s not as if he didn’t know. People of their kind can survive a long time (a long time) without nourishment, but to sustain their bodies in daily functioning, they also need a lot of energy from intake, and magic practitioners especially so. Lacking it, everything unnecessary will dwindle (read; movement, muscles, daily functioning, brain power) in favour of overall longevity, basic survival and resistance being maintained. Not necessarily pleasant survival, but survival nonetheless.
Danvers stops to wait, though, which is annoying.

“I think - I,” Loki gasps, still breathless after half a minute or so, “think I might - might sit here. For a little while.” He goes for a deeper inhale, holding it for a second before releasing again. “You can just go.”

“It’s okay,” she says. “I’m not in a hurry.”

He sighs on an exhale, dropping his head.

But maybe it’s for the best; he isn’t sure he’d have ever gotten up again if her waiting hadn’t been there to motivate.

She takes him straight to Thor’s place, even though he never said he wanted to go there. Stopping outside it, she says “the meeting will be back where you found us yesterday. Before noon. Thor can just take you.”

Then she leaves.

For a second he considers just staying outside. He can’t hide by the water forever but at least until the meeting, and then he wouldn’t have to face Thor. He can hear muffled voices from inside, and the prospect of only the waves and wind for company is honestly a much more welcome pastime - especially on top of this not long but still, for some reason, incredibly draining conversation with Danvers. Or maybe that was just all the walking.

He decides not to hide and isn't sure why. Something about Thor’s frown being etched into his mind’s eye, it somehow getting louder with his every thought of running.

He pushes the door open and looks at an empty sofa. He takes a step forward to peer behind the door, which opens right, finding Thor and Valkyrie both in the kitchen and turned to him.

“Good morning, Lackey,” Valkyrie greets with a throw up of her chin. Thor has one hand on the grip of a pan and the other up in a wave, spatula and all. He’s standing awkwardly twisted to turn from the stove.

Loki wills himself to turn his eyes to the ceiling with a sigh, the most casual gesture he can manage. “Will you be sticking with that name forever?” he says, limping to sit in a chair by the table with its back against the wall. Full view of the room. No windows behind him. “I do have another one, you know.”

“Nah, I’ll save that one for your brother to use,” Valkyrie responds, returning to the chopping of something. Vegetables, it looks like. Thor has one hand on the grip of a pan and the other up in a wave, spatula and all. He’s standing awkwardly twisted to turn from the stove.

Loki pushes the door open and looks at an empty sofa. He takes a step forward to peer behind the door, which opens right, finding Thor and Valkyrie both in the kitchen and turned to him.

“This pan is hot,” Thor cuts in, back still turned but twisting his head to glare at her. “And that’s not true, I don’t tell embarrassing baby stories.”

“The pan is hot,” Thor cuts in, back still turned but twisting his head to glare at her. “And that's not true, I don’t tell embarrassing baby stories.”

“Trust me, he has his moments,” Valkyrie insists with a waggle of eyebrows at Loki, before turning to pour the contents of her cutting board onto the pan, vegetables sizzling.

Loki is not sure whether to believe what she's saying at all. He’d rather gotten the impression Thor avoided talking about him on the whole with any of his friends.
And then, if it is true, he’s not sure how to feel about anyone being told embarrassing baby-stories about him. If Asgard had to burn, couldn’t such things have burned with it?

“Relax, Lackey, it’s not that bad,” Valkyrie drawls, turned to face him again, and Loki realizes he zoned out. “In fact, it’s pretty cute; dandy, all that. You don’t have to look so aghast.”

Loki blinks, moving his eyes back to her in a glare. “I am not aghast. I was just distracted.”

“Yeah, yeah. Sure,” the Valkyrie says, albeit with a glint of humour in her eyes. He scowls.

Then the smells from fried vegetables and what is likely eggs hit him, and he has to concentrate, swallowing hard and reminding himself not to shoot up a hand and pinch his nostrils shut. It’s just so strong, the smell.

“So,” Valkyrie begins again, after a moment, tone light. “Thor says you’re having a hard time getting started with the whole ‘eating things’ thing. Not surprising, of course.” Loki finds himself fighting not to drop his eyes to the table. Under its surface, he picks insistently at his left palm with the nail of his thumb. “Anyway, I proposed to him we start with some fruit,” she continues. “That should be easier on the system.”

Loki blinks. That’s … actually nice of her.

“Yes,” he says. “Alright.”

With a surge of will, he pushes to his feet to go and cut some fruit, he supposes. But the Valkyrie waves a hand in dismissal.

“I can make it for you,” she says brusquely, and he hesitates, leaning with a hand on the table. “Already up here. Would you like some water?”

He sits back down, looking at her. When did she become this nice?

“...Yes,” he says. His can feel his eyes narrowing, so he averts them. “Thank you.”

He sips carefully from the glass, realizing the only thing he had to drink yesterday was half a cup of coffee (and what does that speak of his habits before then). Halfway through it, he stops, deciding to leave space in his already protesting stomach for what is bound to inevitably come.

He’s not hungry. He tries to bite back the frustration of having to eat despite it because it’s ridiculous, he knows he needs to. He’s just not hungry. He feels like an unruly and stubborn child being forced to eat their breakfast, and it makes his fingers twitch. It’s ridiculous. It’s only food, he’s supposed to eat it, get better, all that. It’s not as if he enjoys being about to fall over every moment he’s on his feet.

The bitterness only grows, however, as first the pan is placed on the table, containing something large, heavy looking and with a strong smell (an omelette, Thor calls it), followed by bread, butter, cheese, a pitcher of water. The Valkyrie places a bowl with neatly cut up fruit in front of him as both she and Thor sit down, and Loki is painfully, embarrassingly aware of his own rising contempt for the situation.

It’s simply that he finds his body protesting at the sight of it all. His mouth constricting like it’s trying to close up enough to keep everything out, his head getting foggy as he frowns at the bowl in front of him. He doesn’t want any of this. They can’t make him.
He can feel Thor glancing from the next chair and picks up the fork, half in anger, half in contempt for the very same anger. His hand is shaking a little, he notices, the fork trembling with it. Which, of course, only serves to irritate further. It is fruit. He cannot and will not break down over a bowl of fruit.

He pierces a perfectly cut piece of apple. Red skinned, unblemished. Apple, that’s light, simple. Humble. He’s suddenly very thankful to Valkyrie for cutting it like this, no ragged edges, nothing smeared or mushy but instead, all very .. intentional. Orderly.

A moment later, he scolds himself for needing his fruit to be orderly.

He shoves the apple into his mouth - or maybe he didn’t shove it but it felt rushed and grotesque nonetheless, too fast, too large a movement. He forces himself to bite down, and again, chewing slowly. It’s just fruit. It feels like rubber in his mouth. He swallows, and it feels strange in his body.

It was fine yesterday. He ate the egg, his body rejected it, that wasn’t his fault. Or, well it was, but not like his choice in the immediate situation. Why is it such an issue now?

Loki keeps his eyes down for the entire duration of the meal while Thor and Valkyrie pick up lighthearted conversation, no doubt to give him privacy he shouldn’t be needing in the first place. Somehow it still feels like they’re supervising him (because they are), watching him from the corners of their eyes. He feels exposed and naked as if they can see his every thought and twitch of emotion, and he doesn’t like it.

Luckily, the fruit doesn’t trigger any sort of physical urge to throw it back up, and so he keeps piercing pieces of apple, peach, banana; chewing them slowly, swallowing and keeping it down. Trying not to think too much about the strange feeling in his stomach; too heavy, expanding it.

He likes the colour scheme of it, all soft reds and sandish beige; pale, calm colours. Nothing too stark or out of place. He keeps his mind as empty as possible and avoids the water because that makes it worse.

When did this even happen?

Then all of a sudden, he’s picking up the last piece from the bottom of the bowl (peach) putting it in his mouth and chewing it, then swallowing. He blinks.

It feels odd. As if this all happened too fast, hurried. No time to think anything through. It feels all wrong like he wasn’t supposed to have done that; he was fine without it. It was all there, right there in the bowl and now it’s gone and that means it’s inside of him, and it’s just too much.

It feels like he’s in deep, deep water and doesn’t know how to swim. It was calm and hazy, before; he was floating, placid in the weightless quiet. Safe because he was already falling. Chaotic but .. dulled. Far away, behind a curtain.

Now, he’s punched a hole in the tranquillity, sending fractures out through everything. It’s disrupting inside him, inside his body; it’s inside him, and he can’t control it, it’s too late for that.

It breaks his weightlessness, making him feel everything. His body is reacting, everything is suddenly physical and real and too close. He shouldn’t have done that. He’s inviting the world into his body, and he shouldn’t have done it.

But he should, that was the whole point. He’s been forgetting to eat and now he needs to get back into the habit, he was supposed to eat and now he’s done it, that’s good. So why, then, does he feel like he wants to break down and cry over a goddamn bowl of fruit -
“- Loki?”

Valkyrie’s voice is soft from across the table and he blinks back into existence. He looks up, feeling like a child under her gaze. He manages an “mh-hm?”, furrowing his forehead in feigned lightness.

“Are you alright?”

His heart sinks in his chest. It’s not like he can hide this pathetic thing going on, whatever it is. Not when they’re here, watching him and invading his privacy.

“Yes,” he says, giving her a nod and a half-hearted smile, hoping he can downplay the situation to look like simply the battle of getting his stomach to agree with eating again. A natural, physiological response of the body. Which, really it is just that, isn’t it? That’s all it is.

Hoping his own unease is not as thick and suffocating and obvious in the entire room as it is to himself.

He returns his attention to the water, debating whether to drink it. He really should. But maybe that’s pushing it. He fidgets with it on the table.

Then he looks up with a sudden thought.

“Do we have any coffee?” he asks.

He seems to recall the drink leaving a nice sort of hole inside his stomach, yesterday. A burning hole, eating at itself - the acidity of it, probably. Not to mention the sort of shaky, jittery energy that spread in his body. A closer state to being hazy again. That’s what he needs.

Valkyrie nods slowly. Then she gets up, flicking on something like a kettle. The switch glows and there’s the sound of water beginning to boil inside it. She gets a mug, shaking some sort of rough powder into it, not very different-looking from some kinds of sustenance designed for space-travel, in fact, and pouring the water on top. She sets it in front of him.

“Well done with the fruit,” she says, looking at his face. “Later we’ll do lunch.”

He sips his coffee, careful not to burn his tongue. “Aye,” he mumbles, not meeting anyone’s eye.

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“Did you see him,” Thor hisses, harsh and too loud even despite the running water from the shower, and Brunnhilde once again has to put a finger to her lips with an accompanying glare. Thor rolls his eyes. At least his next whisper is quieter, if still with all the same intensity behind it.

“I thought he was going to cry halfway through!”

“You getting mad about it won’t make anything easier,” she whispers back, glancing toward the bathroom door.

“It was fruit, Brunnhilde.”

“And he ate it, didn’t he?”

Thor sighs, throwing out his arms. The Valkyrie drags him further from the kitchen and bathroom to stand in the opposite end, by the bedroom door.
“Thor, it will be fine,” she says, catching his eyes. His gaze softens a little on hers. “It was bound to be difficult.”

Thor closes his eyes for a second, leaning against the frame of the shut door.

“It’s just so irresponsible of him,” he then says, more a low grumble than a whisper and Brunnhilde punches him on the upper arm. He scowls at her but remembers to keep his voice down. “He comes back after I’ve lost everything. I have him back. But then he disappears, for three years - three years, Brunn! - and he shows back up like this -- actually, no, he didn’t show up, not anywhere, he didn’t even consider telling me he was on Earth, in Norway, no less, and Carol has to drag him out from norns know what kind of place and fly him here because he can barely even walk two steps -”

“I know, Thor, I know,” she tries, but he just huffs, continuing,

“- not to mention his magic, do you even think he can use it at all? I mean it’s completely, it’s, it’s ridiculous -- it was all of it confusing as it was. And I have right to be mad at him, too, it’s not like he’s been easy, I know I haven’t, either, but I was ready to work through all that, you know. We were working on it but then he disappeared and he shows up like this, and I don’t - I just, Brunnhilde, I don’t know what to do about it -”

“Thor,” she says, a little louder, and finally, he comes to a halt. She reaches up to squeeze his arm gently, below the spot she punched before and continues in a whisper. “I know. It’s not good. But at least he’s here.”

“He wept in his sleep last night,” Thor hisses back. “You heard him. Like a damn wounded animal.”

Brunnhilde sighs.

“Yes, you did point that out.” She catches his gaze again. “You’ve done that, too, you know. But being mad about it won’t help him.”

Thor crosses his arms. “Sometimes I think I liked you better when you were a mean drunk,” he grumbles. “At least then things would get settled. You’d call bullshit when it was necessary.”

“I was trading slaves, Thor. To die in gladiatorial combat or at the hands of the Grandmaster. I’d call bullshit on everything - can hardly say all that was any indication of well-balanced judgment.”

He scowls, then mumbles, “alright, that’s fair, I guess.”

Brunnhilde glances back at the bathroom door and sighs.

“Look, he’s your brother,” she continues. “I’m willing to help you with it, for some stupid reason, maybe because I’m afraid someone will fall and cut themselves open on his kneecaps, but it’s up to you to figure this out, between you. If you want to, that is.”

“Of course I want to,” he hisses back.

“Then sort it out.” She holds his gaze. He squirms under it. “I can’t do it for you. I’m not - I’m not saying it’s your job to fix his stuff or whatever, I’m just saying if you want to be there for him, let him know you mean it, then find out how to. You can’t really fix anything, anyway. But you can -- you can help. You already are, helping,” she adds, because it’s true.

“Yes, yes alright,” he says, voice a little quieter. “I’m just - I’m confused, I guess.”

“I understand.”
“He’s - It’s all just confusing,” he repeats, expression falling and suddenly he looks very tired. He goes to sit on the couch, elbows on his knees and burying his face in his hands. “He’s not saying anything,” he mumbles. "And I don’t even know where this all started, where to begin."

Brunnhilde sits down beside him, putting a hand on his back.

“It’ll be fine, Thor,” she says. “Look at you, how far you’ve come. Or at me. Don’t you think he can, too?”

He’s silent for a few moments. “I don’t know,” he then says, still half a whisper. He rubs at his face, leaning back to rest his head on the back of the sofa, staring at the ceiling. “I don’t know.”

They change out of the clothes they slept in, into something more appropriate day-wear, while Thor’s brother is in the shower. Luckily no one else needs to use it, and there’s still a good while until the scheduled meeting because he’s taking forever.

When the water finally shuts off, Thor knocks on the door, a bundle of fresh clothes under his arms and asking if Loki wants them. Brunnhilde thought that idea wholly unnecessary; to change a set of clothes after a single day. But then again, this bordering obsession with cleanliness and order of his, and only in very specific, odd divisions, means maybe it’s a good idea. The door opens to a small crack, a stringy hand reaching out to take them, before shutting and locking again.

Loki’s skin looks almost translucent when he reemerges a few minutes later, clad in a new sweater and pants. Oddly desaturated, his black hair stark against it, as if the totally excessive amounts of water have washed all remaining colour out of him. When Thor redirects his gaze, Brunnhilde goes for a smile, trying for friendly and at ease. There’s no need to make him feel more ashamed about this whole thing than he obviously already does.

A bowl of fruit is not enough, though. If this continues and turns out to be some sort of actual eating problem he’s developed and not just side effects of malnutrition, then she’s not equipped to handle it. The resources for healing here on Midgard aren’t what they were on Asgard, to say the least, but psycho-evaluation and executive conversation is an ancient and effective tool and might be the sort of thing he needs. Just in general, too.

She knows Rogers has some resources that might be helpful, and that Wilson guy, too. Of course, there’s the group-thing she (reluctantly) attended when she first came here which turned out to be helpful, but that’s for another kind of issue.

Apparently, on his little morning wander Loki had talked to Carol because he knows about the meeting already.

“She asked me to come,” he says, clearing his throat. “To talk about how I - managed to not die.”

“Allright,” Brunnhilde nods, and then they’re out the door. Luckily it isn’t far, just the meeting-room from yesterday, because man he’s slow. Okay, so maybe not that slow but slower than she would like to walk, anyway, so she has to think about walking slow all the time and it’s annoying.

They settle down by the table, Loki sticking to Thor’s side and Brunnhilde at the far end. Steve Rogers arrives, sitting across from Thor, then Carol at the end opposite Brunnhilde. Bruce was already there and pours freshly brewed coffee for everyone. Loki laps it in as if it is his very life source.

“So, it’s not like this is a very official meeting,” Brunnhilde says to start it off, “being so few and all.
More like a visit really, I’d argue. But we are here to develop ideas, share anything new if it’s there. So. Anyone got something?”

“I asked Loki if he could fill us in on the whole coming-back-from-the-dead experience,” Carol says, nodding at him briefly. He’s cradling the mug on the table, shoulders hunched as he nods back.

A repeat of yesterday, Brunnhilde is hit by an odd kind of secondhand embarrassment just from his being here. It’s not like she’s embarrassed about him, it’s just -- the sunken eyes and bruise-like circles, he looks so damn tired; the pallor, frail shoulders, the painfully de-muscled limbs with bones standing out underneath his clothes, it all feels very personal. Too personal. As if it was never meant to be seen, or even acknowledged at all, such a far cry from his ordinarily arrogant attitude. Never supposed to see light, but here he is, anyway. Exposed to the very bone.

She tries to shake it off; it’s not her place. And at least he doesn’t smell like death itself, today.

“I’ll do my best,” Loki replies with a shrug. A sip of coffee. “Though I’m afraid I can’t lay out every detail for you as a lot of it was done .. on the spot. Improvised.”

“Let’s start with where you ended up,” Rogers says, that soft commanding tone (and Brunnhilde still hasn’t decided if she likes him or not; she thinks she does, probably), “after …” he trails off, mouth twitching. “After the Asgardian vessel was attacked.”

Loki smirks, at the hesitation, most likely. Brunnhilde very nearly rolls her eyes. “Yes, well, you see,” he quips, “Thanos strangled me to death. Crushed my neck to bits and pieces like a bottle of glass. That did hurt, definitely can’t say it didn’t.”

Rogers just glares tiredly at him. Loki shrugs and looks away, apparently satisfied. He wipes off the smirk for a more neutral expression.

“So, I suspect Thor told you something of my communication with the Tesseract?” he continues. They all nod. That was just about the only thing Thor had been able to say anything about.

“Well, I was trying to fasten a piece of .. myself in it,” he says. “Just a piece, and quite literally, too, nothing metaphorical about that. Not that the gem particularly wanted to house me; to be honest, it was actually all going notably terrible.” He grimaces, but his eyes are becoming increasingly sharp. As if everything else he has going on falls away as he’s captivated by his own telling.

“When it was fastened in the gauntlet, however, it was as if something released, a - surge of power, if you will. I think the fact that my life was being slowly choked out of me at the time also did part of the trick, as it was -- ah, what shall I say, sort of a crumbling experience both mentally and physically. It was easier to latch onto the stone from there, to separate a distinct part of myself like that; very last minute indeed. Anyway, so I wanted to -”

“Wait wait wait wait, hold on, hold on,” Bruce cuts in, pinching at the bridge between his eyes with one hand and waving the other. “You have to - I can’t - this makes no sense whatsoever. How did you do that? Like, specifically, how did you -”

“If I tell the story first,” Loki interrupts, “we can get into the technical details after. It’s better to have the whole picture first, I think. Besides, I suspect your thing will take a lot longer.”

He clears his throat, frowning at the table. “Where was I - right.” He looks up. “So that piece of my soul is what kept me still attached to reality the entire time. I mean, I was still drifting along with all the souls going to the afterlife through Hel and Valhalla - well, Hel, for me - but it was keeping me from passing over, like a string that held me connected.”
They’ve explained this before, to the midgardians, Brunnhilde and Thor. How Hel, Valhalla, they’re not actual realms as such - well they are, but those places aren’t where the souls reside. They’re just the passing-points to the beyond, and what that lies there not even the most ancient of Asgardians know. Well, the ones that are dead probably do, but they’re always so secretive even if you do get contact.

Only the myths, and the fact that there are the two gates - Hel, or Valhalla - is what gives them their theories. And myths, at least in Asgardian history, do tend to carry a lot of truth within them.

It’s a common misconception amongst Midgardians that Hel and Valhalla are realms that hold the dead. However, being able to simply travel to the realms and get back the souls of lost ones like that, would make the whole point of dying completely meaningless. There’s a reason people avoid it.

Which … is exactly the rule they’re trying to surpass, right now. Bringing people back from the dead. It’s just - they figured out time travel without any use of inherent magic, did they not? Why not be a little bold?

Loki continues. “For - what was five years for you, I tried to get back. Recreate my body with the use of dark energy. That’s with a combination of rewinding time in the cells and merging it with the current version of my soul, creating some tissue from scratch. It has to match my age and my soul’s experience you see; I couldn’t just grab a younger, less injured version of my body. But let me tell you -” he huffs, “Hela was not a fan of my trying to get back. She was actually the biggest nuisance of all, really didn’t want me alive for some reason. I mean, if I didn’t know better I’d have almost thought she held some sort of grudge against me, specifically, and whyever would she? She cut me off at the first window of opportunity to return, when the stones were used for the Decimation and I could’ve -” he cuts off, narrowing his eyes. Then shakes his head.

“Anyway. There were a lot of hindrances. The point is my soul refused to leave reality - as part of it was still bound to the dimension where my body used to reside, and well, when the stones were used again, all at the same time, I had my window. That power surge .. you could do a lot of things with that. I harnessed it for my purposes.”

There’s quiet for a few seconds.

Then Bruce asks, “and being able to harness the power surge in the first place, did that have something to do with already being kind of - attached to to Space Stone?”

For a scientist, Brunnhilde is impressed with how metaphorical he’s willing to go. But then again, maybe that is just the sort of things scientist do. She wouldn’t know.

“Very much so,” Loki responds, crossing his arms in front of himself. “I carved my pathway through the power of that specific gem, intensified and stabilized by the working with the others. I don’t suspect, however, that your dead friends had the presence of mind to attach themselves to one before they passed.”

“I .. wouldn’t know,” Bruce says, frowning. “I mean, did you do that with magic? Was that like a magic thing, could it happen without one being aware of it, or -- how?”

“I suspect it was made easier because of my history with the space stone,” Loki answers. “It recognized my signature. And truly, it’s very social like that, I mean it calls to you because it .. it likes - to have … friends.”

Thor is frowning, now. “You’re friends with the Space Stone, now?”
And Loki actually blushes a little. “Not like *that,*” he says. “It isn’t as if it’s a *person.* Only - it was a lot more flexible to work with when it recognized me.” He shrugs. “I think it rather likes me.”

“That’s a first,” Brunnhilde cough under her breath, throwing Loki a smirk when he scowls.

“So that’s - you can communicate with the Space Stone,” Bruce continues. “Is it possible you might influence the other stones through that connection? I mean .. Tony gave his life to use the gauntlet, he might be connected, somehow. Is there any way to check whether he is? Natasha and Gamora both sacrificed themselves for the soul stone, I’m just thinking -”

“You cannot get the Soul gem to do anything,” Loki interrupts with a dismissive wave of his hand. “If you have any friends that are lost to its power then they’re lost forever. That damned stone has got to be the most stubborn power I have *ever* worked with, very nearly foiled all my plans. Besides, as far as I know none of the stones are even in this timeline at all, anyway.”

Rogers who has stayed quiet now leans forward on his elbows. “We’ve got to at least talk about it, consider everything and keep an open mind,” he says. “There’s no use deeming things impossible. That’s not what we’re here for.”

Loki looks at him with narrowed eyes. “It’s up to you what you choose to believe in,” he says. “I won’t get in your way.”

“But you won’t try to help, either.”

“I *am* helping, am I not? I’m simply telling you that some things are outright idiotic to consider.”

“Then we look for another way.”

“And I wish you very good luck with that.”

Thor interrupts the banter. “Loki - isn’t this simply …” He clears his throat. “Your magic has not been at its best for many years. Since even before ...” he trails off. Loki’s gaze has snapped to him in a deadly glare. “I only mean - if we find a way to heal it, might it be more possibilities could arise? If you were able to help with the Soul stone.”

“My magic is *fine,*” Loki snarls in response, which - wasn’t he supposed to be the God of Lies? Because that just wasn’t convincing at all.

Thor studies him with a frown. “If you say so,” he says.

Loki’s scowl sours to a sulk; then he waves a hand dismissively. “So right *now* it might not be entirely on top,” he amends, “but that’s not the *issue.* I propose we go back to the actual topic at hand -”

And then he launches into a complicated explanation of the magical theory, which only makes one third sense to Brunnhilde’s ears.

The rest of the meeting is a mix between those kinds of overly sciency-theoretical things and then the more general discussion of how it might all apply to the problem. They end up with .. possibilities, and even if Loki is notably negative about any chances they might have, he’s obviously also a huge nerd. He and Bruce decide to meet up in the sort-of lab-barracks in town over the next days to explore it all further. Then the meeting is adjourned - which is good, because Loki honestly looks a little overwhelmed by now, flustered and jittery, eyes going unfocused at times.
Carol has to leave. She always has a bunch of things like that to take care of; the entire universe and so on, so it’s remarkable that she even stayed for two nights. Bruce is going to stay in town to work with Loki, and Steve Rogers doesn’t really say anything as to either having to leave or wanting to stay. Brunnhilde suspects he’s just enjoying the break from the city, taking a little vacation. Thor’s friends are coming along increasingly often throughout these last years to visit. It is a rather therapeutic place here by the coast, after all.

“Allright, time for lunch,” she declares, clasping a hand onto Loki’s shoulder. He stiffens under it and she deliberately doesn’t retreat it at the reaction. When did she become his babysitter, again?

“Actually,” Steve Rogers says, getting up from his chair. “Loki, could I talk to you, for just a moment outside?”

Loki frowns. Then he nods, slowly; warily. “Alright.”

He follows the Captain out the door, leaving the others behind, along the house and to a bench a little away. Loki sits down while the other stays standing.

“It isn’t anything serious, or something,” Rogers says, looking at him, hands clasped neatly in front of himself. “I just wanted to apologize for my behaviour. Today and yesterday.”

Loki narrows his eyes. “Apologize,” he echoes. “For .. what, exactly?”

“For, you know -” the Captain cuts off, crossing his arms. “I don’t want to start anything, any fights. I know I was a bit snappy in there.” He frowns at Loki for a second.

“You have your history with the Avengers and Earth,” he continues, “and that affects my attitude. But I do also realise we don’t have the full picture, and I .. don’t want there to be bad blood, anyway.” He clears his throat. “You’re Thor’s brother. And I appreciate that you’re willing to share your knowledge with us.”

“But you don’t trust me,” Loki asserts. Rogers smiles, a little.

“No, I don’t,” he affirms. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t be civil with you.”

Loki pauses. “Well, I ...thank you, I suppose?”

“That’s not what I meant.” Rogers is frowning again. “I just wanted to be sure we were on the same page. And tell you that I think it’s great you’re here.”

Loki snorts but doesn’t comment on it. Great, ha.

Rogers’ frown deepens. “I do - I mean I don’t know you at all, of course, but for Thor. He was … it wasn’t great when you disappeared again.”

Which funnily enough doesn’t make anything better. Both the fact that any positive opinion of Loki has solely to do with the role he plays in Thor’s life, or is supposed to be playing, and that his running off left Thor in, apparently, a worse state than he already was. Or maybe just a similar one.

Loki realises he’s zoned out without noticing when the Captain’s voice, a little quieter now, snaps him back.

“Anyway, that was all. I just wanted to let you know that I’m not - not out to get you, or anything. I
“Of course, Captain,” Loki says, plastering on a smirk to make up for whatever his expression must’ve been just before. These blank stretches in his mind, however short, unsettle him. “Wouldn’t want you to find yourself in such a verily uncomfortable situation.”

“Is that supposed to mean something?”

“Not in the slightest,” Loki says, eyebrows raised in innocence.

Honestly, it wasn’t. Maybe a little. But mostly said to confuse the stoic quality of his character, because few things are as fun as that.

But then the Captain’s expression softens, just studying him, and suddenly **Loki** is the one feeling like he’s being played with. Seen straight through. An uncomfortable tingle spreads in his hands, up through his arms.

“Alright,” Rogers says, a small and almost *sympathetic* smile on his lips. What is *that* supposed to mean? “Well, thank you for talking to me, anyway. I appreciate it.”

Then he walks away, leaving Loki behind to sit stiff as a board back on the bench.

He zones out during lunch, managing to get in both slices of very white toast with butter, and most of the fruit on the side of the plate, too. Then a glass of water, which is definitely uncomfortable, but necessary. He feels bouncy and beside himself afterwards and is painfully aware of Thor’s periodic sideways glancing at him. Feels exposed, like a raw nerve-end.

He makes himself another cup of coffee afterwards, justifying it by the rationale that it *is* made of water and then must count as liquid, too. It makes him feel a little more coherent despite the caffeine actually flaring his nerves up and making him more jittery. He can’t really stop his knee from jumping under the table as he sits with the mug, but at least the knee now feels like his. Like it is, in fact, attached to him.

Thor is on the couch reading a book, lying down halfway against the armrest. Valkyrie left when she and Loki had both finished with their food.

“Would you like something to read?” Thor asks at one point, and Loki looks up. “I have some books - not a lot, but .. some. If you want.”

“...maybe later,” Loki answers after a moment. “Thank you.”

Thor looks back down to the pages. A moment later, without lifting his gaze, he speaks again.

“So when are you and Bruce going to meet in the lab?”

“I think .. as soon as possible. He was going to go to some pub, he said. After that, probably.”

“Ah, yes, the pub,” Thor says, shutting his book but still looking at his hands. “It’s a good place. We should go there, sometime. They serve drinks, coffee. And food.”

Loki nods a couple of time. “Sounds fun,” he says.

Then there’s silence.

“How did you sleep last night?” Thor asks, and Loki feels like wincing from the awkwardness.
“Well,” he says, instead. “Yourself?”
“Yes, alright, I guess.”
“You and the Valkyrie have become good friends, I see.”
“We’ve spent a lot of time together.”
Silence again.
Loki clears his throat. “Perhaps you could show me to the lab? I don’t know where it is, and Banner will probably be there soon, anyway.”
“Yes, of course,” Thor says. “Sure.”
He swings his feet to the floor to pull on his boots and with a jolt, Loki spots the empty slot for a missing buckle. He’s just about to divert his gaze when Thor catches it. Loki isn’t sure if he’s seeing things or if his brother really is looking so very knowing.
“I, eh, I’m just going to - go to the washroom, before we go,” he stammers, getting to his feet and limping across the room.
The clothes are gone from the bench he shed them onto yesterday. He looks around, spotting a tall straw basket in the corner and going to it, opening the lid to find them at the bottom in a bundle. He fishes up his pants, but the pockets are empty.
“Are you looking for this?” it sounds behind him, and he spins around to face Thor standing in the doorway. Loki didn’t even hear the door open. Held up in the light, between thumb and forefinger, is a golden buckle.
Loki’s mouth opens, but he finds no words coming to mind staring at the piece. He turns, instead, to carefully fold the pants back into the basket and replace the lid. Then he faces back to Thor, keeping his expression a carefully neutral mask.
“It fell out of the pocket, yesterday when I put your clothes away for laundry,” his brother says. His face is softened. “It is mine, isn’t it?”
Loki’s tongue still won’t work properly.
“Not that it matters a whole bunch,” Thor continues. “I mean my boots work fine without it. But it is valuable metal, and I’ve got to say, it does kinda complete my look. I thought I must’ve lost it on some battlefield, so - thank you for bringing it back, Loki.”
He smiles, that wide and annoyingly plastered-on smile he uses sometimes. Then he shoots his eyebrows up as if remembering something, suddenly. “Oh, unless of course - did you want it back?”
He holds it out to Loki, who, to his own frustration, takes an instinctive half step back. Then he manages to shake his head, muttering, “no, no thank you”.
He clears his throat. Tries to force some will into his voice.
“Found it in the hotel,” he says. “Only thought you might never notice it yourself, there on the floor, so - I meant to give it to you.” He shrugs. “Guess I forgot.”
But it’s not like Loki has any illusion that he can lie his way out of this one. He had it in the pocket of his pants after three years, for the damned’s sake.
“Guess so,” Thor says with a little, irritating smirk before kneeling down to refasten the piece in the missing spot. Loki clears his throat, moving to limp past him, but his brother suddenly straightens to stand in the way. Thor is frowning.

“Didn’t you have to use the bathroom?” he asks in obviously feigned confusion. “I can just leave.”

Loki rolls his eyes, sighing as he pushes past.

“No,” he mutters, making sure to bump the shoulder. “No, I’m okay.”

Thor chuckles behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Do you guys ever like .. draw on sentences you've heard before? I guess we all do, like referencing vines, stuff like that. Writing something a character has actually said in a movie can make it feel so much more realistic and vivid because you can almost hear them.

The thing is, I find myself thinking of this stupid game show some of the MCU cast did at some point all the goddamn time. They were super drunk. Anyway, Chris Evans has to guess at some category and answers "...'library' but I don't like it" and for some reason that just KEEPS popping up for me. It's stuck in my brain. There'll probably be more than a few instances in this story in which someone just doesn't like it.

That aside, hope you did like the chapter. Working diligently on the next one and having a lot of fun with this writing thing.
Doesn't That Make You Want to Scream?

Chapter Notes

Here's an update!

Oooof, it's been a rough couple of days. But I'm back. Writing gives me life. Thank you all immensely for reading, and the commenting, it's all so wonderful! I hope this continues to be somewhat satisfying.

Oh, and someone asked in the comments whether Steve was old or what, and yeah, there's nothing to clarify that in the story whatsoever - because it .. didn't happen. He stayed with his friends in the future, heh, because I'd miss him otherwise.

I really hope I do the characters somewhat of a justice. I'm so new here. But I mean, definitely devoted, as well.

Sorry about the chapters being so long - or, not sorry? I mean, I'm always stoked when a story I'm following updates with a long chapter but you know, not everyone has that kind of time. Aaaanyway ----

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The walk to the lab is embarrassingly slow. Thor is quiet by his side as Loki limps clumsily across the creaking snow, his ankle throbbing, breathing too hard, and grateful for the non-commenting.

He doesn’t look at his brother, trying to keep everything recent out of his mind. For one, the fact that Thor knows how Loki held on to that goddamn buckle like some other talisman for three years. In his pocket; his real, physical pocket. Sleeping with it, taking it with him everywhere, on his person at all times. He must have guessed it all by now. Every humiliating detail.

The thought of it makes Loki want to hide from sight, crawl in a hole somewhere and sleep awareness away. He was supposed to have escaped all that.

It’s later in the day than during his morning trip to the water, and there are people walking between houses and buildings now. Loki is careful to keep his gaze locked ahead and away from them, his face set neutral as they stare and whisper. Some people even point at him. No wonder - the mad and traitorous second prince, eventually returned to fight for the good of Asgard, lost tragically by the hand of the Titan. And now he’s here, looking like Hel on legs, probably, limping through their streets. Returned from the dead, just as mad as ever but, however, probably not as traitorous. In his current physical state, at least.

Wonderful. All just wonderful.

They reach an oblong building, finally, down to sea level and in the right outskirts of the town. It stands a little away from the harbour, is not very tall and made of something like cement, rather than wood as most the others. There’s a shining metal platter by the door, reading ‘Laboratory of Sciences and Magic, New Asgard.’
Loki finds himself holding up a hand in a sign of pause to Thor, closing his eyes for a second or two as he leans with a shoulder against the wall, concentrating on his breathing. He tunes Thor out, along with the crippling shame of his brother being here to witness this. Having to catch his breath after walking for five minutes.

“Maybe we should get you some crutches,” Thor says. “To walk, you shouldn’t be walking on that foot.”

Loki opens his eyes to glare at Thor. “I am not going to walk with crutches like some dying elder.”

Just the thought of it makes his skin crawl - even if this whole situation already does, anyway. Asgardians, and Jötnar, as well, are supposed to heal. If they aren’t, it’s either because they’re dying of old-age, magic dwindling as their body does, or because the body and mind are in such a state of depletion and instability that magic, and thus natural life-force energy, cannot stay durable.

The fact that he isn’t healing and the state of his body, in general, are such painfully obvious testaments to just how severely his mind has declined in the last years. He has fallen apart to this degree because it was easier than staying coherent, and now he can’t figure out how to piece himself together again. Maybe he doesn’t want to. Either way, no one was ever supposed to see the evidence.

He’s not healing because his magic isn’t working. Because he’s a mess. It’s like his every thought, every doubt and fear is on display just from that fact.

“I’ve seen Midgardians use such tools,” Thor argues. “Young people, too. When they’re injured.”

Loki shifts to lean with his back against the wall, crossing his arms and looking over Thor’s shoulder instead of at his face. “But I’m not Midgardian, am I?”

“You’re not. That doesn’t mean you cannot be in need of aid.”

Loki gives an eye roll, if it feels a little anemic. He pushes away from the wall, going for the door. “Well, I don’t want it.”

“You don’t want to be in need of it,” he can hear Thor mumble behind, and he ignores the comment.

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Thor follows his brother into the lab to find Bruce already there, bent over a table of tools and scribblings on strewn papers.

Loki looks wary at first, staggering to a chair next to a desk and trying so hard to look casual about it as if he wasn’t just ready to pass out after walking downhill for five minutes. Bruce immediately begins to ask him questions. He hesitates a second or two every time, before answering in precise, calculated sentences.

They progress from there.

It’s a lot of technicalities, of magical science merged with the Midgardian brand. They’re meticulous about translating the respective terminology into something meaningful for the other, in order to properly explain and develop the theories. From what Thor can understand of this
otherwise explicitly nerdy conversation, it’s going rather well, largely thanks to Loki’s pre-existent knowledge on the matter. This isn’t his first time working with the Midgardian counterpart to his personal area of expertise.

To Thor’s relief, it seems both he and Bruce are inclined to avoid any discussion of that; of how and when, exactly, Loki learned all this Midgardian methodology and vocabulary. The name Erik Selvig doesn’t pop up even once.

He stands by for a few minutes himself, trying to blend into the background as he watches the two speak. Loki’s answers are getting progressively longer, less guarded, his speech and body language less rigid.
While he’s surely still cold and reserved, as Loki often is, and has that dulled, lethargic energy to him that has been colouring his every word and motion since he came back, he’s also not being outright offensive or mean. Maybe he’s too tired, or maybe he actually likes Bruce a little bit. Maybe the conversation is simply interesting enough for him to forget about being the villain for a moment’s time.

Thor leaves them there. He has no doubt Bruce will be able to handle his little brother, should Loki turn hostile. Besides, as engaged as the other two are with the subject, and that is very engaged, Thor can’t deny that for himself, it might be one of the most boring conversations he’s ever had to listen to.

When he opens the door to go, Loki looks up from some piece of paper on a desk and spots him. For a second he looks almost desperate at the prospect of being left behind. Thor catches his eyes, smiling, and Loki hurries to wipe the expression off, looking back down as if he doesn’t care in the slightest about what Thor chooses to do and not do. As if he doesn’t care. Thor knows better than that.

Outside, he stands for a moment debating what to do next. He could search out Brunnhilde, she’ll no doubt have something he could help with in managing the village; the international agreements and treaties with Norway, supplies, organisation of Avengers businesses, communication tasks - but he honestly feels like he needs a break.
Loki is occupied and will be for some time, if Thor is lucky, and he finds that the idea of a visit to the pub more than a little appealing. With no worrying about whether his brother is healing, remembering to eat and drink, sleep. What Loki is thinking or not thinking and what Thor is supposed to do about it. Bruce can handle him for a little while.

Maybe there’ll be someone there to talk to, at the bar. To get out of his own head for a little while.

It isn’t far, the establishment; a low wooden hut just by the harbour with a few windows of dark glass and a sign reading ‘PUB’ in big, clumsy letters above it. Thor stands for a moment outside the door, listening to waves crashing against the shore, before he pushes through, walking inside. The room is dimly lit with bulbs glowing yellow, booths with dark wood and glass separating them from the room, tables against the walls and a long bar stretching by the wall opposite the door. Low conversation is buzzing and the barkeep throws up a hand in greet. Svenn. A good man; grey-bearded, bald and chronically grim in his demeanour. Thor nods in response, walking up to him.

“Good afternoon, Svenn,” he says, dropping onto a barstool and leaning forward on his elbows.

“You as well, my liege,” Svenn replies, at which Thor waves a hand in dismissal.

“No need for that.”

The barkeep nods. “What can I get you?”
“Dark ale, please,” Thor says. “Large.”

Svenn nods, turning his back to fetch a mug and Thor is grateful for the absence of any visible judgement, dropping his head to rest in his hands with a sigh. As long as he’s careful, Brunnhilde says, makes sure it isn’t turning into something unhealthy again.

A hand lands heavy on his shoulder and he lifts his head, blinking as he turns to see who it is. Steve Rogers gives him a friendly smile.


There’s a thump behind him when Svenn places the drink on the counter, and Thor turns briefly to give him a nod of thanks.

“Sam is here,” Steve says, nodding his head backwards and Thor’s eyes follow the gesture to spot, sure enough, a table inside a booth in which Sam Wilson is seated. He jerks his chin up in a greet. “Do you wanna come sit with us?”

“Sure,” Thor complies, getting to his feet and grabbing his mug to bring it.

He scoots in on the bench across from Sam, Steve taking the outer seat.

“Good to see you,” Thor says to the newcomer, who smiles in return.

“You, too. It sure has been a while.”

“This is your first time here, correct?” Thor asks, and Sam nods.

“Yep. Rookie here. Nice place you’ve got.”

“Brunnhilde is doing an incredible job with it all,” Thor agrees. “Still, you should’ve seen the original Asgard before it was destroyed. Now, that - that was glorious.”

“Be careful,” Steve says with a chuckle, sipping from something that looks like a mug of tea. “If you first get him started you’ll be listening to stories all night.”

“I don’t know, I think I’d like to hear some stories,” Sam says. “I feel like I’m the only one left here who hasn’t been to another planet yet.”

“Realm,” Thor corrects. “Asgard’s construction wouldn’t.. count, as a planet. And you will hear the stories,” he continues, “but first, my friend, I would hear how you fare.”

Sam grins. “I fare pretty good, I’d say. Just came here for a little vacay when I heard how chill Steve was having it. I mean, there’s still more than enough work for us Avengers, and that’s all fun and good, but the crime rates are back to declining -- it’s all looking a lot clearer since the last time we met.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Thor says. “Such is the state of most planets around the galaxies - things are looking brighter. Overall.”

“Seems like the whole thing with getting your loved ones back,” Steve says, ”created a lot of ... appreciation, too. For the people and things you have, I mean. That’s a lot of newfound unification to work on healing the trauma from the first snap.”

Thor agrees with a nod.
“How about you?” Sam asks, looking at him. “Is everything alright, here? It’s been awhile since you came back from your space adventure, as far as I’ve heard.”

“It has been a while,” Thor agrees. Hesitates. “I’ve been helping Brunnhilde with the village and .. working through some things. It’s been good.” He glances away for a moment. “I feel this place is slowly growing to become more of a home, for all of us left.”

Sam nods. “But it’s difficult.”

Thor shrugs.

“The people miss Asgard,” he says. “They like Norway, are fond of Midgard. We’re slowly building up an arsenal of the things lost with our home, trying to recreate what is familiar, the technology, but you know - it’s not the same. Asgard was built upon the most ancient magic, while this place is organic in a whole other way. It’s beautiful. Only .. different.”

“But we do well,” he hurries to add in the following silence. “We’re only happy to have a home, you know. To still be a people.”

Thor fidgets with his beer jug in the few seconds' silence following.

“So, Steve says your brother is back,” Sam speaks up. “That he might have some ideas for the mission.”

Thor nods, slowly.

Steve takes the word when he doesn’t. “Yeah, he was at a meeting we held, earlier, telling us about some magic theory and .. stuff. Pretty confusing. Now he’s working with Bruce in the lab, I think?”

“Yes,” Thor confirms. “I left them there, they seemed to be getting along well enough. Buried in the work, moreso.”

“Bruce does have a tendency to get buried deep in his work, yeah,” Steve says with amusement. Thor huffs.

“That is sort of Loki’s trademark, too.”

There’s a little awkward silence again.

“How is he?” Sam then asks. “Have you two talked?”

Thor does his best to keep his expression calm and unbothered, though he has no doubt his friends will see straight through it. “We’ve talked some,” he says. Hesitates. “He’s .. alright, I guess.”

Steve averts his gaze to the table and Sam clears his throat, if only subtly.

Thor sighs. “He’s - he’ll get better,” he adjusts. “He’s got some things to work through.”

This is exactly what he came here to avoid.

“How has he been up until now, then?” Sam asks, and Thor can’t help a scoff.

“Here. In Norway,” he says. “Apparently, he’s been hiding some hundred miles up north the entire time.”

“Damn.”
“Right - so close, would you believe it?”

“Well .. actually,” Steve says, sounding careful, “to me it - makes sense? Not that I'd know, of course, just from what I saw of him and you before he left, the last time. I mean, that he’d stick close, it kinda fits the picture.”

Thor smiles, it not quite reaching his eyes. “No, I think you’re right,” he says, pausing to think. “It’s only … difficult to understand what he wants.”

There’s quiet for a moment or two. Thor clears his throat.

“I’d appreciate it if you could refrain from spreading the word of his return, for now,” he continues. “Carol and Strange were the ones who found him, they agreed to call it a false alarm. SHIELD could still track him, but I doubt they would as Carol is in charge of that, besides -” He pauses. “Captain, you’ve seen him. He’s in no state to do anything harmful, his magic barely works at all. I’d rather keep him from getting thrown into something like the Raft or its likes for now.”

Sam smiles without mirth. “Not really big fans of the Raft, the two of us,” he says. Thor huffs a bitter laugh.

“It’s all good, Thor,” Steve says. “As long as you keep an eye on him, I guess. We’ll help with that if you want, just say the word.”

“Thank you,” Thor says. He feels his shoulders relaxing down a notch.

“Can I - Can I just ask one last thing?” Sam speaks up, leaning forward on his elbows.

Thor shrugs. “Of course.”

“I know you probably want a break from all this,” Sam continues, “but I just have to understand, first: your brother, he was working for Thanos back in New York, right? That was the whole deal, apparently.”

“Yes.”

“But then when Thanos attacked the Asgardian refugee vessel, he was on our side.”

“He was.”

“Okay,” Sam says, nodding. “Sure, thanks. It’s just confusing all of that, you know, who he really agreed with, on the whole Infinity War thing. Like, whether he shared the vision of the Decimation.” He shrugs. “I’m just saying - we wouldn’t want a Thanos 2.0 situation happening.”

“Don’t say that,” Steve says.

“I'm not joking. I need to know.”

Thor hesitates for a moment before answering. His eyes are narrowed in thought on the glass to Sams left. “There were a lot of other things going on back then, around the time of New York,” he says. “Many .. twisted motivations.”

He pauses. Clears his throat. “He didn’t admit for years that he’d been sent, that it had been a bargain; only when confronted with it on the Statesman and - well, I tried talking to him about it when he came back after the second snap, but he .. really doesn’t want to.”

Thor doesn’t look at them, continuing. “Honestly, he seems more scared of Thanos than anything
else. As far as I know, the partnership was arranged in favour of - Loki’s personal motivations. I see no reason for the Decimation ever being part of his desires.”

He’s leaving things out. Because he doesn’t know anything for sure, and he can’t sit here guessing at his brother’s emotions like that, when Loki himself hasn’t said anything. Literally nothing. That’s what Loki does when he doesn’t want to talk about something - either lies his ass off or keeps his mouth shut entirely, ignoring any questions. Like some other child. It’s frustrating to no end.

But the fear Thor saw in him when Thanos and his lackeys showed up on the Statesman? That spoke a language of its own.

Sam nods. “That’s good,” he says. “That’s what it seems like from what I’ve been hearing, too, just wanted to know your thoughts. And, I mean, we might want to keep an eye out with him, just to be safe.”

Thankfully, they move on to talk about other things from there, lighter or heavy, of friends back in the States, Wakanda. Thor updates them on the Guardians.

Sam has won a girlfriend. She’d disappeared in the decimation and while that wasn’t particularly traumatic for her, there’s a lot of family matters to solve out, so she spends a lot of time with them. Bucky is out travelling. Just around on Midgard; he never has, apparently, not as himself. Doing ‘the whole backpacker thing’ Sam calls it, avoiding college-kids and popular places as much as possible.

Pepper and Morgan Stark are doing well, by the sound of it. They’ve come to visit New Asgard a couple of times, these later years after Thor had gotten sober and initiated contact with Pepper. Though Brunnhilde already had her as a contact of the embassy to the United States. Pepper had taken on a lot of Tony’s roles and is a great help with the continuous integration of New Asgard, and Morgan loves to visit the wild waves and grassy shores.

Last time they were here was in the summer. Sam says Morgan is growing, has started school and is a natural in the science studies.

They venture into more spontaneous, open conversation, including a lot of laughs that leave Thor feeling relieved and brighter than he has in days. After a round of tea for everybody when Thor and Sam have finished their beers, they decide to get up, find out what everybody else is up to. Thor pays Svenn for the beverages in Midgardian coin.

“It really is good to see you, man,” Sam says, smiling as he claps Thor hard on the back as they turn to leave. He cackles once. “Forgot how hilarious you are.”

“You too, my friend,” Thor says, can feel his own smile growing wide. “It’s good to have you here.”

They push through the outer door, into the cold and gloomy weather but that is no damper to their high spirits. The wind is fresh and sharp, and Thor finds himself enjoying the moment, just being there and not worrying, in a way he hasn’t since Loki arrived.

Then, someone shouts, “Oh, there you are!” and Bruce comes running in their direction from the harbour. A stone drops in Thor’s stomach.

“Thank god,” Bruce says, stopping in front of them. “Hi, Sam, good to see you,” he greets.

“Where’s Loki?” Thor asks, and Bruce turns to him.

He takes a breath, wincing a little. “No, no, it’s not like - not like that. It’s - don’t worry, I think
“Everything is fine.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s - well, he’s with the healers. It’s okay, Thor,” Bruce adds. “He passed out, in the lab, but he’s - he’s fine. They said it’s fine.”

Thor tries to keep his expression under control. He gives Bruce a nod. “My friends, I will be going,” he says. “We can catch up later.” Then he turns, striding toward the healing ward.

Suddenly Bruce is by his side, jogging along. Thor hadn’t realised he was walking so fast.

“I really don’t think it’s serious,” Bruce says. “He just seemed exhausted is all, was on his feet for too long, drinking too much coffee. Neither of us noticed because we were so engulfed in the work - he really is clever, your brother, can’t believe I never knew -”

“Thank you, Bruce,” Thor interrupts, slowing down his step a little. “I’m just going to go check up, make sure it’s alright. That he’s not splitting the hospital apart.”

“Would he do that?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.”

Bruce nods, looking a little spooked. “Umm. Okay.”

They reach the doors of the small building, pushing through. A bell rings above their heads.

Inside is a small waiting area, a hallway, some doors along the inner wall. A healer comes out of an open one, his eyes downcast on a stack of papers in his hand. He asks, “yes?”, looking up a second later.

Thor recognises him. A young healer, talented apprentice in Thor’s youth and only a little older than himself. One of Eir’s most cherished students.


He receives a nod in return. The healer glances around to make sure the hall is empty.

“He was distressed, so we gave him a sedative. He’s asleep now.”

Thor sighs. His brother letting his frustration out onto undeserving healers is not a new thing, not in the slightest.

Albjǫrn leads them through the second door, with a single bed inside. In it lies Loki, draped over with a grey blanket. His hair is stark against the white sheets and pillow, but his skin almost the same colour. There’s a gash as long as Thor’s index finger by his left temple, sewn shut with stitches.

He shouldn’t be needing stitches. His skin should already be knitting itself together, by now.

Healers are fiddling with things around the room, one of them sweeping up what looks like a shattered glass cylinder from the floor. And true enough, as Thor gets closer he can see someone picking splinters out of Loki’s left hand, limp in theirs, wiping off the blood with a wet cloth.

“We’re giving him liquid,” Albjǫrn says, gesturing at a cord fastened with a needle in the crook of Loki’s left hand, limp in theirs, wiping off the blood with a wet cloth.

“He was severely dehydrated. As for re-nourishing,” he continues, “there is the possibility of potions and spell-procedures, though we would
have to have the patient’s permission for that. It is also quite extensive and an unnatural way, and manual re-feeding is always preferred."

He clears his throat. "Either way, it will take a long time to rehabilitate his entire system with his magic in the state that it is.”

Thor nods.

“I have to say, regrettably,” Albjörn continues, “that we cannot help with the restoration of it. His seidr is different from the Aesir, even in this shifted state. The blood, we’re not familiar enough with it -- it looks Aesir, in colour, but the composition is something else entirely.”

Bruce frowns beside Thor, who feels his skin prickle.

“Isn’t Loki Ás? Or - of Asgard?"


“So you’ve said,” Bruce says with raised eyebrows but doesn’t pry further, for which Thor is grateful. Loki did, of course, make a play outing himself to the entirety of Asgard but that might’ve had more to do with .. well, him already being outed. And also him being Odin, rather than himself. Distanced. Pretending to be a father who loved his child regardless of species.

It hadn’t exactly been a secret after New York - Loki had, for some reason, wanted every guard and every healer he encountered to know just why he did what he did (“But I am a monster, you see”).

The real Odin, back then, had never actually confirmed it, dismissed any questions because he didn’t want the Jötnar to have a worse reputation than they already did. Being associated with treason and blamed as the reason for it, as Loki wanted them to be. But the rumours, the secrets that had been kept for a millennium by servants and guards - they started to flurry with Loki’s prompting, painting the inevitable picture of something akin to the truth.

To Thor, it doesn’t seem like his little brother has come to terms with his heritage at all, and if he is to be honest, he doesn’t want to rip up in anything like that right now. It’s all about deescalating.

“You should’ve brought him here earlier,” Albjörn says. “Your friend says he arrived two nights ago.”

“You know how he is, Albjörn.”

“I certainly do.”

It hits Thor that the healer and Loki went to school together, Loki being ahead in his studies of magic and joining the older students. Albjörn had been studying healing magic, that being where his talent and passion lies, but the basic classes of theory and magic they shared.


He walks closer to the bed, studying his brother. The healer has finished with his hand and has left. It is now dressed in white gauze. Though his brother looks relaxed, then still not especially peaceful. There's that sallow tinge to his skin. Thor is happy to see him just getting some sleep at all.

He spots a pair of crutches leaning against the wall. Albjörn notices his line of sight.

“They’re for your brother,” he says. “His ankle will only get worse if he keeps ignoring it.”
“I know, I told him. He doesn’t want to.” Thor sits down heavily in a chair beside the hospital bed. Bruce sits, more gingerly, in a chair with its back to the opposite wall, closer to the door. Or, rather, two chairs with no armrests.

“He has to. It’s that or no walking at all.”

Thor nods. “I’ll do my best.”

Albjörn nods. Then he fishes something from inside his coat, handing Thor a flask; glass in pale turquoise with a seethrough liquid inside.

“All his readings are low,” Albjörn says. Thor places the flask on the bedside table. “That’s why he passed out. He’s got a fever, as well, which is only natural from everything else. This should help.” He goes to flick through some papers on a table by the wall. “There might be some medication to help with the whole situation. You know, we’ve been working on altering the Midgardian ingredients and active substances to match our physiology. Some of it is already verified.”

“That’s good,” Thor says. He actually hadn’t heard about that. “Should he just drink this?”

“Oral, yes,” Albjörn confirms. He shuts a book he’d gone to paging through, turning to Thor. “That should be about it. When he wakes, don’t let him take out the drops,” he wrinkles his nose, “call a healer instead. Don’t let him stay on his feet for too long. He shouldn’t be walking on that foot at all. He should get plenty of water and as much nourishment as possible, and I’ll get back to you on the medicine. Yes?”

Thor nods. Hesitates.

“What if he …” he begins, glancing at Bruce, then back at Albjörn. It doesn’t matter. “What if he won’t eat?”

“Nausea?”

“Well yes, for some part,” Thor says. “I’ve managed to get a little into him today, but he needs more, way more than that. It’s as if he doesn’t .. want to.” As if it scares him.

Albjörn blinks for a moment, then his expression softens. He folds his hands elegantly in front.

“Undernourishment can be a delicate affair,” he says. “Compromises both mind and body. Some might feel like they aren’t hungry at all, for instance. Or they can feel very hungry and still not want to eat. Symptoms like that are very normal, including extremities of emotions such as anger, quick reactions. Sensitivity.”

Thor clears his throat, having to will his gaze to stay on the healer instead of straying. He doesn’t like to talk about this, for some reason. It’s as if it feels too personal, not his place. As if Loki is a child who won’t eat his vegetables.

“The important thing is to increase intake steadily,” Albjörn continues, “and then the functioning of biology should return. Including the natural desire nourish oneself - it will happen gradually. Try to remind him why it’s important, if he denies sustenance.” He pauses, face blank as ever. “Was there anything else?”

“No, I think that’s all,” Thor says. “Thank you.”

Albjörn nods, walking out of the room. He shuts the door to leave Thor and Bruce alone.
“Do you want me to go?” Bruce asks. “I can, I just figured I’d be here if you - you know, wanted company.”

“It’s okay,” Thor says. “I’m good either way.”

They end up talking for a little while. Bruce tells him about their work in the lab, though luckily without going into too much technical detail, and it seems like it went fine. Good, even. Up until Loki collapsed over the table, smashing his head on the edge of it and ending up unconscious on the floor. Apparently, there’d been a lot of blood.

Thor nudges Bruce to leave after some time, even though he did enjoy the company, implying that Valkyrie would probably appreciate help making dinner, or she might forget to eat entirely. Someone ought to save her from that low blood sugar headache. Bruce gets the hint and leaves.

It’s just that Thor would rather be alone with Loki when he wakes. That seems better than having an audience.

Sometime later, Loki does begin to stir, giving a small whir of his head and letting out a groggy moan. He clenches his hands and winces, the bandaged one drawing up to his chest. He blinks his eyes open to the hospital ceiling. Immediately, he begins to move, hurriedly, attempting to sit up.

“Loki -” Thor tries, reaching a hand out push him back down, but his brother ignores him entirely, halfway up and blinking at the wall in front of him, eyes glazed over. He struggles against Thor’s hand, muttering, “they put me under -” He blinks again. “They put me - they put me under, they put me to sleep, those bastards -”

“Loki, calm down,” Thor says, letting his hand drop to rest on the bedside instead. Loki scrambles to lean against the wall behind the bed. He turns to Thor, eyes still blurry but ablaze with fiery anger just behind that.

“They sedated me, Thor,” he says, a tad slurred but gaining focus, “like, like some rabid animal! They -- they can’t do that, is that, isn’t that illegal? What are the rules here - you should know, you make them! Thor, please, they can’t do that against my will!”

Thor sighs as Loki fumes, leaning his head back against the chair and closing his eyes for a moment.

“They’re just doing their job, Loki,” he says when his brother stops to breathe for a second, “helping you. You can’t get violent.”

“I wasn’t -” Loki cuts off with a gasp of outrage, “I wasn’t being violent! I didn’t touch them, I just, I didn’t want their potions; I don’t want them to put things in me -- I, I don’t want -” he looks down, noticing the IV’s in both his arms and stopping short, and Thor shoots up with a “Loki, no,” but doesn’t make it before Loki has ripped both needles violently from his arms and blood begins to spurt from the pricks. He actually pales a little (further, who knew that was possible) at the sight of it, just staring, mouth open.

“You’re such an idiot,” Thor grumbles, grabbing both the arms (too frail, too cold) and pressing his thumbs over the pricks as something begins to beep loudly, in two intervals on top of each other.

A moment later, a healer comes running. She makes the beeping noises stop, pushing Thor aside to apply a cotton swab on each of the bleeding pricks. Loki scowls at her and she ignores him, bending his one elbow and moving the hand from the same arm to press onto the other cotton ball. “Hold this here,” she says. There’s a sharp note to her voice.
“I’m sorry, I tried to stop him,” Thor mumbles, feeling like a complete child. The healer waves him off, making sure everything is set as it’s supposed to. Then she turns to him.

“Don’t forget to get the potion in him,” she says, and turns to leave. Thor grimaces. He really doesn’t want to have this fight.

Sure enough, when he turns back to Loki, his brother’s arms are crossed and he’s very nearly pouting.

“Loki, please just take the potion.”

“I don’t want it!”

“Why do always do this?” Thor cries, throwing out his arms.

“I don’t -” Loki begins, likely to say something indignant and righteous, but stops abruptly to bring a hand up to his forehead, closing his eyes, forehead scrunching up. He gives a small noise of pain as he rubs at it. “I don’t need it,” he continues, voice lower. “They had no right to do this, I didn’t want it.”

Thor sighs, sitting back down in the chair by the bed. Here we go.

“It’s your friend Bruce’s fault, anyway, isn’t it?” Loki blames in almost a sneer, dropping the hand to wrap both arms around his middle, not looking at Thor, but the opposite wall instead. “He must be the one who took me here to begin with. Norns, carrying me like some other dead fish through the streets, what a damned freak show it must’ve -”

“You cut your head open on the table. You were unresponsive. What would you have had him do?”

“Yes, yes fine, so the wound had to be treated, I recognise that - but then they go and do all this other stuff, Thor! That’s what they always do, when I’m perfectly fine without it, when - I mean it’s just a scratch, and yet they fuss as if it’s some big deal, they give me all these things and potions and treatments as if I can’t handle it on my own, as if I need their medicine -”

“Are you serious? Do you hear yourself? Loki, you can barely walk! Bruce brought you here because you passed out from standing up for too long, and you don’t even seem to acknowledge that there is a problem at all - your situation is the very definition of needing help.”

Loki stays quiet, for a few moments just breathing hard, chest rising and falling and eyes dark on Thor.

“I don’t want it,” he then says. “It’s not up for you to decide what’s good for me or not. What I need. And it’s not up to them.”

Thor desperately wants to argue with that but he doesn’t want Loki to latch onto that whole ‘you’re controlling my life’ thing. De-escalating.

“No, you’re right,” he says instead, swallowing the objection. “It’s not up to me.” He pauses to let that ring for a moment. Loki is watching him with intense, wary eyes. “But you’re my brother, Loki, I care about you and you’re making some decisions lately that I cannot back up. You’re being so destructive. Acting like it doesn’t matter.” He sighs. “And I don’t want you to die.”

Loki rolls his eyes in a big motion, looking away from Thor and back to the wall. “I’m not going to die, Thor,” he drawls. “That takes a lot more than a bit of sickness.”
“Carol told me about the state she found you in,” Thor responds after a few seconds, watching as Loki’s face hardens. “She said you were just sitting there, doing nothing. Barely conscious, cold as death itself. Your house was almost empty, everything was broken; you clearly haven’t been eating or drinking, or moving. If you’d kept on going like that you would have died.”

“It takes more than that.”

“But maybe you liked it,” Thor continues, unphased, eyes still on his brother. “Not having to do anything, think about anything - being so foggy with sickness that everything else would wither away. Maybe you liked the idea of not being able to even stand on your own legs, so one day you would finally fall and cut your head open, bleed out in the snow; or maybe you were waiting for your body to get so starved of nourishment and magic it could no longer defend itself from its own fever, just rising and rising till you’d boil to death, maybe that’s exactly what you wanted?” Thor pauses, waiting for response but gets none. Loki has turned his face away. “I wouldn’t know. Because you don’t tell me anything.”

There’s quiet for more than a few seconds.

Then Loki says, quietly, though there’s no doubt of the anger seething beneath, “that’s right, you don’t know anything.” A pause. “And you have no right.”

Thor looks at him for a few seconds. Then he sighs.

“Maybe not,” he amends. He keeps his voice calm. “But you’re not alone anymore, Loki. You’re with me. And I can’t allow you to isolate yourself like this again, you can’t handle it. Not right now.”

For once, Loki doesn’t object, just sitting silently. He doesn’t exactly look like he agrees, either, which is honestly a little comforting. That he’s not just resigned. He rolls his sleeves down to cover the cotton balls and his wrists.

“Can we just get out of here, then?” he then says, voice sharp and breaking the silence. “I’ll take the stupid potion if it means I can go.”

Thor raises his eyebrows, reaching out to grab the flask. “Are you sure?” he asks.

“Of course I’m sure, it’s just a potion,” Loki jabs. “It’s the principle of it. But it seems I’m under well your thumb, anyway, so there’s really no point in standing my ground.” He reaches out an impatient hand, and Thor ignores the comment and gives him the flask, half worried he will smash it like the last one.

But Loki downs it in one drag. He turns to Thor and raises an eyebrow when he’s done. “Satisfied?”

“Verily so. Thank you.”

Loki swings his legs over the bed, closing his eyes for a moment to steady himself from the movement, which Thor utilizes to quickly stand and grab the dark blue crutches leaned against the wall. He holds them out to Loki whose eyes open, then widen at the sight.

“No,” he says, snapping a glare back up to Thor.

“I’m not letting you leave without them. I swear, I'll strap you to the bed -”

“You said if I drink the potion -”

“Loki,” Thor interrupts. “The injury is only going to get worse if you keep damaging it. It needs
“No - Thor, please, it’s... embarrassing.”

“It is only crutches! Won’t it be better if your foot is actually healing than having a limp for the rest of your life? I don’t get it, why is it more embarrassing with aid?”

Loki sighs in an angry huff, looking away again. He reaches out a hand, snatching both crutches. “It just is,” he says, nonetheless placing both arms in the handles, hands on the grip. He pushes himself up and sways. Thor moves to steady him. “It’s fine, it’s fine,” Loki mumbles, blinking. “It’s only that damn sedative, still in my system.”

No wonder it’s still in his system if his system is so low he can get jittery from even a single cup of coffee, like earlier today. Like drinking on an empty stomach, anything can flare up cells that have nothing else in them. Thor needs at least three cups to feel anything.

They spend a few minutes practising with the crutches. More than once, Loki is ready to just throw it all to Hel, fuming at the impracticality of the apparently Norn-damned stilts. Thor checks himself to stay calm more than once, picking the crutches up from the floor and silently arranging them on Loki’s arms again. Not a word.

Albjǫrn really must be right - this undernourishment makes Loki’s temper and mood swings even worse than usual. Which is saying a lot. Of course, Thor is no stranger to that very special kind of anger that will occur when hunger begins to gnaw, and it’s really no surprise that being in a constant state of low energy will leave someone emotionally unstable like that. On top of whatever else is going on in Loki's mind; the things fueling all this to begin with.

He gets the hang of the crutches eventually, shifting himself towards the exit wearing a sour expression. With some difficulty he gets the door pushed open, refusing to let Thor do it by moving in the way when he tries. Loki is careful to walk to his side once they get out into the snow though, Thor notices, not ahead and not a foot behind. Right beside him. Not looking anybody in the eye; despite the villagers not doing him the same favour at all. In fact, they are staring shamelessly.

It takes Thor by surprise just how much that offends him. He understands that they’re curious, that they all thought Loki died and yet, here he is; that he looks so sick and bruised - but his brother is not some entertainment for them to watch. They should all know better.

He finds himself staring back with obvious hostility, and people shy away from his gaze. A memory hits him, and they’re back on Asgard, walking side by side toward the palace -- Loki had gotten beaten up by some group and Thor chased them off. The brothers were moving through the gathered crowd, Loki’s head down to hide the bruises and Thor looking at the onlookers, daring them all to say something. Let them try. Then Loki had taken his hand, after regaining enough presence of mind to concentrate on doing magic, and teleported them both away.

The hill is a challenge. Loki still stubbornly refuses to look at anything but the ground, declining to return any of the glances from Thor. The crutches keep slipping in the snow and icy grounds beneath, and more than once, he lands on the injured foot. A hiss of pain cut short every time.

After four occurrences of that, Thor silently slips an arm behind his upper back and under his armpit, taking the crutches with the other. Loki tenses considerably in the closeness, drawing away a little, but he doesn’t wrench free. Eventually, he grabs onto Thor’s shoulder with his left hand, still tense but leaning on him and accepting the support as they move on. His feet slip a little every now and again but they manage.
At the top, they meet Brunnhilde. She’s exiting a long, rectangular shed, the community kitchen, carrying a large roasting tin with something steaming in it. She spots them, throwing up her chin with an “Oy!” and walking towards them.

“There they are, the princes,” she calls. Thor gives Loki the crutches back so he can stand on his own and he takes them, planting both arms, the ends buried in the snow. Brunnhilde stops in front of them, smiling.

“Steve has taught me and Sam how to make ‘lasagna’,” she says, gesturing with a nod of her head at the dish. “Apparently that’s like his thing. Whatever this thing is - smells pretty good, though, right? Oof, it’s heavy,” she adds at the end, putting it down in the snow. The hot metal sizzles.

Thor had, in fact, noticed the scent before she even came over here. “It really does.”

“Well, do you wanna come? We’re over at my place, only made it in the community’s ‘cause my oven wasn’t big enough.”

Thor glances at his brother, who is looking increasingly closed off, eyes fixed somewhere behind Brunnhilde.

“You don’t have to eat an entire piece, Loki,” she adds, looking at him. “No one will get offended. In fact the opposite, I’d think.”

He blinks himself out of it, refocusing on her.

“I am - very tired, actually,” he says, his voice too light, and the disappointment is heavy in Thor’s chest. Even if he hadn’t expected anything else. Loki glances at him. “Would you mind if I just go back? I can sleep on the sofa.”

Thor hesitates for a second. Then he looks away, back at Brunnhilde.

“It smells delicious,” he says, “and thank you for the offer. But Loki and I will just go back to my place, get some dinner before bed.”

Said brother tenses beside him.

“Sure,” Brunnhilde says. “Good idea. I’ll let you all know whether this is any good once I’ve tried it. The Midgardians sure are pretty hyped about it.” She rolls her eyes. Then she turns to walk back to the cluster of house, disappearing.

Loki is silent for a moment, not moving. Then he says, voice bordering frantic, “it’s not that I don’t want to, Thor, it’s just - I’m nauseous, from earlier. A fever, I think. I don’t - I just don’t think I can get anything down, is all. You should go, be with your friends, I’m just going to sleep, anyway. Boring.”

Thor’s stomach twists. He doesn’t know how much of it Loki believes himself and how much is outright, blatant dishonesty.

“It’s just biology, he reminds himself. Natural.

“You have to eat, Loki,” he says, still looking at the houses.

“Yes, I know, I know and I will, it’s just - I’m so tired, Thor. And I already ate today, it's been a long day, I can just eat again tomorrow, it’ll be fine - it’s one evening.”
Thor hums. Neither acknowledgment or disagreeing. “Let’s go back to the house,” he says, and Loki eyes him warily. Skittish, like a hunted animal. But he follows when Thor begins to walk.

Thor pushes open the door to the house, holding it for his brother who immediately goes left, towards the bedroom.

“I don’t think so,” he says, placing a hand Loki’s shoulder and turning him towards the dinner table instead. Loki stands still, tense like a bowstring. His expression is tight.

“Thor,” he says, and it sounds stringy. “Please. I just want to sleep.”

Thor pushes on his shoulder, and Loki has to stumble along with the force. He takes hold of both his little brother’s upper arms, gently, to guide Loki to the chair he sat in yesterday, back against the wall. Thor takes the crutches in one hand, depositing them against the wall, and sits him down. It’s dark outside the window in the kitchen.

He sits in the next chair himself, at the end of the table, still holding Loki’s left upper arm. Loki is practically vibrating underneath his grip. Thor takes a breath.

Time to be the big brother.

He leans forward, eyes on Loki’s downcast ones. “I know you’re tired,” he begins and Loki looks up. His lips are a tight line, breathing through his nose. His eyes are wild. Lost.

“Thor,” he says again, interrupting what Thor was planning to say, his voice stronger than before. Demanding; negotiating. “I promise I’ll eat tomorrow,” he continues. “It’s only, so much has been going on today, you know. I had breakfast and lunch and I, I just - I’m not hungry, really not, I’m still full and I don’t - don’t …” he trails off, looking back down and frowning a little. Thor stays quiet, holding his arm, watching him. Waiting for something more. Come on, brother. Say something you mean.

Then Loki’s eyes snap up again, suddenly burning. “Would you stop looking at me!” he hisses, jerking his arm free from Thor’s hold, chair scraping away.

Thor lets his hand fall in the silence, not bothering to hide the hurt he can feel showing on his face. Loki breathes heavily, though otherwise still, and his eyes immediately extinguish like doused in water. Thor can almost see him get smaller as embarrassment takes over, gaze flickering on Thor's face and falling to the table.

“Could you eat some yoghurt?” Thor asks after a long moment. “I can put honey on it.”

He would suggest fruit as well but has a feeling that the more simple, the better. Loki keeps looking at the table.

Then he nods, barely perceptibly so.

Thor doesn’t reach out to touch him in affection, doesn’t proclaim ‘yes, Loki!’ like he wants to. Instead, he gets up quietly and goes to the kitchen, fetching a bowl from a cabinet. Then the tub of yoghurt from the refrigerator, honey from the spices-shelf. He scoops a small fist of the dairy into the bowl, a dollop of honey on top, careful not to make it look overwhelming or vulgar in any way.

It’s practically nothing.

But it’s dinner, and it’s a routine; it’s three meals in a day and Thor has a feeling habits like this might make it all easier. A frame for normalisation. He finds a clean teaspoon to bring along and
carries the not-meal to the table, putting it down, careful not to make a loud noise with the placing it. Noting how Loki twitches nonetheless.

He sits there just looking at the bowl for a little while. His eyes are too wide, only seeming to get more and more lost as the seconds pass.

Maybe this was a bad idea, Thor can’t help but think. Maybe Loki is too tired because it was fine earlier at lunch, at least better, but now it’s dark outside and he’s sick and everything feels heavier and more chaotic in the night. It’s not a problem like that, Loki is just tired and needs to sleep and maybe this was just a terrible, terrible idea.

“It’s - do you ..” Loki speaks, then, and his voice is trembling. “Do you have a napkin?” he asks. So quietly. As if he doesn’t actually want anyone to hear him.

Thor gets up, bringing back three pieces of paper towel. He feels like he’s walking on floors of paper and is trying not to fall through.

“Is this alright?” he asks and Loki nods, taking one of them gingerly, his hands shaking badly as he places it on the table in front of him. He begins folding it, neatly, so slow as to make all the folds perfectly aligned. Then he brings it to the bowl, shaking along with the hand as he carefully wipes the inside above the yoghurt, at the sides where some is smeared. Oh.

He unfolds the paper, folds it again, face set in a perfect mask of concentration but something else right behind it, not touching the smeared side of the paper until there’s a clean side turned out - then wiping again. He repeats four times.

Then he just holds the dirtied paper, pinched between two fingers like something so unfathomably dirty and disgusting, staring at it. He looks around the surface of the table as if looking for a proper place to put it and finding none. The shaking in the hand gets worse, eyes flickering, not really breathing. There’s a little yoghurt smeared on his thumb and he looks just about to freak the fuck out.

Thor takes it from him, gingerly between forefinger and thumb, and Loki’s shoulders drop as if an immense weight left him along with the yogurt-smeared paper towel. Thor hands him a clean one and Loki wipes his thumb clean, then Thor takes that as well, walking to the kitchen to throw it all out.

With his back to the table as he opens the lid to the waste bin, he hears the cling of metal against porcelain. He tries not to tense, proceeding to throw out the papers, closing the bin again, slowly turning back and walking to the table.

He sits down, stealing a glance at his brother which Loki tenses under. He’s looking at the opposite wall, spoon with yoghurt on it in his hand and hovering in the air.

He mumbles, “could you not look?” and it is so very much mumbled Thor is glad he can even make out the words. He checks himself to keep his own calm, stay supportive. Big brother.

“Oh course,” he says, turning in the chair to sit half with his side and halfway back-turned to Loki, his brother still visible in the edge of his vision. Thor focuses his eyes on the couch.

After a few moments, he gets up to retrieve the book he left there earlier. He goes back to sit in the chair, same way as before, back half turned to Loki, his eyes planted on the pages in his lap. He’s careful to keep his shoulders dropped, face neutral and calm. Focusing on the sentences. Kind of.

Behind him, Loki stops moving again. Thor waits. After a minute or so of nothing, he places the
book on the table, turning to face his brother again.

Loki is staring at the table beside the bowl, has eaten maybe two bites out of the yogurt. His eyes are swimming. He blinks and looks up at Thor, and tears spill over onto his cheeks.

“No, no no, don’t,” he says, voice like a hoarse whisper. “I can do it, it’s - it’s not a problem, I can - I can -” he swallows, more tears breaking free and travelling down. He lifts a shaking hand, gaze flickering as he absentmindedly wipes them away. As if pretending they’re not really there. “It’s not a problem,” he repeats. “I just need a second. Need to -” he cuts off, a breath caught in his throat. The air goes in and out too fast, too shallow.

“Loki,” Thor says, leaning forward but not touching. “You’re alright. Take a breath.”

Loki looks at him again, eyes shining with desperation, then flickering on his face. He blinks in an attempt to focus, another breath catching. “But it’s - it’s not even an issue,” he says, voice harder but higher pitched, too. “It doesn’t matter, I just don’t - I don’t want to -”

Thor reaches out his hand to gently grip the upper arm again. I’m here. I’m here, can you feel it? Do you see me?

“Please, brother. Breathe,” he says. Loki is tense to the point of breaking, every muscle clenched under the touch. He swallows, breath stuck again, and then breaking again in short hitches. “Come on, with me,” Thor says and breathes in, and out. Does it again, waiting as Loki tries to copy the motion. Repeating it when he doesn’t manage to.

He pushes the bowl away with the other hand and not looking away from his brother, who on the other hand follows the movement with his eyes, as it scoots across the table. Thor brings to fingers to his chin and lifts it up, managing to catch his gaze. Eyes wide.

It takes a little while. Eventually, though, Loki begins to catch on, leaning a little into Thor’s touch as he eases into the rhythm. He closes his eyes and drops his head as he keeps following Thor’s breaths, in and out.

Thor drops the hand onto the table, still breathing, and lets it stay there, reached out if Loki wants it. He ignores the confusion and frustration he feels rising in himself to instead focus on the situation at hand. It doesn’t matter why this is happening, because it is happening and he just needs to handle it as well as he can.

After a little while in silence like that, Thor says, “you don’t have to eat it, Loki, it’s alright,” but his brother shakes his head, eyes blinking open and reaching out a tired hand to drag the bowl back in front of himself.

He grabs the spoon, taking a bite and lifting it to his mouth. Swallows, after a few seconds. He begins to tremble again. Thor scoots his own chair closer, lifting his own hand to the back of his brother’s head to cradle it with his palm, stroking the dark curls softly with his thumb. Loki’s eyes are still dropped, shoulders hunched and tense. He takes another bite.

They sit like that for a while, Thor after a minute turning half-sideways to face the other wall but keeping his hand in the hair, thumb stroking, gentle and quiet. I’m here, brother.

And then it’s finished. Loki is scraping the sides of the bowl with the spoon until it’s practically impossible to get anything more out unless he licks the bowl. Which he doesn’t. Though Thor wouldn’t have opposed it.

He drops the hand to Loki’s shoulder, squeezing it. Loki, who still is looking at the table, sighs,
pushing the bowl away and wiggling sideways out of Thor’s hold.

“Don’t,” he says.

Thor retreats the hand, moving it into his own lap, under the table. Wringing it against the other. He’s not sure what to say if Loki doesn’t want him to applaud what seems like an accomplishment.

“It’ll get easier,” he tries. “It’s just because - you’re out of practice. It’s only natural.”

Not that Thor knows any of this for sure.

Loki is frowning slightly. He stays quiet.

Thor looks away. “It’ll get easier,” he repeats.

After a few more moments of silence like this, that strange sensation like a balloon released of air and being now .. nothing, drained, yet it still feeling like the tension is building in the air, suffocating and thick, he asks, “do you want to go to sleep? The bed is yours,” and his brother nods.

They get him in the crutches and Thor follows into the other room, waiting in the doorway. Loki sits on the bed, taking off his boots. He keeps everything else on, lying down on top of all the sheets and facing the wall. Thor wonders if it’s all some show of protest or indifference.

“Don’t you want to take off your clothes?” he asks. “There are plenty of blankets. A comforter, too, if you’d like.”

“It’s fine,” Loki says, not moving.

Thor grabs a blanket from a basket in the corner, going to the bedside and draping it over him. He gets on his knees to sit for a moment. He squeezes the upturned shoulder lightly.

“Goodnight, brother,” he says. Pausing. “You did well.”

Then he gets to his feet, closing the door behind him.

He wants to stay. He wants to stay by the bedside, sleep in the armchair. Already imagining Loki in the bed, alone in the oppressive winter darkness; shaking, terrified of something Thor can’t see or understand in the slightest, and he wants to run in there, hold his hand and whisper soft words in the dark. But they’re not children. Loki stopped asking for such thing many centuries ago - and Thor is pretty sure it wouldn’t be welcomed, now.

Instead, he takes the bowl from the table and washes it, putting it back in the cabinet. Tidies the kitchen. When he runs out of things to clean, he goes to brush his teeth. He’ll make Loki do that, too, tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

oh man, I made myself hungry writing about lasagna. But see, I'm just so goddamn lazy
with cooking, I basically live off of oatmeal and sandwiches on cheap bread. I should really make some lasagna.

Anyway! Hope you liked the chapter. The next one is already written but I think I'll write ahead a bit further before I edit it through and post, just to be a step ahead, you know. Probably a week, max, before the next update.

Thank you so much for reading. And commenting, if you're into that. I love it, all of it <3
Chapter Summary

So! One more!

This one is .. about 6000 words, I think? It was another long-ass chapter, 12k or something, so I split it. Even though some of you said you like the long ones (and how great is that) - I just thought I'd mix it up a bit so it doesn't get overwhelming. It also means the next one is almost ready to go, too, and will be up in a few days :-)

And again, thank you all for reading, and kudos'ing and commenting. You all make my world <3<3

Chapter Notes

Also, a little recap in case someone forgot where we are. I know the feeling of reading many stories at the same time. Man, do I.

Anyway, there was the whole reunion on the battlefield. Then the hotel-room days, Thor was drinking a lot, then Tony's funeral from which Loki ended up fleeing. He then spent three years in some Norwegian mountains in a shitty cabin-thing, getting more and more saaaaad. Carol Danvers found him, eventually. She flew him to New Asgard where some Avengers are visiting. They're working on trying to bring lost ppl back, doing meetings and stuff. Loki drank a lot of coffee. He's not doing too good but when was he ever. On the positive, he's a nerd, and so is Bruce, and nerds are cool. Thor and Loki are trying to be good bros. It's pretty in Norway and people are nice. That's about it?

Yeah so the last chapter was the healing rooms and all that, late-night yogurt, and then they went to sleep. Ooooooh so exciting. I should not do summaries of things

Enjoy this chapter! It's pretty chill. Or, at least more chill than some of the others, I think. I do tend to be dramatic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thor doesn’t even remember falling asleep. He remembers lying down on the mattress by the couch, vaguely recalls crawling under the cover, putting his head on the pillow, and then nothing at all.

He wakes back up to soft light from the kitchen window falling in, checking the clock by the wall. It’s nine thirty by Midgardian countings of the day.
It had taken a little while to adjust to that way of organizing time in the beginning, settling here in the village. The Asgardian day was similar in length, a sister-realm to Midgard and a perfect match like that, but counted in reverse all the way from twenty-four -- like a countdown until the beginning of
the next cycle. The reset of the day, twelve in the night on Midgard, would be twenty-four, one AM would be twenty-three, two AM twenty-two and so on - with the zenith marking the half-point of twelve.*

Makes everything confusing. But they manage.

Of course, there’s the universal time as well, literally, the time of all the universe, counted in fifteen hours at a time, stretches called ‘modules’. That’s what every spaceship goes by, which makes both day and night a little longer if you’re on long-term space travel. But most people just use that to sleep in a little longer. It’s not uncommon to need more sleep in general, either, while travelling.

But most Midgardians are not at all familiar with that concept.

The door to the bedroom is still closed, so likely Loki is asleep. He rarely ever remembers to close a door after himself when leaving a room. Thor has that ingrained from many an irritating incident of having to get up and close the doors to his own chambers, when his brother had stopped by and left again in some hurry.

He sits up, rubbing his eyes, groans from the sluggishness of everything; his thoughts, his body, his .. emotions. He really did just go out cold yesterday, a hazy blur of dreams lingering in his mind but nothing he can make sense of into anything coherent. He wonders if Loki has slept as soundly. For Thor himself, at least, it did some much needed good.

He gets himself off the sofa with the incentive of making tea, dragging the comforter along wrapped around himself with one hand holding it together. It’s really become a habit with the tea thing - and who would’ve ever thought. He sure isn’t ever going to tell the wizard about it.

It was Brunnhilde who started because she thinks coffee is gross, and Thor doesn’t care to drink three cups of the tar every morning just to get that little buzz Midgardians so crave. So he jumped the tea-wagon with her.

In the summer, he has herbs growing outside, up against the wall, but they’re snowed over right now. Instead, he has a large, red clay pot in the windowsill with lemon thyme, rosemary and sage. Pepper helped him pick them out in a botanical store in a bigger city - those were the ones most similar to scents he remembers from home.

Thor breaks off a couple of twigs and leaves of each herb, gathering them in his palm.

He sets the kettle to boil, cutting up a lemon and some ginger root to throw in a pot along with the rest. He remembers to add a bit of cold water to the kettle once it's done, to keep from scorching the plants, root and citrus; just as his mother used to.

While the tea is pulling, he washes his hands with the lavender soap by the sink, then gets out a large, ceramic mixing bowl and a wooden spoon. He turns on the oven and proceeds to find oats, apples, rhubarb from the fridge, yogurt, sugar and oil, placing it all on the counter.

The recipe was taught to him by a woman in the village, who sometimes made it for her kids instead of porridge. He mixes the ingredients by eye, kneading them together with his hands, crumbling it through his fingers, kneading together again. Then he crumbles the mixture into a pan lined with baking paper, putting it into the warm oven.

As he’s pouring himself a cup of tea and just about to sit down with a book, there’s a light knock on
the front door. He carries the mug with him, opening, and an icy gust of air sweeps in.

“Did think you’d be up by now,” Brunnhilde greets with a smile. She’s rubbing at her upper arms, shivering outside. The sun is peeking out despite the freezing air, making the landscape of snow gleam behind her. “Is that tea? Care to give a cup?”

Thor smiles, making space for her to walk through the doorway. “Don’t be loud,” he says. “Loki is sleeping. I think.”

Brunnhilde makes her way to the small counter by the kitchen, an island, finding a mug and pouring into it. She takes a sip, leaning on her elbows and looking at Thor.

“So,” she says. “How’s it going?”

He sits down in a chair by the table, its back to the sofa, and turning it to face towards her instead.

“He had some yogurt last night,” he says and only just stops himself from shrugging in dismiss. Somehow, it’s harder to remember today why that had felt like such an accomplishment yesterday. The easiness of his sleepy haze beginning to wear off in favour of a colder reality.

“I meant you,” Brunnhilde alters, cocking her head to the side.

“You know how I am,” he says. “We’ve been talking about that for three years straight, now.” They really have. And he is fine, on a personal level like that. “So you met Sam, yesterday?” he adds to change the subject. Trying to keep his claws in that blissful tranquility of tea and blurry dreams a little longer.

“I did,” she says, taking the bait without protest. “He’s a cool guy. Real perceptive.”

“He is,” Thor agrees. “Talked to him and Steve for a while when Bruce and Loki were working together. He brought news from the Americas, in the North.”

“They’re doing alright over there, it sounds like,” she says. “With their little police squad thing. And Wakanda is thriving.”

“Earth is rebuilding remarkably quickly, really. Like billions and billions of tiny little ants.”

Brunnhilde snickers.

“Seems like it went pretty well with the lab thing, by the way,” she continues, after a pause. “You think they’re going to do it again?”

“Bruce seemed excited. I’d think so.”

It’s quiet for a moment.

“Do you ever miss the Hulk? Or him, Bruce?” she asks, narrowing her eyes in thought. “I mean just raw Hulk, I miss that guy sometimes.”

“He’s a lot happier like this.”

“That’s for sure.” She scratches at her nose, grimacing. “You know, we had to make an entire separate lasagna for him yesterday. That’s a trait I could do without, at least, he eats me out of the house whenever he visits.”

Thor chuckles.
“Speaking of eating things that are delicious,” she continues, sniffing in the air, “what is that smell?” She turns to him, eyes wide. “Are you making crumble?”

He waggles his eyebrows, throwing out both hands with a shrug.

“*Yes! Man, you are just the best,*” she exclaims. “*No one can match your crumble. Except for maybe Gudrön, but that doesn’t count because she invented it. Oooh, I can’t wait, I’m absolutely starving.*”

She rubs her stomach with a delighted smile.

“Who said you were having any?”

Thor smirks. Her expression falls at once to a scowl.

“Don’t you dare,” she says. “*All the things I do for you, Thor, the least you can give back is a little crumble.*”

“You’re *queen,* Brunnhilde, don’t you have people for these kinds of things?”

“I do, I have you.”

He snorts, going to check on the dish. Warmth floods out in a wave when he opens the oven, along with a heavy scent of baked apple, rhubarb, oats and melted sugar.

“Oooh, now you’re making it worse,” Brunnhilde complains, collapsing over the counter.

“Five more minutes,” Thor says, closing the oven door again.

When the five minutes have passed and he takes out the baking pan, Brunnhilde wastes not a second with scooping a large piece onto a plate, running to the other side of the counter before Thor can stop her.

“No - *Brunnhilde,* you have to wait for it to cool!”

“But I want it now,” she sings, proceeding to take a huge, steaming bite, before spitting it back out onto the plate with a half-muffled yell when it burns her tongue. She’s letting out a stream of vulgar Norse swearing while she runs to the sink.

Thor is laughing and scooping out a piece for himself and she’s gulping down water, when the bedroom door opens to reveal a groggy-looking Loki. Oh, *right.* He was sleeping. Shit.

He leans against the doorframe, squinting at them. The epitomy of displeasure. His hair is a complete mess, still wearing the clothes and big sweater he did yesterday, and everything looks ruffled, his cheeks flustered.

“What’s going on?” he asks. He clears his throat, visibly irritated with the obvious croak. Despite this entire circumstance of theirs, Thor can’t help a smile tugging at his mouth from the familiarity of this scene. Loki appearing late to lessons, still half-asleep. Thor bursting into his room and waking him up to ’*get going*’ onto some quest, knowing full well his brother wouldn’t be up yet. Loki showing up to a family breakfast, ruffled after sleeping in. No time or presence of mind to even cast a glamour.

“B’rnd muh tngue,” Brunnhilde responds, extra acutely incoherent from gurgling water. She spits it out in the sink. “*Ugh. H’rts.*” She grimaces, working her tongue around inside her mouth.
“It was your own fault,” Thor argues. “Told you to wait.”

And Loki actually snorts from the doorway. Then he limps to the counter-island that Thor is standing on the opposite side of (no crutches, he notices begrudgingly), eyes on the pot of tea and his eyebrows pulling together.

He leans over to sniff the spout and says, “this smells good,” looking up at Thor. Sounds almost surprised, eyes a little wide. He blinks, schooling his expression back into something less open. “Like - at home,” he clarifies.

Thor smiles softly. “I found some herbs that are similar to mother’s,” he says. Loki twitches and then nods. “Would you like a cup?”

“...thank you. Yes,” he answers. He waves a lazy hand to stop Thor as he begins to straighten up. “I can manage.”

Thor lets him search through the cabinets, busying himself with finishing scooping food onto his plate. Of course Loki opens the one with mugs last, standing there for a few too many seconds just staring. As if the mugs are some terribly important thing. Then finally, he picks one out and limps back to the counter, pouring tea into it. He’s chosen the red and white polka dotted ceramic one, Thor notes. He wouldn’t have guessed at that one. He’d have thought Loki would at least pick something green.

Thor realises he’s staring when his little brother glances at him with a raised eyebrow. He looks away again. Takes his plate, settling at the end of the dinner table closest to the kitchen. Loki avoids the table, sitting down instead on the couch. There’s an uncomfortable atmosphere surrounding the end of the table opposite Thor where they sat yesterday evening with the yogurt. As if the tension is lingering, the space holding on to the heaviness of this entire situation with Loki. Thor wonders if it’s just his imagination, or if Loki feels it, too, like a real, physical imprint in the room.

Brunnhilde, having finished with both the water and the cursing, settles down in that exact spot, the one Loki has been occupying the other days, by the wall opposite the sofa. Apparently unphased. She blows on a bite of the crumble before eating it and sagging back against the chair with a loud and satisfied groan.

Thor huffs a soft laugh before taking a bite himself. He glances at Loki, who appears to be deeply fixated on his mug of tea. Almost glaring at it in his hands, like he’s trying to wring its every secret out with intimidation.

“How did you sleep, Loki?” Thor asks, after a few moments of silence, eyes on his own plate again. He takes a bite. When Loki doesn’t answer Thor looks at him, and he lifts his gaze as well, blinking. As if bringing himself back into the room from some inner fixation occupying his presence entirely.

“Sorry?”

“I only asked how you slept,” Thor repeats, keeping his voice relaxed. Easy.

Loki shrugs. “I slept alright,” he says. Thor has no way of telling if that’s true. His brother looks tired, which could either be the effect of not sleeping well, or of finally sleeping through a night for the first time in long. “Yourself?”

“Heavily,” Thor replies.

“Well, I for one slept absolutely shit,” Valkyrie decides to contribute, apparently finding that a helpful addition, while she stuffs another spoonful of the dish into her mouth. She nods in Thor’s
direction, chewing, mouth half-open. “Not even you snore as bad as the Hulk, let me tell you. He’s some monster.”

“Oh come on.” Thor scoffs. “As if you’re one to talk. Besides, if anyone here is going to get the prize of the worst snoring, it should be Loki.”

Loki looks positively, genuinely offended.

“I do not snore,” he says, too taken aback to put real strength behind his words. Thor raises his eyebrows at him. Loki blinks, then scoffs. “I don’t!”

“Tell that to the entire camp you kept awake that time in Vanaheim,” Thor rebutes.

“I had a cold! And to refresh your memory, I was the one staying awake the entire night because people would shout me awake whenever I tried to sleep.”

Thor tries to suppress his smirk. He turns to Brunnhilde. “We used to share quarters, when we were kids,” he tells her. “Had to split up because I just couldn’t ever sleep for that infernal noise.”

“That is simply not true!” Loki sputters. “We - we split .. when ..” he trails off, ears going a little red as he realises he’s being baited.

“Oh, yeah, I don’t know, Thor,” Brunnhilde replies, grimacing. “I’m not sure I believe your brother capable of producing such a snore, of any real potency. Leave that to us big guys.” Now Loki’s gaze snaps to her. She smirks in return.

“This is -” Loki objects, cutting off. He takes a short breath through his nose, in and out. When he speaks again his voice is deliberately lower in pitch, calmer. “I am very much capable, thank you,” he says. He settles back against the couch, holding one arm wrapped around his middle and taking a sip of tea with the other. He scoffs again.

Thor snickers, returning to his breakfast.

They eat in silence for a little while, then, apart from Brunnhilde’s occasional noises of pleasure and the clattering of metal against ceramic bowls. At one point Loki gets up, quietly, setting the dotted mug on a coffee table and disappearing into the bathroom. The shower turns on. It reminds Thor that he should probably shower himself, soon.

Loki is only in there for maybe half an hour today. When he comes back out, wearing the same clothes and looking washed out just like yesterday, Thor is reading on the couch and Brunnhilde playing a video game on the TV. It’s her way of de-stressing - but Thor finds he can’t really get himself engaged enough to join, as of late.

Loki goes to the kitchen, turning on the tap and feeling the temperature of the water with a finger, and Thor gets up to fetch a fresh toothbrush and toothpaste from the bathroom.

He goes back in, handing it to Loki, who’s leaning on the counter with one hand and puts down a glass of water to take it.

“Oh,” he says. “Right. Thank you.”

It’s a lucky thing bacteria doesn’t thrive easily in their oral environment, and especially not Midgardian bacteria, since Thor doesn’t know how long it’s been since Loki brushed his teeth. With the current state of his body, anyway, Thor is just not about to take any chances. Even if their breath won’t begin to smell, like Midgardians’. Not at first, at least.
Thor leaves to shut himself in the bathroom, strip off his clothes and go into the shower. The warm water flowing down his body makes him feel less jittery, skin a little less electric. His breath calmer. Slower.

He closes his eyes and lets everything drift for a little while.

***

Loki is left alone in the living room with the Valkyrie when Thor goes to shower. He doesn’t look at her, focusing his attention instead on the newly acquired toothbrush - it looks strange, in a bright green colour, all plastic as opposed to the wooden ones at home. What used to be home. What used to be, just in general.

He squeezes toothpaste onto it, wetting it under the faucet and faces the window. Valkyrie continues with her game behind him. He ignores the noises and sound effects from both the television and her.

It’s less cloudy outside than it was yesterday. The sun peeks out every now and again, glittering its reflection in the snowy ground. Loki can see villagers moving in between the houses further down the hillside, appreciative of Thor’s house being situated as it is, isolated from the others. The commotion around it limited to his guests only.

“You should spit that out,” Valkyrie says, and Loki startles.

“Right,” he answers, muffled by the toothpaste in his mouth, realising that he must’ve been standing there for a while with the toothbrush limp in his mouth. His arms are wrapped around himself. He turns to the sink and spits. The foam is reddened, a little.

“So,” Valkyrie says, and Loki realises the television isn’t on anymore. He rinses out his mouth.

“Your magic isn’t working, is it?”

He braces himself against the sink, just barely resisting the urge to sigh.

“It’ll get better,” he says. Clears his throat. His voice sounds too .. tired.

“Only if you take proper care of it,” she says.

He turns to lean back against the counter, hands still on it. He raises his eyebrows at her.

“What do you know of that?” he says. “You’re no witch.”

“Nope, not me.” She shrugs, but her eyes are steadfast on him. “My lover before Hela slaughtered us all was a mage. She had her issues- I helped her with it where I was able to.”

Loki blinks. Before Hela. It hits him just how little he knows about her, her past - except for the fact that all her friends were killed by Hela’s hand. He doesn’t even know her real name and wonders if she’s told anyone else, by now - Thor, for example. Or if maybe everyone already knows. He hasn't heard anyone call her anything - or has he missed something? At the meeting, someone must have addressed her at some point, right? But then, he's not really at peak awareness and perceptiveness as of late.

He can feel a lump forming in his throat and swallows. Then clears it again. This topic feels .. prickly. Too personal. “What sort of .. issues?” he ventures, anyway. He wants to know what she knows.

“Oh, you know,” she continues, “bouts of melancholy. Depression, I believe they call it here? Like a
term, you know.”

Loki blinks. *Melancholy*. That’s what his mother had called it. And Eir. Rather than ‘frailty of mind’, like Thor and his friends did. And Loki.

“It stunted her magic,” Valkyrie goes on, “badly, whenever it would get worse. You know, when she fell in that hole. When things got hard. Sometimes it was all gone, completely drained; that didn’t really make anything easier for her.”

Loki stays quiet. It really doesn’t make anything particularly easier. To be missing the gold in your veins, the life of your blood. To be hollow where sparks of energy should reside, drained like a brook in drought. The only thing left a cavity, lifeless and dull.

He’s never talked to anyone about this, not anyone but Frigga and Thor, and never either very much. Especially not Thor. Only when it got so bad he wasn’t able to handle it on his own. It’s uncomfortable, Valkyrie stating everything so plainly like this - such most personal experiences of his all laid on the table.

“Of course, there was medication. That worked, for some part.”

He remembers the rattling bottle, little capsules in dusty turquoise colour, like the rivers of melted glacier on a cloudy day. Hiding them under the pillow from Thor in their shared bedroom, or on trips out of the castle in a pouch he carried everywhere. One capsule every morning, one every evening.

“But that couldn’t solve it alone,” Valkyrie continues, “she had to, you know, get back into the groove. Take care of herself a little, take it easy, practising small spells to get back in touch with the seiðr. It wouldn’t be easy, at first, but I would help her with it, keep it consistent and constructive, all that.”

Loki realises his arms are beginning to shake from the effort of holding him upright against the counter. He pushes away from it, staggering to sit at the table in the chair with its back to the kitchen, at the end, and for some reason it feels wrong to occupy this seat instead of the one he’s used to. He pushes the sensation down with force. It’s just a seat.

Valkyrie is looking at him. He meets her gaze.

“She’d think it was the end every time,” she continues. “She was never going to get her magic back, she would never get better. But we both got better at understanding it over time, managing and handling it.”

Loki wills himself to keep his eyes on hers. There’s pause for a few seconds. “It’s not common in Asgard,” he then says. “Not without .. proper reason.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Valkyrie says. “It’s just biology. Brain chemistry. Some people are more vulnerable to that kind of thing, easier pushed over the edge.”

*Vulnerable*. He doesn’t like that phrasing. He already knows very well how fragile he is and always has been.

“You’re right,” she amends after a second, "it isn’t common in our people unless you’ve been in some big traumatic battle or whatever, lost your entire family. Honestly, though? It doesn’t matter *why* it happens.” He looks up at her. “Whether it’s *justified *or not. Kirstine never had any more reason to fall in that kind of a rut than anyone else, yet she did, and we didn’t. It’s not her fault. Everyone has their weaknesses.”
He swallows the growing lump. Blinks. Glances away for a moment.

“Kirstine,” he echoes. He looks back at Valkyrie. “That was her name?”

Something warm enters her expression, and she smiles. A little wistful. She nods once but doesn’t say anything more.

Loki wonders if she’d get mad if he asked her name. It irritates him to no end that he can’t remember whether anyone has addressed her in his company. Or maybe it’s one of those touchy topics better left in the past, and she hasn’t told anyone. And he’s not exactly a friend, in any position to ask something so personal. All he’s been doing for her is cause problems. Ever since they first met.

He decides not to ask.

“We have a greenhouse here in the village,” Valkyrie continues. “That’s what I wanted to tell you, anyway. Was thinking I’d take you there if you want; practice some simple spells and such.”

Loki looks at his hands, trying not the fidget too obviously. He can feel his knee bouncing under the table and can’t really control it. Practising gardening spells. Like some child.

“Thor said your magic has been damaged for some time, now. Years.”

He wants to scowl, a little, but doesn’t. Looks up, instead, at the wall beside the bedroom door. “It wasn’t this bad, before.”

“But it wasn’t good.”

“It was okay. I could still use it.”

She looks at him. “How long has it been this way? ‘okay’, that is.”

He crosses his arms, not sure if it’s in defiance or an attempt to feel safer. His expression feels tight.

“On and off for most of my life,” he says. “Then I fell into the void. That made it decidedly worse.”

“Thor mentioned something about that. Falling from Bifröst.”

“Yes.”

He really doesn’t want to pursue this line of conversation and deliberately closes off his body language to send the message.

She leans forward, elbows on her knees. “Well, I’m thinking you can at least get it back to how it was before that little solitary excursion into the Fjäll. If you get back in touch with your energy and remember to eat and drink, all that, we could make it happen in no time.” She cocks her head. “Thor and I can help you.”

He glances at her. He feels oddly ... hollow, when he’d expect to feel angry about her meddling with his life. Resigned. There’s just not really much choice, anyway. Not trying to get better will create more problems than making the effort will.

“The healers have been working on creating medication, too,” Valkyrie continues. “Similar to Asgard’s formulas. They might have something, meds or treatment, that could -”

“I don’t want medicine,” he interrupts, keeping his eyes fastened on the wall opposite. She blinks.
“...okay,” she says. “It can make some things more manageable, though.”

“I’m not interested.”


The shower turns off inside the bathroom.

They stay in silence until Thor emerges, wearing a towel around his hips. He goes straight to the bedroom.

Loki doesn’t know what to do with himself. As if he’s under some sort of time-lock; he can’t sit in the chair forever but he also doesn’t know what else to do. He should do something. He should want to do something.

He lets himself stay sitting, focusing his attention on the bouncing knee. Despite the hectic energy of the motion it’s strangely grounding. Like a focus-point.

He should probably eat breakfast. That’s a good routine to have. But just the thought of getting up makes his heart beat with unjustified anxiety.

Valkyrie stays in her place on the couch as well, quiet. Loki has his head turned slightly away from her; it feels more private than having his profile exposed. He can still sense her in the edge of his vision.

Everything feels raw and open. At least earlier, the lingering blur of sleep had given it all a nice, distant quality to it.

Thor comes out of the bedroom, dressed in and dark blue and red clothes. His hair being wet makes it a deep shade of brown and his beard as well, which is braided. It all looks .. cleaner, definitely, and more groomed than it did three years ago; but the lengths are more or less the same. Which is nice. It gives him that majestic, almost scary quality to his already imposing figure. It’ll be easier than ever if Loki needs him to intimidate someone. Throw some lightning, eyes white with static and overhead thunder into the mix and the look of ‘angry-thunder-God’ is complete, more so than ever.

He stops in the doorway, raising his eyebrows at Loki who realises he’s staring. He drops his gaze. It’s just, it’s ... so strange to be back. With Thor, after all these years. Everything feels distant in an entirely new way - no longer just the sense of being unwelcome, but too close to something like being a stranger.

There’s quiet for a beat. Smotheringly so. Then, all of a sudden and maybe an effect of all the tension and a need to break free somehow, Loki is hit with a moment's surge of willpower and pushes from the chair to head to the kitchen. He fetches a bowl from the cupboard he saw Thor get one from yesterday, a spoon from the drawer, keeping thoughts out of his head. Making his body go through the motions. With the wooden spoon lying on the kitchen island, he scoops up a fist of the dish in it. He can feel eyes on him and deliberately keeps his own down. Uncaring.

He ignores the rising panic flurrying between his ribs despite the absence of whirling thoughts, expanding out, to the sides and upwards through his trachea. It’s trying to choke him, fill out all the space in his throat so there’s no room for air. He won’t let it.

Instead, he keeps his expression carefully neutral as he settles with his back to the kitchen yet again. He’s already growing more comfortable with this seat. There’s no reason not to be. It’s a seat.
Without giving it a single thought further, he takes a bite. Thor is still in the doorway, and Loki inches his body to turn away from both him and Valkyrie. He can’t taste the food. It feels like ashes in his mouth, sticking like clay to the walls and tongue, but he manages to chew it nonetheless, thoroughly, and then swallow. It meets the shuddering panic on its way down, the lump in his throat, and for a moment he thinks it’s going to come back up, rejected, along with everything else he’s managed to get in these past days; but then it moves past it. Settling further down.

His stomach churns with the newly added substance, noisily, and he can feel colour flush in his cheeks despite feeling increasingly distant from the other people in the room. Even his own body. It feels too heavy. Too alive inside him. He reminds himself to not care, which is hard because for whatever reason, something in him does care. And it is being rather loud.

Luckily, he has skill in this area; once he manages to convince himself that it’s a good idea to do so, he retreats further into himself. To a kind of safe place, distant from the events occurring. His body a shell, a holster for his hiding place where nothing of reality really matters. It's just things happening. It's not his. Spending any amount of time in the company of the good Titan and his lackeys, or just in Loki’s head in general, has taught him this neat skill of pretence.

It is, after all, not really him it’s happening to, is it? All these experiences. Not really. It’s only sensations and emotions, a body, it doesn’t matter. It’s all far away, he is far away and whatever is happening is really no concern of his, it’s just a body. Who knows how much of it is even real, anyway?

His body moves mechanically as he stays blissfully cut off from his own reactions. The panic is knocking, poking him with sharp little pricks and trying to get him to come back, to convince him that this is important. He needs to be there, be aware and alert because this situation is threatening. The fact that he doesn’t understand why it’s threatening makes it that much harder to not listen. But it’s stupid. It’s just food and a body in resistance. So he ignores it. He ignores everything.

“- Loki?” someone says, an uncomfortable echo of the day before in a much similar situation. They’ve been repeating themselves some times, judging by the tone. Insistent. He blinks, refocusing on the space before him.

Oh, right. He was in a room. Thor’s house.

He becomes aware of a hand on his shoulder and jerks, startled by the sensation. The hand falls off, and Loki turns his head. Thor is sitting in the next chair, around the corner of the table. He’s looking at him.

“Are you alright?” Thor asks. Loki can feel his forehead furrowing; looks down, realizing he’s eaten all the food. So that’s something, at least.

The return to his body is uncomfortable, though. Everything that comes with it.

He clears his throat. “Yes,” he says.

“You weren’t responding for a little while.”

“Preoccupied,” Loki answers. “Sorry about that.”

He glances to the side to find the Valkyrie still on the couch, reclined with the back of her neck
against the armrest. Her eyes are on the bedroom wall, not watching him. But she is.

“You made this?” Loki says, forcing more strength into his voice. He gestures vaguely at the empty bowl, to change to subject. “It’s very good.” He does imagine it would be, had he been able to actually taste it. It’s not Thor’s fault Loki’s body is acting weird.

Thor doesn’t answer, to his dismay. Just keeps staring with those scrying eyes.


Thor stares for a moment more, then finally moves; leaning back against his chair and crossing his arms. His expression grows tighter, pursing his lips.

Then he shakes his head, with a sigh turning to face the wall by the front door.

Loki, who rather thinks he did quite well all things taken into consideration, and who also is loathe for Thor to comment on the disassociation (of all the things Loki has done and that have happened with him, that should be one to be happy about, not scorn; it’s actually useful), pushes from the table to stand. He can feel his legs wobbling underneath him. He grabs the apparently empty bowl, a little harshly, ignoring any emotions and thoughts and bodily sensations as he staggers back into the kitchen; though staying careful with the ankle. Which has gotten a little better, in fact. Not as twisted.

He scrubs the bowl clean with some sort of soap by the sink and a brush, only halfway facing it because he can’t quite get himself to stand entirely with his back turned to the room. He feels watched, exposed. Vulnerable. The halfway-turning gives him view in his peripheral vision of the room, while still keeping his eyes on the sink.

It creates the problem of his back being turned to the window, though, which makes him feel twitchy. It’s the same thing. As if someone .. could be there without him noticing them, or hiding outside, watching - and he’s not sure why the thought unnerves him so. What it is exactly.

Not that it's anything new. Especially not when he's going in and out of his body like this as often as he is lately; deliberately or not.

He can’t help but shoot a glance over his shoulder a few times. He must look ridiculous, twisted at the waist like that and looking over his shoulder for monsters hiding behind his back.

When he’s finished, having dried the bowl and put it back in the cupboard, he turns to find Thor still in the same spot, looking at the wall, and the Valkyrie on the couch but with a book in her lap, now. She looks up.

“So, Lackey, did you wanna go to the greenhouse?” she asks, the usual part chippy, part bored tone. Which admittedly has gotten a bit softer over the years. “Thor and I have things to do, so I was thinking I could just deposit you there to have your fun.”

Loki tenses at the thought. He goes to rub at his hand, trying to think of a respectful decline. Even if he can’t actually perform the spells, there’s a large probability that he would pass out trying. Not that he particularly wants anyone there with him to witness that, either, on the other hand, if he’s alone … he doesn’t like the thought of it; anyone could come in there to find him sprawled on the floor. Unconscious in a public place, for who knows how long. And he doesn’t know where he might wake back up again.

It’s not that he has never retrained his magic after being in a rut. It’s just that … every time, before, his
mother had been there to help.

“Oh right,” The Valkyrie says, “Of course, you’re going to need someone with you.” He looks at her sharply. She knows too much about this, it’s as if she can read his every thought from his face. “Well, we could do it in the afternoon, then? You and I, go talk to the plants. Sound like a date?”

Loki finds no words coming to mind but ‘no’, which is frankly too simple and dumb a response for him to give it. He tries to search out something more sophisticated, something that will leave his dignity at least defended. Something that won’t display his every weakness and fear. Thor is still looking at the wall.

“It’s not going to get better if you don’t work on it,” Valkyrie says.

“I want to give it more time,” he responds, finally. Clears his throat. “Before I …” he trails off. It’s not that he’s not aware of how pathetic and thin his voice sounds.

Valkyrie stands up. Arms crossed. “Your magic getting better is what’s going to propel your healing. You won’t get better if it’s not functional.”

Loki wants to snap something back, it’s his life and he decides when and how and if he wants to get better - but he’s suddenly self-conscious about having this argument in front of Thor, Thor of all people. Whom yesterday he screamed at in the hospital about not wanting the meds. Throwing tantrums every time Thor tries to get him to eat.

“Fine,” he says, slumping back against the counter. Maybe it’s something about Thor’s tight expression that softens a little at the agreement, his shoulders dropping an inch when Loki complies. Some of the tension that bleeds out the room. But Loki is still painfully aware of the fact that he lost this one to Valkyrie; she got her way because he’s too tired to demand his own terms.

“That’s cool,” she says, going to dunk Thor on the back of his shoulder. He sighs, motion returning to his body as he moves to get up. Valkyrie grabs a jacket and a scarf from a crook by the door, pulling on her boots.

“Are you going to be okay here, alone?” she asks. Loki manages to muster some strength and look at least a little offended. “Thor and I will be in the city hall, it’s down by the church. Find us if you need anything. Otherwise, I have people staying at my house, you know, Bruce, Rogers, his friend Sam; they’ll probably be helpful, those guys, rather than shoot you down on sight. Anyway, see you later!”

She opens the door, and Thor turns to him, pulling on a jacket. He raises a finger, freezing his movement with a saying glare at Loki. “Use. The crutches,” he demands, brows raised. He holds the eye contact for a moment, as if to make the point clear, then turns to follow Valkyrie outside, shutting the door behind them and leaving behind a quiet house.

* (here's a shitty visual representation of the time-tangent I went on, in case anyone wanted it <3)

(so the blue/green would be Asgards reverse countdown thing, the orange obviously ours. Or, I mean, people who do the whole PM/AM thing. )
Chapter End Notes

See you soon. I hope! Thank you so much for your support. You're damn cool.
And I See Thoughts on the Walls

Chapter Summary

LAST ON WiTQH(<-- did anyone think of that? those are the coolest initials ever! It's like WITCH but without that boring oracle guy - maybe I should make a fun guest appearance of hay lin’s grandma, hmm ...anyway)

In the last chapter ... I mean I don't even remember what happened .. one sec, let's open up a new tab.
Right, so Thor made crumble and everyone had breakfast, they brushed their teeth, Thor showered (finally) and Brunn and Loki talked about depression and building his magic back up with practising. Emotln. Thor and Brunnhilde had things to do, so they left Loki at the house. Drama ensues.

Chapter Notes

This is a little intermezzo thing. Longer, more plotty chapter will follow.

It's, ummm ... it's a little heavy !!

Enjoy, I guess!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The bustling is replaced by utter silence in the leave of Valkyrie and Thor.

Loki is back feeling almost admonished; a child left home alone by its parents, with a long list of reprimands and warnings. We’ll be in the city hall. By the church. Call us if you need anything. Are you going to be okay here, all alone?

That would make Thor and the Valkyrie his parents, which is just weird, but still - it almost makes him want to set something on fire, break .. some expensive vases, maybe, or throw some big party for all his friends.

….aaaall his friends .

He settles for pouring another cup of tea.

Not before covering the baking tray of Thor’s dish with a cloth, though, the smell of it heavy and warm (smothering) in the air, and putting it in the refrigerator. He hopes that’s the right place for it.

He stays standing with the tea, leaned against the counter by the sink. Eyes on the room. He takes a breath. A sip of tea.
Another breath.

He had an idea, before, that he wanted to see what Thor was reading, the book lying facedown on the coffee table. Try to concentrate; or practice concentrating, anyway. However, standing there, he suddenly feels overwhelmed by the silence. As if he’s been moving too fast, thinking too fast and too frantic, and now he can’t slow his perception of the world back down. Can’t quiet it.

He finds that he can’t really will himself to move.

Or he doesn’t dare, maybe; the room feels .. strange, being alone in it. The empty space feels very empty.

This something is building in his solar plexus, sharp-fanged. Something hectic, something .. unsettling. Makes his head spin, his palms tingle and prickle with apprehension. Like something could be lurking just behind static air, ready to break right through the folds of reality. Breaking them, air and borders or what’s real and what isn’t, shattered like glass.

It really is suddenly quiet; almost unnervingly so. His head is beginning to buzz with white noise, while the world itself is blurring out. Sound and vision. As if everything is a little .. far. Like shouting underwater.

He glances at the window. There’s nothing out there except for snow, the cliffside and sky, the houses a little away. The distant hum of villagers talking -- sound. There’s sound. The world; real and there and tangible.

Why wouldn’t it be?

Valkyrie and Thor just went out the door, and it was fine, they were fine. Everything is fine. And yet, the thought of ‘outside’ is .. overwhelming. Feels like too much. If he’s being honest with himself, increasingly terrifying.

At least he probably won’t be needing Thor’s reprimand about the crutches, if he doesn’t dare to venture outside. He can barely get himself to look at the window.

The quiet is still growing in volume. Like a soundless shout in his ears, pounding with pressure. He almost wants to reach up and cover them, curl up and forget about reality for a little while.

Instead, he places the mug on the counter to pull off the sweater he’s wearing. The room feels too warm, unbearably so all of a sudden, sweat springing forth in his armpits, his chest, the back of his neck. It’s so hot, the hem of the sweater too tight, like hands on his throat; a hand closing, tightening; an enormous, ugly, rough hand, and he’s breaking, his neck is crumpling -

He discards the sweater on the floor without care, his arms stiff and movements limited; unsteady, jerky. He picks the mug back up, cupping it in both his trembling hands and taking a careful sip. Feeling the warmth against his cold-sweating palms, the liquid press down his throat, while it’s as if everything vibrates around it, every muscle in his neck, mouth, stomach. He swallows again, after, and his mouth feels dry.

It’s something to do with the window. The fact that his back was turned to it when he was talking to Valkyrie, it almost felt like someone was watching when he wasn’t - which is irrational, as she had clear view of it and would’ve noticed. Said something, if someone has been there, watching him.

Unless she was in on it, of course. Unless the only one who doesn’t know about ..whatever this is, is him.
Which is irrational. Of course.

Still, he’s suddenly half expecting for a face to pop up in the frame and reveal its presence, unknown, wrong and terrifying, press against the glass and claw at it with jagged, sharp fingernails, a shrill and ear-splitting noise.
He can see it for his inner eye, hear it, and for a moment he’s not entirely sure whether the vision is real or not, it’s so clear. Where the lines between his mind and reality are drawn. If there are even lines?
A twisted face in wrong, desaturated colours, staring with too wide, dead eyes. Reaching for him, through the glass, unbothered by the laws of mass, straight through the glass, fingers long and claw-like, the face splitting open as it screams -

He flinches back harshly. Blinks, but then there’s nothing there. The window is empty.

The image is still clear in his mind, though. Laughing at him, high-pitched and shrill, for believing in this shaky reality.
In a minute, it’s saying. It will break in a minute.

His mind begins to run, run wild, and he can’t seem to catch it. Maybe he doesn’t want to. It’s all so convincing. Every ridiculous thought that pops up accompanied by the incapacitating fear, they all feel so real.
He’s afraid that if he doesn’t believe every one of them then when they turn out true he could’ve been expecting it. He wouldn’t have been fooled to think it was real, true, his.

Logically, he knows there are people outside, villagers; the real world is out there. Behind the window, behind the glass. A predictable reality, a system; the world. And in it, Thor (brother), the Valkyrie, their friends. The village. The waters, the snow, the wind and sky, cold and untamed, avid and there.

And yet, his emotions are in doubt as to the nature of that truth, making his heart beat wildly at the thought of opening the door. Revealing it all to be a fiction, a game of his mind. An illusion.
And then who is casting it?

He works desperately to stop that train of thought. He knows well where it is headed. He knows it’s not true, it’s not.

And yet, he finds his entire frame trembling, one hand gripping tight against the counter. He’s staring at the window, he realises; half overtaken by the fear and urge to look away (something will happen) yet locked in place by that very same fear. A deer in headlights.

It makes him realize that the rest of the room is out of his view, though, and with the thought he recoils, scrambling to press back further against the counter, turning his head to watch the room. Empty.
The mug of tea shatters against the floor, sudden, fallen from his hand without him noticing and he jumps at the sound, away from the shattering porcelain. There’s a shadow in the edge of his vision, dark against the brightness of the window, and he turns back to catch it. There’s nothing there. But there was, there was a shadow, something, there was he saw it -

The room is watching him. He stares back at it, the invisible eyes, they’re there. He’s sure of it. In the walls, the ceiling, hidden.

The shadow in the window returns and now he doesn’t dare look back because he’s sure it’s really
there, now, really there. He doesn’t want to see, doesn’t want to bring it into his reality by acknowledging it. It stays, dark and calm, standing still, watching him as he keeps his eyes locked on the room. The empty room, filled with shadows between layers of air.

His heart is beating too fast, threatening to burst his ribcage, something rising in his chest and clogging his throat, keeping him from taking in proper breaths of air. He lifts a hand, grasping desperately at his chest,

(and he knows it’s stupid, he knows he knows, but -)

There are cupboards behind him; empty space behind their doors, pipes underneath the sink. Empty spaces that he can’t see and they could hold anything; a disembodied head staring back with glassy eyes when he opens up the door that should hold only plates in different sizes. A shadow, a spell ready to shoot out and wrap around his soul, steal his magic.

He finds himself flinching away at the thought, backing clumsily from the kitchen. He accidentally places weight on his injured foot, yelling out as he stumbles, half falling. He bumps against something.

He cries out in horror upon the impact and scrambles back forward, towards the kitchen again and turning to see the thing. What it was he collided with. It was only a table, apparently, but that does nothing to alleviate the panic, and he stumbles again, this time losing balance and falling heavily to the ground, landing on his lower back. It gives a sickening crack and a sharp pain shoots through but he barely notices, clambering to sit, shuffling backwards to press his back against a cupboard door underneath the sink.

That door, the one he’s sitting in front of must be safe; it couldn’t be opened from the inside unless he moved. But he’s suddenly imagining every other kitchen cupboard and drawer flying open, at once, behind and around him, an inferno of movement and sound and attack. Even if it’s only a picture inside his mind he finds himself cowering, hiding his face between his knees and squeezing his eyes shut, curling tighter in on himself. Arms over his head to leave as little surface as possible bared to damage.

Exposed, on the floor. Vulnerable, no armour. Defenseless.

He doesn’t know how long he’s on the ground like that, heart hammering and the world shaking; his body, the ground beneath him, the cupboards threatening to burst with the faceless danger, the entire room shaking like an earthquake.

He barely even remembers how he ended up on the floor.

He only knows that he comes back at some point. He first grows vaguely aware of the fact that he’s sweating; armpits, back and chest drenched, cold. Everything is cold. And the room is quiet, a calmer quiet, now; the absence of vibrating, soundless shouts inside his ears gone.

His back hurts. Somewhere above the tailbone. Moving his arms makes sharp pain shoot up through his spine.

He tries to lift his head and it aches, pounding, like he’s been banging it against a wall. Who knows, maybe he has. Everything of thought, memory or logic is sort of blurry right now. He reaches up to it instinctively, holding his temples with both hands.

He’s dimly aware of the fact that he’s whimpering; a thin, continuous and almost voiceless sound,
muffled by his underwater-hearing. He wills himself to take a deep breath, and it feels stale and
condensed on the way in, barely room for it in his chest, bursting back out in a harsh gust. He takes
another, through his nose, holding it in as well as he can, blinking and attempting to raise his head
again, slower this time.

Opening his eyes, finally, his head throbs at the light. Daylight, streaming in from the window,
though less bright than it was last he remembers. Some time must’ve passed.

*Oh.* The window.

The only thing trembling as he gets up are his legs (not the ground, not the cupboards) and his arms
bracing against the counter. Everything aches, but he’s able to stay upright. The room is quiet, now,
but he doesn’t dare trust it.

He staggers to the window while ignoring the eyes lingering on his back, hidden, now, but only just
hidden, as he reaches a hand to the string of a curtain. He pulls it, but not hard enough, his hand
trembling and having a hard time obeying his intention. So he does it again using both hands,
gripping tight, and the flimsy grey curtain falls with a rattling clap. Too loud in the quiet, and he
flinches once again, stumbling backwards.

There’s a painful lurch of his stomach, and he wobbles to the sink just in time to throw up in it, his
body forcing back up the hard-earned breakfast. He gasps in between the violent clenches of his
stomach, leaning on the tabletop and feeling the danger draw closer to his back. Reappearing from its
folds now that he isn’t looking. Like a game of Stop; the others can only move when you’re not
looking, your back turned, getting closer until they can touch you and then they win; they reach out a
hand, reaching for your shoulder -

He wants to move, face it, fight it, but his stomach clenches again and it’s *painful,* as if his body
wants to puke out *everything* inside him; innards and organs and blood and feelings and thoughts. He
throws up again, a violent lurch bringing up sour bile; water, tea, maybe yogurt; gripping tighter at
the table and just barely staying on his feet. His entire body is shaking.

His breathing is rattling and thin by the end. He slumps over the sink, breathing an exhausted sigh.
He manages to fumble a hand to the knob to turn on the water, the other holding him upright on the
counter, letting the stream wash away the grossly translucent yellow before remembering to turn the
faucet back off. Then he turns to face the room with his eyes closed this time as he slides down, back
against the counter and, to sit on the ground again. His tailbone throbs, but it feels dulled.

The window is covered. The room is empty. And yet he struggles to breathe deeper, lungs feeling
too tight, lacking oxygen but still refusing to relax, expand, to simply take a breath and take in
*enough air.*

He realises he’s crying; the quiet, hitched sobs just barely reaching his ears through the blanket of
muffled soundscape. His face is wet. He’s … sad, apparently. Or scared. Both, probably.

He wishes someone would come back. Anyone. Valkyrie, Thor. Danvers. Banner, Rogers. They
could talk to him, kind words or unfriendly and harsh words, it doesn’t matter. He just needs
someone here.

Deep down, he wishes for someone to sit beside him. Hold his hand. Someone keeping him
company in the cold, the fear. He wants someone close, just *someone.* A friend? That never did seem
to be a privilege of his. Other people’s, yes.

Not his.
No one comes. So maybe he’s right; maybe the world outside ate them whole the moment they closed the door. Maybe he is even more alone, in reality, than he’d thought. Maybe he’s all alone.

He wraps his arms around his knees, locking them together tightly. Trying to keep his body in place when it feels as if it’s trying to fall apart.

The breathing eases a little, over time. He can’t really stop crying, but he can breathe okay around it. He feels lightheaded, sluggish, and everything hurts.

He misses home. He misses the halls, his room, the windows; he misses the bed and the blankets and furs and pillows, he misses his mother’s gentle hand stroking his hair until he’d fall asleep. Whispering soft words of enchantment, magic even when it weren’t spells; he misses her voice. He misses her, he misses her gardens, he misses talking to her, laughing with her. He misses crying in her arms and being held.

After a little while, he manages to get to his feet, the bedroom in mind, wanting to lie down somewhere less exposed. However, he changes his course when he realises how difficult it is to get his shaking legs to cooperate; he won’t be able to walk very far.

He’s well aware of the pathetic sight he must make, tears streaming down his face, his body wracked by sobs as he staggers across the room. Stumbling into furniture and keeping himself upright just barely.

Luckily, there’s no one there to watch.

He almost makes it to the sofa, collapsing to his knees beside it with a thump. With shaking hands, he searches out the rough blanket, heaving himself up onto the cushions. His tailbone throbs and spikes with pain and distantly, he hears himself cry out softly from it.

He manages despite it, pulling the wool over his body as he lies down. His teeth clatter. He’s so cold.

The sofa’s back is turned to the bare wall, nothing there, and yet he can’t help but imagine hands reaching out from it, cold and dead, to grab him and haul him with them. Faces protruding from wooden planks in obscured grimaces. He knows it’s not real, so he squeezes his eyes shut instead of looking, shivering under the blanket as the images continue to run in his mind. His breath speeds up again, through his nose, in out in out in out, too fast.

He imagines things rising from the floorboards, bodies. A gathering of people around the sofa, drawing closer, leaning in, watching. Reaching out all at once, every one of them, touching, probing. Their hands cold and wet.

He pulls the blanket over his head like a child and lies shivering, lightheaded.

Finally, he passes out.

He wakes up to something warm, living, touching his face and immediately recoils backwards. He thinks he might’ve made a sound of startlement of some kind, but his head is foggy, slow to grasp reality and only half awake, and all sound is still far away.

“Loki -” someone says, “Loki -- calm down,” a deep voice, and he knows the hoarse rumble. His breaths begin to come quicker with the return to the world, and he takes a moment to concentrate on
keeping it controlled. Then he opens his eyes.

He’s lying on his side, pressed against the back of the sofa. His lower back is aching. Thor is
crouching in front of him, his hand lying limp on the edge of the cushion from where Loki rejected it.

Loki swallows, aware of his own expression, how his eyes feel widened like prey’s, and he blinks
again in an attempt to get it back under control. Takes in a deliberate breath through his nose.

“Thor,” he says. Or croaks. Thor’s forehead is furrowed, and he reaches out the hand again, hesitant,
ending up brushing Loki’s cheek with his uncurled knuckles. Loki can’t help twitching at the touch
but immediately renounces it by forcefully easing the tenseness of his muscles. It’s just Thor.

Just Thor. He relaxes down with a sigh, face plopping sideways into the cushion.

He’s distantly aware of light reaching through the window somewhere behind his brother, which is
yet again left uncovered. He closes his eyes again.

“What are you doing here?” he half-whispers.

“It’s three in the afternoon,” Thor says, and his voice is soft. “We finished duties.” He pauses for a
second. “You’re very cold, brother.”

That’s not surprising.

A little while passes. Then Thor clears his throat. Hesitantly asks, “did you throw up in the sink?”
and Loki feels warmth creep into his cheeks.

Right. He did that, it’s definitely in there in the blur of panic in his memories from before falling
asleep. He seems to remember rinsing it out with water, too, but, well; everything was rather hazy at
the time.

“Loki?” Thor asks, thumb moving to stroke softly on the cheek. Despite everything, Loki finds
himself leaning into the touch.

“Mhh,” he mumbles. “Wasn’t feeling well.”

The hand moves to his hair, stroking it away from his face, and again, softly back. His forehead feels
clammy and sticky against Thor’s dry and warm skin. He must’ve been wearing mittens on the way
back, in the cold.

“Is he alright?” he can hear the Valkyrie ask, presumably from the kitchen. There’s the sound of
running water, too.

“I don’t know,” Thor responds, sound directed away from Loki. Then his head turns back to him,
the sound coming straight on. “How are you feeling? -- Loki?”

Loki sighs again, still sleepy despite apparently having slept for a good many hours, already, with no
interruptions. “Fine, fine,” he says, leaning further into the hand. The touch was unwelcome,
overwhelming at first. Now, it feels as if Thor’s warmth is the only thing really keeping him held
together.

“We should take him to the healers,” Thor says. “He doesn’t seem lucid.”

At which Loki groans, forcing his eyes to open again to look at Thor. Thor, who is there. Not an
illusion (probably?). The floor isn’t eating him. Loki can feel him. Can’t he?
Of course he’s real. Of course he’s real.

He suppresses the lurch in his chest at the doubt. Says instead, “Thor, I’m fine,” and takes a deep breath. “Lucid. No need for healers.”

Thor’s eyebrows are pulled together, still. That must be giving him a headache. Which reminds Loki of his own headache, and he winces from the returning pounding. “I was just - sleeping a little,” he says from behind a hand, rubbing his temples with thumb and middle finger. “Tired.”

“You think you’re tired, it might still be something worse,” Thor says. He pauses. “I’m taking you, Loki. Just for a quick look.”

“No, Thor, it’s not - I just ..” Loki sighs again, slumping down. “I was - afraid. It got out of hand, that’s all. I only need to sleep it off.”

“Afraid?”

Loki closes his eyes again. Taking another breath. “Nothing - nothing real,” he says. Lets himself relax again.

He just wants to sleep.

There’s quiet for a few seconds. Loki almost thinks his brother is going to let him be. Then Thor says, “are you sure that’s all?”

“Yes.”

“Your body isn’t .. shutting down.”

Loki doesn’t answer. Or rather, he has already. But Thor shakes his shoulder. “Loki,” and he opens his eyes back up to glare at his brother. “Don’t fall asleep,” Thor says.

Loki sighs, but can see the logic in that. Somewhat. He can hear something clattering, swept from the floor, glass? Or - porcelain … did he drop a teacup?

He seems to remember doing so. But it’s for the better, anyway - it was hideous. He only chose it to spite his own indecision on the matter of choosing a norns damned cup.

Thor is still stroking his hair. It’s nice, he likes this new side to Thor - or, it’s not new, not at all, but it certainly has been missing from Loki’s life in the last many years.

To counteract this embarrassingly half-awake, docile state, he tries to muster up some resistance; just a little snark to his voice. That should convince Thor.

“May I never sleep again, then?” he asks, going for something sarcastic but it comes out sounding painfully gullible and pure-of-heart, instead. He would’ve cringing. Abort mission.

He can feel Thor tugging the blanket tighter around him. Or blankets. Apparently, another has been added on top. “In a moment,” Thor says. “You can sleep in a moment. If you’re sure you’re not .. dying.”

“I’m not, I’m not.” Loki can hear the slur to the words and opts to stop talking.

But then Thor says, “at least drink some water, first,” and when the hand falls away from Loki’s hair it feels like the world falling apart. The warmth going away, leaving a cold, unpredictable, and unsteady reality in its wake.
Even if Thor were not real, Loki would choose his supposed presence over anything else.

His eyes snap open as he shoots out a hand to grab Thor’s wrist. Hard. His brother pauses in his movement, blinking.

“Don’t -” Loki gulps. Swallows. “Please don’t go.”

Thor is looking at him, with those eyes. “I’m only getting water,” he says. “In the kitchen, right over there.”

Loki doesn’t follow the directive nod of his head with his eyes, keeping them locked firmly on his brother instead (Thor. Real), and when Thor tries to move away again, Loki grips tighter around the wrist, pulling it towards himself. Thor doesn’t budge, but he doesn’t move further away, either. His frown is deepening.

“Thor, please. Please,” Loki hears himself whisper, hearing the choked quality of it, heedless of the Valkyrie watching. It’s ridiculous; he can feel his breath picking up again.

He’s afraid Thor will ask him what’s wrong, why he’s not allowed to move even five steps away. Because Loki is only half awake and exhausted and might give him too much of the truth in this state.

However, Thor only looks at him for a long moment, something softening his expression.

“Alright,” he says, voice careful, “I’ll stay here,” and then he sits down on the floor, leaning sideways against the couch. He holds up the wrist Loki has locked in his grip with a saying lift of the eyebrows, and Loki lets go. Slowly. He swallows. Allowing Thor to move it back to the hair, stroking backwards.

“I’ll stay,” Thor says, and Loki feels himself slump back. Tense shoulders easing as he lets go, calming down under the touch. His eyes drift close at their own volition. “I’ll stay,” Thor repeats, even if there’s a confused edge to his words.

Loki is only half aware of his consciousness fading away, wrapped in the presence of the real, warm body beside him, the heavy hand in his hair. A cocoon of safety in his shaky reality.

It’s dark when he wakes again. Very dark, and quiet. He’s also not as cold. Those are the first things he becomes aware of.

The next is the pounding headache making itself known, stabbing above his right temple like a bolt of lightning and spreading from there, growing, rings in water through his forehead. He can’t quite bring himself to move his arms just yet to massage it, instead whirring his head a little in an attempt to reposition and hearing something like a thin whine escape his lips when the throbbing worsens.

Awareness is slow to grasp him. His limbs feel heavy as if weighed with lead, everything slow and blurry. That’s not surprising, after his episode earlier.

He doesn’t even know what set it off, which is unsettling. It’s like everything is just unstable lately; fragile. Ripped open, rippling on the surface of his skin and all too easy to stir.

There’s a sound that makes his eyes snap open, someone nearby - but as he manages to focus he can make out that it is only Thor, in the armchair under the small window in the bedroom. He’s asleep; shifts a little.
It’s warm in the room. Comfortably so, Loki would’ve thought - but suddenly, it feels like too much. Heat rising in his neck, shoulders, face, thickening in a sauna under the fabric of his shirt, his skin sticking to it and all of a sudden burning with heat.

He scrambles to sit up, fumbling with the comforter as he desperately half pulls, half kicks it off. It ends up halfway on the floor, and he with his back pressed against the wall behind the bed.

*Calm down,* he tells himself, tells the lingering after-effects of panic, making his heart beat like a rabbit’s and his skin prick with nervousness at the slightest thing.

Accompanied by that heavy lethargy to everything. A strange and very tiring mix of sensations.

He takes a breath, feeling it expand his chest. Closes his eyes for a moment, letting his arms wrap around his middle as he sits against the wall. He feels like he could begin crying any time again and damns it all. It’s one thing to be on edge, bordering on madness and sometimes engulfed in it completely, but at least he used to be able to .. *manage* it. Most of the time, anyway. Lately, everything is just so much more on the surface, and he doesn’t know how to control it.

It’s as if his skin has been flayed, or decomposed, maybe, leaving him vulnerable and without covering. Maybe it finally broke in Hela’s flames, or after that, in the silence between him and his brother after Loki’s return, the gnawing emptiness growing all-consuming in that time. Maybe sometime in the mountains, in his three years of festering solitude.

There’s no sound to indicate anything but suddenly, he feels the energy in the room shift, eyes on him, and freezes. Makes sure to lock down the thoughts, bottomless like ponds of the marshland.

He opens his eyes again and looks straight ahead at first; can feel Thor’s eyes on him from the side. His face feels tight, dried with salty streaks.

Then he turns to meet his brother’s gaze.

Thor is sitting just as he was, the only difference being his open eyes. Just looking, face neutral, or maybe rather; his expression has gotten harder to read over the years. Especially in these last eight years, in which Loki has been present for no more than a week at most.

Loki clears his throat. He’s glad, without the comforter, that no one thought fit to remove his clothes before moving him to the bed. That wasn’t a rare occurrence in his youth upon awakening in the healing chambers; to his immense frustration, which he let anyone who would listen know.

“What time is it?” he asks. He ignores the state of his voice.

Thor is quiet for a moment. Then he says, “it is nighttime,” still painfully neutral. Almost aloof. “Past midnight. You’ve slept since yesterday morning.”

Loki attempts to control his spasming expression. “Oh,” he says. Then runs out of further ideas.

Thor goes for a half-smile. “I mean I’m glad you’re sleeping,” he says. “You look like you need it.”

Loki looks away to the wall again.

“Right.”

He spends a moment to further gather his awareness, attempting to make his perception and thoughts stand clearer. He takes a breath, deep, releasing it again. He glances at his brother.
“Shouldn’t you be sleeping somewhere .. more sleepable?”

“I’d rather stay,” Thor says, with a slight raise of his eyebrows.

There’s quiet for a moment. “You asked me to,” he then adds.

Loki’s stomach does an uncomfortable jump. He doesn’t stop his arm from curling tighter around his middle, the other going to fidget with the fabric of pants on his thigh. “I’m fine now,” he says. “You can go sleep.”

“I would like to be here, actually,” Thor says, and there’s a careful edge to his words. “If you’ll allow it.”

Loki mumbles something like ‘Mhm’ in response, turning his face away from Thor. It feels about to crumble again and he thinks he should probably sleep. Being awake in the middle of the night never did any wonders for the state of his mind.

But he feels twirly, prickly. Like electric currents running just under his skin. He wonders if Thor ever feels like that, like for real, physically. If it ever keeps him from sleeping.

“Loki?” Thor asks, dragging him back into the room. Loki twitches.

“I think I might - go back to sleep,” he says. He sits still for a moment more, though, hesitating. Then he breaks the stupor, lying back down and facing the wall. For some reason having Thor in his blind spot right now, at his back, doesn’t feel threatening at all. Maybe because Loki can smell him, feel him, the unique, warm presence that is Thor. There.

Thor doesn’t say anything in response. His breathing is easy behind Loki, but doesn’t quite slow down to that of unconsciousness. Loki lets himself drift with his thoughts, and expects that Thor is doing the same for the hours that pass next; he’s quiet, but not asleep.

Eventually, though, when the darkness is beginning to dissipate and dawn is approaching, Thor does begin to snore softly. His breath heavy and slow. The sound is so familiar that Loki instantly finds his muscles relaxing (at long last), body slumping into the mattress. He hadn’t realised he was so tense.

He drifts off with the sound as his anchor. As if he’s nothing but a boy, scared of shadows but safe in his brother’s company.

Chapter End Notes

Feeling nervous about this chapter because it's .. very self-indulgent. Happened on a whim. And I'm new to this whole trying-to-write thing, like except for middle school stuff. And then I've written songs and poetry since I was a lil girl so I guess that counts as words too but you know; I do realise that sometimes I word vomit in this format.
It's also a thing that I like to do, describing stuff in details and being free in the writing process. There's just a lot I haven't learnt yet (I mean there always will be), and I'm working a lot on the whole 'what to keep and what to throw away'. Still, I like to read detailed stories, myself, things handling the in-between-plot things. Emotions, yeahyeahyeah, it's my stuff.

Anyway, thank you all so much for reading. It is SO MUCH FUN to write and know that other people are consuming my words!! And the kudos and comments are just ... *kisses two pinched fingers and holds them up in that way cooks do when something tastes really good*. It's incredible! But know, any readers who might not be commenting - you are just as valid and appreciated. I love you all so much and thank you for following the story.
Names

Chapter Summary

Last chapter:

Loki was freaking out because his mind isn't doing too good. That's about it. Thor came back to the house (and Val, too) and things got a little calmer from there. But it was scary, I think at least. The bros talked a little, in the night and afternoon. Fluffy, you guys are telling me, which is awesome.

Also, Thor does snore, apparently (who would've guessed). Though not with the ferocity of a blundering bilgesnipe, as Valkyrie would have people believe. At least not in that particular night.

Chapter Notes

YOU PEOPLE ARE THE KINDEST COMMENTERS???

Lovely! Incredible! Just incredible +++ ! I still have a couple left to respond to but know that you are all so CHERISHED and loved, every one of you (also the people not commenting!!), and I will get to it soon. Just wanted to get this chapter out. I love to read your thoughts.

So, I said in the last one that we'd be getting 'more plotty' in this one; which, I guess it's true if plot means that 'things happen'? Because .. they do, I mean. It's almost 12 000 words, they aren't going to just .. well I guess the could sleep all day for that, but they're not going to.

As to the more overarching plot that we're moving towards, a lot of stuff is going to move forward in the following two chapters, jumping in time a little. I've enjoyed exploring details for these chapters, though. Just so you know we're building up, going to take more speed soon.

Oh, ALSO: there are some characters from the comics in here, minor ones. Their names and roles are the same, but I don't know enough about the older comics to write them in-character. There's not a whole lot about them on the internet except for their names.

Do feel free to enjoy (; I love all of you readers, you beautiful readers <3<3<3<3

In the morning, Thor is still asleep in the chair. Once again, Loki has to painstakingly drag himself back to the world of the living, eventually finding himself awake on the cot in the bedroom.

He’s shivering a little, the comforter still halfway on the ground, the air cool, and he’s covered only by the thin clothes he’s wearing.

He smells gross from all the sweating yesterday. That’s not surprising. But still gross.
As he sits up he stays quiet, trying not to rustle the sheets too loud. It’s harder to keep in the yelp he almost utters when his lower back shifts. *Oof.* Painful.

For a second he sits with closed eyes, catching his breath before carefully shifting on the bed to swing his legs over the edge and stand up, supporting himself on the bedpost.

He doesn’t bump into anything, limping to pick up a sweater lying discarded on the floor. His ankle *throbs*, worse than yesterday, and he wonders if something happened to it in the blob of memory-blur from yesterday. What was that all about, again? Something with the window?

Stuffing the sweater under his arm, he moves to the closet and grabs a few items of understated colours, then staggering for the door.

Last minute, he spots the dark-blue crutches leaned against the wall. He just manages to keep himself from sighing. It’s probably a good idea.

He grabs them in one hand.

He backs into the living room, pulling the door closed behind him, silently. Then he turns, only now noticing the Valkyrie once again on the mattress beside the sofa.

She looks asleep, on her back with her arms splayed above her head. Dark hair like waterfalls over the pillow.

As quietly as possible, he limps across the room. Valkyrie doesn’t wake, it seems, before he can disappear into the bathroom.

The shower is quick. He keeps from washing his hair, even if it is sticky with dried sweat; if he closes his eyes he’ll check out, that’s for sure. If he lets the water stream over his face he won’t be able to keep himself held together. It’s like it washes him apart.

Instead, he’s careful to stay conscious and not take too long; just enough so he won’t stink all over the village. That was embarrassing enough to have done the first days.

Afterwards, he dries himself off, then pulls on the shirt. It’s big, too big, hanging from his shoulders like a wet rag. Like he’s not a body but instead a closet hanger. He curses his brother’s oversized logs for upper arms but even with that in mind, Loki has worn Thor’s clothes before (or tried to) and they weren’t ever quite this oversized.

Norns. He’ll really have to get serious about that eating thing.

The pants don’t work at all. Even with a belt, they wouldn’t fit, pooling around his ankles as he tries to hold them up. Inside the too-loose hem, while trying to fasten them, he catches a glimpse of a hipbone and quickly averts his gaze. The image of *too sharp, protruding* stays in his mind. *Skeleton.* He carefully avoids the mirror and pulls on the old pants instead. They don’t smell, anyway. Then the sweater. New socks. He grabs the crutches in one hand again.

It feels good to be wearing at least *some* new clothes. Like another chance at a new day.

Inside the living room, Loki debates with himself for a moment, pausing in front of the kitchen island and leaning on it with one hand. He makes up his mind and begins to limp towards the still sleeping Valkyrie, only to realise that 1.) he’s not sure what to address her by since ‘scraper 142’ probably wouldn’t be appreciated. It feels weird to call her ‘the Valkyrie’ if she, in fact, does have a real name that she uses.

And 2.) it’s probably not a great idea to sneak too close to a sleeping Valkyrie, either way.

So he stops some feet away from her. He whispers “Valkyrie,” leaning forward a little. Too quiet, it
seems; she doesn’t stir. He’s having a hard time keeping his balance without putting weight on his injured foot so he places the crutches on his elbows, adjusting to lean his weight onto them instead.

“Valkyrie,” he tries again, closer to a hiss this time, and she twitches. He leans back as she begins to stir, her head jerking. Then it turns in his direction, and she blinks, grimacing against the light.

“Lackey,” she whispers back. She manages to blink her eyes open, looking around at the empty room, then back at him. She narrows her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

He glares at her. “Nothing’s wrong. I’m going to go out.” A pause. “Thought I’d let someone know so Thor doesn’t bust some important organ with stress.”

“Why didn’t you just tell him, then?”

Loki pauses. “He’d follow me. Anyway.” He turns, clumsily on the crutches, to make for the door.

“Wait, wait - where are you going?”

He stops, back turned. “The science building, I think.”

“Alright.” A pause. “That was kind, to tell me. For Thor.”

Loki begins to move again, but then she speaks again. There’s a note of amusement to her tone. “Oh, and Lackey?” she says. “My name is Brunnhilde.”

He turns, looking at her. She raises her eyebrows, a smirk curving her lips. “Not Valkyrie,” she clarifies. “That’s more of a .. title, you know. Profession.”

He feels his expression fall to a scowl. “Yes, I do know, thank you,” he sneers. “I trust you are able to recall my actual name, likewise. If you really do try.”

He turns to shift to the door. The Valkyrie .. Brunnhilde snickers behind him.

Outside is cold. Dark; the bloom of winter’s dawn still on the early side of rising, casting everything in a dim tone. Almost lingering night.
The wind is wild, and it’s snowing; a mixture of soft white and some harder, icy specks blowing into his face, legs, hands and pricking through the sweater like shards of glass. He should really get himself a coat.

For a moment he debates whether to just go back inside. The lab is only an excuse to be alone, really, to not have to face Thor right this second and have something to focus on, and the prospect of making his way through this weather is honestly daunting.

He begins to walk. Without any conscious or logical decision behind the movement.

It turns out to be all good, though, because the harsh weather counteracts the heat-flush rising in his body as he moves down the hill, his body still sluggish, heavy, and not very willing to move at all. His head spinning, and his tailbone throbbing with the ignored injury. Maybe he should get that checked out.

He will if it gets worse.

All that’s on top of having to constantly concentrate on the crutches, keeping them firmly planted behind his elbows. Like yesterday, they slip in the snow (it’s not like it gets any easier when he can
barely see for the armies of white in the air) and he accidentally puts his weight on the ankle more than once. If he isn’t careful there’s going to be permanent damage with that.

The rectangular house appears in the distance, eventually, and the decline flattens out for a plateau of the village.

He would’ve run the last of the way, had he been able, but settles for shifting forward hurriedly with the crutches, wind and snow blowing in his face so he barely can see. Longing for the warmth of the house, some coffee, to just sit down and have space to think -

He grabs the handle, and the door budges in his grip but doesn’t open. Locked. Fuck.

“Fuck!” he exclaims, maybe more of a yell but it’s carried away by the raging wind in an instant. He rattles the handle again, harder. The specks of ice and snow hurl cold against his back, his hair and neck, around and into his face, drizzle from his hair and down the hem. It’s locked. The prospect of either staying outside or else working his way back up the hill to Thor’s house …

He has the sudden urge to simply collapse onto the ground, lay there for a little while. He’s exhausted from crying yesterday; his eyes, his body and his mind, but despite it feels extremely close to breaking into tears again right now. Or maybe because of it.

Still, he stays standing there for a moment, just staring at the handle as if he could pry it open with his gaze. The worst part is he could, easily, had he his magic. But he doesn’t have it.

And whose fault is that?

He turns around, his back to the door and sliding down against it to sit on the doorstep. There’s nothing to shield him from the raging wind, no canopy or shed roof, so he hides his face between his knees, arms over his head with his hands wrapped in the sweater sleeves. He can feel his shoulders trembling slightly and is not sure whether it’s with the strain of moving, the cold, or emotion; the anger from not having thought this through, or that feeling that’s eerily close to something like hopelessness, springing from just the facts of a locked door, a hill and some harsh weather.

He stubbornly keeps from crying.

After sitting there for a little while, half seething at himself and the stupid door and half feeling hollowed out by the seeming lack of options, the confinement of the situation, his head begins to clear a little. The wind is still blowing wet and cold flecks down the back of his neck, making the sweater wet. Howling in a tumultuous soundscape outside of the hands he currently has pressed against his ears.

It all begins to feel less overwhelming than a minute ago.

He finally lifts his head to look around, remembering that he is, in fact, not in the middle of nowhere and without the strength to make it to a safe house, but in a village. There are houses around him. Most of them have the curtains drawn, still, in the early morning, but there are lights in some further ahead. Loki startles, noticing people walking not very far from where he sits - but it does not seem they’ve noticed him in turn. Three figures, walking with their arms up to shield their eyes from the weather.

Maybe he could go somewhere, knock on a door. Ask if there’s a key to the lab somewhere.
Through the blur of whirling snow he can make out the door of the nearest; more specifically, the disk under the peephole. Much like the one indicating the science building. This one in wood, it looks like, and there’s something written on it.

A name, likely.

And all of a sudden, with a lurch in his chest, Loki realizes that this is a village of people he knew. Not like, knew, necessarily .. but - people from home. There might be, who knows, some officials, old acquaintances from the court meetings. Or schoolmates from shared lessons. Sparring partners. Librarians, teachers. Healers. Or maybe, and that gives a pang in his chest, some children he later taught, himself, magic and theory, history. That had been before his reputation had started to … dwindled, in the later years.

He hopes every child is here. Every one. Here, and not …

It’s like a hand squeezing in his chest. Memories he’s so carefully avoided for years. In the grip of Hela because he needed to focus. Keep sight of his mission. In the mountains -- well, he’d kept memories away there because every time he’d thought of his past, of Thor, of home it would leave him incapacitated for hours, curled up somewhere. The grief like intermittent stabs through his abdomen. Tears obscuring the world to a blurry haze until it would be hard to make out what was the real world and what was inside his mind. It would take days to crawl back out of that hole, once he’d fallen in.

So he’d keep it limited. Out of sight. Make it as not-real as possible; it didn’t really matter, anyway. Not anymore.

He finds himself wondering about the village by the mountains he’d lived in. The people there. It must’ve been close to a year since last he was there, the last time was … he’d bought some juice. A couple of toothbrushes. And he’d realised how unkempt he’d looked and how .. well, how terribly he stank in the context of more or less well-groomed, regularly showering and combing, not-bordering-mental people. He’d been given a lot of glances and hadn’t really had the desire to go back, after that.

By now, they probably think he’s died. Corpse rotting somewhere in the mountains. If he had to place a bet.

The crutches are splayed in the snow and cold against his fingers when he places his hands in the grips, pushing up on a shaking leg, back pressed against the door. It goes okay. He ends up upright in the end, anyway. The wind punches snow in his face and he blinks against it, half wanting to sit right down again. But he’s cold, and for some reason, it’s beginning to matter again, as opposed to back on his slope.

Everything had been so far, there. He misses it.

He looks to the sides, orientating himself, but there’s no one in sight. The people by the houses have gone by now, disappeared down the slope to the harbour. He’d followed them with his eyes, every step, until they’d disappeared.

To his right, further out and behind a line of houses on an elevated coast is the sea. He moves parallel with it, forward and towards the first house in the land, some twenty feet away from the lab. The one with the name-tag.

‘Envars’, he can make out the closer he gets. A family name, but it doesn’t ring a bell. The windows are dark, besides.
He shifts himself towards the next one, to the right.

‘Antak - Urich’.

Neither name rings a bell. He moves on.

‘Sólris’.

‘Burguönnson’.

None of these names mean anything to him. He moves from front door to front door, getting more frantic with each one.

‘Tal’.

Nothing. There’s nothing. He doesn’t know any of them. Anyone.

‘Vildún - Boda’.

‘Ánlarnar’.

Nothing.

‘Engsdöttir’.


One crutch slips on his way to the next house, and his ankle twists painfully when he tries to catch himself on it, toppling forward. He cries out, landing on his stomach, face-first in the snow. His head bangs against the ground with a thud.

For a moment, he just stays there, head buried in snow and wondering if it’s really worth it to get back up. The ankle and forehead throb, too, hot with flaring pain.

He does lift his head eventually, sputtering snow and lifting a hand to wipe away the rest while propping himself up on the other elbow. He looks around and the closest houses are dark in the windows. No one is watching. Something warm and wet sticks to his hand when it brushes his forehead, a sharp sting of pain, and he lowers it to inspect it. It’s red.

Oh, great. Just great. The fall has ripped open the stitches.

This is all just looking more and more wonderful by the minute.

Blood begins to drip over his eyebrow, into his eye and he wipes irritatedly at it while fumbling for the crutches in the snow.

So now he’s bleeding, and apparently a lot because he can barely see through the eye for the dark red. Barely upright and on crutches; sick-looking and magic-less, and his mind feels just as much a mess.

He wonders if he should just try to make it back up the hill already, but the prospect of meeting with Thor like this is just not much better than spending his day on his arse in the snow. The fuss, the scorn, even though he didn’t mean to fall. Or forget a key.

Besides, his ankle throbs like Hel itself, and he’d rather not pass out from fatigue or pain halfway up
to be found by anyone.

He wipes at his eye again once upright, a difficult feat of having to lean heavily on one crutch, the other balancing against his hip while he tries to keep both its and his own balance. He very nearly falls again.

Something sounds behind him, and he looks over his shoulder to see two figures emerging from a house a while away, making move in his direction.

That decides it, and he moves again, upright by now and towards the sea this time. The line of houses by the edge of the cliff leading down to the coast. He glances over his shoulder again. The two people seem to have noticed him, faltering in their conversation and looking, and he quickly averts his own gaze, continuing to move. They were too far to see the blood, he’d think. The blur of white in the air would’ve hidden it.

It whirs his hair around as he moves, getting it in his eyes, blood dripping to obscure his vision but he doesn’t care to wipe it away. Keeps his one eye closed, instead. Lets the hair stick to it.

All the snow and the pricking cold is eerily familiar; similar weather, years ago, dark and cold and anxious. The snow falling there had been softer but the landscape rough, exclusively cliff and ice. Loki wonders if his blood would change colour if he changed form - like the purple pooling around hordes of freakish bodies on the ground. The violent spurts when he threw his knives in their eyes, eyes red as blood but bleeding like they were contaminated.

It probably would, wouldn’t it? He should’ve tested it years ago. If he had had the courage.

He reaches the first house, all the way to the left and closest to the decline to the harbour. There’s a little dark wooden staircase up to a porch stretching to the door. Much like his own shed in the mountains, minus the canopy. He cannot make out the name on the door, and stands by the foot of the stairs for a moment, debating whether or not to go up and look.

Why was this so important again? Oh right, the key. The snow. His legs, shaking.

He manages to tow himself up the stairs. They’re slippery, but he keeps his footing. Resolutely. They creak a little, which is frustrating; revealing his presence before deciding whether he even wanted to.

Once up, the name on the platter gets clearer. Getting slowly into focus. When he can finally make out the single word, his stomach lurches and he almost takes a step back, only just remembering the stairs behind him. He takes a breath. Leans forward, narrowing his eyes to make sure they aren’t deceiving him. He takes a step closer, still glaring at the platter.

‘Volstagg’, it reads.

Volstagg.

He hadn’t been on the Statesman. That was the whole thing, Thor’s friends hadn’t been there - they’d done the countings in two days, and for every name on the list, the light in Thor’s eyes had dwindled a little more. Loki had tried to make him feel better - tried to tell jokes, given Thor parts of his rations, let him have the good blankets, even smiled at him when they met, but nothing had worked.

Then the counting had finished. Everyone assigned sleeping accommodations. And Thor’s friends still hadn’t shown.

Loki had known about Sif, of course. She’d been off-world. She’d stayed off-world on his explicit
command.

But Thor’s friends … well. They’d been on Asgard when Hela showed up, and they weren’t on the
statesman. Loki knew they’d been on Asgard because every one of them had refused to come and
see his play. He was pretty sure they’d figured out his deception, by then (at least them, if not most
Asgard), and had been so confused as to why no one had contacted Thor about it, yet.

But now, the name Volstagg is right here, on a house of living people. Like a ghost coming back to
haunt.

*It must be his family,* Loki just gets to think before the door mere steps away from him swings open
into the snow, breaking the illusion of House and World. He startles, drawing back again. He can
feel his fists closing, tightening at his sides, and he’s not quite sure why.

It’s a woman in the door. A tall and voluminous woman, wide shoulders and big hair and a sculpted,
the large, curved body; and he knows her. He knows the round, kind face, the rough hands and
strong way she carries herself.
He does not think he’s ever seen her face fall the way it does when her eyes fall on him before,
though. She gasps, lifting a hand to cover her mouth, but her voice warm and melodic as ever when
she speaks.

“Oh, dear boy,” she says, pausing for a moment in the door.

Loki blinks. Swallows. She takes a step forward, staggering a little, down out onto the porch. He
instinctively draws backwards. She stops. Her eyebrows draw together in a furrow.

“Hildegund,” Loki speaks, and it sounds weak, carried off in the raging wind. Small. He clears his
throat.

“Loki,” she says with a nod. There’s nothing hostile in her tone. As if he were simply an old friend
visiting.

There’s quiet for a moment, the two of them just looking at each other. Her expression hesitant,
expectant. Something else, too.

“I only wondered -” Loki tries, clearing his throat again when it still sounds wrong. Tries to blink
blood away and has to lift one hand to wipe it off. He hides the hand at his side, afterwards,
gathering both crutches in the other one, to hold instead of using them. Hiding them as well as
possible behind himself without it looking obvious. He leans his weight on the good foot and is
careful to keep balance.

“I was looking for a key to the science building,” he says, stronger. Firmer; a statement. “It’s …
locked.”

Less of a statement.

Her expression softens, for some reason. “You’re bleeding, my boy,” she says, and something in him
breaks at the second use of that word. “And shivering. Come inside for a moment, then we’ll find the
key you need when you’ve warmed up.” She’s holding the door open against the wind. Takes half a
step forward, and Loki forces himself to stand straight.

“I have a kettle of tea on the stove,” she further incites. Smiles, a little. Then she takes another step
towards him, hand outstretched, and he doesn’t move away. She places it, gentle, on his shoulder
and guides him towards the door. He follows the movement without thought, limping across the
snowy porch.
The warmth radiates from the doorway already before he’s through it. It takes an embarrassingly long time to make his way up the single, albeit very tall, step. He stubbornly keeps the crutches in his left hand, Hildegund behind him and keeping the steadying hand on his right shoulder.

Inside, he pauses by the shoe rack but she pats his shoulder to keep him moving forward. The entry hall is dim, lit by a single bulb in the wall.

“My shoes … ” Loki tries, readjusting his weight constantly with the hand with the crutches against the wall to keep him steady, gesturing vaguely at the wet trail already forming from the door.

“Don’t worry about it,” she says, leading him on.

She takes him through another doorway and into what seems like a living room. There’s a lot of dark wood, the walls, the floors, the window frames, although different types and shades. There’s an oblong table in the middle; hazelnut, he thinks. His mother liked hazelnut wood.

Hildegund leads him to the far end of the table, a chair with its back to the back wall of the room. There’s a window to the left. She holds a hand up for him to wait with sitting while she grabs a stack of newspapers from a basket by a fireplace, spreading them on the plush seat.

“It’s vintage. Wouldn’t want to get it all wet,” she says, nodding at the chair. “Please, sit.”

She turns her back to go find something else. Loki sits down, the newspapers crinkling under him.

Hildegund is back again a moment later, carrying something bulky, cloth, in her arms. She puts the bundle down onto the table, sitting down in the chair to his crooked right, across from the window. She holds up one item from the pile - a sweater.

“I’ve got a new one for you, here,” she says. “That one is soaked. Is going to take hours to dry, surely.”

He looks at the new sweater. It’s green. She raises her eyebrows in the edge of his vision, and he looks back at her.

“Well?” she asks, wiggling the fabric in her hold. He blinks. Then nods, pulling off Thor’s sweater. It’s cold and heavy and wet, clinging to his skin, and it feels nice to get it off.

From the bundle on the table, Hildegund picks up a towel, handing it to him. The long-sleeved, blue shirt he’s wearing underneath is damp, especially around the neck, but not as completely drenched as the other one. There’s a faint weaved depiction of waves on the front, crashing, blending into the fabric in an elegant way. He hadn’t even noticed that - but it’s kind of fitting to this entire situation.

He pats the worst dry with the towel, then takes the green sweater and pulls it on. He looks up.

Hildegund is looking at him, a slightly deprecating tint to it.

“You would do good to eat some more, kid,” she says, looking into his eyes. Searching. Then she lifts a hand, patting the top of his head and smiling, a little sadly. “Don’t forget to dry the hair,” she says, getting up. “There’s a blanket on the table. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Kid. He’s past a thousand years. Nobody would ever call Thor kid. Or then, maybe Hildegund of all people would.

Loki is flabbergasted by the fact that he’s even here at all. In her living room. As if no time has passed at all, since he and Thor were mere children, eating dinner at Voltstaggs house, drinking tea and playing with his boys and daughter some hundred years younger than the two.
Then they got older, Volstagg becoming more of an equal friend than a guardian. The princes' protector, still, accompanying them on quests and errands. Helping them with sparring, teaching them techniques. Getting in quarrels with Loki.

They got older yet and Loki more and more distant from his alleged friends. More - isolated, hostile, over time; creating enemies wherever he went. He’d grown .. darker. More twisted, some would say. They would probably be right. That’s how it felt, anyway. Went from being the ally with occasional antagonistic tendencies to being the villain.

He never asked, but he doesn’t think he would’ve been welcome in Volstagg home in at least the last two hundred years before his fall.

And yet here he is. Like a child again. As if he’s welcome. As if Hildegund doesn’t know what he is, what he’s done.

Maybe it’s just that he’s not very threatening right now; pretending to be friendly to him won’t be a risk.

That thought twists like a knife in his gut.

He takes the towel, bowing his head to ruffle the hair drier with the fabric. It smells clean, like fresh laundry. He shakes hair out of his eyes, not bothering to smooth it down. Some sticks to the wound in his forehead and he winces from the sting as he has to pull it free. It's been years since he last was this slow to heal - in Hel, you’d be whole by the next day (ready for more injuries). Svartalfheim and the stab wound took probably the longest time he's ever taken to heal something and took his energy from most other healing - but then, that was so close to being a deadly wound, so it doesn't count. Sanctuary was definitely worse than this, though.

He tucks the hair behind his ear, wiping again at his eye.

The towel is stained red, too, he notices, the sleeve of the sweater he’s wearing, too. He’d forgotten about the wound. He keeps the bloodied hand limp in his lap.

Hildegund returns, carrying some basket filled with things over her elbow, rattling as she walks, two steaming mugs in each a hand. She places one in front of Loki on the table, then clicks her tongue scornfully.

"The blanket," she says, and he’s afraid for a second that it’s about the blood smeared on the towel, maybe he also got some on -

but then she says, “do you not want to get warm?” picking up the last item of the bundle on the table, moving to drape it over his shoulders. He holds her back, though, lifting his smeared hand out of the way and holding it up.

“My hand,” he says, apologetic and holding it uselessly. “I don’t want to … ”

“Just wipe it off in the towel, that’s fine,” she brushes it off, with a wave of her hand, and he hesitates for only a second before doing so. She drops the blanket, sitting down again in front of him.

From the basket, she fishes a few different things, spreading them out on the table. Loki takes a sip of the tea - it’s nice. Sweet with floral aromas, and honey, probably. Hildegund scoots her chair closer, holding a wet wipe up to his face. He blinks, a little startled. but doesn’t move away. She begins to gently wipe his eyebrow.

“Close your eyes,” she then says, and he does. He feels like he should feel unsafe, not being able to see. But he doesn’t. All he feels is her soft wipes across his eyelid, her warm hand on his jaw.
keeping his head steady. That one stays while the other retreats, a fresh wipe returning with it. He could almost sigh. Sag his posture and lean into her hand.

He doesn’t, though.

“You can open your eyes again,” she says, and he does, blinking hard to get the sting of blood and the moistness from the tissue out of his eye.

“Drink your tea,” she says, fiddling with things from the basket, and he does. Cups the mug on the table after taking a sip.

Hildegund brings a new wipe to his forehead. “This might sting,” she says. As if he’s a child; as if he hasn’t endured much, much worse than a gash in his forehead. Despite the fact, he still winces when she begins with the wound.

Hildegund holds something up – a series of small, cream-coloured squares of fabric, held together on a string. “Self-stitches,” she says, with a self-deprecating smile. “I would aid with healing the wound myself, however … I think we all know my talents lie not in that area.”

He smiles back. It feels faint, but he does mean it. The actual healers could’ve healed his wounds, too - but that’s healer policy for you. Minor wounds are not to be aided. They might get many patients in a day and will be of no use if they spend all their energy on every ailing. Besides, that’s their energy - it is not to be used as a paid profession, bound by law, given out to all and everybody. They prefer magical technology for that kind of thing. Only in emergencies is it actually allowed to use their own, inherent seiðr. There’s a chart for what’s an emergency.

She puts the squares to his forehead, setting them in place. Their magic programming activates on its own as soon as they detect the wound, and it’s a quick process. Not painless, as the minuscule thread weaves through his skin with eerie precision, tightening to close and smooth out the gap; but quick. Hildegund is already at the ready with a padded patch to put on top when it’s over. Loki imagines he must look ridiculous, hair wet, blanketed thoroughly and with a big band-aid on his forehead - but can’t really find it in himself to care. Most of all he’s just glad to have the blood out of his vision.

Hildegund leans back in her chair, inspecting the work and lifting her mug of tea to her lips to take a sip. She smacks her lips, setting it back down and nodding to herself. Then she looks him in the eyes, going more serious.

“You should take better care of yourself,” she says. Loki gives in to a little, breathless laugh. Smiles.

“I’ll try. Thank you.”

“Try, boy, what kind of a promise is that,” she chides, but with a hint of a smile in her eyes, too, twisting a corner of the mouth. “What were you doing out there, anyway, in that weather? Looking for a key, you said?”

He takes a breath. “I was trying to get into the building of sciences.”

“An early hour for studying, surely.”

“Well - I am working on a project. I was keen to get on with it.”

“You always were such a scholar,” she says with a smile, and it is no question. Something in him feels tight and loaded heavily at the sentiment. That she remembers the detail - that Loki was, in fact, something else than this, at one point. He’d been something; he’d had a home. He studied in the library. Asgard was a place and a people, a place of meadows and waters and remarkable
architecture and beautiful magic. Loki had been the second prince of it. Thor’s brother. The scholar, the mage.

To his relief, she doesn’t ask about his magic. The fact that he hadn’t just .. unlocked the door, himself. Healed his wound. Not have to walk on crutches. She knows why, in general terms, there's no doubt about that. He’s grateful that she lets it be at that.

“Is that ..” it suddenly sounds from behind Loki, and he whirls around in the chair, startled. His head throbs with the movement, and he controls the wince down to a slight grimace.

“It is!” the newcomer exclaims, and Loki is not sure whether it’s with contempt, shock or glee or maybe a mix of a few of them. “Loki! Prince Loki himself!”

Loki can do nothing but sit there and blink as the boy walks with long, heavy strides across the room, clapping a hand harshly onto his shoulder. He looks Loki in the eye, who keeps his expression carefully contained.

“It’s truly you,” Volstagg’s son says. “I did hear you were back, people said it, but I wasn’t sure - I hadn’t seen Thor, so -” He nods assertively. Eyes searching. “It is good to see you, Loki.”

Loki only just keeps himself from swallowing nervously, nodding back instead. He tries to place the face, but Volstagg had many sons, all younger than Loki, and he hadn’t exactly seen them much in the later years.

The boy removes his hand, blowing a whistled note as he goes around the table to sit across from his mother.

“Forgive my rudeness,” Loki says, clearing his throat. “You are a son of Hildegund. But I’m afraid I …”

“Sigfod,” the boy answers, cutting off Loki’s hesitation and settling in the chair. He smiles. Then moves his gaze to the doorway behind Loki which he just emerged from.

“Leif!” he calls, rather loudly so. “Hurry up your big feet and come see who’s here!”

“I’m coming, don’t hurry me - and my feet are not big, they’re in fact completely - oh!”

A second boy appears in the doorway, stopping short. Loki has turned in his chair again and watches his eyebrows shoot up. This one, Leif, apparently, looks younger, hair as red as his father’s; whereas Sigfod takes more after their mother’s light mane. Leif’s cheeks are round and youthful. It reminds Loki of Thor in his younger days.

“Well well! If it isn’t everyone’s saviour!” Leif says with a smirk, and Loki cannot help the faint smile curling his own lips. The boy moves to stand in front of him, stretching out his hand.

“Leif,” he says in an introduction. “You probably don’t remember me.” Loki takes his hand, shaking it, and has no time to respond that actually, he does, remembers all of them if not their names, before Leif turns to his mother, eyes fixing onto the teacup in her hand.

“Oooh, I want tea,” he says. “Is there more?”

“In the kitchen,” she answers, a wry smile twisting her lips.

Leif turns, and Sigfod calls after him, “Bring some for me, too,” to which Leif responds, over his shoulder while disappearing through another doorway, “If you want tea, you can get it yourself,” in
an almost sing-song voice. Sigfod groans, chair scraping as he gets up to follow after his brother. The
bickering continues behind the doorway.

Hildegund scoffs softly, shaking her head. She looks at Loki. “I’m sorry about the fuss,” she says,
smiling faintly. “Just let me know if you need to leave.”

“Well, I was actually going to -” Loki begins, to ask about the key, but is interrupted as the brothers
come back, still bickering and plunging down beside each other at the table. Loki at the end, the boys
to his left side.

“What is all this commotion about,” it suddenly sounds, almost like a snarl, again from the doorway
diagonally behind Loki.
Just like before, he swivels in the chair. Another boy - or, closer to ‘man’, this one. A young man.
His hair is black, skin pale and limbs long and slender, and he reminds Loki of himself some three
hundred years ago.

He remembers this one, too - the oldest of the three here.

“Oh,” the boy says. “You.”

Then he sighs and disappears through the doorway to the kitchen. As if Loki being there was the
least interesting event of the entire week.
Loki clears his throat, turning back to the table and keeping his gaze firmly planted on the tea. He
takes a sip.

“I don’t think I know anyone who’s as grumpy in the morning as Aleric is,” Leif says. Sigfod
snickers.

The last boy, Aleric, returns to the room and sits down at the far end opposite from Loki. He takes a
sip of tea, then raises his eyebrows.

“So you look pathetic,” he says, voice almost bored, and Loki resists the urge to roll his eyes.
Well, yes, obviously.

“Aleric,” his mother hisses, reaching out a hand to smack his upper arm, albeit lightly. “Loki is a
guest of our house. That requires you to be polite at the very least.”

“Why?” Aleric asks, eyes on his mother. “He never was.”

Which is not true, that Loki never was polite. The boy, being younger as he is, just doesn’t
remember the time of Loki’s childhood in which he was, in fact, a very sweet child. Very early
childhood, perhaps. The wry tendencies had admittedly begun to spring at a young age.

“Aleric,” Hildegund says again, tone quieter and darker, this time. Warning.
Loki breaks in. Clears his throat. “It’s no problem, Hildegund,” he says. “Your son is quite right in
his assessment.” He goes for a crooked smile at her. “I do believe I deserve that.”

She leans her head sideways, eyes soft on him. He feels like just melting right then and there. He
looks at the boy, Aleric, instead.

“I am sorry,” Loki says. Keeping his expression neutral, voice the same, though not indifferent.
Attempting to sound sincere yet not sappy, not lying too vulnerable for mocking. “For whatever hurt
I have caused you in the past.”
It’s good. Simple. Humble.

But Aleric doesn’t seem to think so.

“Not me,” he says. Very nearly a sneer. “It’s not about me. You; you’re the problem, you’re a bad person, you’ve done terrible things. I don’t like you. I never have, and I won’t, suddenly, just because you’re back from the dead.”

Loki keeps himself from twitching.

“That’s alright,” he says instead. “I get it.” Not sure what else to say. People were never really his strong suit, not emotional interactions like this. No less an angry boy barely out of adolescence.

“Come on, Aleric,” Leif says, taking the word. ‘Could you just be nice for once. We have a prince in our home.”

Aleric’s gaze snaps to him. “I’ll choose to be nice if I want to be nice, regardless of anyone’s status.” Then he pushes his chair back, disappearing again into the doorway behind Loki.

His brothers sigh in unison.

“Sorry about him,” Sigfod says to Loki. “He’s really such a drama queen. Always has been.”

*Drama queen.* Loki has never heard that one before, but it’s not hard to derive the meaning. The way Sigfod says it makes it sound like something derisive, but to Loki, it seems more like a couple of very flattering words to use about someone.

“Loki,” Hildegund says, and Loki realises he zoned out. How long? The boys are looking at him strangely. He blinks, turning to their mother.

“How long?” she asks. "It’s still early. You look like you could need it.”

Loki shakes his head. “No, I - need to get back to that project I was working on. In the laboratory.”

“Yes, the key.” Hildegund hesitates for a moment. “Boys, could you go into the kitchen and get started on breakfast? I was thinking we’d have a nice one, together. Eggs and all that.”

The two adolescents get the hint, despite looking a tad disheartened at being told to go. Loki wonders why they are apparently so interested in him. Whether it’s because he was once a prince, royalty; or if it’s the whole evading death thing; if it’s about his crimes and treachery, his imprisonment, or his, sometimes well-deserved, reputation as the notoriously cold-hearted of the princes - and how fitting is that. Maybe it’s the Jötunn thing, making him subject of curiosity (or disgust). Or the fact that apparently looks like shit, and zones out at odd points in a conversation. Maybe all of them combined.

“My prince,” Hildegund begins, but Loki cuts her off with a breathless laugh, too bitter for even his liking. He tries for a less sharp smile.

“My lady,” he says, “I’m afraid that title applies to me not, any longer. Just 'Loki', is fine.”

She studies him for a second. “That’s going to be a hard one for the people to unlearn. They’ve known you as prince for more than a thousand years.” She shrugs. “Besides, it’s necessary to have successors in line, for the safety of the people.”
I hardly think anyone would want me on their throne, Loki doesn’t say. Not willingly. That’s not any kind of ‘safety’.

“Either way,” Hilegund continues. “We have a spare bedroom if you would care for a rest. Have you had breakfast? You could join us for the meal.”

He feels himself twitch at ‘breakfast’ and is irritated with it.

“You lost some blood,” Hildegund says. “Looking a tad pale, there.”

He gives her a smile again. “Truly, thank you, Hildegund. I am grateful for the offer, and your assistance.” He turns the teacup on the table in a fidget. “But I meant what I said. I would like to get back to my studying - my health should be of no concern. You got me all patched up, after all.” He winks, hoping to sink the point further with it.

She shakes her head with a soft scoff. “Does your brother know where you are?”

Loki feels himself stiffen.

“He was sleeping when I left,” he says. “I wanted not to disturb him.”

He’s not sure why Hildegund would ask him that, why she would know about Thor’s incessant worry and clinging to Loki since he was found; unless everyone in the village knows of Thor’s worry for his brother through these last three years, of course. Unless everyone knows how Loki left, like a coward, how he’s been hiding while Thor was left to deal on his own. Unless Thor has talked to the whole village about it.

Hildegund gives a ‘hm’, crossing her arms and leaning back.

“At least stay for breakfast,” she says.

“I already had breakfast,” Loki responds, without thinking, and finds himself wondering a moment later why that seemed like a necessary lie to tell. He just wants to get out of there. It’s warm and lovely and she is kind, but he’s beginning to feel smothered. Small. Caged. He needs air, space; time alone.

“I wanted - did you know where I could possibly find the key?” he asks, and his voice is beginning to shake.

She hesitates. Looking at him for a second. Then shakes her head again, as if to clear it. “Yes. Alright,” she says. Pauses. “The custodian has it, his house is down by the harbour - do you want to stay here while I fetch it?”

The prospect of following Hildegund down to the harbour, on crutches and in the worst general shape he’s probably ever been, going twice as slow as normal .. Then meet some unknown custodian while red in the face and still gasping for air, or otherwise have Hildegund wait on him till he’s recovered, and then follow her back up the hill -- not especially appealing.

Staying here to entertain her sons’ curiosity is not a lot better. They’re well-meaning and kind - but Loki is already feeling overwhelmed. His palms tingling, clammy. Head hurting. Feeling shaky and more than a little distant. If he did stay, it might end up with something very embarrassing; a freak-out of some kind, him trying to run out and stumbling over his stupid, injured foot. And he’d really rather avoid that.

“I -” he begins, but stops, not sure what exactly he wants to say. He gathers himself. “I might just go
wait by the science building. I could need some air."

It’s vulnerable and uncomfortable. Shining light on both the fact that he can’t really walk, that he’s powerless and not healing properly and the fact that his mind is too far out to handle being with a couple of boys for five minutes. That he already needs a break.

But Hildegund only says, “yes, of course. Boys, am I right?” and begins to get up from her chair. “Well, let’s do it, then!”

Loki follows suit, holding himself steady at the table. When he’s upright, Sigfod and Leif reemerge in the doorway.

“Are you leaving already?” Leif asks. There’s something childish, like disappointment, in his tone.

Loki stays standing with one hand on the table; subtly, he hopes. “I must be going.”

Hildegund has stopped in the doorway to the hall. “Loki has things he needs to be doing. We’ll go find something real quick, then I’ll be back.”

“Something? What thing?” Sigfod asks.

“A key,” Loki explains. "I need to get into the building of sciences." Re-adjusting his footing. His ankle hurts.

“But can’t you just .. magic your way in?”

Loki keeps his expression smooth, unwavering. “I’m afraid not,” he says. Nods politely. “I thank you all much for your company.”

Then he proceeds to let go of the table and limp across the room towards the entry hall, ignoring both the stabbing pain in his ankle and head, and the shame heating his face. He can just imagine how he must look. Like a wet cat who lost a fight.

He smiles at the boys despite it, quickly, before finally disappearing into the hall.

There, he leans against the wall for a moment. Hildegund is already dressed in an overcoat, handing the crutches towards him. He accepts, for once thankful for having them. But before he can place them on his elbows she’s handing him another thing - a long, dark jacket with fur lining at the hands and neck. There’s a large hood with no lining. It’s made of some rough material, but not wool. Smoother than that, lighter.

He hesitates. Looks at her, and she raises her eyebrows.

“I’m not going to let you out into that weather without proper clothing. That would be shameful to my nature.”

“I’ll bring it back to you later today, then,” Loki affirms.


“You’ve done more than enough already, I’ll just bring it back later.”

“Loki,” she says. Insistent. “I have three sons." Only three? There’d been seven children in total, last Loki remembers. "Neither of them use it - you’d be doing me a favour.”

He looks at the jacket for a moment. Then he takes it, gingerly. “Thank you.”
It's not very heavy, but looks warm. He pulls it on - it's large, hangs loose even on top of the bulky sweater he’s wearing. The fabric is coarse against his neck, but not so tight that it’s … uncomfortable. That’s relieving. It hasn’t really gotten a lot better, that sensitivity of things touching his neck, over the years. Everything still feels smothering, like hands, like he can’t draw in enough breath. Too tight. Not surprising, taking his general touchiness since he returned from death into account.

It’s embarrassing, is what it is.

Hildegund opens the door, and Loki fastens the crutches in his grip, following. She puts a hand on his shoulder to hold him steady as he manages moving down the first step, across the porch with the ice layers underneath the powdered snow, then down the steps to the ground. Loki spots blood in the white where he’d been standing earlier, covered by some powdered specks and yet shining through, stark red. It must’ve dripped from his hand. His footprints are covered over, though, by the snow still blowing in wild winds, casting his hair everywhere once they get onto the ground and away from the slight shielding of the house. The layer of snow has gotten thicker, up to over Loki’s ankles.

It’s gotten lighter, the world. Tinged with purple from a sun rising behind clouds somewhere.

Hildegund stops once down, letting go of his shoulder. “I’m going to get the key,” she says. “Are you going to be alright? It will only be a few minutes.”

“I’ll be fine,” Loki says. “I’m properly dressed, now, aren’t I?”

She chuckles, then actually pinches his cheek in affection. “It’s good to see you, boy,” she says. “I’ll be there in a moment. Go sit down.” Then she turns to walk down the hill.

Loki wonders if she’ll be calling him ‘boy’ even after his hair begins to grey. If he’ll even make it so far as to have his hair grey, that is.

He sees her go, and something tightens in him until he can’t help but call out for her. “Hildegund?”

She turns, looking at him with puzzlement. “Did you say something?” she shouts over the wind. He takes a step closer, ears heating.

“Yes,” he calls, trying to match her force of voice. He takes a step closer to her, and she notices the movement, walking back towards him. "I only .." he tries as she gets closer. She stops. He sighs. "I'm sorry," he says. Closes his eyes for a second, then dares to meet her's. "I'm sorry about your husband." He hesitates. "And anyone else you might've ... might've ..." He can't get himself to say the word 'lost', for some reason. Maybe because it makes every decision he made up until Ragnarok feel more real than he wants it to, too real.

She blinks. Cocks her head, expression softening in sorrow, but she's still studying Loki.

"Oh, my boy, I am, too," she says, smiling faintly and reaching a hand up to his cheek again, cupping it. He doesn't jerk under her touch; though he doesn't feel like he deserves it, either. "But that's not your fault."

_But it is_, he wants to say. _Everything is. Everything is._

"I'll be back in a moment," she repeats, smiling a little brighter. "And thank you, Loki. I am grateful for your sympathy."
Then she turns, and Loki stands back, watching her disappear down the hill.

He heads in the direction of the lab, then, careful with the slippery grounds. It’s hard to see for the whirling snow everywhere and from every direction, getting in his eyes and slicking his grip on the crutches. He holds tight, blinking and keeping his head down, moving forward. It really had to turn into a storm, this.

Then there’s a yell of “LOKI!” and his heart lurches, stomach constricting. A shout, furious. It’s not like he doesn’t know who it is. He’s just not sure why Thor is mad at him.

He looks up, startled at the sound, and can make out his brother’s imposing figure stomping towards him. Instinctively, Loki stops, and then begins to draw back, hurriedly. Just about to turn around and bolt. But the right crutch slips in the snow, he loses his footing in the middle of a frantic step backwards and for the second time that day, he lands with a harsh thump on the ground. This time on his backside. His tailbone flares in a shot of aching pain upon impact with the injury, but the only sound he makes is a breathless gust of an exhale.

The next second, Thor is looming above him, face set in something stormy. Which is appropriate in more than one way; there’s a faint hint of electricity dancing over his skin, and Loki doesn’t know if Thor just hasn’t learnt to control that yet, or if he’s deliberately .. preparing to attack. Or intimidate. He finds his breath catching, afraid of what he might’ve done, or what Thor thinks he’s done, this time; if Thor has finally snapped with him, and now they’re going to fight.

And Loki is going to lose.

Thor crouches down, for a second scanning Loki’s face, body with dark eyes, settling on the patch on his forehead. He grabs Loki by his upper arms, who does yell out now, both form just the harshness of Thor’s grip and the faint electricity running through him.

“Thor!” he cries, the word broken up as he seizes with the sparks, but Thor ignores him, hauling him to his feet. Loki cries out again, his tailbone shifting and sending a spike of pain through his back. The crutches are sprawled somewhere in the snow and he is completely defenceless, not sure he could even stand on his own, his body crumpling. Thor holds him at arm’s length for a second, eyes hard and wild, hands shaking and then -

he pulls Loki in, his arms wrapping behind his shoulders, Loki’s nose slamming into his collarbone as they -

Hug. Thor is hugging him.

Rather tightly, really. Crushing his shoulders, and Loki wiggles to free himself, but to no avail. Thor is holding him tight. He just barely keeps himself from whimpering at the pain in his lower back.

Only seconds later does Thor let him go, grabbing Loki's upper arms and holding him out again. For a moment, his face is so pure. Like the boy Loki once knew, gullible, naive, simple. Unscarred, wide-eyed. Ruled by his emotions - well. That last one clearly hasn’t changed.

Then his expression changes, turning dark again, like a sea in stormy winds. Loki recoils instinctively, but Thor holds him fast.

“You clown,” Thor growls. “You total and complete idiot.”

Loki takes a breath. “Now, Thor,” he tries. His voice sounds weak and shaky in the wind. “Let’s not get carried away. Those are my nicknames for you, remember?”
“Though I’m certainly not the one deserving of them right now, am I,” Thor growls in response. When Loki doesn’t answer, he repeats himself; “Am I?!”

It’s almost a shout, and Loki flinches again. He can feel himself trembling a little in Thor’s grip; trying to control it is to no avail.

“I - I haven’t done anything!” he protests, finding his voice again and trying anew to wiggle free. A fresh pain spikes in his back and he winces. “I was just - I told the Valkyrie I left!”

*That was for you.*

“But you weren’t there, Loki, where you said you’d be!” Thor shouts. Loki glances around to see if anyone is watching. He feels like he’s being scolded in public by a parent. “You weren’t! Only a puddle of blood in the snow left, some villagers who’d seen you stagger*ing* away looking half-dead and then disappearing, no footprints left, nothing. -”

“That wasn’t anything, Thor, I -”

“And then in this weather -- for all I know you could be hiding somewhere to lick your wounds in private, bleeding out! Or - or you might’ve gone to the water and passed out again, or slipped in the snow and fallen in, over the edge, and I wouldn’t -”

“How was I supposed to know you were going to follow me?! I can’t plan everything to make certain you won’t flip from the slightest thing -”

“You could’ve been dead, Loki!” Thor roars, and everything quiets in the wake of his voice. Loki stills.

“I wasn’t in danger.”

“But you are,” Thor says in response, his face softening to something unbearably miserable. A tiny, mirthless smile on his lips. “You are in danger.” He pauses, and Loki is not quite sure where he’s going with that. Something feels uneasy about it.

Thor stays quiet. Loki waits for him to say something. Really, he wants to interrupt, change the topic, but he doesn’t want to infuriate his brother further.

Thor readjusts his hands on Loki to hold him less tight. Drops one hand. Loki's leg is aching with the strain of staying upright.

“Do you remember dreaming, last night?” Thor then asks, catching Loki off guard. He blinks.

“I .. don’t think so?”

He does remember *dreaming*, both last night and in general; most nights waking in short intervals, shaking in desperate fear or anger, or both. But Thor means something specific, last night, and Loki doesn’t remember waking from a dream and talking to Thor about it.

“You dream a lot, you know,” his brother continues. “Shift, make sounds. Sometimes you weep.”

Loki keeps their gazes locked, refusing to let the shame show. He’s well aware of his restless sleep and what occupies it instead of rest. Hence, why he’d been sleeping in the bedroom, secluded - but apparently, Thor has been watching, anyway. Listening.

“Last night you talked,” Thor continues. “Or, rather, you were yelling.”
Loki looks away. The snow behind Thor. He blinks specks from his eyes.

“When you finally calmed down from that you were upset and scared. Didn’t know where you were - you were afraid of the window, I think, like you were .. seeing things. Things that I couldn't see, so I brought you into the bedroom. It took a while to get you to calm down.”


“You are in danger, Loki. Constant danger,” Thor says. “I was so scared last night. Beside yourself, far out, like you was going to do something stupid, reckless, at any given moment.”

“It was just a dream.”

“But it’s not only when you dream. It’s like you have that look in your eyes, constantly, all the time. Hidden just under whatever expression you’re choosing to wear.”

Thor pauses. “Do you know I’m terrified of the knives in the kitchen?” he then asks. “The cliffside by the house?”

Loki hesitates. His lips tight. “That fall wouldn’t even kill me.”

“Who knows? Yesterday you cracked your head open by falling on a table.” Thor studies his face. “But you wouldn’t want to risk it like that, would you?” he then says, voice painfully blazé. "You’d want to be sure, right? To make sure no one would find you too soon, you’d want to be certain that it would succeed, a bulletproof plan -”

“Stop, Thor,” Loki says, and even though it’s spoken quietly, Thor listens. “It’s not like that.”

“Isn’t it?” Thor asks. "Isn't that exactly it?"

It’s so simple, so honest. Loki finds himself unable to lie in the face of it. So he stays silent.

Then there’s a call behind Loki, and Thor allows him to whirl around, moving to his side. “Thor!” Hildegund greets over the roaring wind, making her way with long strides across the snow. “How good to see you!”

She gets closer, smiles. Loki gives one back but it feels a little frail. Thor’s hand is still on his one arm and he sees Hildegund frown at it for a second, noticing the tense situation, before shrugging it off. Loki glances to see Thor's expressing; he's smiling, if a little strained then also genuinely.

“Here you go,” Hildegund says, reaching a hand out and taking Loki’s wrist, lifting it. She opens his fingers, which apparently were clenched in a fist, and deposits an object of cold metal in it. She releases his hand.

“Sorry it took a little while. He was finding a spare, so you can just keep it.”

He looks at the key. Silver. Attached to a metal ring. “Thank you,” he remembers to say, looking back up. She smiles again.

“You’re welcome. It was good to have your company, Loki. Do come visit again one day; Flosi, my daughter if you remember, would be most excited to meet you, I imagine. And don’t mind Aleric, he’s always being cross like that.” She looks at Thor, lifting a raised finger. “Take care of him now, will you? We don’t want to make a habit of him showing up bloodied and half-frozen on my doorstep.”

Then she nods in parting and turns to walk away. She disappears behind a house and Thor is left
back, blinking. Then, after a moment, his face falls into something sour, and he mutters, “I’m trying to.” He shakes his head and then lets go of Loki’s arm to crouch down and pick up the crutches.

Loki sways a little at the loss of support. He feels suddenly very lightheaded from being on his feet so long.

“Thor,” he says. It sounds thin, and Thor looks up from his crouch in the snow with raised eyebrows.

His expression falls (again), and the next second he’s there, holding Loki steady with one arm tight around his shoulders. He’s trying to get the arms deposited in the crutches and Loki tries to help, he really does, but his vision is greying at the edges his arms aren’t responding to the signals he’s sending them. His hearing getting dulled, the world fading fast -

The next second, he’s leaning limply, awkwardly against Thor who has apparently dropped the crutches, carrying Loki’s full weight with his arm around his torso. His legs are boneless. A dull pain is throbbing in his back. One hand is clapping his cheek lightly.

“ - hey, come on. Loki. Are you there? Brother?”

Loki tries to shuffle his feet to regain footing, fingers gripping at Thor’s jacket in a feeble attempt at hauling himself upright. He can’t, really, and instead just nods twice, unable to do anything as he feels himself sliding towards the ground. Thor shifts to get a better hold while Loki shifts with him like a ragdoll. He winces, though, when Thor hand wraps too close to his lower back. Thor is quick to remove it, being obviously more gentle in his movement from there.

His head lands on Thor’s shoulder, placed there by his brother’s gentle hand, turned into his neck. His body is upright but only because Thor is keeping it so. His arms are folded awkwardly in between the press of their bodies.

He concentrates on breathing for a moment. Then he attempts to blink his eyes open.

The world is bright; a chaos of snow and hurling wind. His eyes drift closed again and he swallows thickly, shifting his head to rest sideways on Thor’s collarbone and straightening his body as well as possible, feet regaining some ground, yet still leaning heavily on his brother. Thor moves one hand to tuck a lock of straying dark hair behind his ears. Stroking his head, once, afterwards.

“You’re alright,” he says, mumbling it with his own face pressed into Loki’s hair, and it sounds like a reassurance meant for both of them. “You’re alright.”

They stand like that for a little while. Loki focusing on his breathing, in and out, easing himself back into reality. Thor holding him upright, a steady rock against Loki’s fleeting frame.

A woman’s voice speaks from a little away at one point, “are you hurt? Do you need help?” and Loki can feel Thor’s chest move as he shakes his head. A soft rumble as he speaks, softly.

“Thank you, we’re fine.”

The other person doesn’t say anything more, and Loki presumes they’ve left.

Finally, he takes a particularly deep breath, sighs and lifts his head. Wills his legs to stay in place and straightens up.

“I can stand,” he mumbles, and Thor removes his hand from the hair to hold Loki’s shoulder instead. He looks him in the eyes and Loki attempts to make his appear focused, clear. He’s not sure how he’s supposed to do that.
“Are you sure?” Thor says. Loki nods, closing his eyes again for just a second, before brushing Thor’s remaining hand off. He doesn’t sway very much this time.

It takes Thor only seconds to get the crutches back up, and he places them behind Loki’s elbows; who grabs the handles, grateful for the support.

“Come,” Thor rumbles. “Let’s go inside and sit down.” And Loki nods again, starting towards the lab.

Luckily it isn’t far. They’re at the door in less than a minute, and Thor pulls the key out from his pocket, holding it to the lock. He notices Loki frowning at it, and says, “you dropped it. In the snow;” and that does make sense, with the whole passing out and all. Thor walks inside, holding it open for Loki and closing it behind them both once in. The overwhelming soundscape of the snowstorm is cut off in favour of a faint electrical humming when Thor turns on the overhead fluorescent lights. Loki breathes a sigh of relief, leaning against the wall. Quiet.

Then he shifts towards a chair by a desk, slumping down in it and leaning the crutches on the table. Thor stays standing, leaned sideways against the wall by the door. He’s looking at empty air, eyes narrowing a little in thought.

“You’re up early,” Loki says after a few moments of silence. Thor blinks, eyes moving to him.

“Hm. You were earlier.”

“Guess so.”

There’s a pause. Then Thor asks, “what happened to your back? It’s giving you pain.”

Loki shrugs, and even that movement sends dull spikes from the injury. “I fell on my arse yesterday if you must know.”

“You seem to be doing that a lot, as of late.”

Loki scoffs tiredly. “It’s fine,” he says. “I just need to be a little careful.”

They pause again. Then Loki continues. “Why did you come after me in the first place?”

He eyes Thor’s clothes, only really noticing them now. Sweatpants and some big shirt underneath the long coat - the clothes he slept in. “You haven’t even changed. Something urgent?”

Thor looks at him for a long moment. It’s irritating, the way he’s doing that a lot, lately. As if he knows something.

“Nothing urgent,” he says, and then he pushes from the wall, crouching down to rummage through a sack he was wearing slung over his shoulder, before. Something crunches like paper as he grabs it, and he hauls a brown bag up, walking to Loki and setting it on the desk. Despite them just before having basically hugged for who knows how long, Loki feels himself tense in the sudden closeness. Thor looks down at him for a moment, staying in the close proximity and pausing when he’s set the bag down as if he can read Loki’s every thought. Then he moves back to the wall, and Loki can breathe again.

“Breakfast,” Thor says. Loki wants to just acknowledge the offering and leave the topic, but can’t keep himself from turning to unfold the bag and hold it open with a finger, peering inside. There’s a red apple. A bun. A plum. Some cheese, it looks like. He inhales the scents.
Thor clears his throat behind him, and Loki realizes he’s been looking at the food for a little too long. He blinks, rolling the bag closed again as he feels his ears redden. He lifts his chin and meets Thor’s gaze despite it.

“Thank you,” he says.

Thor nods. “Are you going to work on your and Bruce’s project?” he asks. Loki shrugs.

“Exploring some theories on the matter, I guess,” he says. “I could use some coffee for the task, though. Do you know of any place I might find such a thing?”

Thor looks at him, almost a stare and looking very close to rolling his eyes. “There’s a meeting room two buildings over with a small kitchen.”

“Am I supposed to go there every time I want a refill, then?”

“Or you could just eat normally,” Thor grumbles, and it’s not quite under his breath, “and you wouldn’t need some kick to keep you going.”

Loki looks away. He doesn't want to talk about that. Thor is not looking at him, either.

Thor coughs discreetly into his fist after a few moments of awkward silence. “I can go make you a cup, though, if you want.”

Loki looks back up, eyebrows raised.

“How about a pitcher?”

Thor glares at him. He purses his lips.

“Alright,” he then says, after a long moment. “I can make you a pitcher. On the one condition that you promise to eat breakfast. All of it.”

Loki feels his own gaze fall away again, to the floor. “I was going to, anyway,” he says. Maybe a bit mumbled.

“Do we have a deal, then?” Thor asks.

“Sure.”

“I trust you to keep your word, Loki,” he says, wrapping his jacket tighter around himself and holding it closed with one hand. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

Then he opens the door, disappearing out into the storm. It slams shut behind him.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked it. Might've taken a little while to read, I imagine, it certainly did to edit.

heheheh and of course, who would've thought, I'm insecure about this chapter. I KNOW, uNHEARD of, right? (rolling my eyes). Sometimes, someone will enjoy a thing that I couldn't see clearly, so instead of deleting everything and starting over .. you know. Here it is ’x)
The next chapters are on their way. Thank you again for reading, and for kudos'ing, and bookmarking, and all you lovelies commenting. Amazing.
Chapter Summary

So. We're still in New Asgard. Loki was with Volstagg’s family, last. Thor found him afterwards, now they've gone into the lab because Loki wants something to distract his thoughts, and also he really needs to sit down. Thor went out to make coffee, oooooooohhhhh amirite? The drama

Chapter Notes

Here's another one.

Please do enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Loki takes the time alone to sit with his head in his hands.

He straightens up abruptly when Thor comes back, startled by the sound of the door opening in midst of the quiet and can’t help the noise of distress that escapes him at the following flare of pain through his lower back. He grimaces.

Thor pauses in the door, a dark blue pitcher in one hand and two cups in the other. “Are you alright?” He closes the door slowly, eyes on his brother.

“Fine,” Loki grinds out. “Just my stupid back.”

“I'd say you’re the stupid one from falling on it.”

“It’s not like I meant to fall.”

Thor places the pitcher on a table in the middle of the room, pouring one cup to the brim. Loki rolls his chair over, taking it and lifting it to his lips. Thor pours into the other cup. To the brim as well.

Loki swallows his sip. “Is that for me or are you just stealing my hard-earned coffee?” he asks, voice deceivingly light. Thor raises an eyebrow at him.

“You have a liter and a half, here; I'd say you've got enough to share.”

“Alright, fine. Sure.”

Thor is still looking at him. “Did you actually mean that, just now?” he asks. “I don’t seem to remember you being quite so possessive.”

Loki glares. “I’m not being possessive,” he objects, “it’s just that you promised me if I eat the breakfast, I could have a pitcher of coffee. And now you’re drinking it. But it’s fine, it’s not a problem.”
“Loki, the kitchen is so close. You can just go make another one if you need to.”

“It’s the principle of it. It doesn’t matter, Thor. What’s done is done.”

Thor looks at him in disbelief, both eyebrows raised as if to say ‘do you hear yourself?’ Loki scoffs, looking away and taking another sip. “Just drink it already,” he says.

Thor hesitates for a moment. Then he says “alright,” taking a sip, and Loki realises he does feel actually very possessive when the action makes a pang of irritation shoot through him.

He tries to shut it down. Norns, it’s just a drink.

After a moment’s pause he sighs, dropping his head and shaking it. “I’m sorry,” he manages. However much it pains him to say. “That was .. irrational.”

“It’s alright, Loki,” Thor answers but there’s a hint of amusement to his tone, and Loki lifts his head again to glare at him. Thor looks amused, too.

“Don’t laugh at me,” Loki sputters. ”Not when I'm being sincere!”

The barely suppressed smile on his brother’s dumb face only becomes even less successfully suppressed.

“Come on, that was funny.”


Thor laughs. Then they’re quiet for a little while, the humour fading but leaving a lighter sense in the room. A while passes.

Thor is first to speak again, breaking the quiet.

“I had a healer stop by yesterday, while you were sleeping,” he says. That makes Loki look up. With alarm.

Thor studies him, and Loki schools his expression down to something more neutral. “She didn’t do anything - invasive,” Thor explains. “Just checked your pulse, temperature, stuff like that. To make sure the general things were alright.” He takes a sip of coffee. “It was really a wonder you didn’t wake.”

“Then why didn’t you just wake me?” Loki asks, voice low, and it’s easy to hear the outrage just barely contained underneath the words.

“We just figured it was better to let you sleep.”

Loki wants to shoot back but keeps the snarky responses from spilling over his lips. It’s not that big of a deal. It isn’t.

“But everything was alright,” Thor continues. “Well. Except for the usual.”

“That’s what I told you.”

“You looked scary, though. Like a ghost.”

Loki hums, taking a sip and keeping his eyes on the floor.
There’s pause for another few seconds. Then Loki sighs, setting down the coffee and looks at Thor.

“Come on, brother,” he says. “It’s not like I’m the only one who’s ever been in deep shit - you were drinking that much to suppress something.”

Thor’s wince is well hidden, but Loki catches it.

“I was - suffering, yes,” Thor says. And then immediately changes the topic from himself. “A lot of people were, from the first snap; flashbacks, such things. Was that what happened to you yesterday?”

“Yes,” Loki says, holding his glare. That’s an easier answer than the whole truth; he wouldn’t know how to explain that he’d been afraid the world had eaten Thor.

“I have a cell phone, you know,” Thor then says, to Loki’s surprise. He’d expected more prying. But then, you never do know with Thor.

“I don’t use it much. But I have this watch, see, very handy,” he lifts his left arm, the sleeve falling down to reveal some black contraption around his wrist. It looks eerily like some sort of shackle.

“I can pick up calls with it,” Thor continues. “All without magic or stones or anything.” He hesitates. “The next time something like this happened, you could call me. I’d come get you.”

“But I would need a cellphone myself, wouldn’t I,” Loki asks, ignoring Thor’s last comment.. “To call you,” he elaborates. “And your .. digits, it’s digits they use, like a code, right?”

“Right, of course, that’s right,” Thor says, rolling his sleeve back down. “You’d need one. I’ll ask Bruce about it.”

Loki hesitates. Had he had the option yesterday, he’s pretty sure he would’ve called Thor. But then that would’ve also been way more humiliating than just being found sleeping on the sofa, and so he’s not sure he really wants the option of reaching out in situations where he can barely breathe.

But he says, “thank you,” and takes another sip of coffee. It’s already warming him up from the inside.

“You know I’m here for you, Loki,” Thor then says. It’s quieter, his voice. “You can talk to me. Or I can .. be there when you need me to.”

Loki can feel his cheeks flushing. He hums again, fidgeting with the cup in his lap. “Thanks,” he says.

He wants to give something back, some … offering. He wants to tell Thor that he’s there for him, too, that Thor can talk to him, but it wouldn’t be true. Last time Loki had had a chance of helping Thor, back in the hotel room, he’d fled every opportunity.

It had scared him to see Thor so out of control. It’d made him embarrassed on Thor’s behalf, embarrassed by being his kin.

He can’t tell Thor that he’s there for him, too, because Loki is scared off by weakness. He can’t bear his brother being pitiful and frail, he doesn’t have space inside himself to hold Thor’s qualms as well as his own. He doesn’t even try.

And so he can’t tell Thor that he’s a good brother. Because he isn’t.

Loki puts the coffee down and pushes from the chair to stand, ignoring the pain from his back as well as he can. He staggers to the desk he and Banner left their work on yesterday, his back turned to Thor.
“I want to continue the work,” he says, flicking thoughtlessly through some papers. “Get started.”

Thor clears his throat behind him. “Sure.”

“I’ll eat the breakfast in a minute. I promise, I just need to get started first. Get my thoughts going.”

“I’m going to talk to Bruce about the cellphone,” Thor says, fabric rustling as he pulls his jacket back on. “Make sure to get you one.”

Loki hums in response.

Thor pauses for a moment, Loki’s back still turned to him. “Eat the breakfast,” he says, then opening the door. The hurling wind whines and shakes outside but is cut off just as quickly when the door slams shut.

Loki finds himself unable to keep from spinning around, then, staring at where Thor left. The closed door. He quickly turns back to the table again, though, anxiety already beginning to bubble in his throat from the repeat situation of yesterday. Someone leaving. A closed door. The world outside, unreal. It’s like muscle memory - his body almost expecting for it to happen again and thus causing the same thoughts to begin whirling.

He distracts himself with the work.

Very nearly does he forget to eat the breakfast. It’s hard to keep his mind as sharp as it’s supposed to, and often an important train of thought will just stop, dissipate into thin air, or his aching head and body will distract him.

Still, at least a good couple of hours pass before he finally gets so lightheaded he has to sit down on the floor, head between his knees. His stomach growls loudly and for many seconds like some other beast. It surely feels like a beast. And he realises that the dulled, hazy quality to the world, the way his head is spinning and his thoughts are getting less and less coherent surely isn’t being helped by the facts of a still lowering blood-sugar and food-less system.

He manages to his feet when the worst of the dizziness passes, stumbling to grab the brown paper bag Thor left. He opens it, plunges a shaky hand inside to grab the apple while sitting down by the desk.

The next moment, he’s eaten it all; everything in the bag. Every last scrap. He looks around, spotting an apple core carelessly thrown on the ground, plum stone sticky on the table. The cloth from the cheese lying over a pen-holder on the desk. And there are crumbs everywhere. He looks down on himself, appalled to find the remains of bread all over the sweater, stuck in the coarse fabric, on his thighs, littered around his feet. His hands are sticky, and he’s left marks with them on the table.

Then there’s impending nausea from eating so fast (apparently), and he wraps an arm around his stomach. It constricts under his hold, harshly and he gags, eyes widening, for a moment sure he’s just going to throw up right here, beads of sweat springing forth on his forehead; but then the spell passes.

He takes a deep breath, trying to quell the remains of it. Closes his eyes.

He barely remembers consuming any of the food. Like it was done in some trance. And he’s still hungry, which is terrible - but anyway, he wouldn’t be able to get anything more down right now.

Bracing himself with a hand on the table, he gets to his feet, leaning his weight on the uninjured foot. His leg is trembling underneath him.
He brushes off the crumbs on his clothes with his spare hand, then the ones on the table. He picks up the litter, putting it back into the paper bag. Kicks the crumbs under the table, spreading them out so it could look like just dust. Uses his sleeve to wipe off the surface of the desk; gross. But at least it no longer looks such a mess.

Despite his stomach growling and protesting at the abuse (first no food at all, then all of it at once), it’s easier to focus. He stays sitting in the chair most of the time, working with pen and paper to see if any of the equations of time-workings and soul-retrieving in working with the Infinity Gems could work. Lead to something.

He drinks coffee to keep his thoughts going. To keep everything from becoming heavy.

When the door opens behind him a while later, he drops the paper he’s working on with a sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. The headache is getting worse.

“Thor, you don’t have to come to check up on me,” he grumbles, swirling around in the chair. “I am perfectly fine without your constant -”

He cuts off. In the door stands Captain Rogers, looking just as surprised as Loki feels, in a bulky, light grey-blue jacket and with snow sprinkling from his hair and shoulders. Those very, very broad shoulders. Let it not be said Loki doesn’t have a type.

“Oh captain, my captain,” he drawls, sticking on a smirk despite how shitty his body feels on the inside. “What brings you to my humble premise?”

Rogers’ lips actually twitch in what could be the edge of an amused smile. Then he steps to the side, and Bruce Banner stumbles in after him, barely fitting through the door’s small frame.

“Man, what a weather!” he exclaims, shuddering and brushing snow off of his upper arms and shoulders. He’s just wearing a sweater. “You could’ve waited, Steve, I was almost afraid I was gonna lose sight of - oh, hi, Loki.”

Loki raises his eyebrows, folding his hands in his lap. Back straight. “Hello, Bruce,” he says, an echo of another time. He doesn’t feel quite as cocky this time around, but then - he actually hadn’t back then, either. “What brings you here?”

Banner shrugs off the last of the snow, going to take Thor’s abandoned cup from the table and pouring coffee from the pitcher. Loki twitches.

“I was going to work on our theories,” Banner says. “Great that you’re here, actually.”

Loki directs his gaze to look at Rogers.

“Then how about the good Captain?” he asks, blinking innocently.

Again that hint of a smile.

“My friend Sam’s in town, he’s being given the whole tour of the place by Brunnhilde.”

Brunnhilde. That’s the first time Loki has heard anyone say it. He can’t help but wonder if it’s some joke everyone but him is in on - so he’ll think that it’s her real name, but everyone else knows it isn’t.

“I thought I’d watch Bruce work instead,” Rogers continues. “Chill out, drink some coffee - are there any more mugs?”
On second thought, the added company might be good for the coffee situation. They can go and make it.

“There should be a meeting room two buildings from here,” Loki says. “Thor brewed the beverage there. More cups, too, would be my guess.”

“Oh,” Rogers says. “Thor was here?”

“Earlier, yes.”

“You guys really get up so early. Well, I might go get a cup more. Maybe refill the pitcher?”

“There’s no need -” Loki starts to say, but Banner holds up the pitcher and there’s the sound of a bit of liquid sloshing at the bottom.

“That might be a good idea,” he says. Apparently, Loki has drunk almost the entire thing.

“See you in a minute,” Rogers replies, still in his jacket and disappearing out the door.

That leaves Loki and Banner alone, which - they managed it last they worked together. It became almost easy as they went on.

“So,” Banner says. He goes for a crooked, slightly unsure smile. “Sit down if you get dizzy this time around, right?”

Loki scoffs. “Sure. Now - I had a look at that Geisenberg case you told me about last. I was thinking; if we took the formula of the similar working I presented … ”

They get back into the groove. Rogers returns with a new pot of coffee.

Loki stays in his chair despite desperately wanting to stand up; feeling more grounded like that, in contact with his mind and senses. A habit from studying magic; it’s not like it would even make a difference, now, being drained as he is. There’s nothing to feel in his body that might matter, nothing of importance like premonistic sensations or magical intuition. Only the most primal of bodily instincts.

Speaking of: as Banner is explaining something, Loki suddenly feels his bladder protest in a painful spasm. He sits up straight in a jerk. Banner stops talking, the end of his sentence sounding like a question.

Loki blinks back into the room. “Sorry?”

“I only asked -” Bruce begins, and Loki feels his expression twitching with another spasm. “Are you okay?”

Norns, all that coffee. He should’ve known.

“Yes, fine,” he grinds out, irritated, moving carefully as he pushes to stand. Ymir’s beard, he really has to go. “I just -- bathroom,” he mutters, grabbing the crutches and hastening to get them secured behind his elbows. The lab is only a single floor with no doors or separate rooms; no bathroom here, as far as he knows.

“Do you know where it is?” Rogers asks, standing up from his chair. “There was one in the other building. It’s super close.”

“It’s fine, I’ll find it,” Loki says, moving to the exit.
He can feel Rogers and Banner exchange a glance behind him and ignores it, ear reddening and pulling open the door with fumbling hands and more than a little difficulty before plunging outside into the weather. The storm is still raging, but the sun has risen.

Everything is a blinding white.

Before he can close the door, Rogers slips out with him, halfway through pulling on his jacket. "Figured I’d just point you in the right direction," he says. Then points at a red brick house in the opposite direction of the decline to the coast. "The low one, grey, behind that red building."

It really isn’t too far. So that’s something, at least.

Loki nods, planting the crutches in the snow to move forward. The first step he tries to take, however, one crutch slips backwards in the sap. His feet lose grip and he tumbles forward; had it not been for the Captain reaching out with an arm under his armpits, Loki would’ve crashed to the ground.

He stiffens in the hold, the arms, flesh his body despite being protected by the layers of clothes. Like an animal under a flashlight.

"Don’t touch me," he hisses, trying desperately to shuffle himself back to standing. He’s not quite sure why he’s being aggressive. After all, the Captain just saved him from a potentially extremely embarrassing situation.

He only knows that the arm around his torso feels oppressive, tight like ropes, Rogers’ body too close and too warm and Loki wants him away.

Maybe it’s all the coffee. The jitteriness, making him more touchy.

Rogers twitches at the outburst but takes two seconds to help Loki find steady ground again before removing his arm. Loki removes himself further immediately.

"I’m sorry," Rogers says soberly. "I didn’t mean to offend you."

"Well, you did," Loki snarls, being careful with the crutches, now, as he plunges them back into the snow again, shifting forward. He only barely hides the shake of his voice, glad to be moving away. Even if it means having his back turned.

Don’t fall don’t fall don’t fall, he repeats to himself while moving across the snow. Thankfully, Rogers stays by the door, still there when Loki glances over his shoulder.

He finds his way to the building, this one of something like cement and thankfully it’s still unlocked. Going through the door, he spots the door with a bathroom sign to the left and goes for it in a beeline. He practically throws the crutches to the tiled floor, locking the door and hurrying across the room. He sits down just to be in the safe; wouldn’t want to pass out from sheer relief and fall to the floor.

He doesn’t pass out. He does, however, zone out; which, that would probably rank somewhere at the top of his list as to the worst places he’s done that. And he’s really, really glad the door was locked. He comes back to with his head resting sideways against the wall, eyes unfocused, to the sound of someone calling his name. They call again.

"Loki? Are you in there?" It’s Rogers. Loki blinks himself back to the present and sighs. "Are you okay?"

"I’m fine," he says, hauling himself up by the wall. There’s no real strength behind the words. “I’m
fine,” he repeats, louder. Wonders how long it’s been.

“Do you need help?”

Loki rolls his eyes though there’s no one to see. He flushes the toilet. “I do not require your assistance, no,” he calls through the door and over the running water, making his way to the sink. “Go back.”

“I don’t think so,” Rogers answers. “Come out, then we can talk about it.”

“In a minute.”

“What are you doing in there?”

Loki sighs, ignoring Rogers and turning on the faucet. He pumps soap into his palm, wringing his hands against each other. Then he makes the mistake of looking up, and his own face looks back at him in a dirty mirror on the wall. He jerks in surprise yet finds that he can’t get himself to look away.

Sunken cheeks, too sharp bones. Dark and heavy bags under his eyes. Skin almost sallow. Lips pale and cracked. Eyes staring back, hollow and dark; haunted.

He’s never enjoyed looking at himself during ruts like these. He knows his time with Thanos caused something similar, in the beginning especially. They sometimes forced him to face his own reflection, in duplicates or illusions. He’d always feel so hollowed out afterwards. Like nothing really mattered.

“Loki,” Rogers is calling again, and the door is rattling from his grip on the other side. “I’m going to kick down the door if you don’t respond now.”

“No - wait a second,” Loki hurries to say. Gods, not again. The water is still running in the sink and he makes his hands move again, washing off the soap. Then turns it off. “I’ll be out in a second.”

He dries his hands in paper towels, grabs the crutches from the floor and unlocks the door. Steve Rogers is right on the other side, blocking the door and facing Loki with a frown. Arms crossed.

“Are you alright?” he asks. Loki raises two tired eyebrows.

“Very,” he responds.

Then he places the crutches and begins moving towards the exit. Rogers glances into the bathroom before following as if there’d be some sort of evidence of what Loki had been doing in there. As if he’d been up to something nefarious; digging a tunnel out to escape, Loki imagines the Captain is thinking, or maybe making some teleporter or weapon with stolen equipment. Perhaps Loki should do that.

He moves out the door of the building, and the Captain has no problem catching up to walk by his side.

“You were in there for a long time,” he says. Loki sighs. A little dramatically so, perhaps.

“We are but human; isn’t that what you Midgardians say?”

Roger hesitates, looking at Loki. “I guess,” he says.

“So, we all have our basal, shameful needs. Wouldn’t you agree?”
The Captain turns a little red around the ears. Apparently, he decides not to probe further, which is both appreciated and appropriate. Inquiring in such a way about someone’s visit to the restroom is honestly just rude.

"Not for forty minutes," Rogers mumbles under his breath, though, right before they enter back into the lab; but then leaving the topic from there.

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“We’ve found the solution!” Banner proclaims to the Valkyrie’s living room full of people, throwing out his arms and knocking over the coat stand in the process, sending it crashing to the floor.

“We most certainly have not ‘found the solution’,” Loki objects as Banner picks back up the mess of coats, looking apologetic. Loki himself is standing leaned with his back against the wall by the door, arms crossed. “We’re onto something useful. That’s all.”

“We’ve found it, I’m sure,” Banner insists, light shining in his eyes and looking lost in thought for a moment. Then he coughs, blinking himself back.

“We’ll need the stones,” he says. “All of them, here in the present. Loki explained the theory of some workings - well, some of the theory, and -”

“Yes, a theory,” Loki interrupts. “We don’t know if your friends are even connected to the stones anymore.”

“But they have to be, Loki, from the things you’ve told me it just seems like there’s no other -”

“There are always other possibilities. We don’t know anything yet.”

“Yes, and that’s where it all gets really fun,” Banner continues, unphased. “We’re working on a contraption to combine electrical forces - that’s where you come in, Thor - with our tech and magic. Which, I mean, it’s sort of all electrical forces but they work in super different ways. With the power of the stones, if Tony and Natasha and Vision are still connected somehow - which they have to be - we can bring them back. With Loki's spells; they're super cool, let me tell you - he just needs to restore his magic, then we might have a chance!”

“Restore my magic, which is not a simple task in the slightest, may I remind you.”

Loki doesn’t like talking about this thing, not least in the company of every Avengers currently in New Asgard. That Sam guy is looking at him from the couch, and his eyes look way too knowing. Did Rogers tell him something? The Captain himself is in a dinner table chair by a doorway to the kitchen. Banner is standing by the wall, Thor is on the lilac couch as well and the Valkyrie in a comfy-looking, light brown leather armchair to its right.

“Which is why,” Loki continues, “I propose we involve another sorcerer. If you would let me speak for but a moment,” he adds on maybe a slightly sour note to Banner.

There’s silent. Then Thor says, “it sounds like complicated magic, Loki. You’d need a mage at your level to manage that. Someone sturdy enough to work with my power, too.”

“It’s the only option we have. We don’t know how long it’s going to take for my magic to heal.”

Thor sighs, looking away. He mumbles, “if you would just eat maybe it wouldn’t be such a feat,” at which Loki stares because everyone could definitely hear that, and the Valkyrie sends Thor a warning glare. He looks between them, the sulk taking on an embarrassed note. He clears his throat. “I just mean - it’d have to be someone powerful. Those aren’t exactly ripe to pick off the trees.”
“Didn’t any mages survive Ragnarok?” Loki asks, not meeting anyone else's eye. The fact that he looks like this and can barely walk is one thing; that he freaks out every time he has to eat is another. It's humiliating, and he doesn't want anyone to know about it. He doesn't want to hear their judgement.

“Yes, many,” Thor complies, “but you know well that no one in Asgard could match your level.”


“We’re not bringing her into it,” he says. It’s almost a growl.

“You know Lorelei isn’t strong enough, she’s more trickster than sorceress - on the other hand her sister -”

“We are not bringing her into this,” Thor insists. “Not until every other opportunity is out of the picture. I’d think you of all people would be done with Amora’s tricks by now; if anyone’s been affected the worst it would be -”

“Let’s not get into that,” Loki interrupts. “Fine. Then what are our other options?”

“There’s Wanda,” Rogers says, and the name stirs Loki memory. He just keeps himself from grimacing.

“Her power is too wild, untrained,” he says, remembering the animal-like lashes. “She could be useful as raw energy but we’ll need someone able to direct their magic more deliberately, not just in telekinesis. We need someone on reality-bender level. She might be able to learn with a little time, though; her power is truly … astounding. Who else do we have?”

Banner says, “well, I mean, Doctor Stephen Strange is -”

“No, not him,” Loki interrupts. “Anyone else?”

Quiet.


He huffs with frustration. “Are you honestly implying that this wizard is the only thing, besides one powerful but completely untrained witch, even resembling a sorcerer on this sorry realm?”

“He calls himself a sorcerer,” Valkyrie cuts in. “I think he’s pretty good. For a beginner.”

“Keep your thoughts to yourself, Brunn Brunn.” He raises his eyebrows at her. “That was the name, right? Like the engine of some shitty, dying ship?”

Valkyrie shoots him a grimace. “Fuck off, Lackey. You’re not the boss around here.”

“No, I guess you are. Queen of a fisherman’s village, my my, truly, what an honour it must -”

“Hey,” Thor cuts in, standing up in a quick, swift motion. He’s glaring at Loki. “Get yourself together.”

Loki scoffs. Biting his tongue to keep the building remarks back.

“Strange is not an option,” he says instead after a moment. “Our magics would have to be intertwined in the working and I don’t trust him in that. I don’t trust him, period.”
Rogers’ eyebrows pull together. “How come you dislike him so much?”

“I just do.”

Thor snickers. “He trapped Loki when we were on Midgard, the most ridiculous spell, thirty minutes of –”

“That’s enough, Thor.” And it isn’t just bicker, either; Loki’s voice is hard, raised. He can feel his fists shaking a little by his side.

“Okay,” Sam Wilson says, raising his palms in surrender as if he has something at all to do with any of this. “Let’s all take a breath. There’s gotta be a method everyone can agree on.”

“Well do we know any other sorcerers?” Valkyrie says. She doesn’t look at Loki.

There’s quiet.

“Loki, you must know someone,” Thor objects.

“Not anyone trustworthy,” Loki replies, eyes on his hands as he picks at a nail. “Nor are they talented enough in this field. Most mages are specialized to do one thing really well, and are not very broad in their reach.”

Quiet again. For more than ten seconds. Fifteen …

Everyone is looking at the floor, pretending to not be thinking exactly what they’re thinking .. Twenty seconds …

“Fine, then, we’ll take the wizard!” Loki exclaims with an irritated huff. There’s a collective sigh of relief. “But I will not spend a minute more in his company than I need to. I won’t.”

Valkyrie pumps her fist in the air. Then blinks, surprised at herself. “I mean - it’s not like I particularly like the guy, either,” she follows up by saying. “But … hooray?”

“So you have a plan,” Rogers repeats, to Banner this time, leaning forward on his elbows, “and it might even work. What do we need to do from here?”

There’s quiet for a moment. Then Loki speaks.

“We need to get the stones. That’s the next step.”

There’s a collective groan at the prospect of that. Even though Banner had mentioned it already. Apparently, it takes the direct voicing of the plan for the reality to sink in.

“Honestly, I just put them back,” Rogers mutters, only half under his breath. “I feel like a kindergarten teacher cleaning up toys.”

"Should've maybe chosen that profession instead," Sam Wilson mutters.

“Isn’t it just the same plan as the last time, though? More or less,” Bruce says. “That’ll make it easier, we know where they are -” he cuts off, a flash of hurt passing across his face. “I mean, not the soul stone. We can just grab that from past-Clint after he got it, right?”

“Wouldn’t that create a branched reality, then?” Valkyrie says. Her lips are pursed in thought. After three seconds, her expression falls. “Ah, that … that gets complicated real quick.”
“But we just need to return the stone when we’re done. And nothing will be changed.”

“If we don’t fuck up,” Sam says.

“We didn’t the last time, did we?”

“And that was a close call, too,” Thor grumbles from his place on the couch, having been quiet for long.

“Look,” Banner tries, holding out his hands, “if there’s even a slight chance that we can get our friends back, shouldn’t we try? We always knew there would probably be a risk if we did find a way.”

“Risking more lives?” Thor says. “That we might not be able to get back?”

Loki stands back, wondering how he got himself into this mess. He just wanted something to occupy his mind, help out with the stuff he knows. Now, he’s started a rockslide of crazy plans.

“Actually,” Rogers cuts in, “we might be able to save some more lives in the process. Not just our friends - or, well. More friends? A lot of people.”

Loki turns to him, frowning. He’s the only one who looks confused, though, and Thor glances nervously in his direction.

“What?” Loki asks him. “What am I missing?”

“Well - I was the one who went back to replace the stones we took last,” Rogers says, looking at Loki. His eyes are almost .. apologetic?

“I went back to New York, 2012, to return the Time and Mind Stones.”

Loki twitches. “And the tesseract,” he finishes, with a nod, waiting for more.

“Not exactly,” Rogers says. “We originally got the Tesseract from the nineteen forties.”

Loki looks at him warily. “Why, what happened with the one in New York?”

“Well …” Rogers winces. “You took it.”

Loki looks at him for a moment. Then he shakes his head. “Get the one from the forties, then.”

“It’s a hellhole, Loki,” Rogers continues. “In 2012, that branched reality. Thanos completed the decimation, the universe is in chaos, he’s a constant threat looming. You’re off who knows where -”

“It’s not our problem. That’s another reality, those selves aren’t ours. They’re different people. We’re not supposed to -”

“Thor is dead,” Rogers says, and Loki stiffens. Refusing to meet his brother’s eyes, despite them being planted firmly on him in return. “A lot of people are.” He sighs. Loki keeps his eyes hard and hopefully unreadable.

“It’s already happened that way for them,” Rogers continues. “You escaped with the space stone, that’s what created the branch; the moving on an infinity stone. But we could set in there, in the past, find you before Thanos gets the stone from you. After the reality has been branched but before it goes awry. We could correct everything.”

Loki stays quiet. Pressing his thumb into his palm. “It’s not our problem,” he repeats, and he means
it. That’s another Loki. An outdated, idiot Loki, and the real Loki wants nothing more to do with him.

“But you could find yourself, couldn’t you?” Thor asks. “If your magic was stronger.”

“Of course I could,” Loki snaps. “A piece of cake.”

“Then isn’t that the best option?” Banner suggests. “Sounds like there’s very little risk involved.”

Loki’s eyes set on him. “But it’s not my problem,” he snarls. “I’m offering my knowledge to help build this contraption. I’m willing to share my magic once it’s better, see if I can open the stones for their resurrection - but I’m not risking my life in alternate futures with twisted villain-versions of my own self to get your friends back.” There’s silence. “They’re not my friends,” he adds with emphasis, to make that point clear.

No one can really say anything to that.

They settle on contacting Strange, hoping that he will be able to track Loki in the branched 2012 reality. They seem intent on fixing that mess. Because it’s ‘their fault’, or something. Personally, Loki has no sympathy whatsoever for that dumbass Loki who apparently is causing universal destruction just by lulling around being an idiot. That’s that guy’s own fault.

The wizard will get in town once they’re nearer to finishing the prototype of the machinery supposed to release the stones’ energy and open a passageway to any possible souls tied to them.

After the meeting, Loki spends the rest of the afternoon asleep. He’d meant to go to the lab and work with Bruce on the prototype of his Midgardian tech-contraption, but Thor took him by the arm and literally dragged him back to the house. Only out of pride and principle did Loki not scream and kick the entire way. Not the entire way. Okay so not screaming, maybe, but definitely a kick or two, and a lot of swearing.

The plan, as Thor reminds him, relies on him being able to work his seidr. Even with the witch’s mind-magic (which Loki actually would rather not touch with a fire poker) and the Strange wizard’s, he’ll need his own magic at least somewhat restored for it all to work, to guide their magic. He needs his own to be predictable; which mean his body being somewhat stable.

It makes him want to throw it all in the sink. Flush it out. He never agreed to be under the Avengers’ thumb, his magic their slave - he agreed to share his knowledge. Now, that apparently means getting healthy. That’s his own business, not theirs. Not Thor’s.

But everything gets so mixed up. He wants his magic back. He wants to be able to do the spell, if for nothing else than just the fact that he can; he’s here with Thor, anyway, might as well make a little sense of it. He wants to be better, he just … he just doesn’t want it to be because he’s doing someone else’s bid.

Still, it’s not hard to fall asleep once he’s lying down. At all. That would maybe feel like a defeat, but Loki is honestly too tired to care. Thor has practically carried him onto the sofa, and he goes out like a light.

What’s less nice is waking up screaming in the grips of a nightmare hours later, realising too late that Ebony Maw’s cold, clammy hands on his arms are really Thor’s warm ones. Stroking with his thumbs and keeping Loki from tumbling onto the floor.
Valkyrie is there, sitting by the table, which makes everything that much worse.

But she doesn’t mock, despite his jab at her name earlier. In fact, instead, after he’s calmed somewhat and managed to stop the tears streaming involuntarily, she offers to take him to the greenhouse and show him the plants. He showers for the second time that day, then gets dressed, and they go together. Thor stays back to do work.

Loki tries to support a withering squash plant in growing and then has to sit for five minutes with his head between his knees, legs drawn up into his chest. Everything spinning and throbbing. Valkyrie sits with him, talking quietly. About all sorts of stuff, ridiculous things but her voice gentle. He doesn’t respond, just listening. Focusing.

She gives him a juice-box when he thinks he can stomach it, and they wait a couple of minutes further after he’s drunk it, to give it a chance of entering his system. Then he tries again, proceeding in a gentler way this time. He stops when he feels the spell of dizziness come on, drawing back and releasing the magic. When he opens his eyes, the plant actually looks a little greener. Stands taller.

Still not quite healthy, though.

The greenhouse is empty of people, which is nice. At one point, though, an elderly lady comes in to pick some leaves of a bush, and she glances at them which makes Loki feel self-conscious. Sitting cross-legged on the ground and practising on a squash plant to rebuild his frayed seiðr like a schoolkid.

“Do you want to stop?” Valkyrie asks after the third time and another juice-box. Loki is feeling lightheaded, but confidence is swelling in his chest. He’s doing it. He can feel the edges of his seiðr like wisps of gold just under his skin, in the linings of his organs, playing in his brain like the energy that it’s lacking; like Thor’s electricity but so soft, familiar. Perfect.

“Again,” he insists.

When he feels the edge this time he ignores it. He feels his hands beginning to tremble raised over the plant and ignores it. His eyes are closed, head bowed, and spots in colours are beginning to dance in the dark behind his eyelids.

“Lackey,” the Valkyrie warns, but he shakes his head.

“It’s okay,” he grinds out, “I need to push the boundaries -” panting “if I -- if I want it to - ex - expand - eh -”

With a hurk, he retches onto the floor. He thankfully has enough presence of mind to turn away from the Valkyrie, away from the squash plant and its bedding in front of him.

She rubs his back while he clutches his stomach, on his knees and bowed forward. His middle constricts again and he gags, but nothing more comes up.

“I’m - I’m sorry,” he gasps, feeling on the verge of weeping. Well, there are tears but that’s from vomiting and doesn’t count.

She sighs.

“It’s alright,” she says, sounding a little tired. “Are you, though? Does anything hurt that shouldn’t?”

“No,” he says, voice weak. Swallows. “It’s not bad.”
She finds cleaning supplies in a storeroom in the wall. Loki tries to tell her to wait and let him do it while he sits, unable to do anything but clutch his stomach and keep his head down. Everything shaking as he barely keeps his body upright.

Valkyrie ignores him, however, and between the blurry slits of his eyes, he can see her going at the puddle with a rag and water.

“Norns help us,” she says. “Remind me to bring a bucket next time. This is disgusting.”

“Just wait,” he tries, giving a pained moan and clutching tighter when his stomach clenches in dissatisfaction. Every trail of the returning seidr is gone with the wind. Or the sick, if you will. “I can do it. Just .. give me - give me a, a moment -- ah ,” another clench and he curls tighter on himself. He feels a tear slip in the corner of his eye.

“Sure, suure, you’re up for anything, right, straight after pushing yourself well past your limits. Bloody Hel, Lackey.”

Loki stays quiet, eyes closed. All he’d wanted was - was to -

The Valkyrie speaks again, and her voice is a little softer. The rag is wrung in the water. “That was good, though,” she says. “You did well.”

And Loki, despite everything and to his immense irritation, feels a small pride swell in his chest at the words.

The next day, they do bring a bucket. Loki is firmly set on not letting it be used, though; to a point where Valkyrie takes to nudging him with her elbow, saying “I think you’ll be alright going a little further, right? No need to be this careful”.

On the fifth try, on a new plant today, his vision begins to grey at the edges. The seiðr he felt building in a calm tranquillity in his cells rushing back again, to focus its energy on affected areas of trouble. Mainly his brain, he’d guess, since that seems to be the main thing failing to function right now.

He immediately retreats his tendrils as if burned but even then the world continues to disappear in rapid time. His hearing dulled and far, he’s dimly aware of slumping forward, Valkyrie holding him up from falling facefirst into the plant bedding. Then it’s all gone.

He wakes back up on the ground to Valkyrie clapping his cheeks. “Heeere we go, highness,” she’s saying. “That’s it, back at it. Doing good.”

Loki squeezes his eyes shut against the light, grimacing. “I don’t think - I’m the highness here,” he croaks.

“Sure you are,” she chips. “Once a prince, always a prince. Come on, now, don’t fall asleep on me. There we go.”

He eats dinner with Thor, Sam Wilson, Valkyrie and Banner that night in Thor’s house. Valkyrie and Wilson made lasagna again, and for what feels like the first time in long, Loki can actually taste something of it. It’s not just wet dirt in his mouth. It’s definitely heavy, sticky, and he can’t eat the entire piece, but it does … taste nice, he thinks.

He stays quiet throughout the ordeal. No one sends him any strange looks, which is nice.

Thor’s friends linger, afterwards, and Loki finds himself wanting them to leave. Instead, he goes
himself, declaring he’s going for a walk - and he does walk, limping all the way to the cliffside before sitting down. He watches the stars dance and glimmer over the dark, tumultuous waves.

He finds his mind wandering down there. Wondering how cold the water is. Whether there are sharp cliffs at the bottom, and undercurrents that will drag you under and keep you hostage in their heavy palace until you drown, blissful. The thought is strangely calming; icy streams, a dark, dark world. A body wrapped in a cocoon of oppressive wet and yet, everything is open. Chaotic, lawless. It seems like a nice place to drift.

With his mind in the waves and far out, deep down, he hears something, bringing him back into his own body.

“Brother!”

It’s Thor. And other footsteps, faint laughing, murmured conversation and .. singing? Loki turns to look over his shoulder, grabbing the crutches lying by his side, ready to move if they want him to; and he’s not quite sure why he thinks they might. It just feels as if this is their place, their cliffside. Their friendship. He’s the intruder, so everywhere they let him be is only that; because they let him.

He should be in a prison cell, anyway. The only reason he isn’t is because he’s too pathetic for anyone to bother calling the authorities.

It’s all the people from dinner. Banner’s arm is around Valkyrie’s shoulders and hers around his waist, singing some ancient Norse sailor’s song Valkyrie must’ve taught him. Sam Wilson is chuckling by their side, trying to follow the words, occasionally barking out a loud ‘HA’ when a line is apparently extraordinarily funny or ridiculous. To be fair, those old Norse songs often are.

Wilson is the only one who doesn’t walk like he’s drunk, though still just as merry as the rest. Thor is definitely drunk, it becomes clear as he comes closer. But not uncomfortably so. Just a buzz.

He calls, “you cannot sit out here and freeze all alone, Loki!” and holds up the jacket Hildegund let Loki have the other day, wiggling it in his hands accompanied by a waggle of his eyebrows. Loki is not particularly cold with the food in his system (heavy and uncomfortable, which he’s ignoring) and no fever or unwell worth taking notice off. But the thought is still nice.

“What a nice. Place,” Wilson huffs in awe as they get closer, breathless, getting to his knees to Loki’s right in front of the drop of cliff to stare out over the dark, unruly waters and the sky littered with stars above. Thor appears to Loki’s left and hands the jacket to him with a ridiculously wide smile, like he’s so proud of the idea of bringing it.

Loki takes the offering with a smile, albeit a little less enthusiastic one (because Thor’s current enthusiasm would be hard to match), pulling it on. It’s warm and soft against his cold skin.

“If you think this place is beautiful,” Thor drawls, plopping down heavily next to Loki “you should-”

“- I should’ve seen Asgard, yeah, think I’ve got it by now,” Sam Wilson laughs. “I really do wish I’d have had the chance.”

“Vanaheim is beautiful this time of year, too” Valkyrie says, cutting off her sailor’s song, Banner chuckling faintly beside her. Loki wonders if he’s drunk, if he can get drunk, or if he’s just happy in the company. “Not to mention still standing.”

“It’s not the same, though,” Thor complains. He scurries nearer Loki who stiffens at the closeness,
then throws an arm around his shoulder, pulling him into his chest. Loki is too surprised to resist, his back and left side bumping hard against Thor’s torso, head sideways on his collarbone.

“Come here, little brother,” Thor says, words a little slurred and adjusting his grip to hold Loki better. “You need a hug.”

Loki could break free, but there’s something about the atmosphere that makes him relax, instead. Despite Thor’s drunken state - it doesn’t feel as it did back in the hotel room. It doesn't feel unsafe, now, with his head resting against Thor, his body slumping to accept the half-sitting, half-reclined position in his brother’s arms.

Something about Wilson and Banner speaking with each other, friends catching up; a whole group of friends around them, who are supporting Loki's brother. Keeping him safe. Something about Thor’s chest rumbling when he speaks. The Valkyrie telling jokes that no one gets, strange analogies from a time before Thor and Loki or anyone here was born, but which everyone laughs at. Something about the waves still crashing down below, far down, but the cold of the sea suddenly seeming a little less lonely.

A little less lost.

Chapter End Notes

So Loki ... basically fell asleep on the toilet. ok so not sleeping, zoning out and it's different, but you know.

THAT ASIDE (I'm just being squeamish of my own sense of humour. Or attempts at .. realism?) Thank you for reading! There's more on the way. Things are going to be happening.

Until next time! <3
Chapter Summary

This story: Loki is in New Asgard. He returned from the dead and then took to hiding in the mountains because his mind is a mess, and he was afraid Thor didn't actually want him there (want him alive). Now it's all a very tangible mess.

Chapter Notes

Here's another chapter!

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The wizard arrives three weeks after they decided to bring him into the project. He had things to do and besides, they needed more time to work on (as Banner calls it,) the Converter; the machinery to get magic and technology working together in an ultimate higher purpose.

Loki thinks that is rather a long name. Even if it is for something so complicated.

It’s an unspoken reason for the delay as well that Loki needed time to, besides working with Banner, rebuild his magic; time to get better.

Unspoken, as in Loki doesn’t speak about it if he can avoid it.

He knows Thor does, with Valkyrie especially. He knows that the villagers stare and draw conclusions in their private homes. He knows the world looks and pries.

So he begins wearing glamours, the better his magic gets. Just tiny ones, to trick the people around him and still not drain himself; skin less sallow, eyes brighter, face not as sharp. Legs thicker. Thor notices every time, of course, but at least it works on the villagers. It keeps Loki from feeling exposed to the bone in front of Thor’s friends.

It’s still difficult to eat, and he continues to not understand it; only knows that he doesn’t really want things in his body besides coffee, tea; maybe some water. Logically, yes, he does want to eat. Emotionally, though? Not so much.

He’s been good despite it, with getting in the meals. When not hiding under the glamours, he thinks the skin on his arms looks less translucent, his wrists not as grossly pronounced, and he could’ve sworn he saw Hildegund smile to herself when she ran her eyes over him the last time he visited the Volstagg household. He wasn’t tricking her with a glamour, then. He can’t get himself to do it; see her smile at his improved appearance and know that he’s lying to her. Her smile built on a fake foundation. Or maybe it’s just fear of getting found out that stops him.

He eats. He gets better. He’s being good.
Thor has tried to get him to cut down on the coffee, too, but with no luck. Loki is not about to cut out one of the very few things that actually help him deal.

Because while his body is definitely on a healing path, and his magic somewhat with it, the exhaustion of his mind persists. Or overwork, franticness. The occasionally tunnel-like vision, the grey, coating everything he sees. Keeping it all dulled, as if underwater, or behind a veil. While everything feels static, hectic at the same time. Uneasy.
A world where there should be colours but is only clouds - but he barely remembers the colours, anyway, and thus is not quite sure if they’re even real. Or if life is just supposed to feel like this.

It’s not unfamiliar. Almost safe, like a home, a familiar bed; except everything that isn’t himself wants him to the opposite. The village; the world is designed to be alive. Thor wants him to do things, be happier, be more and want more, see more. And Loki most of the time just wants to wither away in the wind. Being actively alive is hard, and he finds himself missing his slope often.

Clashing interests, you might say.

So it makes him seek solitude; retreating into the room during the day to pretend to sleep and sometimes actually sleep, especially when the night gave no such rest. With his strength increasing and foot healing faster, he starts to examine the hillside on walks to escape company and the confines of the house. Finding new and exciting rock-dens in which to hide until the people visiting have left Thor’s house.

He went to the healers, too, to check up on everything. Thor wouldn’t shut up about it. Loki agreed to take a potion a week, but wouldn’t accept the sleeping pills.

He doesn’t like medicine. Someone else’s seiðr and science inside his body.

A week and a half in of eating regularly (somewhat) and practising with the Valkyrie in the greenhouse, Loki had found Thor crying in the house. He was just coming back from an evening walk when Thor’s friends had been occupying the house. They’d tried to get Loki to stay and ‘hang out’, and he’d politely declined.

Thor had been sitting on the couch, head in his hands, leaned on his knees and honest-to-gods sobbing. It sounded too young, too vulnerable for Thor. Like a young boy who lost a match at sparring rather than a grown man.

It had cut off immediately when Loki opened the door.

Thor was drying his eyes, swallowing a hitched breath as Loki stopped to look at him, at a loss. “Didn’t think you’d be back so soon,” Thor had said, looking back at his brother with red eyes.

“I’ve been gone for two hours,” Loki had said. Voice quiet.

“Right. Of course.”

Loki hadn’t asked what was wrong. He somehow couldn’t find it in himself. He’d eaten his dinner and zoned out, no longer bothering to hide the strategy from Thor, brushed his teeth and gone to bed.

He didn’t know what to do with Thor when he got like this. He’d had enough in his own mind being incomprehensible mush.

The next morning, Thor had been sitting in the chair by Loki’s bed. More accurately, he’d been petting Loki’s hair from his seat, which had resulted in a panicked waking with more than a few
shouts.

His heart beating wildly at the unexpected invasion of privacy Loki had cried, “Thor, what? What do you want?”

Thor had looked like he hadn’t slept a single minute, eyes red and bags dark.

“I’m sorry,” he’d sighed. Sounding tired. So tired. “I just - had to check that you were really here,” and Loki had twitched.

It’s not as if he hadn’t considered the possibility of running off.

His magic was getting better with the help of the Valkyrie; his foot and back healing faster, finally, his body getting stronger. He would soon be able to keep up a shrouding. Walk up the hill and keep walking - maybe turn into a sparrow and fly off, unnoticed in the horizon.

That morning, though, he’d told Thor he wasn’t running.

It wasn’t a promise, and Thor knew it. Loki couldn’t give that. He just couldn’t.

Something Midgardians call ‘Christmas’ comes and goes. It’s basically the same as Winter’s Solstice celebration, except about some guy who’s in a popular Midgardian book and his birthday (and Loki is pretty sure he’s heard that name before, many many years ago; some bearded fella, nice guy). Everyone in New Asgard flies out to America for it, and Loki can’t really come along seeing as there’ll probably be press surrounding Stark industries, who are hosting the event. Not that he wanted to, anyway.

Thor stays back with him, and his friends being gone is hard. It feels suffocating, like Thor has nobody to support him and to be there in light, enjoyable and friendly ways, and so Loki feels like he should fulfil that role but he can’t. Can’t be funny or light or enjoyable company. Well sometimes he succeeds but everything is so grey lately, and it’s been ages since he and Thor lived together like this. Since they were supposed to be … friends.

Loki can be sharp. In regard to being funny? Well; he prides himself on being able to laugh in any given situation, make a joke out of everything. Problem is, that kind of laugh is more often bordering on the hysterical side, a manic, murderous laugh, and that’s not what Thor needs at all.

There’s a lot of avoiding each other.

Then ‘Christmas Eve’ arrives. Apparently, it’s customary to make some big dinner but Thor asks, and Loki answers honestly that he would rather not.

They spend the evening drinking hot cocoa by the cliffside in the dark when Loki isn’t able to get a lot of the regular dinner down. It’s nice. And they end up laughing, meaning it.

Even if that, then, makes Loki feel like they should be laughing always.

Like he should always be able to make Thor laugh but isn’t. He makes Thor anxious, instead. Loki makes Thor cry more often than he puts a smile on his face. And when he does make him smile, it’s likely only because Loki is improving in some way, eating something, saying something just remotely not-heavy; because there’s something that could’ve gone worse that didn’t - not because something is actually good and enjoyable.

Loki had been practising a lot of magic in those days when he and Thor were avoiding each other.
and on the cliffside of Christmas Eve, he shows Thor the green flame he’s just re-learnt to let spring in his palm. He makes it burn as bright as he can without it weakening him so much it shows. It was the first real trick Loki ever learnt; simple, and taught to him by their mother. It was the first trick he ever showed Thor, and it makes Thor cry silently, sitting by the hillside.

They stay in silence for a long time, after that.

Then the magician arrives. Pesterimg the village with his stinking presence.

Loki discovers in the following days that the guy doesn’t ever transport or even move around like normal people. And since when did Loki consider himself one of the ‘normal people’. But Strange seems to teleport everywhere - and under normal circumstances, Loki would just scoff at the ridiculousness of relying on magic for everything like the other does, but with his own magic still not being great as it is, it annoys him to no degree.

When Strange first arrives, it is by portal down by the harbour. There’s a welcome committee of Thor, Valkyrie, Banner and Rogers standing on the ready. Wilson is running a few errands in Oslo but will be back in a few days.

Loki sits on a bench a little behind the group with his arms crossed and a well-placed sulk. He still would’ve chosen Amora anytime over this arse (definitely not up to grade with captain Rogers, to say the least). Though, she would’ve probably caused all sorts of other problems. Such as running off with the stones; and wouldn’t that be unfortunate.

He's not wearing a glamour. He'd glanced in the mirror that morning after his shower and thought everything looked better; not as thin or pathetic-looking. Well enough to not waste energy on keeping up facades.

The red-haired young woman, Wanda, steps through the portal to the wizard’s left. She’s coming to lend her power to lace into their prototype. As fuel for the extraction process of the souls, if it becomes relevant.

Loki has prepared mental shield after mental shield to not be overwhelmed by her magic (a reason for the initial distance, as well, though the sulking is a good cover-up excuse), but is still is taken aback when she arrives. Smothering energy.

It’s not so much her actual power as it is the memories associated with that. Memories of being incapacitated, ripped apart to a snivelling mess. Put together wrongly. Laughed at, twisted; then he was laughing at himself, his own tears. Laughing at false memories, false thoughts, despite how much they burned with anguish in his chest.

He and the Mind stone are just not very friendly, like that.

When he does manage to keep her actual power out, with his shields in place, it’s easier to see it for what it is. Just power, present, and his panic associated with it doesn’t have to mean anything.

“Yes, he’s - over there,” he hears distantly, caught in his thoughts, and looks up just in time to see Strange and the Wanda girl walking towards him.

He concentrates on the shields as she gets closer. Keeping the power out. He gives them both a curt nod and keeping his expression somewhere between neutral (for the witch) and scowling (for Strange).

“Loki,” the wizard says. Loki rolls his eyes and looks at the woman instead. Way more interesting.
“Wanda, correct?” he greets. “A pleasure, I’m sure. I do apologize for the chaos of our last meeting.”

She blinks. “Right.” Her voice has a slight accent to it, but it’s mostly erased by the American.

Strange turns away with a huff and goes to talk to Valkyrie instead. Loki follows him with his eyes and can’t help a little smirk at Valkyrie’s closed off, rigid body language. Realizing that most people here probably aren’t, actually, too fond of the good doctor, either.

“She told me you had returned,” the witch says, and Loki’s gaze wanders back to her. Her voice is almost stern, matter-of-fact, and yet with a soft edge to it.

“Obviously,” he says.

“Nobody knows,” she continues, studying him. “No one outside of Asgard.”

“New Asgard,” Loki corrects. “And that’s nice, I guess.”

“It keeps you out of jail,” she says, lifting an eyebrow. He smiles wryly.

“Sure does.”

He manages to keep up the shields, unbroken. After she deliberately tries reaching for his mind (apparently she was curious), he asks her politely to keep her grabby hands to herself. Please. It turns out, then, that she’s actually not too aware or conscious of keeping her power to herself; letting it run around freely like a dog without the lease. After she becomes aware, keeping her out becomes considerably easier.

He knows she saw something, the last time they met. He doesn’t talk about it but can see it in her eyes when she looks at him. She had glimpsed associations he was reliving, flashes from sanctuary. Emotions and thoughts, sensations of his body. She’d seen Ebony Maw, the scepter, the Other, and Loki doesn’t know how much of it she’s pieced together. He doesn’t know how much he has pieced together, himself; everything about that time is still confusing. Messy. Something he only ever thinks about when he’s unconscious, asleep and out of control of where his mind wanders.

From the harbour, Banner takes them to the lab, and Loki follows. He can walk, now, without the crutches; has been able to for many days. Once his magic began returning during the second week, his healing sped up and both muscle and injury began getting better. His back doesn’t hurt anymore.

His ankle, though; it hurts, sometimes, and has a hard time holding his weight when it’s strained. There’s a click every time he walks on it, and he still has a slight limp. Barely noticeable - but there. He feels people giving him the looks.

Banner suggested surgery, one day, when Loki twisted it on accident and fell. He has a friend, Banner had said, princess of Wakanda, who could -- but Loki refused. The healers here had already tried, but it would require more extensive surgery, seeing as the bone has healed wrong and would need an implant of some kind; and Loki’s body is just not in a place where he’s about to inflict deliberate injury from surgery and trust his body to heal again soon. He doesn’t trust his body to do much of anything, lately.

He’s been sparring with Thor and Valkyrie to rebuild strength, too. Not the Hulk; despite Banner not actually being the Hulk, ‘big and green’ still has too negative associations for Loki to voluntarily throw himself in a physical opposition of the guy.

It’s similar with Thor, so he trains with Valkyrie the most. Thor is hurt by it, Loki knows; but every
time they fight he’s reminded of their real fights. Suddenly he’s back on top of Stark tower and his mind is gone.
Or on the Bifrost, and then he’s falling, Thor is running towards him, slaming into him and throwing him over the frayed edge, their father is there and he’s kicking Loki in the stomach, hard, kick, kick, kick (no that wasn’t right, was it? That’s not what happened.).
Or he’s on Svartalfheim again, even he and Thor’s side-by-side fighting reminding him of one of the most terrified moments of his life. He knows what happens next. He dies and then he wakes up again. Alone.

And it’s hard to lay himself vulnerable in a sparring session whenever his ankle is protesting or his magic gives out or he gets tired too quick - and then be in a situation that honestly, despite the reality of it, feels like life or death.

Valkyrie is easier. She gets something out of it in opposition to the magic training sessions where she had been there only to support him, which Loki has taken to doing on his own, now. She likes sparring, she gains from it; she’s good, and she doesn’t hold back despite Loki’s current sticks for arms. And he’s rebuilding strength because of it.

Not that he particularly … cares about it much, to be honest. Sometimes he does; it’s nice to be able to walk and do magic, some magic at least, to feel his magic most of all but most days, he finds himself clueless as to why he’s bothering with it all. Why he doesn’t just run off again, his magic by now well enough to shield him. Hide better, this time. Sometimes it just doesn’t feel worth it to stay.

Especially when he and Thor have been in a fight. Loki has been close to running off more than a few times.

At time’s like that, he tries to remind himself of how he’d felt on the Statesman; nearer something resembling home than he had in a long time. He didn’t run then. He can stay this time, too.

Strange is not an engineer but gets the theory of the prototype well enough. He’s smart, and a quick learner, Loki will give him that. Wanda looks lost but that doesn’t matter. She’s only here as raw power.

“Can you teach me?” she asks Loki, when they’re making their way up the hill to find accommodations for the newcomers. He’s glad it doesn’t exhaust him so, anymore, but careful not to put too much of the pressure uphill on his bad ankle.

“Teach you what?” he asks.

“To bend reality. You say I have much energy but I can’t control it in the right way. Can you teach me?”

“Maybe,” he says.

He agrees to let her watch as he practices on his own.

That same evening, after she’s been showed around and Loki has snuck a well-deserved (if he may say so himself) nap on the couch, they meet up. Everyone is eating at Valkyrie’s later, but it’s still early evening and they have time.

He usually practices in Thor’s room, sitting on the bed. It has to be secluded, private, for him to concentrate.
He asks if she wants to go somewhere else, outside maybe, but she shudders and says “no, thank you, not in this weather”.

It feels strange to have her in the bedroom. Where he dreams and sleeps and talks to Thor late in the night after a particularly nasty attack of panic. Where he practices his frayed magic, nursing it back to health like an injured bird but not quite succeeding with it. Where he weeps quietly late at night in the dark when he feels most alone and Thor sleeps in the living room. Where he will suddenly have to take off all his clothes because it felt like he was being strangled and crushed, sitting shivering on the bed in his underwear.

He feels like she can read everything from the way the comforter and pillow are placed on the bed (neat, as if covering up dirty secrets). From Thor’s mattress on the ground, when they both sleep in here. From the earbuds on the nightstand for when everything becomes too overwhelming.

She doesn’t say it if she can. She probably can’t. She can’t know anything, anyway. (Can’t she?).

He practices connecting to his own energy, first, and lets her look. Not letting in, but allowing her magic to hover just outside his skin, peering in to witness how he breathes into the golden wisps under his surface, in his cells. Talks to it without words. Allows his magic to drift from the tension in his mind and settle back into where it’s supposed to be, grow. Stroking it like a little animal, a scared child.

That’s bending in itself, in essence. Magicking his magic back to life.

Then he hears a hitched, wet and poorly hidden gasp of breath and, startled, opens his eyes. Wanda’s nose is red. Her eyes, too, and her cheeks are lined with fresh tears.

“I’m sorry,” she says, snivelling, “It’s just ..” she takes a deep breath, steadying her voice. “It’s because you’re sad - that it’s gone. As if it’s wounded - and you miss it so.”

Loki stiffens at that observation. He knows it’s not only his emotions that this is about, that she has her own griefs to bear and is reacting strongly to this as a result but still, it feels personal.

“If you can’t stay out of my emotions then we’re not going to do this,” he says, voice hard. Wanda’s eyes just harden in response.

“I wasn’t in your emotions. It’s obvious from looking at the way your energy moves.”

She snivels again, still glaring at him and looking irritated with her own crying, now.

“Well, control yourself,” Loki says flatly and closes his eyes again. He goes less gently to it, this time, trying to force it instead of nudge - and his magic responds in like; turning rigid and inflexible.

“Stop doing that,” Wanda says, annoyed. He looks at her, and her eyes are closed, too, in a frown. Her face twitches. “You’re upsetting it.”

He sighs. But stops doing it.

She shows him how she does the telekinesis; how she moves her magic around with physical power. He stays outside the force of it but allows himself to look. And he doesn’t throw up the moment she begins, which is a good start.

Then he retreats back into himself (safer), setting his shield back up and explaining how he would do it differently. Wanda is manipulating the very elements of air and matter, and that raw burst of red is powerful but very harsh, too. Can only move things; not bend them. He shows her how it can be
more subtle, how he wraps tendrils of seiðr around air and molecules, how he speaks to them to create a connection. Rather than force the world to alter to his will.

“It’s very blurry with your shields,” she suddenly says while he’s showing her, sounding a little irritated, and Loki stiffens again. He didn’t think she’d feel those, let alone see them. “Can’t you take them down?”

He hesitates. Panic is already fluttering in his chest. “I could,” he says, slowly. “But only if you would promise to -- to -” his voice gives out in a breathless gust. He clears his throat. “Promise to .. retreat when I tell you to. To not go inside my magic. Only observe.”

He can hear the waver of his voice well enough, and she opens her eyes. “You don’t have to do it,” she says, slowly. “It was just a suggestion. I didn’t think they were up for me, specifically.”

“They’re not,” he lies. “I’ll take them down. Be careful, though. Please.”

It goes fine. She’s not a natural at the bending, the subtler workings, being very blunt and straightforward in her way of moving. Very few people are naturals. But she’s flexible, extremely strong, slithering like a cat walking through the legs of café tables. Just .. very hurried. Very blunt force, sharp fangs, lashing out for the biggest, most obvious energies.

It’s a sign of greediness, which is good. It’s a sign of her magic having immense raw power, and her ability to master it, guide it is strong. She’s only going to become stronger, the more she learns; there’s no doubt about that.

She looks at her phone when it’s gotten dark outside, after a try at literally bending the desk by the wall (not breaking it), and says, “oh! We have to go, there’s dinner at Brunnhilde’s.”

Loki swallows. Everything inside him is nervous energy right now, from working with her. He doesn’t particularly want to throw a bunch of food down on top of the writhing mess in his stomach. Being emotional already doesn’t make eating easier.

“Go on ahead,” he tells her, packing away the assortment of spoons and books and flasks they’ve been practising with. “I think I’ll retire for the day, myself.”

She frowns at him, pausing with her movement to stand, instead sitting back down in the armchair. “What about dinner?”

“I’m not very hungry.”

She cocks her head. Hesitates. “I think you should come,” she says.

He stops the needless fidgeting with things, lifting his head to stare at her. “Well good for you,” he says, “You have an opinion. Now scoot.”

She narrows her eyes at him for a moment, and he goes back to ‘packing away’ to avoid looking at her. Then she huffs, standing up. She pauses. “Thank you for the lesson. I hope you’ll agree to do it again because it was very helpful.”

“Sure, little witch,” Loki says, getting back up to put the items in the desk drawer. “We’ll do it again.”

She stands for a moment more. Then she leaves.
Once he hears the front door go with her leave, Loki takes off his clothes and puts on a big t-shirt, crawling under the cover and hoping to be asleep before Thor inevitably comes.

He actually manages to drift, drained from using more magic than usual, but that doesn’t stop Thor from being his ordinary, irritating self. Loki wakes back up to a half-assed hissed whisper of “Loki” and a shake to his shoulder. Not a light shake at all.

He groans, trying to shake the hand away. “Fuck off, Thor.”

“Come eat, Loki.”

Loki gives another noise of discomfort, burying his head in the pillow. “I’m not wearing any clothes. And I’m sleeping.” It’s muffled by the sheets.

“To avoid eating.”

“That’s not it. I’m tired.”

Thor waits for a second. “Did something happen?”

“No.”

“With Wanda? She seems to think so.”

“Nothing happened.” Loki sighs, rolling onto his back and opening his eyes. “Thor, please. Just one night will be fine.”

“Why aren’t you leaving?”

“I’ve told you,” he sighs. “I’ve nothing better to be doing.”

“It’s not like I chose to be the one everything relies on to get your friends,” Loki complains, shuffling to sit up against the wall. He draws his legs into his chest, covered by the comforter.

“No, but you’re going along with it,” Thor states, and he’s not wrong. “So why are you?” He sounds genuinely curious, relaxed, but Loki has no doubt of the anxiousness beneath. ‘Why aren’t you leaving?’

“I’ve told you,” he sighs. “I’ve nothing better to be doing.”

“Except not eat, and sleep all day.”

“Can we not talk about that right now?” Loki says sharply, turning his head to stare at Thor. Thor raises his eyebrows, and Loki huffs. “Fine! Fine, I’ll eat your stupid dinner, just let me - would you look away, Thor, I told you I’m not wearing clothes.”

Thor does look away with a sigh, and Loki has the chance to find the pants and pull them back on, sending suspicious glances at his brother’s only halfway turned head. He wraps himself in the
comforter, shuffling out into the living room, ankle clicking.

Thor notices it too, apparently. “You should get that fixed,” he says.

“I don’t think surgery is my top priority right now,” Loki answers. “They might mess it up worse than it already is.”

“Come on, you know they won’t.”

“I don’t know how long it’ll take to heal again. They might do something wrong, anything could happen.”

“The healers on Asgard have saved your ass so many times, I can’t believe you still don’t trust them.”

“Just shut up and let us get this over with,” Loki says. Thor sends him a glance.


“You woke me up.”

“Because you tried to sleep your way out of eating. It’s your medicine, Loki, remember?” Thor smiles wide, holding up a plastic bag and dangling it from his hand. Some smell is wafting from it, and it’s pretty good.

Loki turns his eyes to the ceiling and blows a sigh.

It’s potato and leek soup, with some leeks Loki helped grow, apparently. It goes fine; he doesn’t disassociate or zone out. He doesn’t like it, the feeling, either, but that’s just how it is. He’s bouncy and restless, feeling beside himself, and wants to go back to sleep.

When he’s finished both bread and soup his body is calling for more food, but his emotions are frayed and chaotic and he doesn’t want to eat more. He wants to sleep, and he can eat again tomorrow. It’s fine.

Loki leaves Thor with the dishes. That’s what he gets for waking him up.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you once again for reading. It's glorious.

Sending love to you !! <3
Far From Home

Chapter Summary

Last chapter:

Wanda and Strange arrived in New Asgard, to work on the project of bringing back the lost ppl. They're currently working on creating a pathway for any lost souls still possibly attached to the stones (because WE MISS TONY AND NAT AND GAMORA AND VISION). Loki and Wanda were practising magic together.

Chapter Notes

**Warnings** in this chapter for a possible parallel to a non-con situation: no actual, physical non-con - we're talking a violation of boundaries, quite literal boundaries of the mind, on accident. Magic stuff. The two things can become eerily similar when writing it, I feel like, so please tread carefully.

Besides that, THANK YOU ALL for reading! I love you people! <3<3<3<3

I've read all you guys' juicy comments and I can't wait to get to answering them. Just wanted this one out. Enjoy if you will :)))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He practices magic when he wakes up; that’s become sort of a routine. For one, it grounds his energy, the anxiety that always begins to whirl even before his eyes are open.

Second, he just feels most in touch with it in the morning. Most focused. It's a good intention to set for the day. For whose sake, he isn't sure - the clever part, though, is that he's too tired upon waking to think about that for too long.

The magic is tired, too. He spends this morning trying to comfort it. Talk to it, gently, soft strokes, gentle activations. Like he remembers his mother doing.

As if she were reaching into his very heart, filling it with her beautiful light until it had no choice but to spread out through his body, the frayed seiðr.

Loki doesn't have a lot of light to spare, himself. But he manages the gentleness. Doing his best to blow the life in his breath back where it's supposed to be; to blow life in the fire that should burn bright inside him.

After breakfast, he goes to work with Banner and ( sigh ) Strange. He keeps his sentences short and precise and doesn’t engage in too direct conversation with the other. He manages to not snap at
anything, nothing serious, and Strange seems to be intent on professionalism as well. Which is all good.

Except everything the wizard does is irritating. Loki is not sure when this started because surely he can’t still be holding a grudge about that portal thing (though it was definitely rude).

It’s just .. every little word Strange decides to speak, the way he moves, does things, pronounces things; the words he chooses ...

it’s just irritating.

And their first meeting certainly wasn’t an appeal to Loki’s liking of the other’s character, either. But it’s not like he’s holding a grudge.

They manage to work together fine. Banner holds the flag most of the time, acting moderator and team captain in his own slightly hesitant and apologetic kind of way. Strange and Loki work to get their magic incorporated into the workings of the machinery, which at first is impossible because Loki doesn’t want the other’s magic slathered all over his own, and that’s sort of essential for the idea to work at all. And it was Loki’s idea, he just didn’t have Strange in mind back when he voiced it.

They move closer to merging, though, and no arguments of any real calibre arise. They’re productive. They get closer.

After lunch, he meets with Wanda again. The snow has melted mostly, for now, but it’s nearing January and it’s cold; however, the sun is shining, so they decide to be outside for the day.

“Do you know it’s New Years tomorrow?” Wanda asks him as they settle on a couple of boulders. Lighthearted conversation.

“I think someone mentioned it, yes,” Loki replies, brushing off his clothes and frowning at the mix of dirt and snow.

“You don’t care.”

“Not particularly, no.” He looks up and claps his hands together, bracing himself. Why was he putting himself through this, again?

“So, we were going to work on subtlety, right? Let's start with the visualisation - see, it’s like water; if you imagine you were breathing water instead of air, a big wave going in -”

The lesson goes well. Wanda reacts to analogies and pictures, so Loki turns that up a notch. He finds his own magic stronger, too, and litters with demonstrations and illusions to underline points. He’s careful not to touch her magic aside from the occasional nudge in the right direction; only watching it from a safe distance. Both for her sake (that’s invasive) and for his own (that’s scary).

They play with the subtler, finer parts of seiðr-kunnst and Loki finds himself relaxing, calmer than he’s been in a while. Like he’s back on Asgard, tutoring children, or being tutored himself. Learning spells and talking exciting theory.

Wanda is positive and constructive in her way of working, determined, not very easily discouraged. She’s tough and thoughtful, reflective. Loki finds himself smiling a few times when she’s not looking.

But then she gets excited.

She’s making breezes to play with the grass, and succeeding. The breeze touches Loki’s hair, too,
lifting strands to waver in the air. He smiles because she's exceeding expectation.

Then it continues getting stronger. Wind picking up speed. Fast. He blinks his eyes open, startled at the sudden power.

Once she gets it, she really does get it.

Wanda is sitting cross-legged on her boulder, smiling, while the world greys and darkens around her. Snow hurling in the wind. As if she's unaware of the rising storm around them, calm in the eye of it. The horizon further out over the sea is still clear as day, sun glittering in the waves, but here is suddenly cold and dark, like clouds caging them in. The world blurring with the force of the weather.

Loki is not in the eye of it.

He's about to call out to her when he feels the wind beginning to cling to him, to his skin. Like it's searching his body. Still blowing harsh and wild, but wisps of it sticking, moving, slithering over him like snakes, his arms and his chest and face, beginning to climb in through his ears, eyes, nose -

His stomach drops.

"Wanda," he tries to shout over the wind, but it comes out weak. The wind is eating it like it's trying to eat him. He keeps the wisps at bay, just manages to; they pick at his openings like birds pecking and it hurts.

The wind is going to swallow him whole and erase everything that he thinks is his identity. It's taken his voice; it's roaring over it, inhaling the words he tries to speak.

His hands shoot up to cover his ears, and they're shaking all of a sudden. Everything is so loud.

"Wan - Wanda!" he tries again, putting force behind the words and despite the stutter, his voice comes out stronger. He sees her open her eyes, her little smile falling at once. Loki pleads wordlessly, eyes glued to her as his body is being infiltrated; she's the only one who can stop this. She's the only one. He feels something move in his stomach like an animal is in there. His shoulders, his neck. As if his body isn't his but, really, belongs to the energy.

"What - what's happening," he hears, her words breathless, muffled behind his hands and the wind. She moves her fingers in fluent motions and Loki's eyes follow them frantically, the solution, the red energy swirling; it makes the wind calm a little. But only a little, then it rises again and her eyes swim with frustration. She tries again, and it's as if her power flickers and dies each time. Smothered by the wind.

She's created something too strong.

Just before they were smiling. Calm, the world was calm.

Things break easily.

The energy is inside him. It's broken through his defences. Seeping in.

This is all too familiar, he knows this feeling; he can almost hear Maw's voice in his head, his own screams echoing in vast halls. His own derisive laughter, then, because this is what he wants, right; to be with purpose, to be something again, he will prove to them all that he is a king. That he deserves to be.
He can hear his own screams when he forgets that he's a real person (for he was *made* to be ruled), he forgets what he is, who he is - how he weeps on the floor when he's nothing, nothing at all.

But Ebony Maw is dead. Dead. Gone. Thanos is, they're not here, they're *not*. Loki is not *there*.

(*But I am inevitable, you see!*)

(*Welcome to Sanctuary, Loki of Asgard*)

(*Anything is possible, little king*)

“Stop,” he says, gaze faltering to the ground, and it comes out a whisper. He can't hear it, he can't *hear it*. He closes his eyes, bowing his head into his knees. “Stop. Stopstopstopstopstop.”

“I’m sorry!” she cries over the wind. He can feel her move, the energy getting closer and his head jerks up; he wants to move, run, but he’s held in place by the red, the wind binding him to the rock. Like a prisoner. Like they want him to be stuck and the apologies are just formalities, to lead him off track. To keep him trapped. What if - what if this isn’t really her? Isn't really, isn't really Loki, here, now? Wanda, a girl he made up in his mind. All in his head.

It could be.

What if this isn't her, but someone else. Someone with that same power, creating illusions. *Someone.* Given access to his mind, his shields down, Loki complying like an *idiot* because he didn't think (but he did, he did think -)

What if none of this is real?

It certainly wouldn't be the first time.

He jerks away from her as much as he can within the binding of the magic and she stops, staying back and dropping to her knees in the half-melted snow.

“I don’t know how to do this!” she shouts, the wind only getting wilder. Loki’s breath won’t enter his lungs though he’s trying desperately, gasping for it. “Loki, _help me_, please! I’m *sorry!*”

But he can do nothing. He’s powerless, she’s stronger than him and he can do nothing. She might not even be here, at all. He lowers his head again, eyes squeezed shut and hands still on his ears but the magic doesn’t care; it’s inside his body, his mind, like it’s eating at his very cells. Forcing him out of himself.

“Please, what can I do,” he hears her distant voice, muffled behind his hands, and he doesn’t know. He doesn't know what she can do.

And then the last of his petty, thin shield breaks, the last of his body trying to keep the foreign and unwelcome magic out; it floods into him, reaching inside his mind where it roams freely. Every barrier shattered like glass.

She’s inside his head and all that’s his is now hers. Maybe it always was.

She feels his fear of her, of her power, biting like snakes in his stomach, shuddering every cell in his body. She sees how desperately he tries to hide it.

She sees how he is desperate for Thor to care about him, to not give up. How his pathetic heart aches at every word Thor speaks, in both love and anger, and all of it makes Loki afraid; it all makes him want to run. She sees that he’s too much a coward to do it.
She sees nourishment through his eyes, how it's twisted and obscured inside his head. She feels his body, how it swells with each added bite and how the shame burns along with it. Afterwards. How he’s so scared of the feeling. How scared he is.

She sees how scared he is. Of everything. Of her, of Strange, of Thor and Banner and everyone, of himself, of healers and of his own emotions. Of the goddamn eating, of death; of not dying.

Somewhere in the middle of it all, he realises that the power must stem from her. That he would be able to feel it, were it someone else casting an illusion; were she an illusion. Her power is too distinctly Wanda for it to be anything else, and there’s no other power, Maw's distinct energy is nowhere to be found. And it would be, were he here; were this and illusion and he the illusion-maker.

It doesn’t make anything better, really.

There’s not time to go through his every memory and thought but she glimpses things no one should’ve ever even have been told of.

Worst, she glimpses so much that he can’t keep track of what she’s seen and what she hasn’t.

And so nothing inside him is his own, really. Not anymore.

Then the connection breaks. Loki gasps, drawing back in a jerk and feeling rock scrape against his palms, ripping open the skin. In front of him on the ground, Wanda falls back as well. He startles upon seeing her, scrambling further back.

He shivers in the sun warming through his clothes.

“I did it,” she’s saying, vaguely distant, lost in thought and looking from hand to hand. She’s sitting in the snow, hair dishevelled from the wind but the wind itself has stilled. “I did it - did you see, Loki I -”

She cuts off upon looking up at him, face falling. “Oh my god, I’m so sorry. I’m -”

His face is wet, he realises. Tears are still building, falling. He’s staring at her, shaking all over from rage and fear and humiliation. Fear. Fear fear fear fear fear.

“I didn’t know. I didn’t, Loki - what can I do -- please, tell me what I can -”

He pushes to his feet in one, quick motion, not looking at her, and then stumbles away as fast as he can manage. Towards the rising hill and away from the village; into the forest.

She doesn’t follow but despite it, he finds it doesn’t really get easier to breathe the farther he gets away from her. If anything he just feels more and more alone.

He walks for a long time, tears still falling silently. Only once he’s safely far from the edge of the forest and deep inside the cave of trees does he let go of the shreds of his composure. Crashing to his knees, a sob erupting from his throat from somewhere deep down inside.

Harsh and ugly.

The sun is filtering through the trees, casting dots of shimmering gold in cold air. His knees are
getting wet from the thin layer of snow. His palms are bleeding from scraping against the rock, but it's already healing.

After a few seconds, he lets his body fall apart, too, collapsing onto his side. Curled in on himself in the snow. His head aches and spins and his body feels empty.

Eventually, he begins to feel too exposed. Not as in cold, even though he is wearing just a sweater. Even his Jotun physiology has limits in this form. He’s pretty sure the ice-creatures in their own forms can withstand incredible minus-degrees, but he can only, under the Asgardian shapeshift at least, withstand certain degrees a bit better than other Asgardians. Still, he doesn’t really notice the cold, now.

He feels more exposed as in bare, laid vulnerable. The tears have stopped and everything feels raw.

So he pushes to his elbows, clumsily, and manages to move out of the low bushes. Behind some thicker shrubbery, around a fallen tree. There’s an indent in the ground by its network of roots, torn up and rising vertically and he crawls down in the den, back against the root-wall, curling back up. It feels more shielded, down there. Which is good because he doesn’t think he’d be much up for defending himself against anything wild in the forest, right now.

He sets up a shroud, too, for good measure - doesn't want to be found, in case anyone tries. He wants to be alone.

It’s dark when he opens his eyes next. It’s dark, and he’s very, very cold.

Everything feels drained but is still a mess inside, a tangle of memories and emotions that don’t make sense in this way of connecting. He goes back to sleep, or tries to. It feels a little pointless, but he doesn’t know what else to do.

He sees things that aren't real, in the night. Hears things. He thinks they aren't, at least.

Cries from within the trees. A woman sobbing. It's muffled by dirt in her mouth; she's buried underground, he's sure of it - there's evil in this forest. They caught her. Then she goes quiet. Shadows drifting by, cloaked and shrouded, blending into the shadows of the trees until it's hard to make out what is figure and just ordinary shadows. One of them turns its face and looks at him, its skin is ivory and sallow under the hood, twisted in a derisive grin too large for its face. Eyes hollow, staring at his chest as if it wants to consume his very soul. Make him disappear for good. He closes his eyes as if not seeing it will make it go away (maybe it will), shaking from fear and cold and curling himself up as small as possible. The face is imprinted in his mind's eye, stark against the darkness behind his eyelids.

He doesn't dare move. Not an inch.

“Loki,” he thinks he hears someone calling, but then that might be wishful thinking. More than one voice. He smiles. What a nice idea, of someone looking for him. It's the only nice hallucination he's had that night, and he's grateful for it. Like a blanket over his icy form.

He wakes up again because he’s being rustled, moved. His first instinct is to feel alarmed, but then
the fight drains out of him. He’s just so tired. Let the world push him around if it will, let it eat him up.

There’s something warm against him, something whole. A heart beating. Real?

Voices, far away.

He drifts in and out of sleep like that. Wakes somewhere soft.

He dreams. Talks to someone at one point, he thinks, but it might just be himself. Everything is extremely hazy.

When he wakes up next, really wakes, it’s less dark and he’s on a couch. He feels for his magic and it almost makes him want to cry bitter tears again with how frayed it is. He doesn’t, though, coming back to himself a little more and realising that he’s spent .. gods know how long crying, what felt like forever .. in the woods? Why was he in the woods again?

It hits him, the memory of teaching Wanda. The wind, the reaching of her magic, her power slithering inside him. He draws in a sharp breath.

“Are we awake, highness?”

Loki tries to lift a hand to his throbbing forehead and the hand feels oddly heavy. He realises that it’s because there are blankets on top of it. A lot of blankets, he can make out when he blinks his eyes open to (thankfully) dim lights. Layers upon layers of wool.

“I guess so,” he answers the Valkyrie’s question, plopping his head back down on the pillow and closing his eyes again. His voice is a croak. “Am I in your house?”

“Well, you sure are. And Lackey, while you’re still here I gotta tell ya’ - you’ve got to do something about those dreams of yours. Surtur’s breath, is it terrifying.”

Oh right. Now that she mentions it he does remember waking a few times in a panic. Screaming once, he thinks. How embarrassing.

“Happy New Years,” she continues, “by the way. Or I mean, I guess it’s tonight.”

“I don’t care,” Loki croaks back, managing to free the hand and propping it over his eyes.

“Alright, someone’s grumpy,” Valkyrie says. Loki can almost see her expression, lazy eyebrows raised over keen eyes.

He doesn’t answer. After a little while he falls back asleep.

The following day is a nightmare. Not literally.

Thor is there when Loki wakes back up, and he’s angry, that much is obvious - angry about Loki running off. Angry at himself for being angry, probably. Hurt-angry, most of all; but it’s fighting a losing battle with him just being sad, and the result is a very emotionally unstable Thor still trying to be there for an always emotionally unstable Loki.
They eat breakfast. Loki’s body throws it back up in the toilet because he is apparently too much in a state of anxiousness to hold anything down. Thor doesn’t say anything at all.

Later, Loki spars with the Valkyrie. That’s nice. He goes hard, and she beats him every time because he isn’t thinking.

At all.

She doesn’t ask why he’s so angry; just lets him steam it out. She’s probably already heard; the whole village has probably already heard about his practice session with Wanda, how he ran off like a scared cat with its tail between the legs.

Besides, Valkyrie was apparently in the party that found him by the tree-roots. Just that thought, of being carried like a dead fish through the forest in Thor’s strong arms, Loki’s diminished form pathetic against his brother for the sight of Valkyrie, Rogers, Banner, Strange and Wanda is infuriating and humiliating.

They could’ve just left him, let him wake up on his own and come back. He would’ve been fine.

He throws another blow and she blocks it, kicking him off his feet. He lands on his side and screams out in frustration. It's almost feral.

They sit and drink a cup of coffee afterwards, by the wall of the gym. Valkyrie brought it in a thermo.

“You can call me Brunnhilde, you know,” she says to him, all of a sudden. “I mean you're allowed to. Or Hilde, Brunn, Val if that’s better. Whatever you like.”

Loki scoffs. “We’re not friends,” he says. She turns her head to look at him and is wearing a strange expression.

“Ouch.” She pauses. "Can’t say that doesn’t hurt.”

He glances at her sideways. “Not like - not that I don’t like you. I just mean ..” he hesitates. “Obviously I appreciate your help. It's just, you’re doing it for him, because you care about Thor. You're his friend.”

She snorts softly and without any trace of amusement. “I guess that’s for you to decide. Apparently.”

Then she gets to her feet, walking out of the gym and leaving both him and the thermo behind.

"You should talk to Wanda," Thor tells him. "She was out there looking for you for hours before she went back to get us. She was terrified, Loki."

There are raised voices sounding from the lab when Loki nears it. An open door. Strange, Banner and a younger voice. One Loki doesn’t think he’s heard before.

“But I need to help - mister Strange, please!”

“You can’t, Peter,” Strange answers. “I’m sorry but I’m not letting you get involved in this.”

The young voice whines back (it really is a whine), “I can’t just - just sit by when I know you’re all
“What about May,” Banner interrupts in a sigh, and Loki decides that now is a good a time as ever to interrupt. “What are you gonna tell -”

He pushes through the door, and the three people inside swivel to face him.

There’s a boy in the middle, barely out of adolescence. Chestnut brown hair, wide eyes; Loki has seen him before, in Stark’s backyard. The boy’s eyes widen further.

“Is that …” he says, breathless.

Loki raises his eyebrows. The boy blinks, shaking his head as if to clear it.

“And you are?” Loki asks, a little amused (certainly for the first time that day) at the boy’s chaotic energy.

“I’m Peter Parker,” Peter Parker says, stretching out a hand, rigid movement. His eyes are still glued to Loki’s face. “Spiderman.”

“...spider .. man,” Loki echoes slowly, frowning.

“Yeah, I - that’s my made up one, anyway. I just thought; I mean I don’t know how Asgard does titles and stuff, like whether you’re just ‘Loki’ or ‘Loki of Asgard’ or your last name - I’m sorry but I actually don’t know your last name because Thor said -”

“I’m Loki,” Loki says, shaking Peter Parker, the Spider Man’s hand. “Of Asgard.”

“...yes. Eh.” They retreat the hands. The boy blinks again, a little distant. As if seeing stars.

Strange huffs. “Why are you fascinated with him?” he asks Parker. With obvious bias, of course.

“He levelled part of your home city!”

“I know that,” Parker answers, sounding terribly nonchalant about it. That actually was kind of a big deal. Earned Loki a lifetime in isolation prison.

“But it wasn’t really him, or, I mean - Thor says, you know how Thor says ‘there is much we do not yet know’, the boy does a spot on impression of Thor’s regal speak and deep rumble of a voice, and continues in a hasty monologue, “and I see that, I mean, it makes sense -- Thanos was involved, that alone speaks volumes, I mean I talked to Ned about it and he totally agrees and so I think because Nebula said - oh sorry, I’m talking about you,” he adds, turning to Loki, cheeks reddening. “I didn’t mean to.”

He looks back at Strange, already forgetting the embarrassment. “He’s an alien! Thor's brother! And he can do magic, all sorts of magic, you of all people should know that that is the most exciting thing ever; it’s like lightsabers but made out of thin air -”

“So, Parker,” Loki interrupts. An involuntary, unwelcome smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Peter Parker mirrors his movement with a chair behind him. Strange huffs, going to lean back against the wall while Banner stays standing, looking at a loss.

“Well, I …” the kid begins, pausing for a second to search for words, and then Strange takes over.

“He flew himself out here, under a false name - on New Year’s, no less - leaving his family behind
so he could risk his life on this mission.”

“I don’t necessarily have to ‘risk my life’,” the kid says with another spot on impression, “I just want to help, Mr Strange. You know, I, I heard there was science involved and you know I love science, working with the Infinity Stones would just be -”

“Infinity Stones are dangerous, kid,” Banner says. “You especially should know the kind of damage they can do.”

There’s quiet for a moment. The kid looks crestfallen. "But I -" he begins. Sighs, "I want to reverse the damage."

"I'm afraid we can't just let you come along, Peter," Strange says. There's a soft note to his voice. "You can help with the Converter. But you're not going to be here when the stones are."

The kid's eyes are extinguished like doused in water. Then they turn harder, determined.

“What if someone else gets hurt? On the mission to get the stones?”

“That's a risk we're running, I'm afraid.”

“But I could help with that, I could come. What if I'm the one factor that makes sure we win? Would you really risk that?”

“To keep you alive?” Strange's eyebrows rise. "Yes. I would.”

The kid leans back with an explosive sigh, arms crossed. He’s not looking at anyone.

It's an awkward kind of quiet.

“So nobody knows you're here?” Loki asks to break it.

“No,” the kid sulks, sending a quick glance at Loki.

“And you flew out here under a false name?”

"Mm-hm."


Parker looks up and there’s a gleam of something like pride in his eyes. A moment later he goes back to sulking. “Yeah, I mean, that’s what I keep telling them.”

“Look,” Strange says, “you can help with our work on the Converter, that's it. Be Bruce’s assistant, whatever." He crosses his arms. "We have to get started.”

Parker gets to his feet in a quick, swift motion, standing precisely how Loki would imagine a superhero would stand; feet apart, shoulders back, chin raised a little. “Assistant. I can do that. So, what are we doing?”

Banner smiles, shaking his head.

Banner explains it to the kid. Currently, they're working on matching the cases for the stones with each specific stone's signature. That means Loki emulating the frequency of each gem, going through them one by one. Making the cases suitable holsters - a lot like the gauntlet, but bigger, so they won't have to have anyone use it on their body like with the snap.
“Which stones haven’t we done?” Strange asks, mostly to himself, it looks like. He raises an index finger with a thought. “Right, the Mind Stone?”

“Not Mind,” Loki says, already feeling the panic creeping up through his throat, threatening to smother him. He’s not going to emulate that frequency today; just the thought makes colour drain from his face.

“Space. We haven’t done Space.” It’s the last two left. Space is also associated with all kinds of bad memories, but it’s not as terrible as Mind. He thinks he’ll manage.

There’s no such thing as taking a sick day in this group anyway, apparently.


Banner starts up the machine. It’s big as a desk, square, and with six closed metal boxes on top of it. There are various wires connecting them to each other, and the entire front side of the machine is uncovered, showing the motor inside. Gold sparks as it boots up; that’s from Loki’s spell. Green wisps from his and Strange’s powers both swirl around the chords.

“Ready,” Banner confirms.

He stays standing, to be in contact with his body. He’s glad he managed to avoid lunch, Thor still being distracted and upset, because his body is lighter like this. It’s easier to stay in that strange mid-space between ground and air (not literally hovering, though, more of a metaphysical state), to be connected to the earth but still vibrating at a frequency high enough to .

He feels the magic flurry between his ribs and closes his eyes.

“Strange,” he prompts and immediately, the other’s power begins to reach for him. Flow into his veins and merge with his own. Not .. intrusive, but like a helping hand, keeping his own together where it’s fractured. Strange is oddly .. soft with it, today. As if he’s being deliberately gentle.

Loki is too tired to be annoyed by the obvious pity.

He lets Strange's magic loose, washing through his cells. Open, like water. Focuses on the task with his mind.

It’s all about memory, this. He worked with the stones when he came back, so he has each of their signature stored in his memories. He takes a breath, lifting a hand to his own temple, and digs in.

It’s not hard to search out the things he’s looking for. Very deliberately does he not linger on associated emotions - the dead agents in the underground SHIELD facility, Agent Barton’s sky-blue eyes. His own twisted words.

Instead, he focuses on the cube. The song it sings, the way it reaches out for every being in the room, draws everything to it. He’s careful not to get lost in the power but instead just experience it. It’s not real, he reminds himself again and again. He can’t do anything with this power, anyway; it’s only a memory. There’s no use in pining.

And on it goes. He memory-jumps, nothing specific, just letting anything where that cube is involved pop up. There's no other way to do it; he searches for emotions, specific search-words, but he can't decide what comes up. Not with this.

He’s in the vault, taking it just before Ragnarok. He’s on the Commodore on his way back to the others, it’s in his interdimensional pocket and it’s burning in there; he’s distracted by it and almost crashes into the Statesman in absentmindedness. He's not sure why he's coming back at all; he's scared of Thor leaving without him. He barely notices the only home he ever had burn to ash behind
him.

Quality time spent with the cube as his time impersonating Odin pops up next. Embarrassment flares; he’s sitting in the Vault, cross-legged in an indent in the wall, in his own form because magic flows better like that, holding the cube up to his cheek. Stroking it. Absorbing its power without ever doing anything with it, nothing except letting it wash through his body, take up space that should be filled with other things. Family, love, joy, motivation. But he needs none of those things, he has the Tesseract.

He focuses on the power in the memory instead of lingering on his own pitiful state.

He needs more power. He needs the signature of the stone in action. He knows what that entails and braces himself.

The blue wash as he holds his dagger to Thanos’ throat is powerful. Distantly, Loki can hear Banner exclaim ‘yes, keep doing that!’ and he does. Focusing on the blue. He feels the hand on his throat before he can see the memory unfold. That’s how he remembers it best, apparently. He tries to keep his thoughts off of it but it’s difficult, ‘Loki, what’s happening? The signature is faltering’, so he grits his teeth, honing in further on the power he had in his grasp just before. The memory is playing out, stuck moving through the dreadful scene, he can’t seem to reset it because his mind is running - but he can hold the moment he just saw before fast in his mind. Hold it, hold it, hold -

‘We’ve got it!’ he hears, and relieved, lets go of the demanding focus on the blue power.

Bad idea.

The memory doesn’t let go and there’s nothing to distract him from the cold ship, the dead bodies littered everywhere. Nothing to distract him from the panic as he’s lifted off the ground, jerking and squirming to get free, failing, his air canal failing he can’t breathe -- Thanos staring at him while his hand gets tighter, tighter, the bones are giving way. Nothing to distract him from his own strangled words, barely a whisper. The fear, all-consuming. Thanos smiles, a mock, but Loki can barely see it for the black in his vision - his eyes drift to the ceiling and he remembers, he remembers standing here just days ago when Thor’s coronation was held, he remembers feeling more at home than he had in long. He grieves everything he’s going to lose, and he holds on desperately to the power of the Space gem, his last hope. Thanos is smiling and Loki can't see anymore, Thor’s sounds of distress behind him, everything is fading, and then -

-- crunch --

“Hey - come back, breathe - shit, what is this?!” he hears, distantly. There’s something pressing against his shoulder, he's slumping against it and it’s keeping him from falling forward. His knees are on cold, hard floor.

“What the hell,” he hears. His neck hurts and he’s not really breathing. Someone is clapping his cheek and he recoils because that’s a hand and that’s too close to his neck. The hand retreats, and the support.

“Loki, it’s okay,” he can hear Banner saying, now. He’s farther than the first voice, who must be Strange.

He’s shaking all over. Head bowed and unsupported but staying upright.

“It’s fine,” he manages after a gasp of air into clenched lungs. “Just - one second.”
He wraps trembling arms around his middle, trying to hold himself together. Focusing on the breath. It feels smothering in his throat, too small as if the flesh is swelling, he’s broken and his neck is swelling so now he can’t - can’t breathe -

The gasp catches in his throat and he holds it there for a few seconds. Then releases it. He takes a breath. Holds it. Releases.

“Did you get what you needed?” he asks, eyes still closed. There are a few seconds before the answer comes.

“Yes, we did,” Banner says. A pause. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine. I just need a minute.”

“Your neck looks weird, Loki.”

Oh, fuck. Backlash. So on top of being an emotional wreck today, he’s going to have to waltz around with Thanos’ death mark on his neck yet again; a blooming bruising for all to behold.

That had been bad enough the first time. Having to hide from prying eyes in the city he and Thor had been staying in before Stark’s funeral.

He takes another deep breath and the passageway feels a little clearer, then opens his eyes. Lifts his head. Banner winces.

“That looks horrible.”

Loki raises an eyebrow. Swallows. His throat feels tight (too tight) and he tries to ignore it. The panic is just under the surface. He’s not going to ripple it if he can avoid it. “Why, thank you,” he croaks.

“Not like that, just … ” Banner trails off. Hesitates. “You went back there, didn’t you?”

Loki nods. Strange asks, “the Statesman?” and Loki nods again. He’s looking at Loki’s neck. A little disgusted in his frown.

“I’m sorry,” Banner says, and sounds genuine about it, too. Loki gives him a brief smile.

“What - I don’t understand. What just happened?” Peter Parker asks, and Loki almost winces upon remembering his presence. He looks pale, sitting in a chair a little away, by a desk.

Loki sighs. “You shouldn’t have witnessed that,” he says, feeling his cheeks heat. Irritated with this whole situation.

“I - I mean it's fine! It's fine but what .. what happened?” The kid asks, then shakes his head in a little whir. “Are you okay? What’s up with your neck, and what’s a Statesman?”

Loki snorts softly despite himself. He takes a breath, then gets to his feet. Staggers towards a chair. “I used memory to access the specific signature of the Space gem,” he says. “The Statesman is the ship with Asgardian refugees. On which Thanos strangled me to death.”


“Loki,” Banner asks again. “Are you okay?”

Loki blinks, directing his gaze to the green man-beast. “Yes. Yes, I’m okay. It was nothing real.”
“It looks pretty real,” the Wizard objects, nodding at Loki’s neck. Loki has the instinctual urge to reach up and cover it from sight. He can just imagine the purple splotch covering everything under his chin, spreading to his collarbone. The burst vessels in his eyes, face. He wonders if he's bleeding and reaches up a hand to his nose - it comes back wet with the warm red.

He straightens his posture, looking back up at Strange.

“It’s just my mark flaring up, a - mark of death, you might say; those things tend to stick. Couldn't have killed me.” He looks at the kid. “Your friend Parker has one, too.”

Parker blinks. Looks down at himself and making a triple-chin when he tries to look for bruising on his own neck. “Me? A mark?” he says, looking back up. “I don’t see it.”


The kid’s face clears. “Oh,” he says. “That’s what that is. Is it like, a magic thing?”

“It is. Since you were resurrected with magic.”

“What, what is?” Banner asks, blinking. “What is it you feel?”

Parker looks down, forehead furrowing as he thinks. “Sometimes it just feels ..” he begins. “It feels like there’s a watermark inside me? You know. Or maybe like, like a magnet, do you know those? Where the magnet is under the paper, and then you drizzle these led flakes onto the paper and they move by their own volition, arranging in a depiction of the magnet’s force field - it feels like that.” That was the longest and most irrelevant description Loki has probably ever heard. He wonders if there's a point to it. “Except the opposite.”

Parker looks up. Banner cocks his head, still frowning, and the kid sighs. “Like - like my body wants to fall apart. Like that mark inside me, it’s like the stuff on Loki’s neck,” Loki stiffens, just barely, “like a tattoo - Saruman’s hand, you know, in the Two Towers? Except I’m definitely more of a Samwise that an orca, but you know -- that mark, it’s like the magnet and it’s trying to get the particles of my body to fall apart, I mean I'm the led flakes and the mark is the magnet, making them let go of each other, like they did back when - you know, when I turned to dust. I mean it never happens, but it can feel like it.”

“It’s a real mark,” Loki says. “Not a hand, but .. watermark was the most accurate.”

“It’s here, then, isn’t it?” Parker asks, pointing a finger to his solar plexus.

Loki nods. It is.

“Well yours is a lot more terrifying,” the boy then says, with the hint of a self-deprecating smile.

“I wouldn’t say so,” Loki replies.

There’s a big party in the community hall for the entire village, that evening. New Years. There's booze and there are snacks and a live band; a mix-genre of modern, Midgardian Folk and Asgard’s variation of the sort. There's a trumpet, banjo and guitar and a drumset, which a boy in the village has taken to learning. To the dismay of every neighbour, despite his obvious talent. There’s a Norwegian boy playing the flute. He and the drum-boy are friends, met in a village close by.

Valkyrie has had everyone help with decorations. Even Loki came, not talking to anyone and
wearing a large, knitted turtleneck sweater despite that being probably the most embarrassing fashion choice he’s made in a long time. It was necessary since it isn’t possible to erase a death mark with glamours. Some magic rules are just irritating like that.

Thor noticed, of course. The moment Loki stepped into the hall, he was stomping in his direction, eyes dark and set on Loki’s neck. That might’ve got something to do with the fact that tendrils of overloaded veins are spreading subtly up through Loki’s jaw, his eyes pink in the white from burst vessels.

Thor had looked ready to faint at the sight, or kick something super hard, maybe. “Has this been here the whole time? Is it permanent, have you just been wearing glamours?” he’d asked, and Loki had hissed at him, dragging him outside by the arm.

“It’s not permanent,” he’d sneered. “I wouldn’t have been able to hide it, remember, with my magic in the state that it was. I’m not able to hide it at all,” he adds in a grumble.

“Then why is it - why does it look like this? What happened?” There’s tangible dread in Thor’s voice.

“It’s nothing, Thor. I had to go into a memory to get the signature of the Space Gem. It went well, fine; just - this stuck.”

“But you’re okay,” Thor clarifies for himself. Pause. “Why did it stick, though, I don’t get it -”

After that, Loki had kept his hair down and his back turned as well as possible to anyone and everyone. He was only there to make up for .. apparently upsetting the Valkyrie earlier. Show some goodwill. Who would’ve known someone could get upset from Loki not being their friend.

He makes a brief appearance at the party. He didn’t want to come, originally, but after eating dinner with Thor, he just doesn’t feel like staying in the house. He wants air. And instead of walking along the snowy cliffs, he decides why not. To support the Valkyrie, right?

He gets himself a glass of something strong and stays by his brother’s side, grateful for the dim lights in the evening; the angry vein-lines through his face probably not obviously visible. Thor leads them to a group of people, Peter Parker being the centre of attention. He’s telling a group of villagers about how he escaped New York under the false name.

“My friends were all going to go to this dumb party - I mean, not that I don’t like parties, this one is super fun but, you know, I just couldn’t stand the thought of sitting in some couch, listening to people gossip while I knew that over here there were people to save! And I just needed to come and help; you see, I’m the friendly neighbourhood Spiderman but I am an Avenger, after all -”

Loki retreats at some point to get himself another glass of the good wine. He finds himself falling into a reverie, looking out the window by the makeshift bar at the dark ocean further out. Then he feels her energy behind him, and he turns. Wanda’s eyes are steadfast on him. Loki glances around; there are people here. He’s not alone with her. It’s going to be fine.

( There’s nothing to be scared of. )

“Loki, I’m sorry,” she finally says. “It wasn’t on purpose.”

“I know,” he says, taking a sip of wine and looking away, somewhere behind her. His throat feels constricted as he swallows. “It wasn’t your fault.”
His voice sounds mechanic. Indifferent.

“You don’t sound like you mean that.”

“I do. I don’t blame you.”

Her forehead creases. She pauses for a few seconds. “You haven’t told anyone about these things. What I saw.” I don’t know what you saw.


It's not hard to distinguish the bitter quality to the words.

“You mean you think he's guessed at some of it.”

“He has.” Loki pauses, takes a sip of the drink. “Besides. See what happens when I do tell people.”

“It’s not shameful.”

“That’s not for you to decide.”

“It’s what I feel. I’m allowed to feel that way.”

Loki moves aside for a boy to get to the punch bowl. Moves a little away, glances at the Witch.

“I'll say it again, Wanda; good for you.”

He turns to go outside, towards the door. He doesn’t want to be here.

He needs air, real air, because there’s not enough for him, here.

He moves only a few steps before she puts a hand on his shoulder and he whirs back around, the wine-glass flying from his hand. It shatters against the floor, and Wanda immediately retreats the hand. The nearest partygoers swivel to stare, a quiet falling aside from the music. He swallows.

“Loki,” Wanda says, voice quiet. "I'm not going to hurt you."

“I know that,” he hisses back, glancing at the people around. They're staring shamelessly so he returns his gaze to them to deliver a few of them a well-placed sneer. He waves his hand over the mess of wine and glass, and it disappears.

Then he turns again and walks away.

Cool air hits as he bursts out the door, air, fresh in his lungs - and there’s enough of it, enough space in him. There is. He begins to pull off the damned high-collared sweater, the fabric loose around his neck but still around his neck, and he needs to get it off. It’s fine. It’s fine it’s fine it’s fine.

Wanda follows him.

“Please, wait!” she calls after him as he staggers away, sweater half off, stumbling onwards. The door swings shut behind her. “Can we talk about it?”

"No," he calls back, finally managing to pull the sweater off, smoothing his hair back down with a hand, the sweater stuffed under his arm.

"I don't want to scare you!"
He stops, back turned. Scoffs, then turns to face her. “I’m not scared of you.”

“You’re acting scared.”


She glances at his neck and Loki wonders if she knows what happened. If he's still the talk of the town. Then something glistens on her cheek, and he realise’s she’s crying again. He almost sighs. She snivels.

Then, in a soft, gentle motion she lifts her hands and they move like waves, red wisps beginning to materialize in between them. From thin air suddenly the red is pulsing, strong, wild, unpredictable. Loki draws back, breath catching.

“I think it’s scary,” Wanda says, playing with the tendrils. Twirling a finger, red twirling with it. Her eyes are dark and focused, caught in her working. “I’m scared of it.”

He keeps his own eyes on her hands, on the red. It's soft, like smoke, pulsing like summer waves. But he knows better.

“It can do terrible things,” she says, another tear breaking free.

She stays quiet for a moment, just watching the force curling around her fingers. Sometimes it twitches, like claws, fangs, like it wants to escape her hold. Loki twitches with it. She's in control of it, she is but it can do terrible things, either way. It might.

If she were, say, upset with Loki. As he is oft to make people; upset with him.

She looks up at him. Her eyes are deep like oceans with grief and hurt and sorrow. Regret. He almost flinches back from it.

“Please,” she says, voice controlled. "I want you to teach me. I don’t ..” she cuts off. Takes a breath. Then her eyes turn steely on him. “I don’t want to hurt people.”

He realises he’s trembling again, his legs, his hands and his shoulders. His eyes drift to the red. He’s imagining it reaching for him, like a beast springing out of hiding, pushing him down to eat him alive.

She flicks her hands and it disappears. He redirects his gaze to hers. Looks at her for a long moment as she, in turn, studies him.

Then he sighs.

“I’ll teach you,” he says. Lifting a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Give me a little time, and we’ll go back to the lessons.”

She swallows. Nods.

She goes for a smile and he returns it with a quick grimace.

He goes back to the house after that. Drinks a cup of coffee because he can’t figure out how to be in his own skin. Then he sits on the bed, practising bending the air to form illusions. Practising a healing spell. Conjures a glass of water. Drinks it.

Thor finds him there, just when he’s turned one of the ugly mugs into a rabbit and is petting it in his
arms. Holding it close to his chest and stroking the soft fur. Loki hears the front door go and the small, grey rabbit stiffens, ears raised, but Loki shushes it. “It’s okay,” he murmurs. “It’s just Thor.”

That’s not hard to discern from the heavy steps; yet somehow still gentle. Soft like thunder can be, perhaps.

Thor knocks lightly on the door and Loki calls "hmm?", not too loud to not disturb the animal. Thor turns the handle, opening, then stopping in the door. He frowns, the hint of a smile on his lips.

“A rabbit,” he says.

“Don’t startle it,” Loki says.

“Where’s that going to live?”

“Outside. There are plenty of rabbits in the forest.” He pauses, breaking the pretend. "You know it's not real, Thor."

Thor shrugs. Then he walks all the way inside, closing the door and going to sit beside Loki. “May I?” he asks, reaching out a hand. Loki can see him eying the uncovered neck of bruising when he thinks Loki isn’t noticing.

“Go ahead.”

Thor pets the rabbits head, big hand gentle against the small creature.

“That’s a complicated spell,” he says after a minute like that. "Aren’t you tired?"

“I’m going to bed, anyway.”

Pause. Thor stops petting the rabbit, and Loki takes the responsibility back. It squeaks under his hand and he smiles faintly.

Thor says, “You and Wanda talked.”

“A little.”

“She seemed in a better mood.”

“That’s good.”

Pause. Thor pets the rabbit's head again, scratching it behind the ears.

“I was wondering if you wanted to come outside," he says. "There’ll be fireworks in a few minutes.”

“There already have been fireworks.”

“But the rest of them. At twelve o’ clock, that’s the big show-time.”

“I don’t think the rabbit will enjoy it.”

“She can stay in here.”

“It’s a he.”

“Really? Oh, well.”
Silence. “Alright,” Loki then sighs, after a little while, putting the rabbit down on his pillow. “Let's go, then.”

Thor smiles. He follows Loki out the door, closing it behind.

Minutes later, under the stars and watching fireworks glisten in the sea’s mirror from the cliffside, Thor says, “Happy New Year’s, brother.”

Loki squeezes his shoulder briefly.

He practices his magic in the following days. Alone on the bed. He goes for walks. His ankle clicks and it’s fine - he doesn’t have the excess of energy right now to do anything about it.

He avoids company outside of work until the bruising has faded. It takes a few days.

The Parker kid is clever. He works with Loki, Banner and Strange and suggests alterations based on the readings from the energy signatures Loki has been sending out, and it's clever. Loki tells him so, one day, and the kid turns red like a beet.

They work on recreating the time travel equipment and suits - Bruce has old drawings and parts that make it an easy job.

Then, one day, they can’t get further with the Passageway, as Bruce has shifted to call it. Loki thinks that’s a more appropriate name than the last.

“That’s it, then,” Banner says, throwing out his arms in defeat.

“There must be -” Loki says, cutting off as he works with the buttons, the screen, trying to see if there’s anything they’ve missed.

“We can't keep doing this all day, Loki,” Strange says. “We need the stones to get on with it.”

“It just can’t be - already -”

"Feel free to double-check. Again."

But there’s nothing they’ve missed that Loki can find. Bruce is going to call in a princess from Wakanda because she might have new ideas, but in all, the machine has hit a roadblock until they have the stones. To check what works and what doesn't. They have backups ideas on the ready. The necessary Pym Particles are collected. The suits are made, more or less.

The next step is going back in time.

Chapter End Notes

Ooooooohhh !!
Loki came back from the dead. He and Thor were both sad. Loki went hiding in the mountains for three years. Now, he’s helping to possibly resurrect the fallen friends in New Asgard ... but they need the stones. Insert time-travel preparations.

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Here’s another one!

Do enjoy <3 And thank you for reading.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Thor and Valkyrie have been keeping in contact with Pepper ever since Bruce and Loki started working together.

‘We have something that might work,’ Thor had told her on a conference call where Loki sat listening quietly out of the camera’s range. They’d kept up these kinds of calls with her regularly to let her know the progress along the way.

The day after the dead-end had been reached with the Passageway, while Loki is reading on the couch, Valkyrie comes waltzing into Thor’s house. She’s in the middle of a conversation on her cell-phone. Laughing. There’s a bright woman’s voice sounding from the other end.

(Valkyrie has let Loki try that phone thing a few times, and he rather likes the concept of the internet. Earth’s own little private community in the cloud. Held in physical satellites. He’d found an app he liked, Tumblr, and pressed the green button with every picture that he enjoyed. Written commentaries underneath, quite clever ones in fact. Searched for particular things he wanted to see.
Then he’d gotten in a fight over a few Shakespearean works with some buffoon, and when Loki told them that he’d actually been around for Shakespeare’s time and so would obviously know better, they didn’t even believe him.
Valkyrie had sighed with exasperation when he’d told her about his experiences on the site; apparently, he was destroying her blog’s theme and reputation or whatever by reblogging pictures of hot chocolate and sunsets.)

“It’s Pepper,” Valkyrie whispers, holding the phone a little out from her ear. “Pep,” she says louder, “I’m going to put you on speaker, it’s Thor and Loki.”

“- ure,” they hear the end of the word as Valkyrie presses a button on the screen.

“Hello, Miss Potts,” Thor calls, and Valkyrie goes to sit in a chair by the table across from where he is seated, shaking her head with a smile. Loki watches from the couch.

“Miss Potts, please, Thor,” the voice rings out, metallic through the tiny speaker. “I thought we were past that.”
“Pepper is coming here,” Valkyrie says. “Now that we’re so close.”

“I’m sure as hell not going to stay over here,” Potts quips in, and there’s a young-sounding ‘mom!’ shrieked in the background, “sorry, sweetheart, I said a wrong word - not gonna stay here while you work on resurrecting my husband, that’s for certain.”

“Looking forward to having you, Pep,” Valkyrie says. “We’ll get a lodge ready.”

So Pepper comes. And with her, every other so-called ‘Avenger’ seem to invite themselves along.

She was the one who contacted them all; to let everyone know that something might be underway.

She arrives in a private jet and brings her daughter Morgan, who likes Thor and Valkyrie a lot. She laughs and giggling as they run around tables with her, chasing each other, or when Thor dangles her from his arms, lifting her deadweight up and down, or makes tiny sparks to fly through the air like stars in the day.

The girl is kept in a wide arch of Loki at all times. He only sees her play with them from afar when he doesn’t know what else to do besides be with Thor; when he doesn’t trust himself to be alone and Thor happens to be playing with Morgan. And then Pepper is always there, making sure Loki is not within any kind of range of the girl. Not speaking a word to him or giving him a glance.

They shook hands upon meeting, and that’s it. Her eyes were cold and unfriendly.

He gets the obvious hints and stays distant. It’s not strange that she doesn’t like him. He threw her now dead husband out of a window, one time. For one thing.

And it doesn’t matter, anyway. Loki has other things to do than play with children and be friendly with people.

The other’s begin to filter in, in the days following Pepper’s arrival. Most arrive by portals of Strange’s.

The princess of Wakanda comes first, bringing a handful of trusted officers, while her brother had to stay home to take care of the kingdom. She spends a lot of time with Banner, working on the Passageway. She apparently has new things to add that neither Loki nor Banner had thought of.

Next, Steve Rogers’ friend Bucky Barnes comes. He seems wary of Loki, and Loki feels wary of him in turn. He’s not sure why, exactly; there’s just some atmosphere, something that feels .. off, or maybe familiar. Like they have something in common that neither of them would ever be interested in acknowledging. He doesn’t like it.

They avoid each other.

Really, Loki avoids everyone. Wanda and Rogers and the people of Wakanda, Valkyrie and Strange and Banner and Wilson and anyone. Everyone joining the group in New Asgard in the following day. Which is a lot of people - an entire army. The ones who battled Thanos.

He avoids everyone except for Thor. Thor is alright.

When the so called Guardians of the Galaxy arrive, Loki realises too late that Nebula is part of their group.

He’s alone by the harbour that particular day, on a bench looking over the water and sketching
waves in a notepad Thor gave him, when a ship begins to descend from the sky, humming over the wind. An outer-galactic design, clearly not of Midgard. The weather is cold and grey and the harbour devoid of people; obviously no one is expecting the newcomers.

Alarmed, Loki gets to his feet, gathering his magic in his hands in case it’s someone bringing a fight.

Thor, Valkyrie and Strange come running a moment later, slipping along in the sparse snow while the ship settles on a bare patch of sap-covered grass a little away from the water.

“It’s alright,” Valkyrie says, putting a hand on Loki’s shoulder. He pushes it back off and she rolls her eyes. “They’re friends.”

“The Guardians,” Thor says, staring at the retro ship, something like excitement or relief in his voice, a hint of a smile on his lips.

The ship lands with a reverberating bump before a ramp begins to descend. Then a door slides to the side, revealing none other than Star-Lord himself. The arrogant prick who thinks himself some super-criminal of the cosmos.

An amateur is what he is.

“Returned you’d be here,” he says with a nod at Loki while making his way down the ramp. Strutting, really. He shakes Thor’s hand, who uses the grip to pull him into a hug, instead. There’s a thump of bodies colliding, an oomph from Star-Lord.

Loki’s jealousy flares hotly.

“Didn’t know you had a real name,” he says. Calmly. “Peter, was it?” He shrugs. “I would understand the need to come up with something a little more .. dramatic.”

Star-Lord glares at Loki for a long moment and saying, “at least mine is longer than yours,” while his companions shake hands with Strange, Thor and Valkyrie and Loki grimaces at the choice of words. They’d been at Stark’s funeral as well - the young woman with antennas; the large, bare-chested man with markings all over; the raccoon in clothes. That’s not the weirdest being Loki has ever seen.

Star-Lord continues to hold the gaze for some seconds. Then all of a sudden he shrugs, giving up the hostile stance. Holding out his hand.

“We’re on the same side, this time,” he says, eyes fast on Loki. “Let’s be civil, eh?”

Loki hesitates. Wondering if it’s a trick. Then he shakes the hand, hastily drawing back again, after. That physical touch with someone who isn’t Thor feels weird, unwanted, as if he needs to wash his hands several times to get the traces of the other’s skin back off his own, now.

The antenna-girl doesn’t shake hands with anyone, and Loki manages to look closed off and passively hostile enough to avoid anything more than a nod exchanged with the purple man and raccoon.

There’s a Flora Colossus, too, a young one - which Loki is irritated to find that Thor can understand while Loki can’t. He had thought that elective wholly unnecessary, back in the day, and chosen another. He’d laughed at Thor for selecting it.

By the ship, now, Thor sends him a smug smile after answering yet another entirely indecipherable ‘I am Groot’ uttered by the … Groot. Is what they call it.
Isn’t that creative.

Then Loki notices his brother’s eyes widening, fixed on the ship which Loki’s back is turned to and he begins to say, “Loki, I should tell you -” but there are sounds from the ramp and Loki turns away from him -

to be faced with Nebula walking down.

His heart plummets.

Her mouth tightens when their eyes meet and she redirects her gaze to Thor immediately, moving down to stand at the edge of the gathering, arms crossed in front of herself. Cold as ever. There was another person walking behind her, shaking hands eagerly with Thor, but Loki’s attention is rather occupied.

She nods at Thor and Valkyrie, not saying a word, then glances at Loki again and he feels his breath catching. Face twitching involuntarily. Lips trembling at the edges.

Then the other person from the ramp is in his field of vision, and Loki startles.

"Kraglin,” he says and it sounds loud to Loki's ears, holding out a hand. Loki nods at him, keeping his own hands clasped behind his back.

"Greetings,” he says, coolly. The other's face falls, but Loki doesn't have the necessary spare of attention to feel bad. Kraglin moves away, and then suddenly Nebula is standing in front of him, face unreadable.

He keeps from swallowing nervously and nods at her instead, holding his breath; an attempt to conceal and control the anxiety. “Nebula,” he says. Voice neutral.

“Loki,” she says.

The harsh and grinding voice.

He remembers her screams.

He clenches his jaw, looking away. Had he known she would be here, he would have not been part of the welcome committee.

She removes herself from in front of him, at a weight releases from his chest.

He doesn’t look anyone in the eye while they get over the formalities, frozen in place. He's being reminded of all sorts of unpleasant things all at the same time. Mind running while the others talk, Thor glancing nervously towards him. Loki’s own eyes drift to the ground.

He wants to leave.

His legs won't budge. Or maybe his mind won't let them.

Then the group begins to move, walk away, and Loki still isn’t able to move. Until they're are a good distance away and Thor grabs him by gently the shoulder, staying behind. He lifts Loki’s chin with his other hand, gaze flickering between Loki’s eyes.

“Brother,” he says. Loki blinks himself back into reality.

“Yes,” he says, voice a little thin. He shakes his head to clear his thoughts. “Sorry. One second.”
“It’s fine.” Thor hesitates. “I’m sorry. For forgetting to tell you about her. I didn’t know they were coming at all.”

Loki squirms free of Thor’s grip, gaze dropping to the ground again but his legs regaining steadfast footing. “It’s not about her,” he lies, not quite sure why he’s lying at all. It’s a meek lie, anyway. “I need to get my book.”

He begins walking back towards the bench, and calls to Thor over his shoulder, “I’ll be at the house.”

Thor stands in place, mouth a little open and eyes lost. Loki flees up the hill, walking along another, steeper path than the one Thor is standing in front of. Blocking.

Nebula is ‘good now’, they all say, but he cannot stand to be near her. She avoids him as well as he does her in the days following. Apparently, she has no desire to be reminded of the past, either.

“Thor, your friend,” Loki says later on that day they arrived, both of them on the couch, drinking tea. Loki’s ankle is elevated on a pillow in Thor’s lap, having twisted it earlier. He’s promised to look into surgery after this whole thing is over but cannot afford for his magic to be compromised right now, spending its energy on healing.

Thor lifts his head from his book.

“Hm?”

“He’s not a rabbit.”

Thor frowns. “Surely some kind of rabbit.”

“Not a - no, he’s a racoon,” Loki says, eyebrows pulling together, and Thor’s eyes widen in surprise. Loki’s face falls into a glare. “Honestly, I can’t believe that you’d -” he begins, but Thor shushes Loki, a finger to his lips and eyes still wide.

“I’m serious, don’t call him that,” he whispers. “He’ll get so mad.”

The number of people littering the village grows, and it shows everywhere. In literal littering. Crowding the streets and patches of level ground. Eating meals together outside, at Valkyrie’s house, in the Community Hall. Holding meetings in the unoccupied lodges and leaving dirty coffee cups everywhere. Forgetting jackets, purses, luggage waiting to be taken inside, belongings, technology, clothes.

Leaving trash; Starbucks cups and beer cans and pizza boxes that Strange walks around grumbling about having to magic away. Loki rather likes him in that new role as the town janitor - he thinks it fits nicely.

He tells Strange so one day and receives a death-glare in return.

There are knocks on Thor’s door at unexpected times, and Loki figures out that there’s space enough for him to hide in the closet in the bedroom. Without it getting especially cramped, too. That way, he won’t have to deal with them knowing that he’s in the house; they’ll just think he’s out, as long as he stays quiet until they’ve left.
Thor only finds him in there once, which is a win in Loki’s book. Thor has found Loki in strange places many times over the years.

He spends a lot of time in the forest to be alone, too. Just walking, building up strength gently. Sitting. Listening. Or being in Thor’s room, in the house in general. It’s not the main hangout place for the groups of people joining the village-gathering gradually, thankfully.

He reads. Lets time pass with staring at walls or thin air. Talks to Thor, sometimes Valkyrie who insists on stopping by to invade Loki’s privacy. She brings Rogers and Banner, a few times. It’s awkward at best.
It’s Thor who teaches Loki to draw some basic things, stuff Thor has learned from Rogers. Mostly landscapes. He teaches Loki to brew coffee through a filter. They cook together.

Wanda stops by some times, and Loki doesn’t hide from her. She wants to practice again, but he gets nauseous just thinking about it.

They hang out, instead. Talk about magic, sometimes, but with no practical practising.

Thor says he should try it, to prove to himself that it’s not dangerous - and he could be there, Thor suggests, to intervene if anything happened.

Loki doesn’t want to. He wants time to himself, and he wants to rebuild his magic without interruptions. Without setbacks. Without distractions.

He likes being with Wanda, though. His shields are back up which makes it feel a lot safer (some illusion of control), and that makes space for the two of them to just .. be. Talk.
She’s very strong. Terrifying, at times. When she gets excited or worked up about some topic, Loki feels himself wanting to crawl under something and hide, imagining the red colouring her eyes like the lightning colours Thor’s in untamed enthusiasm or distress. Maybe he doesn’t imagine it - maybe there are hints of it. A shade of red.

The thought makes him shudder.

She tries more than once to use her powers in his presence, sneaky as she is, attempting to get him back to the lessons: making something float, doing something subtle to prove that she can without losing control. Every time, Loki has shut it down, told her no. He doesn’t want to. Not yet.

The newcomers lodge in the Community Hall, royals and scrappers alike, the only exception being Morgan and Pepper. On mattresses and in indoor tents. Makeshift beds and heaps of pillows, blankets, cots, spare futons. It’s a mess in there, and Loki stays away from it.

They’re building up the time-travel machine in the hall, too, Bruce and Shuri, the princess. Peter Parker, Hank Pym (the particle-man), anyone else interested in science joining the process. They’re reluctant to let Rocket help; he apparently has a history of turning things into guns instead of what they were supposed to be, not to mention steal parts in the process.

Bruce asks Loki to join them, and he declines. He’d rather not be too engaged in the chaotic environment in the Community Hall, it trying to be something organized but failing miserably; many people in one place with all their personal systems, ways of doing things, none of which Loki has any kind of control over.

No thanks.

So Thor and Loki continue to sleep in Thor’s house. Thor spends many evenings with his friends, strategizing, Loki staying back at the house. Waiting. He doesn't like the dark, being alone in it, but
Thor has to be with his friends to plan everything, and it drags out into the evenings often.

He always comes back, though, and never especially late. As if he knows Loki is waiting.

They take turns on the bedroom. In the end, though, they often end up in the same bed, anyway; keeping each other stitched together when the night is overwhelming. Or when nightmares take physical shape.

It’s like being children again: Thor had bad nightmares in periods of their youth, for whatever reason, and would sometimes climb into Loki’s bed at night - when they were older, sneak to Loki’s quarters. Crawling under the covers before Loki could stop him and falling asleep there.

Loki usually wouldn’t come to Thor. And still, in the years of childhood and a little later than that, somehow Thor seemed to know every time Loki needed him. If he’d been teased and ridiculed and hadn’t told anyone. If he was upset, feeling isolated and all alone in the world. If he couldn’t sleep for intrusive, scary thoughts; nightmares knocking.

Thor would come, and Loki wouldn’t have to say a word. He would always calm, a little at the very least, with his brother being near. His strong and warm brother. Thor, Gentle, coarse and grounding.

The hard part had been to get older. That Thor stopped coming when Loki needed him but didn’t ask, that Thor stopped seeking out comfort for himself in Loki. Grew out of the nightmares. Grew further from his brother.

Loki could’ve needed him. It wouldn't have hurt.

They were both adults in the years before Thor’s coronation but nonetheless, Loki had needed his brother more than ever in that time. He’d needed Thor to sneak into his quarters, crawl in the bed and hold him in the night, tell him it was alright; because Loki shivered in his bed like the world was of ice, as if his veins had stopped running with warmth. Like his heart had stopped and his lungs collapsed, not enough air in the world to make them re-expand.

He’d been falling apart and scared of it, and he hadn’t dared tell anybody. He’d needed Thor to notice, he’d needed his mother, he’d needed his father, he’d needed his friends, and all of them had had other things to do, think about. As they often had had. They’d reacted when he lashed out in anger but never cared to look underneath the aggression. His mother had been distracted. Thor’s mind had grown elsewhere and away from Loki.

It’s tight in the small bed or on the mattresses on the floor, but it doesn’t matter. On nights like those, Loki has grown addicted to his brother’s presence; can’t stand the thought of Thor not being there when everything feels like it’s falling apart - and the closer Thor is, the better. The warmer. The more real.

They never speak of it. He doesn’t know if Thor tells anyone. He hopes not. It feels very private; it’s childish and embarrassing, to need his brother like a safety blanket like that because he fears the dark.

But Thor fears it, too, and somehow that makes Loki’s own shame more bearable.

Thor has his scars. Loki plays no small part in them, and yet somehow, it seems his brother is as comforted by Loki’s being near as Loki is by his.

There’s a lot of drama around deciding who gets to go back in time. They can’t just send everybody, even though very nearly everybody wants to go. It needs to be a smaller crew since they can’t draw attention to themselves and cause too many ripples. Thanos is present in the past, after all. He followed them the last time.
Someone has to be in charge of the decisions, so the heads of the discussion are the hosts; the Avengers originally in New Asgard, the founders of the idea. Thor, Valkyrie, Rogers, Banner.

For that same reason, they’re quite high on the list of who gets to go. They came up with the idea - or were the ones present when it was founded, anyway. And they’re a good bet in Time-Heisting; good matches of powers and abilities.

It’s a bit random, really, because everyone is as good a candidate as the next. But there’s a general consensus that Thor and Valkyrie are going, being heads of the village, and most of the people who went the last time and know how the entire thing works.

Wanda and Strange are coming, too, because their magic will be useful in hopefully tracking 2012-Loki and finding the tesseract.

Everyone wants Loki to be on the 2012 team because he can track himself. Easily. Save the entire divergent timeline, and without hassle. They’re all trying to respect his choice of staying back by not commenting, not pleading him, but he can feel their looks on his back. He knows they ask Thor to convince him.

It makes him want to run.

“Are you going to run?” Valkyrie asks him one day, over a session of sparring.

Loki is feeling particularly lethargic that day. Tired, because his mind is. “No,” he says between clenched teeth, landing a blow. She blocks it.

“You look like you are,” she says.

He stops, panting and wiping sweat off his brow. She rolls her shoulders. They stare at each other for a second.

Then Loki walks out to sit down against the wall.

“I know my history does not make me out as the most trustworthy of allies,” he says. “But even I would not start a project such as this and then just leave them all in the dirt. You would all be lost without me, even if you had the stones.”

“We really would.”

“Besides, it’s exciting magic. It’s good. For my .. progress.”

“But you don’t care about that.”

He lifts an eyebrow at her “Do you want me to leave?”

“I’m just stating a fact. I’m trying to get you to talk about it.” She shrugs. “Maybe I can talk you out of leaving, in turn.”

He gets to his feet with an irritated huff, exiting out through the door. Just back to Thor’s house, though.

Eventually, Loki agrees to join the mission. To come along. He’s just tired of people wanting him to do things and him wanting to flee because of it; he doesn’t want anyone to make decisions for him,
their wants dictating his choice, and yet he doesn’t want to run, either - but then suddenly he does want to run and he *should*, he should run. He’s tired of the inner discussion, so he just decides to give in. Let them win, this once.

What does he have to lose?

Of course, then the gossiping about him begins to change. Is it a good idea, after all? To send Loki, *Loki* after the *Tesseract* of all things? The Mind stone? Loki hears whispers in crooks and corners, the looks on his back turned suspicious.

“They haven’t seen you in years,” Thor says. “They don’t know what you’ve been through.”

“*Been through,*” Loki copies with a grimace. “They know exactly what I’ve *been through*. That’s *why* they don’t trust me.”

Apparently, Strange manages to convince the masses anyway. That’s what Thor says, at least. Loki imagines it has something to do with Strange being able to stick Loki in a thirty minute loop if he misbehaves, and in general Loki’s current look that resembles something like ‘straight-out-of-the-dishwasher’ making him not too intimidating in comparison to the ever-so-polished Strange.

Maybe Strange had a talk with Barton, too. Who, as far as Loki’s understanding goes, was the main catalyst for the negative opinions. Which is understandable.

The opinions shift again. People are wary of Loki and send him glances but it all seems … friendly enough. A more open kind of wariness, not trusting but hopeful. They believe him useful in the 2012 diverged timeline. Again, probably because he hasn’t been especially intimidating or threatening in the last many years.

Thor is, in fact, the only one except for Barton who doesn’t like the idea of Loki joining the mission to get the stones. Not in the slightest. He sulks every time it’s mentioned, tries to object a few times, but the arguments against his ‘I just don’t think it’s a good idea’ are too strong.

He’d tried to convince Loki, too. Searched him out, one day, in the hills behind the house where Loki was hiding from having to face the world. It wasn’t a particularly good day.

“What do you want?” Loki had asked, maybe a little hard in the tone as Thor neared. Thor had raised his palms in an irritating attempt at soothing Loki’s obvious temper.

“Only to talk, brother.”

Thor had sat down a little away from where Loki sat, wrapped in his jacket on a frozen rock. “Nice day, today,” Thor had said.

“Get to it,” Loki had said.

Thor sighed.


Loki had wrung his hands a little tighter. Blame it on the cold and his Ás form. “I don’t think there’ll be any problems. I can track him easily, take him down. I know his weaknesses.”

Thor had glanced sidelong at him. “*It is you,* you know. *You* don’t have to pretend he’s someone else.”
Loki’s face had felt tight, looking straight ahead. “It’s not me.” And Thor had turned to look at him.

“Loki,” he’d sighed. “You know, you wouldn’t be the person you are today if not -”

“Exactly,” Loki had interrupted, and Thor had trailed off. He’d not bothered to elaborate - that had already been enough sharing as it was.

After a few seconds of silence, he’d said, “I’m going. It’s too late for you to change my mind.”

Thor’s eyes had stayed on the water further out. “I thought you’d say that.”

Then he’d got up and left Loki alone on the cliffs. It’d felt colder than before.

Loki joins the next strategy meeting, now being ‘part of the group’.

Does that make him an Avenger? He certainly hopes not.

It’s all very … cozy. People in blankets and comforters in a corner of the community hall, eating noodles and drinking tea and discussing how to retrieve the most powerful objects of the universe in a time-travel heist.

“You don’t need a third team,” Loki intervenes at one point and feels his nerves prickle at everyone turning their heads to him, silence falling. He ignores it; having been raised as a prince, he has enough education in speaking in front of crowds.

He straightens his back.

“In 2014, the Reality gem is on its way to the Collector on Knowhere, depending on when you land exactly. You can just steal it after collecting Power on Moraq, either before or after he gets it.”

There’s silence for a second. Then Banner says, gesturing a hand in Loki’s direction, “Hey, well, that’s great - great, Loki. Thanks.”

Thor is looking at Loki and says, “you gave that to him.”

“Odin had it delivered to him, the Collector would say if you asked. If he weren’t dead, I mean.”

“Why didn’t you keep it?”

“Two infinity stones kept in Asgard’s vault? Even you would agree that’s not a good idea.”


“Anyway,” Loki continues, facing the gathering of people instead of his brother. Clearing his throat to get back on track. “Someone on the 2014 team can just retrieve it. Problem solved.”

Valkyrie stays for dinner at Thor’s house that night. Thor and Loki make a spaghetti dish while she plays video games, Thor handing out orders and Loki chopping vegetables raggedly. Too large and too small, crooked and gnarled. Cooking was never a talent of his. He'd tried to make porridge, one day, and nearly set fire to the kitchen. That’d been embarrassing.

The dish turns out exactly as planned, though, since Thor is the one in charge. Loki also can’t help but feel the small surge of pride at the picturesque pasta in the bowl, basil and fresh tomatoes (that Loki cut) on top. Just like the pictures on tumblr.
He manages to both conversate and eat at the table. Valkyrie says he should get a phone. And try something called Pinterest, which Loki thinks is a strange word to choose for a title. What’s wrong with Interest?

The food is nice. He tries not to focus on it, too much, the anxiety threatening just under the surface. It’s strange, really, that it continues to be a problem. This definitely isn’t the first time Loki has failed to eat for a prolonged period of time, but never has he reacted like this, afterwards. Some combination of his mindset and a physiological response would be his guess. Speculations like that are pretty distracting from the present without having to check out completely.

It makes him miss his mother, all of it. He knows she would have an answer for him if he could ask her.

He drinks a cup of coffee afterwards. They watch a movie on the couch. He can’t really concentrate on it, but it’s alright to be there, anyway. Thor and Valkyrie beside him; it’s calm enough.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed! I know I certainly enjoy writing for this incredible audience!
New York, New York! (time, pt 1/2)

Chapter Notes

It's haaaaarrrddd to wrriiittteeeeee

ok that was all for my whining today. Thank you (it's also fun to write). Enjoy the chapter! Bit of a ridiculous one. But also serious. IDK, ANYWAY X)

Update: I'm still here! And enjoying your comments IMMENSELY! Needing some time to get juice and fresh thoughts, and work and my head is getting in the way. No more than a week will pass since this update was released, though, I expect :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It's decided that Loki is going on the 2012 team. Obviously.

Along with Valkyrie, Strange, Wanda, Rogers, and Banner. The last two because they were in New York last time and can get the Time and Mind gems the same way as then. Something like it, at least. Strange as magical support-person for Loki (which is an embarrassing concept in itself), Wanda as extra enforcements and Valkyrie as pilot and group Captain.

Everyone needs a group Captain.

Wanda gets Nebula’s old suit, Valkyrie gets a new one made.

The 2014 Knowhere & Morag team for the reality stone is Colonel Rhodes, Hope Van Dyne, Thor and the Rodent. Apparently, the last two make a good buddy team (which only makes Loki a little jealous), and the man they call Rhodey has a dry enough sense of humour that Loki thinks he’ll fit it. Van Dyne seems tough; like someone who could survive in most situations, and in most company.

They wouldn't simply send Rogers to get the stones in his own past just before he put them back. It would create a mess of timelines. Loki has been calculating on it along with Banner; they've concluded that most likely would it badly interfere with that point in time. Create a vacuum, an endless loop. An alternate branch, a glitch of time that would be inaccessible by time travel as it's more of a whole other dimension than anyone's past, stagnant and unchangeable by events changed with time travelling. And dimension-hopping is a whole other genre. Super-duper dangerous. It's just a fact of the stones: their presence creates chaos. Having them all in one place is dangerous, removing them even more so. Them not being returned to their rightful places from 2023 and instead removed to another future would create too many layers of possible branches, and realities would begin to blur. Pasts on top of pasts in layers that eventually will bleed together if you're not careful.

Messing with time is dangerous; travelling to mess with time travelling is even more dangerous, not to even begin on the fact of every Infinity Stone being involved. The possibilities for messing something up in that endeavour are just too many; the risk of messing up an entire reality.

Thor has to be in 2014 to travel between worlds with Stormbreaker; the plan is to get the stone off Morag, someone travelling back to the future with it, and the rest going to Knowhere to infiltrate the
Collector’s place. Or catch Sif and Volstagg before they reach Knowhere - they're still working on the logistics of that. Despite being able to lift Stormbreaker, Rogers still hasn’t been able to activate the Bifrost, so it can’t be him on that team; and besides, he’s going to be in New York for the sceptre. Strange, the only other who could move a whole team from Morag to Knowhere in an instant, needs to be with Loki.

Which means Loki and Thor could under no circumstance be on the same team. It’s just not a possible scenario.

Loki hears Thor talking to Strange about it, later. Trying to convince him that he and Loki need to be together. It ends up with Strange promising he’ll keep watch over Loki, for Thor’s sake - make sure no harm comes to him. That seems to make Thor calm a little. Apparently, the wizard’s word is worth something, anyway.

And besides, in the end, it’s Loki’s choice to come. Not Thor’s. Loki has chosen to come along on the premise of doing whatever is necessary, however it is necessary.

It’s not a camp-out trip with his Big Brother.

For Vormir, Barton is on. He and Loki have not talked at all since the other arrived, and Loki is planning to keep it that way. They simply pretend one another doesn’t exist. On the Hawk's team is Star-lord. Banner wanted to go, but he had to be in New York to talk to The Ancient One.

It’s safe, too, because Star-Lord and Banner don’t possess any kind of true love for each other. They barely know each other. So there’s no risk there, at least.

Nebula wanted to go, too, but even though Shuri has fixed her communications error from last, they dare not send her and risk it going awry again. She grumbles for a long time about ‘those two goddamn idiots not being able to even get out a spaceship without falling on their asses and alerting the entirety of the Galaxy,’ but otherwise doesn't complain too much. Overtly, at least.

Pepper wouldn’t leave Morgan behind to go and risk her own life. Besides, she feels too emotionally invested. Everyone gets it.

The teams are made.

And they’re actually set to go.

Loki wakes up screaming that night before the mission. He lies curled up against Thor’s chest for hours on end on the mattress on the floor, shivering, drifting between dreams and half-awake thoughts.

Thoughts of 2012 and the Tesseract. The mind stone. Of Sanctuary, of Thor being dead, or Loki himself dying, again and again and again, Thor grieving. Thor not grieving. Their home, gone.

Thoughts of his mother. The all-father. Laufey, Jotunheim. His mind just won’t calm.

He’s started to glance in the mirror, occasionally; as he’s brushing his teeth the next morning, he does. There are dark bags under his eyes and everything looks too desaturated. Lifeless. Despite not being as gaunt as he was he still looks a mess, and the fact that his mind has been whirling with fear, worries, memories, frayed magic, red power, the waves underneath the cliffside -
He casts a glamour that covers it up. He’s made up his mind about going, and he’s not going to let anyone change it again just because he looks *tired*.

The remainder of bruising on his neck stays; almost faded but still a shadow of greenish blue and black. He can be in public without people noticing straight away, now.

He and Thor eat breakfast in silence. When Loki is washing their bowls and Thor wiping off the kitchen counter island, Thor suddenly turns, taking one, determined step to close the distance between them and draw Loki into a tight hug.

His shoulders are trembling. His tears wet Loki’s shoulder.

Loki holds his brother, cradling the back of his head gingerly.

“It’s gonna be fine, Thor,” he says and tries to mean it. “It’ll be over quickly.”

Thor doesn’t say anything back. Just draws away after a little while, wiping his eyes and not looking Loki in the eyes. Then they walk out the door together.

Outside the Community Hall, Thor stops. He gives Loki a watch like his own, the one that acts like a cellphone and looks like a handcuff.

“Just so you have it,” he says. Eyes averted. “My number is the only one in it.” He pauses. “It probably won’t work out there, but you know.”

Loki fastens the black watch, and Thor shows him how to call the other one. It works; Thor’s watch beeps and what are apparently Loki’s digits show up on the display. With them both in New Asgard, 2027, at least.

Loki puts a spell inside it. Calls it ‘magical cell reception’ to get Thor to smile (which Thor doesn’t) when really it’s just a little bunch of time-shenanigan spells and tricks. It probably won’t work, anyway.

They walk into the building.

Loki gets another contraption inside for his other wrist, this one from Banner; the suits he and Shuri have been upgrading and creating. Some of the others have already put them on, and Loki is not looking forward to activating his own. Those are *definitely* not his colours. Too bright, too *white*. His skin has enough of that particular shade to spare as it is.

The hall is filled with people. Every Avenger in the city, there to support and be ready in case anything happens. It feels like a crowded airport; people standing in groups, talking, filtered around the platform set up in the middle of the room.

It’s a makeshift, Loki has been told; not as elaborate as the one they made the last time, but it can do the same things. Just not *as* flashy.

Personally, he thinks it looks pretty enormous and shiny.

Valkyrie activates her suit a little away from him. It sweeps over her body in a motion almost too quick to perceive and the next second, she’s engulfed in red and white. She looks up, noticing him staring and lifts an eyebrow. Wiggles her hips.

“Like what you see, Loki?”
He scoffs, looking away with a quirk of his lips.

The suits are designed to fit their bodies skin-tight with added breastplates and enforcement in various spots. They took height, hips, waist, arms, legs and weight measurements the other day, and though Loki didn’t look at the numbers, he did see the worried look Banner shot him when he stepped off the scale. Banner had said, hushed, “we’re going to talk about this.”

He activates the suit. It hugs him tight, with texture to the fabric but other than that like a second skin, and he feels horribly exposed. Thank the Norns for the enforcement of armour adding at least some protection and shielding. His arms are just that bit too narrow for it to look healthy, his knees sharp, his waist waning. He had gained weight - but maybe not as much as he would’ve liked. It’s just difficult.

His bones are a lot stronger, though, and his muscles have gained some mass and strength back. He can use his body, more or less, and that’s what counts

So what if he’s a little on the lean side.

Thor looks phenomenal in his suit, of course. Beard braided, hair hanging loose in the impressive mane over his shoulders. His body larger than it was before Thanos and the Statesman, less lean and just bigger, softer, all the more impressive for it. His legs like steadfast logs, his entire composure screaming ‘ready to fight’.

Except for the looks he’s shooting in Loki’s direction every now and again that lean more to the insecure side. Worried. Loki sees him eying the suit, Loki’s exposed body and wants to crawl into a hole and die. Thor doesn’t meet his eyes, though, not for more than a split second. He talks to Hope and Rhody, then Rocket, staying distant across the room. Loki stands alone.

Just before they step onto the platform, Thor grabs his shoulder, turning Loki to face him, finally looking him in the eye.

“Please be careful,” he pleads. “I don’t want to lose you, Loki. I can’t.”

“Of course. You too.”

Thor’s eyes flicker between Loki’s as if trying desperately to read something from them. Loki tries not to squirm under the gaze. “Promise,” Thor says. “Promise me on our mother than you won’t just throw your life away. If you can’t for you, then for me.”

Loki blinks. His voice catches in his throat for a moment.


Thor looks at him hard for a long moment. Then he pulls Loki into their second hug that day, arms tight around Loki.

Huh. It really is a hugging day.

“I love you, brother. Never doubt it.”

Loki pats Thor’s back, his arm almost immovable from Thor’s hold around his body.

The groups filter onto the platform and people quiet down on the floor. Loki can see Morgan Stark close to the wall, her mother holding her with two arms across her chest; apparently, Morgan has been allowed to observe. Loki accidentally catches Pepper’s gaze and hurries to look away.
He takes his place in the circle. Valkyrie to his right, Hope Van Dyne to his left. Rhodes next to her, then Wanda. Rogers, Thor, the Racoon Rocket, Banner in his ginormous suit, Star-lord. Barton stands in the opposite corner of the circle from Loki, and they haven’t as much as looked at each other. Barton doesn’t really look much at anyone, seeming very focused and single-minded with his task.

Strange is beside Loki. He gives him a solemn nod which Loki returns with a grimace. Which Strange scoffs at, looking away again. It’s not an entirely unfriendly exchange; not as unfriendly as it had been when Strange had just arrived, at least. There’s definitely some well-meaning sarcasm in there.

It’s been a couple of weeks of gradually getting used to each other, and the wizard is not as irritating as he was in the beginning; Loki is loathed to admit that the man grows on him.

He straightens, re-focusing, directing his gaze to empty air.

Everyone is restless. Impatient. Not quite able to stand still on their feet, alternating between fidgeting and attempting to look composed.

Once everyone is on the platform and settled, Rogers says, “I did the speech the last time. Anyone else wanna take it?”

“Speech?” Loki wonders, readjusting the suit’s fabric over his chest. He doesn’t like that it sits so close to his skin. He can see the reflection beneath in the glass, and he feels like everything is visible in this contraption of a garment. “Shouldn’t we just get going?”

Rogers sends him a smile and a tired headshake. “We need to get the spirit up. Have a focus. Be ready for what’s ahead.”

“Well there you have it,” Loki says with a shrug. “That was a nice speech. Add a little something about returning safe and it’s good, even.”

Rogers scoffs softly, then looks away, facing the entire group. He takes a moment. Then his voice rings out clear for everybody in the hall.

“For those who were present the last time we stood here,” he says, ”you know what happened next. Some things went well.” He pauses, looking around on everyone. “Others didn’t,” he says, softer. His eyes linger on Barton, who gives a sad smile.

“This is our fight,” Rogers continues, “and we can make it through without losses.”

His eyebrows raise at ‘without losses’. It’s all incredibly sincere-appearing.

Rogers looks down as if in thought. Loki wonders whether it is sincere or just for show. “We have an incredible chance, provided we get the stones.” His voice is a little quieter, gaze still down. “We might be able to get our friends back. We can give them what they gave us; what they gave the entire world in their bravery. It can go right, this time. We can win, too.”

He looks up, eyes glimmering. “For the fallen,” he says, stronger. “They always deserved better. Now is our time to avenge their sacrifices. Properly.”

There’s silence for a moment. Then Barton holds out his fist in the middle, and the others begin to follow one by one, in the middle of the circle. Loki has a feeling they’ve done this before, too.

“For the fallen,” the others mutter, and they smile and nod at each other but Loki doesn’t dare look anyone in the eye. He can’t get himself to repeat the words, either. It’s not really his place, he feels; he’s just here as backup. Not a friend.
They regain their spots by the edge of the platform and everything is very silent. Loki clears his throat and it almost echoes.

Then someone whoops, “yeah! Go Time Heist!” from the floor, breaking the tight atmosphere entirely. Scott Lang. He’s beaming up at them. “Good speech, Rogers - once again. You really did it my man, spot on.” He doesn't stop to notice the sidelong glances from around him. "Good luck, everyone! I love you, Hope - that’s my girlfriend up there! Hope, here!”

Murmurs of good luck are heard from around the room. A few nervous laughs. It’s very awkward, all of it. The ant-man doesn’t seem to notice, while his girlfriend, the Wasp, they call her, looks embarrassed enough for the both of them.

Shuri, standing behind the computer system managing the entire thing, calls, “ready?”

They all look at each other. Except for Loki, looking down and nodding, instead. Then Valkyrie shouts, “ready!” on behalf of them all.

“Tractors engaged,” Shuri calls. “Okay, you’re all in for a hell of a ride. Here we gooo -”

She begins counting down. “3,” she says. Loki can feel his brother’s eyes boring into him and for some reason still can’t get himself to meet them.


“1.”

“Loki!”

It’s more of a desperate cry than it is a shout. Loki, a little startled, looks up to finally lock eyes with his brother. Thor’s are swimming with frustration and … fear. It looks like fear.

And Loki just manages to send a smile to his brother that, for once, actually feels reassuring. A small one but containing all the love he can muster in that second. *It’ll be alright, Thor.*

He sees Thor breathe a sigh of relief, shoulders sagging for a split-second. Loki keeps on the smile, softening it.

Then the suit’s mask clicks shut over both their faces, the ground underneath them explodes and Loki feels himself being sucked under with the pressure.

It takes less than a second before the room is gone.

He’s engulfed in a swirling array of colour. Much like the Bifrost, in fact.

Except here, instead of travelling distance, it’s clear that he’s becoming *smaller.* Travelling rapidly *down, or into,* smaller particles, new subcultures, atoms becoming large as dragon-bellies, a psychedelic space of surreality until -

His feet crash to solid ground. Pavement. Air around them, outside.

They’re standing in an alley, an obscure circle, regaining their footing. Strange is there, Rogers, Valkyrie to Loki’s right. Banner, Wanda. They all look up at each other.
Thor is gone. Not here.

Of course he’s gone. As he was supposed to.)

“So this is familiar,” Banner says, probably referring to the last time they time-travelled to New York. Or maybe the first time they were here, the actual past of 2012. Perhaps both. Loki’s heart beats harder at the thought of the latter - at what that entails, being in 2012.

Rogers huffs a short, breathless laugh. “Go to the Ancient One,” he then says to Banner. “You’ll meet yourself there. We’re in our own 2023 past, right; the ‘23 version of 2012. Choose the right time to interrupt. Okay?”

Then there’s a deathly shriek interrupting from above them and a Chitauri fighter jumps from a building, followed by another, and another - six in all.

Loki just glimpses Wanda’s magic flaring up, red around her fists - his stomach lurches as she raises them above her head, eyes gleaming, the force drawing in, holding back like a stretched elastic band, ready to shoot back out -

Then Strange snaps his fingers, and every Chitauri disappears through portals in the air on their way down.

One limb doesn’t quite make it and is cut off with the closing of the portal. Falling right on Strange’s shoulder, and the man actually gives a little squeak, jumping in the opposite direction and giving a full-body shudder to shake off the arm. That's what Loki thinks it is, anyway. It falls with a thump, and he is left with sticky, black residue on his shoulder. Which he magics away with a handwave, face contorted in a nose-wrinkle.

“Disgusting creatures,” he says. Loki unclenches his fists, realizing his seiðr is swirling around them, too, legs in a battle stance. His adrenaline is going crazy just being here.

Wanda almost looks disappointed, the energy seeping back in through her fingers.

“Okay,” Banner says, nodding back at Rogers. “I’ve got it. I’ve got this.” Then he runs off.

Strange disappears before their eyes. To follow Banner, one would hope; he’s part of that plan.

“Stark tower - let's go,” Valkyrie says; the plan they sketched up on the whiteboard. Wanda nods. Then they run out of the alley and into the street; her, Valkyrie, Rogers and Loki. Loki the furthest behind, his foot not hurting, necessarily, but making him slower than he otherwise would’ve been. He really should do something about that. He hasn't realised, having been in New Asgard only. He hasn't run in ages.

There's Chitauri everywhere. Destruction. Lifeless bodies, every now and again, humans carried away on stretchers. It all makes him want to puke.

Of course, they’ve barely run along the main street for a minute before his younger self flies above their heads and Loki's stomach jolts. He knows Romanoff is on the ground not far from here and hastily throws on a glamour, a disguise, just for good measure.

2012-Loki looks on the damn high-horse; he's definitely not hiding. Only his silhouette is visible from down on the ground but it’s straight-backed, chin raised. The leader of an army. (Or maybe that's just the horns, they really are so majestic), flying towards the tower to in a second be smashed incapacitated by the Hulk inside the penthouse.

That would be one of the few things Loki had actually done right that day; he shudders to think what
would’ve happened to him, had he actually won. Delivered the prize for Thanos. A prisoner of Sanctuary, bound by his own fear of death and that worse. A puppet forever.

The arrow is fired at the other Loki. It explodes, and he tumbles through the air and onto the platform far above. It’s for the best, anyway.

They make it to the foot of the tower, and everything there is chaos; civilians running, guided by police and they look *scared* - though, of course they're scared, their home is being demolished. Loki finds his gut in a permanent state of knotted tangles as they run, and when they stop, it feels like his body is still at it, heart pumping, blood rushing in his ears so the soundscape is blurred around him. Except for the Chitauri, their shrill, high pitched sounds standing out clear. Screams. No wonder, considering the place they come from, a place of almost constant screaming. It’s everywhere, almost like being back on Sanctuary (but he’s not) but it’s just so *lou* -

Valkyrie puts a hand on his shoulder and he startles, a little. “Are you okay?” she asks. He nods, blinking himself back. His breathing is harsh. He's so not in good shape.

He gulps in a breath of air. “Perfectly.”

None of the Midgardians takes notice of the small party of four, even if one of them is Captain America. Who sends Loki a strange look once he’s oriented himself and his eyes return to his companions.

“Is .. that your real hair colour?”

Loki smirks behind the braided beard he conjured up as disguise. He'd forgotten about that. The beard is prettier than Thor’s, more well-kempt. Not as long. He twirls a lock of ginger hair between his fingers. He made freckles, too, and imagines it must look quite cute.

*Imagines*, who is he kidding - he’s spent hours perfecting this particular disguise in the mirror.

“No, but it’s a good look, isn’t it?” He swings his head to his now fellow redhead. "Wanda, do you like it?"

She smiles.

“I do.”

“I can give you a beard, too, if you’d like.”

She grimaces. Valkyrie takes the word.

“Wanda, you have to keep an eye on Loki before he disappears - not you,” she adds with a nod to the *real* Loki. “The other Loki. Steve, your job is to get the sceptre. Want backup? Loki and I can split up, one with each of you.”

Steve narrows his eyes for a second, then says, “actually …” his eyes darting to Loki and glinting with *something*.

So now, Loki is going to be involved with a battle between three Captain Americas in skin-tight bodysuits *obviously* designed to enhance the trademark buttocks, and he really cannot claim to be despairing.
Valkyrie and Wanda press their watches and civilian clothing engulfs them; what they were wearing beneath the quantum-suits, and stay at ground level. To oversee the process of the Tesseract getting stolen. See if there’s anything they missed the last time.

Meanwhile, Loki and Rogers sneak into the tower.

They find 2023-Stark hiding, watching as 2012-Loki hauls his face off the floor, clumsily, pushing on the stairs to sit. Turning, to be faced with every original Avenger, weapons to his face. Loki remembers that. His magic had been busy mending his body together, more than a few bones to snap back into place, and he’d been so tired. Had known they would be coming for him. He’d lost.

He hadn’t been kidding about that drink. He would've done a lot of things for such a thing, at the time.

He watches from a hiding place behind 2023-Stark in his hiding place and notices Roger’s eyes on his dead friend’s past version. They don’t betray much specific emotion, but it’s definitely in there; missing his friend terribly. Just under the surface.

“If it’s all the same to you,” Loki hears and very nearly scoffs at the ridiculousness of it all. Both the half-joke, but also the entire situation - if the Avengers had only known the paradoxical nature of this entire scene. “I’ll have that drink now.”

“Alright, get him on his feet.”

He sees himself getting hauled up by the hand, body mending with his accelerated healing, 2012-Loki twitching with every piece of bone resetting itself. Luckily Thanos hadn't taken that ability from him. 2012-Loki's jaw is tense. Teeth clenched, holding back outbursts of distress.

At first, he can’t stand by himself, and Thor holds him harshly by the shoulders from the side. Both hands on the upper arms as 2012-Loki keeps his eyes locked on the floor. Thor doesn’t look at him, either.

The real Loki remembers that grip. There'd been so much anger, disappointment .. despair behind it. He remembers feeling like a stranger. Being a stranger.

He sees his past self keep his eyes down as his feet regain ground, legs re-learning to stand. He remembers the humiliation, barely being able to keep his breath coming into still-mending lungs, body shaking with the effort of staying upright, eyes watering from pain. The injuries Thor’s hands mercilessly dug into, like Loki had dug his knife into Thor’s stomach, earlier.

He notices 2012-Rogers sending a look at the trembling legs, a raised eyebrow and a mocking gleam to his expression. The shame that must be burning is in 2012-Loki is not visible anywhere but in his jaw clenching and in the glare he sends back to the Captain.

Present-Loki feels present-Rogers glancing at him, clearly having noticed the silent interaction. “I’m so sorry about that,” he says. His eyes look irritatingly sincere, which almost makes it all worse.

A minute later, Rogers walks past 2012-Loki who transforms to mimic him in a mocking impression, copying his words. “I’m not sorry about that,” present-Loki whispers, grinning at present-Captain who hits him lightly on the upper arm with a silent chuckle. He definitely deserved it. So solemn.

2012-Loki gets muzzled, is walked to the elevator.

The beast almost enters and Loki remembers the dulling indifference; as if the fear at the prospect of the beast entering was far away. A greyness, blurry tinge to everything. Sort of heavy, like he wasn’t all awake.
He’d lost. There was no use in the fear. He’d lost. He was going to be executed, anyway.

Loki shakes himself back into the present. The ‘present’.

That was then. He’s somewhere else, now, a different time and a different person. He’s learned, he’s changed.

He has.

(Has he, really?)

“I’ll be back in a moment,” he whispers to Rogers, who nods. Part of the plan; Loki needs to watch his other self teleport away. Watch the signature as it moves, just as a safety precaution. Then he’ll be back.

Also, it’s nice to be alone right now. And hidden from sight.

He speaks the spell to make himself invisible, two words, popping into the lobby. He lands by a wall by the elevator and leans on it for a second, catching his breath. The teleporting is taxing.

Then he spots the Valkyrie and Wanda standing around casually in their civilian clothing, then. Can see 2023-Stark in his costume by the secretary’s desk. So easy to recognize, absolutely incredible that no one did.

Then the elevator dings, and out prances 2012 Stark, Thor, Loki’s younger self, and a bunch of guards.

2012-Loki looks beaten and tired, but Loki thinks that he’s doing pretty good despite the odds. It’s a good outfit too.

He hears the Secretary demand that the prisoner be ‘handed over’ and remembers knowing that kind of face, cold and with that sadistic gleam; knowing what kinds of things they would do to Loki if he were ‘handed over’.

Then Thor says ‘uuuuuh no,’ and past-Loki rolls his eyes, secretly so relieved.

Then the chaos begins to unfold, and at least Loki’s alternate self is smart enough to grab the tesseract and flee from it. Away from all the drama, for once.

He’d thought he was ready for the axe, back then. Desired it, even. Given the chance, apparently, he’d been too much a coward.

He feels the magic swallow the body away. The trace of himself (not him) lingering in the air but really, dragging somewhere else. Far. He captures the feels of the spell, the connection, in his memory. It stays like an invisible line between him and the other Loki.

Just before he teleports back, he hears Thor’s panicked, breathless, “Where’s Loki -- Loki!”, and it rings in his ears. The despair of it.

Loki very nearly feels bad for this Thor.

(Who is he kidding. Of course, he feels bad.)

“Oh, thank God,” Rogers sighs as Loki pops back next to him.

“How about you thank me. I'm the one who's here.”

Rogers rolls his eyes. “You’re late. The other me is just about to get out of the elevator.”
Rogers nods at a glass-bridge (and isn’t *that* disconcerting, glass and bridge in the same word) which they’re hiding a little away from, behind a bunch of boxes. “The 2012-alter is on his way up the stairs on the other side of the bridge,” he says. There are, true enough, some stairs leading down on the other side.

“Do we have a plan?” Loki says. “Except for ‘get the sceptre’.”

“Confuse them. Stall. Then we take the sceptre at the right time. If we try talking sense, they’ll attack us first, ask later which we can’t risk.” His head swivels. “Here he comes -”

Present-Rogers absentmindedly throws a hand over Loki’s mouth to keep him silent, which Loki immediately pries off with his own fingers, glaring. He does stay mostly silent though, only whispering a barely audible spell to make them both invisible.

Being invisible is always a good element of confusion.

2023-Rogers appears from behind a corner, case in hand, and he trots right past them on his way to the bridge.

“Look at that,” present-Rogers murmurs to himself beside Loki, eyes fixed on his own backside, and Loki turns his face to look at him with a raised eyebrow. Rogers shrugs. “What can I say? God made me that way.” Loki snorts, quiet.

2023-Rogers is speaking lowly into his communicator, “Tony, what’s going on?” and looking right at where Loki and present-Rogers crouch. Good thing they’re invisible. And behind boxes. “Tell me you found that cube,” 2023-Roger continues, then looks up, coming to a halt. Faced with his own 2012-self in full America garb.

“Ah, you’ve *gotta* be shitting me.”

2012-Rogers presses a finger to the communicator in his ear.

“I have eyes on Loki,” he says. The embodiment of righteousness. “Fourteenth floor.”

Present-Rogers nudges Loki in the ribs.

“I’m not Loki,” 2023 Rogers begins to say, solemn, and Loki enjoys his own name being spoken so many times from the various Rogers’ mouths while he rises from the crouch, stepping out of hiding. His ankle clicks in the echoing glass-room.

“He really isn’t,” he calls just before 2023-Rogers is about to say something else, taking a few steps forward and releasing the invisibility spell. 2023-Rogers whirls to face him while the younger jumps at the sudden appearance. “I mean. Since *I’m here.*”

Both Rogers’ foreheads crease. “You don’t look like Loki,” the 2012-bastard says, and Loki realises he’s still wearing the glamour. What an anticlimax. The big reveal.

He sighs, dropping the beard and red hair for his own. “Better?”

“A little,” 2023-Rogers says, glancing at the other self behind him, who gives a nervous glare back. “You’re sort of .. skinny.”

Loki scowls.

He wants to shoot something hurtful back, but 2023-Rogers continues with, “you’re wearing the
quantum suit,” glancing at Loki’s garment. He looks Loki in the eyes, eyebrows pulled together.

The next moment, 2012-Rogers is charging forward, shield raised to attack his 2023 counterpart. Loki throws a force-field in his way, sending him flying backwards at the impact. He flinches as the person hits the glass bridge with a loud thud. But the glass doesn’t break.

“Damn magic,” 2012-Rogers complains from the ground, lifting his head to cast a dark glare in Loki’s direction. He eyes the forcefield, still up to prevent him from charging again.

“Are you here for the sceptre?” he asks.

And then, to make everything even more chaotic and wonderful, present-2027-Rogers steps out from behind the hiding of boxes, and Loki turns to cast off the invisibility. Rogers is wearing a phenomenally toothy smirk that looks so wrong on his own face, and he drawls, “but that’s not Loki. I am.”

The real Loki smirks, back turned to the other two Rogers’. Inspired by the Captain’s improv, he shifts both their appearances with a wave of his hand hidden neatly in front of himself, away from the others’ sight.

To his delight, present-Rogers mimics the hand-wave, visible for the others as if he’s the one doing the spell.

The next moment, Loki looks like present-Rogers, and present-Rogers looks like Loki’s 2012-self. With the golden armour and all; just to give a guy the full experience.

Loki’s own experience is not so bad, either. The confidence really does surge, not least from the fact of the added muscles and worldly confirmed good looks.

Lastly, he glamours the bewildered 2023-Rogers to mimic Loki’s appearance at the time around Ragnarok. One of his better Sakaar outfits, if he may say so himself, that Thor sadly never got to see - all gold and blue with green embroidering, a lot of satin and chiffon. Very flowy.

2023-Rogers looks down on himself, realising what’s happened. He turns to present Rogers, who he apparently believes to be the real Loki after their little spell trick.

“Don’t you dare,” he says, his voice sounding like Loki, hoisting up in the case in his hand. The blue satin flows and gets in the way, and irritated, Sakaar-Rogers-Loki from 2023 flaps it out of the way.

“That does look heavy, Captain,” Rogers says with Loki’s face, nodding at the case. “Want me to take it off your hands?”

“You stay back,” 2023-Rogers says, warning.

“You’re all Loki,” 2012-Rogers says, on his feet again and taking a fighting stance. The middle one takes a step back from him, looking torn between the duo of his older self and 2012-Loki who looked like himself just a minute ago or his younger self, ready to punch them all; which one is the worse option.

“I’m not,” Loki says in Rogers’ voice, just as Rogers in the Sakaar outfit and Loki’s body says the exact same thing. That’s nice and confusing.

“Turn. me. back,” Rogers from 2023 says to 2027-Rogers, who sighs, shaking his (Loki’s) head.

“Fine,” he sighs in Loki’s voice, going on to use Loki’s words. “It was only a little jest - norns, some
people just can’t take any fun.”

Then he waves his hand as if doing a spell and Loki does the same hidden behind his back, turning Sakaar-Loki back into his rightful self, 2023-Rogers.

2012-Rogers’s face hardens. To hide impending confusion, would be Loki’s guess.

“Give me the case, Loki,” he says, eyes flickering between the three others, obviously not sure who’s who, “and no one will get hurt.”

Present-Rogers smirks with Loki’s mouth, and jeez, Loki never knew he could act like this. Or is he really that much of a stereotype? “Oh honey,” Rogers says with a low, almost seductive tone to Loki’s voice. It very nearly makes the real Loki blush. “Keep telling yourself that.”

2012-Rogers’s face tightens impossibly further.

The real Loki in the look of present-Rogers takes a step forward with his palms raised, slow movement, making his face go solemn as he’s so often seen the Captain do.

“Listen,” he says. “I’m from 2027. Natasha and Tony are gone. I’m here to save them, but I need the Mind stone. Loki has been following me around, shifting our appearances and teleporting me around but I’m me, now. I just need the stone.”

2023-Rogers says, “that’s exactly the kind of thing Loki would say,” narrowing his eyes. “Especially a Loki from the future. Are you hijacking our time heist?”

“Time heist?” 2012-Rogers asks, breathless and so adorably confused. “Future?”

“I’m not Loki, I swear,” Loki swears. “His illusions aren’t solid, right? Throw something at me, you’ll see.”

And he would never ask anyone to throw something at him. So that should prove to the others that he’s not Loki.

Well he is. But.

An amplified voice speaks out from the open space in the gigantic room surrounding the bridge, “I can throw something at you,” and the red Iron Man comes flying up by the edge of the bridge. “That wasn’t part of the plan.

His repulsors charge and Loki only barely gets up a shield in front of himself and present-Rogers who looks like him to block them both. The blasts explode off of them in a ruckus of sound and light, sending a crack through the bridge.

“I meant some paper or something,” Loki cries with Roger’s voice, throwing his arms over his head. “Maybe the case, or - wait!” he shouts as the repulsors charge again, throwing up another force-field. This one reaching all the way around them, including 2023-Rogers with the sceptre. Loki eyes the crack in the glass they’re all standing on. Another blast and it’ll break.

There are people behind him, he can feel. Their signatures. The Spider, it must be, and her Hawk. Thor isn’t there.

The repulsors stop charging.

“Do you want to keep this going,” the Iron Man calls, “until you drain of those fairy dust shields? Or
the bridge breaks?” The mask turns to look directly at 2023-Rogers. “Or, Loki-Doki, do you want to hand over the sceptre to the grown-ups?”

“I’m not Loki,” 2023-Rogers laments.

Tony Stark’s mask flicks up, suit still hovering in the air, and his eyes wander between the four figures with a frown. “Yeah, who is Loki? Cap, where are you? Really?”

“Here!” Loki and 2012-Rogers both say. The latter swears, and Loki copies it.

“What’s going on,” 2012-Rogers cries.

“Just knock them all out, Tony!” Loki hears Romanoff call from behind him, walking out from her hiding, and sees present-Rogers stiffen at the voice. “We can take care of this mess in a cell, later.”

“What if he shows up another shield,” the Iron Man calls back. “Or a dragon? I don’t want to start a magic fight in my tower!”

“Just break the bridge!”

“I don’t especially want to break my bridge!”

The 2023-Captain’s eyes settle on Rogers-who-looks-like-Loki. The 2012-version of Loki. “Why do this whole show of mimicking me? What’s in it for you?”

Present-Rogers blinks himself back, refabricating the confidence he lost at Romanoff’s voice and plastering on a new smirk. Such an act.

Stark and Romanoff stop bickering when he speaks.

“Why, Captain,” Rogers says in Loki’s voice, with Loki’s mouth and in a perfect drawl. He takes four long, elegant strides forward (and where did he learn to move his hips like that?) to stand right in front of his 2023-self, who draws back, frowning at the sudden closeness, but not attacking. Yet. He holds the case behind himself, away from the ‘Loki’ in front of him.

“It’s just because I think you’re so cute,” 2027-Rogers whispers, and it is so near a moan Loki’s own knees honestly get a little weak.

Rogers reaches out to caress his own cheek with a soft, loose-wristed (Loki’s) hand.

The 2023-Captain does draw back, then, looking appalled and more than a little confused.

“- wait!” the 2012-Captain, Stark and Romanoff shout at the same time, 2012-Cap throwing himself forward, but it’s too late: Loki has taken the moment of weakness and harnessed it, materializing with a teleporting spell behind the 2023-Captain and yanking the box with the sceptre out of his momentarily slack grip. He changes back to his own 2027 appearance, this time his own armour, and watches his own 2012 false look shimmer away to present-Rogers who grimaces, just managing to utter a ‘sorry’, repulsors charging and firing, an arrow flying and Romanoff throwing herself forward just before Loki teleports them both away.

They re-materialize onto the pavement in an alley beside Stark Tower and burst out laughing. It’s raining, heavily, and thunder sounds in the distance. Loki can feel the sceptre humming inside the case, and there’s no need to open it and check. He has no doubt in his mind that it’s there.

He rolls onto his back, holding his shaking stomach.
“Because. You’re just. So. Cute!” he sputters, wiping rain from his face.

Loki glances at Rogers, still laughing. He’s sitting leaned against a brick wall, head tipped back and held in his hands, shaking from laughter.

“You totally think so,” he gets out between cackles.

The laughing dies down, as such things do, and it’s almost .. sad. Or more like heavy, grey as the water crashing down while reality does the same.

Loki hadn’t laughed like that in years.

Rogers says, “Don’t think I haven’t seen you checking out my ass,” smirking at Loki, and a little of the weight lifts again. “I mean. Not that I blame you.”

Loki scoffs softly. “Who wouldn’t,” he mutters, getting to his feet and brushing water off his leathers.

They make their way back towards Stark Tower.

“We need a disguise,” Rogers says over the rain. The streets are devoid of people in the storm.

“Yes.”

And the next moment, shimmering into existence are two friends walking side by side, both in cardigans and summer dresses with very low cuts.

The one with raven black hair is carrying a Versace purse with a little, yellow gem fastened in the buckle.

They also both have enormous breasts.

Rogers looks down. Then he lifts his gaze to scowl at Loki. His long, blonde hair is already sticking to his face with rain. “Make me a man,” he says.

“Oh, come on. It’ll do you some good to be put in someone else’s shoes - not literally, be happy I didn’t put you in heels,” he says, as his own Louis Vuitton clack loudly against the pavement. “I really should’ve put you on your period. It’s horrible.”

Rogers frowns, glancing down. “They’re heavy,” he says. Loki shrugs.

“It’s a real issue. People get back problems.”

Rogers buttons the cardigan up, crossing his arms in front of himself, and Loki materializes a pair of stockings on him. Just for his modesty’s sake, if he cares so much.

They just make it inside the building, the door shutting behind them before it flies right open again and Thor literally flies into the room, nearly knocking over Loki in the process before he lands dripping wet on the floor, Mjölnir in hand. Past-Stark and the secretary were arguing and both sigh, now, turning to face Thor.

“I can’t find him,” Thor growls, backed up by a clap of thunder outside. Loki shudders. The despair is obvious underneath the fury, and it’s almost unbearable to hear his brother sound this lost. Not like Loki hasn’t heard it before, just .. it’s been a while since this particular disappointment has surfaced, last.
He snaps himself out of the stupor of staring heedlessly at his past brother, ushering him and Rogers to a couple of couches. Rogers keeps glancing to Stark as he’s dragged along.

They sit down. Loki almost would wish he had some popcorn. Someone unimportant moves in his way so he can’t see Thor, and he repositions on the couch, irritated.

“Something strange is going on!” Thor booms.

“It’s not so strange, is it, Thor,” Stark snarls, clearly at his very last straw. “This is sort of what your brother does. Haven’t you read your own mythology? To be honest, it baffles me that you’ve ever trusted him with anything at all; everyone else knows .”

“But - how, I don’t understand when he had time to think out this ploy, he'd lost, he could barely stand -”

“I mean, these myths have been around since forever .”

“First the problem with your heart machine, it must’ve been him, or someone -”

“My reactor can’t be hacked, I told you, that’s impossible .”

“And then Loki disappears with the Tesseract, now the sceptre -”

“Something weird is going on!” Steve Rogers of 2012 declares, barging in, still in the full-blown America gear. Helmet and all.

And he looks sour.

“Yes, thank you very much, Old Glory, we know,” Stark says, and Loki can feel the real Rogers shift on the couch beside him.

The funny thing about lounging in the sofas while drama unfolds - well, Loki lounges and Rogers looks uncomfortable, Loki imagines partly because of his form and partly because his deceased friend is alive and hale in front of him - is that Strange, Valkyrie and Wanda are standing at the opposite side of the room, right across from them, and they have no idea that the lovely ladies in the sofas are really their very own Captain America, and the Avengers’ former archenemy. Loki could swear he sees Valkyrie checking him out a few times.

They agreed to meet here, after, in case the 2012-people suspect anything. To see what they would do, if it would interfere with their own plan. Turns out, they all suspect something.

“So now Loki has both the Tesseract and the Sceptre, and is off who knows where -”

“They’re from the future,” 2012-Rogers says.

“The future!” Tony Stark shouts to the ceiling, a distinct whine to the words. “I hate this I hate this I hate this!”

The 2012-Avengers eventually agree to meet up to discuss strategy (and have Shawarma brought out), after they’ve found a way to get the Hulk back to Banner. For now, he’s subdued in the corner of the room, sulking. They’re all sulking in various degrees.

Loki can’t help but feel a teeny bit smug at that. It doesn’t bother him to see the heroes lose to his wit, for once.

It doesn’t hurt, either, the fact that the Loki in this timeline won’t have to face the humiliation of
being duct taped to a chair in a Shawarma restaurant for an hour while his captivators feast before him.

The lobby is still filled with people and employees, allowed to stay in there because of the rain and despite the security breach. Once the Secretary and Stark have left with the Hulk in tow, Thor flown out to keep looking for his lost brother, Loki nudges Rogers to get up from the couch. He traipses across the room, himself, slithering elegantly in between groups of people and making sure to work his hips in the walk. Just a little.

“Like what you see?” he asks, coming up to the Valkyrie. Making his voice a little lower, she'll like that. She stands leaning sideways against a wall and raises her eyebrows at him, letting her gaze wander down and up his body. He smiles sweetly.


Loki feels his own face fall. “You know it’s me,” he says.

“You look like yourself.” She looks at him with a smirk. "Don't worry, Loki. You're still strapping.”

That does make sense -- while Rogers’ look is a glamour, Loki shapeshifted himself, just because it’s easier. He just thought … since she’s never seen him do that ...

Rogers walks, or stumbles, up to them. “Jeez, there are so many people in here,” he says, and his voice is high pitched and very female. Valkyrie snorts, and Loki can’t help a smile.

Rogers scowls at them. “We don’t have a lot of time. Let's get out of here.”

“Strange should be here in a moment.” Valkyrie waves at Wanda who walks over.

“..Loki?” Wanda asks, eyebrows knitting together as she looks him in the eyes, then looking up and down Rogers, gaze lingering on the chest before she snaps herself out of it, looking at his face. “..Steve?”

Rogers sighs. It sounds so soft. “We just needed a disguise. Loki’s work.”

Loki wolf-whistles under his breath, turning his head to look Rogers up and down. “And beautiful work, isn’t it?”

Then suddenly Strange is there with a ‘hi’. Everyone startles. He gestures a hand. Next thing, they’re landing feet-first in a grassy field, no civilisation in sight.

Valkyrie and Rogers both fall to the ground, legs buckling in surprise, while Loki and Wanda stay up. Valkyrie curses under her breath while Rogers gets to his feet.

“I'm going back to Banner,” Strange hurries to say. “We haven’t gotten the chance to talk to the Ancient One, yet. But soon.” He looks around, as if checking where they are. If they’re being watched. Then he looks back at them. “Find the other Loki. We have a deadline, remember.”

Strange disappears again.

“Loki?” Valkyrie says, turning to him. “Can you track the other you?”

The connection is clear as day in Loki’s mind. His own signature could never be shielded from his own energy. “Easily.”
She smirks. “Let’s go get the son of a bitch, then.”

They enlarge the spaceship Valkyrie brought in miniature with the Pym tech.

“The Commodore?” Loki groans as the candy-striped craft comes into view. “Are you serious?”

She shrugs, walking towards it. “It’s the only one I had on hand.”

“Loki,” the Captain says as Loki is walking up the ramp. He turns to Rogers who is gesticulating at himself with a hand. “Could you …?” he wiggles his fingers.

Loki snorts. Then wiggles his fingers.

The Captain shimmers and turns back into himself with a heavy sigh. “Thank you,” he groans, rolling his shoulders back. Loki shifts back into his male form, as well. Just because it makes more sense in this particular setting.

Inside, Loki takes the co-pilot’s seat, sitting down gingerly. He side-eyes Valkyrie as she flops in the pilot’s. She notices.

“What?”

He shrugs, looking out the front. “Nothing of importance.”

She looks at him for a moment. Then concludes, “you and Gast fucked in this chair, didn’t you.”

“I wouldn’t say that chair only,” he replies, still looking out the window, a smirk growing on his face.

“Man, I’m glad I had this thing cleaned,” she mumbles, booting up the ship. “Buckle up, kids,” she calls. “We’re leaving Midgard!”

“Midgard,” Loki hears Steve echo to himself as he’s buckling his seatbelt, a smile in his voice. He looks back to see him sitting behind Valkyrie’s seat, Wanda behind Loki’s. He gives them a smile, and he isn’t sure why, and turns back to the window. It’s something about being about to take off, he thinks. It feels like ages since he was last flying - he hasn’t turned into anything with wings for years.

“What are you looking so smug for,” Valkyrie grumbles, revving up the engine. He quickly wipes off the smile for a more usual, neutral expression.

"I'm not."

She scoffs. “You can have fun, you know, Lackey,” she says. “I wasn’t telling you not to.”

She pulls a lever, and then they’re off. Rising in an almost vertical line towards the atmosphere of Earth. They can barely feel the shift of gravity with how fast it’s going.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I love all of you peeps! <3
I'm playing with pacing. Hoping that's okay. I'm learning a lot, anyway. It doesn't mean this is going to be fast-paced forever - I'm really trying to find some kind of balance :)

See you soon! The next one is gonna be a long one, I think
Here's the Fall (time, pt 2/2)

Chapter Summary

So. We're time-travelling! Loki came back from the dead, he's not been doing so well, Thor is trying to take care of him in New Asgard. Thor is better with the drinking but still has his issues. They're trying to resurrect the fallen Avengers with magic and infinity stones.

Here's a damn long chapter!

Chapter Notes

**Warnings for:** injury, profound suicidal tendencies & a minor character death. Please tread carefully, always feel free to message me if you would like to know more details before reading. Remember to **take care of yourself** 😊

I always feel like everything could be made more elegant when I'm posting a chapter. Like I want to rewrite the entire thing, delete every passage and write new ones instead. But then, I am where I am with writing, and it won't necessarily get better with me nitpicking or changing stuff. Just a little disclaimer, here, that I needed to share! x) I'm just going to share this as it is, rather than spending a shitton of energy trying to edit and change things till I get blind to whether anything even works at all, I don't think that's what I'm supposed to do right now ... maybe more in future stories. Anyway, it's such a huge gift to get to share this with you amazing readers. I'm learning so damn much. Thank you all immensely, it means ... a whole lot to me.

Last thing, I've only watched endgame like .. once, and then clips here and there. So my facts might be off. But who CARES XD

Thor lands on the desolate rock of Morag, and his brother is gone.

As Loki was supposed to be.

They get Clint and Quill sent off to Vormir. Quill says “don’t hit me too hard,” with a self-deprecating smile before disappearing up the ramp.

Thor, Rocket, Rhodey and Hope collect the stone. Rhodey knows just how to do it - fishing a tool from Quills jacket (after hitting him .. pretty hard), retrieving the orb containing the Power gem out of its protection mechanism with a fire poker he brought.

Rhodey sends himself back to the present. It’s better like that; the stone being secured. Besides, three people are more than enough for a mission to retrieve the Reality stone. “Thanks for the trip, guys,” he says with a little smile. “Can’t claim I’m upset about getting to go home first.” He pauses. Sighs, eyebrows pulled together. “Good luck, anyway.”
Then he disappears.

They diminish the spaceship again with the shrinking tech, and with their hands on Thor’s shoulders, he transports himself, Hope and Rocket to a habitable planet neighbouring Knowhere.

They land in the outer banks, appearing in a flash of coloured light in a dirty street, dust clouding the air, receiving more than a few odd looks from the city residents. It’s dark again as soon as the flash disappears, though, which means they can easily slip into shadows by the walls. According to Loki the team of Sif and Volstagg should be arriving on this planet tomorrow by ship. It’s a low exposure mission, highly secretive. Not going straight to the goal.

Thor, Hope and Rocket stay at an inn, taking turns sleeping. Hope is tense as a bowstring, and doesn’t talk much. Rocket talks a lot, at first, about all sorts of ridiculous things but quiets down gradually. Eventually takes his turn of sleeping and quiets.

When morning comes, at the very first light, they go out to search for breakfast, neither of the really having slept very much. They find a mush resembling porridge, with only a faint scent and made from something like yam. Rocket will eat anything, but even Hope and Thor are on board with this. It tastes alright.

Thor wonders if they have anything to sustain themselves on, on the 2012 team.

Next, they go to a tavern. The tavern Loki had arranged for Sif and Volstagg to meet a local; someone discreet, a friend of his who could take them to Knowhere without fuss. And in exchange for a substantial value of currency.

When Thor is about to call for the barkeep and order a third beer, Rocket puts his paw on Thor’s hand, keeping Thor from raising it.

“Maybe not today, buddy,” he says. Thor glares at him for a moment, but then sighs, giving it up. Rocket is right.

Hope is funny, they learn. Really funny, a quirky, absurd sense of humour, and she throws in these dry comments every now and again that are just so over the top. Maybe it’s the oddness of the situation making everything a lot more surrealistic but they manage to ease the tension despite the wait, and it turns companionable. They laugh, if aware of keeping their voices hushed. It’s nice.

Until the door opens, and two of Thor’s best friends, one of whom is dead in the present, walk in.

There’s nothing he can do for Volstagg, Thor reminds himself. The stones had nothing to do with his death.

That doesn’t do anything for the grief like a stone in his throat.

Thor and Sif lock eyes, and hers widen. She punches Volstagg on the upper arm to get his attention. Thor can feel his own eyes rising with tears. He has seen Sif, recently, but seeing two of his oldest friends together again …

“What are you doing here,” Sif hisses, taking his upper arm as he stands up.

“Keep your voice down, Sif, anyone could -”

“But who are these people, Thor, you aren’t supposed to -”

“Sif,” Thor says. “We need to go somewhere more private.” He can already feel eyes of curious
strangers on them.

“We have to meet someone here,” Sif whispers. “Not you, by the way.”

“I know. I promise you, it’ll all make sense in a minute.”

She glares at him. Then huffs. “Fine. Outside, then.”

She leads the way to an alley. It’s daytime, but the sun is clouded behind the smoke constantly lingering in the city. Like very literal clouds, and everything is cast in a dim grey.

“You shouldn’t know about this mission,” she hisses.

“Good to see you, Thor,” Volstagg says with an apologetic grimace, and Thor can barely get himself to meet his friend’s eyes.

“And why do you look like this? What in the Norns has happened - why are you crying, Odin’s ravens, Thor - explain yourself!”

He wipes his eyes. Looks at Volstagg. “It’s good to see you, too, my friend,” he says.

“Thor,” Sif hisses, and he looks back at her. Her gaze is fiery. “How do you know about this? It is business strictly between the Allfather, Volstagg, and I.”

Thor sighs. “Because Loki told me. I know because he told me.”

Sif pauses, her forehead furrowing.

“Thor, you do know,” she says, voice softer. Hesitates. “You do recall that Loki is -”

“Dead, yes,” he interrupts. “Except he’s not. He didn’t die.”

“What are you talking about?”

Thor scoffs to himself, glancing away. His jaw is clenched. “I saw him die, but he didn’t die, and I don’t know how or why because he won’t ever talk to me about things, any things.” He bites down on the frustration. Pausing to regain the thread. “He overpowered the Allfather. Odin is on Midgard, imprisoned with a spell.”

“He’s not ..” Sif begins. Sighs. “My prince, I’m sorry but you must be imagining things. I just talked to the Allfather a few days ago, and Loki is -”

“You talked to Loki,” Thor interrupts. “He’s parading as the Allfather with glamours. He will continue to do so for four years without my noticing.”

“What are you saying - did you have a vision again?”

“No. I travelled here, from 2027. Because I need the Infinity Stone you bear.”

Sif stiffens. “I bear no such thing.”

“The Aether. Sif ..” he sighs. “I have a chance at saving - saving friends I lost, but we need the stones. We’ve travelled back in time to get them.”

“You’re - you’re travelling in time ..” She shakes her head, snapping herself out of the stupor. “Thor,
I can’t give it to you. Especially not when you’re acting like this - it all sounds completely delusional, you must realise. I, I understand, your grief must be -"

“I can show you,” Thor interrupts. Sif frowns. Hope shifts behind Thor, reading his intention before Sif understands.

“What?”

“I can show you that I’m speaking the truth. That Loki sits on the throne of Asgard right this second.” He shrugs, corners of his mouth tugging down. “I should wish to speak to my brother, anyway."

He looks around at their companions. Rocket and Hope. Volstagg. Asks with a humourless, wide grin, “anyone fancy a ride to Asgard?”, lifting up Stormbreaker.

Rocket grimaces, taking a hesitant step forward. “Buddy …”

“Thor, do you really think,” Hope tries. Pauses. “We only have a day left.”

“An entire day.” Thor shoots back, smiling wider. He still doesn’t feel it in his eyes.

Hope sighs.

They land in the courtyard by a large, round fountain. Just like last he visited Asgard in another time, Thor is hit hard by grief and longing first thing.

Mother is the initial, desperate thought that pops into his head.

But she’s not here.

The sun is shining and he feels like a child again; like he wants to go out and spar, or on a trip with his friends, he wants to visit the local pub instead of going to lessons, to sit by the coast in merry company and drink wine; except nothing of this is right. Nothing is his.

Thor catches Volstagg looking at him with a frown and quickly schools his expression back to neutral.

“The Allfather has been secluded, lately, due to his grief,” Sif says. “Which we all respect, of course.” Her expression is hard. “He might be in his study.”

He isn’t in his study, though; they find Odin in the throne room.

It’s empty when they enter, except for the lone figure at the far end, on the large, golden dais. Sitting with their head resting in one hand, arm on the golden lean of the throne and looking to be … asleep.

“Good day, father,” Thor booms through the hall, and the figure on the throne flinches, startling awake. It’s so easy to read Loki in that jumbled movement. Thor wonders if it would be if you thought you were looking at a grief-stricken king.

Odin readjusts himself on the throne. He looks tired, even with the glamour.

“What is this?” he calls, his voice Odin’s. “You bring back my trusted deputies already? And with the stone still on you, I see.” His eyes are on Sif’s satchel. Almost greedy in their desire, though his
tone implies dissatisfaction. “Who are these friends you bring? One a walking *animal*, I see?”

The tone is derisive and Rocket’s hackles rise. He glares, fists clenching, but, thankfully, doesn’t say anything. Thor specifically instructed them not to.

‘*Let me handle my brother*’.

“They are companions of mine,” Thor says, voice conversational but with an ominous hint of firmness underneath. Odin repositions on the throne, expression wary; perhaps taken aback at Thor’s cavalier attitude. “I am afraid I had to interrupt the mission of Lady Sif and the good Volstagg, yes, for there were more important matters to see to with the Reality stone.” Odin twitches. Which Odin would never do. “You yourself agree with me; I would know for a fact. Father,” he adds, just a second too late. On purpose, of course.

Odin’s eyes narrow on Thor, who’s halfway through the hall, close enough for them to better see each other. Odin looks at the beard, the Midgardian clothes.

“My boy,” he says. “I am afraid know not what you speak of. I do wonder what brings you here, in direct defiance of your King’s orders to his loyals - and in such a state, too. What *have* you been up to, Thor, you look absolutely -”

His gaze settles on Thor’s eyes and he trails off; the party of five is close enough by now for him to be able to make out that it isn’t really Thor’s eye. Maybe it’s the colour - maybe it’s just the fact that it’s different, something is different.

It’s as if something clicks in Loki’s mind. The changes, how different Thor looks, the borderline threatening riddles in which he speaks. The way he’s been sauntering with a knowing very-nearly-smirk across the hall. The eyes that don't match. The long-healed wound turned to scar-tissue around the new eye.

Odin gets up from his chair, too swift for the old body - and bolts. *Sprinting* down the steps and into the nearest corridor. Too quick for a King nearing the six thousand.

Thor honestly doesn’t mind having this confrontation again.

He sets into a sprint, too. Can already see Loki faltering up ahead in the corridor, slowing down as if weakened. That would explain him *sleeping* on the throne.

They’ve never really talked about it, he and future-Loki; and so it feels like it never did get settled. Thor thinking his brother dead, only to find him *eating grapes* four years later. He hasn’t had a chance to say it, and he hasn’t had a chance to hear Loki’s side of the story. Maybe then he could actually forgive Loki, or himself, or both of them.

Loki turns left, towards the stairs leading down and outside. He looks over his shoulder and that unadulterated fear looks too young on the Allfather’s face. *Not the Allfather*, Thor reminds himself for the umpteenth time. *Not father*.

He knows where Loki is headed by the turn of the corridors, and yet he knows not why. He’s only steps behind his brother, catching up, Loki panting harshly. There’s an odd sort of wet rasp to the breathing, evident in the quiet of only footsteps ringing in the empty halls.

Loki pushes open the door to the Queen’s Gardens.

He doesn’t stop. Keeps running, straight towards the fall of water and Thor realises with a jolt of his heart that Loki is going for the *edge* -
Thor is quicker, tackling his brother from behind before he can jump. Into the roaring water and sharp cliffs beneath.

Loki cries out as they tumble to the ground in a mess of limbs. Not just in shock, but a cry of pain, *agony*, and Thor isn’t sure if it’s mental or physical or both. He immediately releases some strength of his grip at the sound, not wanting to injure further or upset Loki, but Loki takes the opportunity to try and squirm free, elbowing frantically in direction of the fall, and Thor has to grab him again, haul him back.

He puts his little brother on his back in the grass, Loki shouting and yelling. Thor holds his shoulders down, sitting across Loki’s stomach with a knee on either side.

The glamour is flickering with the fight - one moment there is Odin, glaring hatefully at Thor, the next is Loki, face turned and twisted in agony, eyes squeezed shut and tears coating his cheeks, something odd and wrong but there’s not enough time to point out what; then Odin again, the old king; then Loki, in pain; Odin, unharmed. An absurd, surreal flicker, changing even the body underneath him from Odin’s harsh metal armour to soft cloth and leather and - something warm, wet. He looks down, and there’s dark red on his pants now seeping through both the alternating armour and green cloth; a spreading patch on Loki’s middle.

“Loki, stop, STOP,” he shouts over Loki’s now endless and bordering senseless curses and insults (“You goat, you stupid, blithering and ungrateful, big worm, I hate you, Thor, so damn almighty -- well you're not, you're not worthy of anything, if only you had never been born - “) and the glamour finally flickers, leaving his little brother as himself - except too pale, limp under Thor’s arms and with tears running sideways from his eyes, droplets jumping when he jerks his head in feeble escape-attempts. There are black tendrils reaching from underneath his shirt, up through his collar and over his jaw. Like rot, spreading as tar in water.

The weeping stops abruptly as Loki's head drops back and he screams out in frustration, shrill and bone-chilling.

“Let me go, let me go,” he cries. He shifts from incoherent to livid, glaring at Thor with fiery eyes, hissing, “let me go.”

Thor is dimly aware of his friends watching from the sidelines, Sif with a hand over her mouth, but his attention is on his brother.

He would half expect Loki to have shapeshifted by now; to something small or slimy to escape Thor's grip, but it hits him that Loki probably can't.

“You’re bleeding, Loki,” Thor says.

“I know,” Loki snarls, fighting. Thor holds him fast. “Just let me go -- you’re hurting me!”

Thor moves off and Loki goes eerily still in the process - but Thor keeps holding his brother’s hands locked together over his head. So when Loki moves for the waterfall again, stumbling to get to his feet, Thor yanks him back, getting to his feet clumsily. It's all very chaotic, the movements, like a badly orchestrated dance. Stumbling and yanking, falling over their own feet. Chaotic, clumsy and dead-frightening.

He holds 2014-Loki out by the shoulders. Squeezing the flesh in his grip. Here, solid. Thor's hands are shaking, he registers distantly.

“Don’t do that,” he says, trying to keep his own voice steady and failing. “Please. Loki. Brother. Don't do that.”
Loki’s gaze is hateful but his lower lip is quivering. Thor keeps looking at him, breathing hard. Afraid. At a loss.

*Don't drop him. Don't you dare.*

*Not this time.*

Thor tightens his hold further. Swallows, trying to search out the answers he's missing from his little brother's eyes. *What can I do?*

Loki's eyes are filling quickly with tears and flickering, not really seeing. He bows his head, face becoming obscured by strands of greasy, black hair. Not just from the oil he's always used to slick it back, no, actually greasy. He looks like he hasn't bathed for weeks. Smells like it, too. Then his legs buckle, a gradual process of giving up, and Thor keeps the descend to the ground controlled. Managing Loki to his knees instead of letting him crumble entirely.

He asks Sif for the shackles they brought and cuffs Loki’s wrists behind his back while his brother stays still, held upright mostly by Thor’s grip on his arms.

“Come now,” Thor says, moving one hand to Loki’s shoulder. His voice is hoarse.

He doesn't know what to do with this - it's as if he's been given a second chance. As if he's back on the broken Bifrost and has managed to haul Loki up onto the bridge instead of seeing him fall; as if he's saved Loki from the Void and his own mind. A second chance. And now, Thor is in the aftermath - he just doesn't know how you're supposed to handle an actively suicidal little brother.

Loki tried to jump. Over the edge.

He knows what would happen, he knows the risk.

He tried to jump and Thor caught him. He caught him, this time.

There's a growing patch of dark red on Loki’s shirt and it’s making Thor heart clump in his throat. "Loki, your wound ..."

“Who are you,” Loki replies in ask, voice choked and still not raising his head. His eyes are open now, flickering wildly on the ground. A droplet falls from them into the grass.

“You know me.”

“You’re not *my* Thor.” Loki’s breath catches, then releases again. “He swore to kill me. He swore it.”

“He didn’t mean it.”

*Snivel.* “So you're from the future, then.”

“Yes.”

“That’s how you knew.”

"Let's get you to a healer."

Loki ignores him. "That's cheating," he mumbles. "You knew already, that was cheating."

Thor sighs. "Brother, you need to see a healer.”
Loki takes a shuddering breath and it sounds as if there’s not quite enough air in it for him. “Did I survive this the last time?”

It’s an honest question. Thor doesn’t understand how Loki can both so obviously fear to die and then seek it so directly at the very same time.

“..you did.”

Loki takes another breath. Wraps his arms around his middle as if to hold it in place. “Then I’ll survive just fine again.”

Thor pauses. “Your magic isn’t working.”

“Just leave me be, Thor. Throw me in my cell.” Snivel. “I don’t care.”

“Yes, you do.”

Thor feels a hand on his shoulder. He looks up to see Sif’s face, hollow with anguish and betrayal. “Thor, what’s happening?” she asks.

“He’s wounded,” Thor says. “From Svartalfheim. I - never knew it was this bad, I always thought ...” he trails off. "He's wounded," he finishes meekly.

It’s not what she asked. But she says, anyway, looking at the shaking, pale and diminished form of Thor’s brother, “he needs a healer.”

“Loki,” Thor says, releasing one hand from his brother’s shaking shoulders and undoing the top button on his tunic. Immediately, Loki’s head snaps up and he jerks away. Thor’s grip still doesn’t falter.


“Do you want the others to leave?”

“I don’t want you to look - I told you, it’s fine!”

Suddenly, his eyes get glassy as if all energy left with the outburst. Like a veil falling in front of his irises. Loki blinks, quiet for a second or two; then his eyes roll upwards and he tumbles forward into Thor. Completely limp. He lands awkwardly, arms bent at strange angles against Thor’s stomach, forehead heavy against his chest and lolling sideways. Very, very unconscious.

That’s really becoming a habit.

Thor lifts his brother gingerly up in his arms, and Loki doesn’t stir, following like a cloth toy. Or a dead animal, heavy in Thor’s arms, limbs flailing uselessly in the air, bleeding. Bleeding. He’s breathing, though, and there’s a definite pulse in his wrist.

Thor looks briefly at Sif while he carries the unconscious Loki past the group to hurry towards the healing rooms. Her eyes are difficult to read.

The wound must’ve sprung back open in the struggling. Or maybe the healing regressed because Loki was expending too much energy running and panicking.
Thor wouldn't know. He doesn’t know anything.

Loki’s face is slack and looks so young in sleep when Thor looks down, mouth hanging open a little. He can’t help feeling like a small boy, the first time he ever held his little brother. His secret brother, the pregnancy kept from everyone because of the risks of the war, his special brother. Not even Thor had known that a brother was on his way. The special baby in Thor’s gentle arms. So careful not to drop the fragile, tiny Ás.

It feels like that. Like if he drops Loki, now, his brother will shatter, the back of his head will cave in and he’ll die. He’ll die - he’ll die if Thor drops him.

“He needs blood,” Eir says once Loki is lying on a bed inside the healing rooms. It’s white with wooden panels running along the ceiling, the floor shining. It smells sterile and clean in there. Some other healers remove Loki’s shirt and Thor has the distinct urge to vomit. He doesn’t, though, frozen with his eyes on Loki’s middle; the large, heavily infected, dark red, sickly yellow and black wound, the black spreading up to his face and down across his stomach. How hasn’t Thor noticed that? There must be some scarring left behind from that kind of wound.

But Loki has been hiding his body. The one time he changed his shirt that Thor can remember, on his first day in New Asgard, Thor had looked away because his brother's body had been scary to look at. Before, in the hotel, Thor had noticed that Loki always slept in clothes. Long sleeves. Never changed in front of Thor.

Now, though, everything is visible. So is the marred skin across Loki’s shoulders, stomach and arms. The long cut-lines all over his skin, like lines of counting, long, ragged. All over. The ugly, white scars under his collarbone, as if something large had been stabbed through. Thor knows he shouldn’t be surprised. He knows. It’s obvious that something like this had happened, even if Loki won’t say a word about it. The scars make it feel all that more real, though.

The healers work on getting out the infection from the Kursed’s stab wound. Give him painkillers directly in the bloodstream. Clean the wound, which is dirty and untouched and Thor wonders if glamours are able to hide the stench of death, also. It would seem so since the smell certainly isn’t hidden anymore. It all makes him sick.

Eir fixes something with a few ingredients mixed into a bag of fresh blood, a spell or two - then sets the IV to drip into his arm.

Thor sits in a chair by the wall, watching as the healers work.

“Thor,” Rocket says, standing by the door with a satchel slung over his shoulder. He and Sif and the others had been waiting outside. “We’ve got the stone. We gotta get back with it.”

“You can go back,” he says. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

“We’ve got a deadline in half a day.”

“I’ll remember. I’ll be back before the Asgardian sundown.”

“...alright. Sure, up to you,” Rocket says. He turns to leave, then stops for a moment. “Just don’t forget the real world. Your real brother.”

But that’s just the thing. This is his real brother.
“I see him,” Quill whispers, and Clint is already getting goddamn tired of that guy. They have their loss in common, a lot of things maybe, but right now his jitteriness is just getting on Clint’s nerves.

“Be quiet,” he mouths back.

If they’re going to do this, going to ambush Clint Barton, Hawkeye, then they’re going to have to be silent. No matter how grief-stricken this Clint currently is. That doesn’t make the guy less alert; Clint would know.

And he definitely is, that. Grief-stricken.

The 2023-Clint is kneeling in the water at the bottom of the mountain. Clint remembers this; he’d been so close to throwing himself after Natasha, hanging on that cliff. Giving it all up; he couldn’t live with this.

Then everything had flashed, and he’d woken back up in the water. Stone in his hand.

He’d sat there for a long time.

It’s all about catching him, holding him down before he can trigger the quantum physics. If he catches them first -

“I hear you,” the Clint in the water says, twitching his head in their direction. His voice is hoarse. Hard.

Both ambushers stiffen.

“What do you want?” 2023-Clint asks.

2027-Clint steps forward, out of the hiding behind the rocks.

“I want to talk,” he says.

“And your friend?”

“The same. Please,” he adds before the other Clint can say something like ‘well I don’t’ and disappear, “give me a moment.”

He swallows.

“It’s about Tasha.”

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“Where is the damned wizard?” Loki hisses, fidgeting with his hands on the rail of the co-pilot’s chair.
“They’re doing the best they can, Loki,” Valkyrie responds, concentrating on the still waves of galaxy dust in front of them.

“He’s too far, we need to get to him. We need to - now, he’s - he’s --” he cuts off with a huff. *Too far.*

The truth is that, yes, 2012-Loki is far away, and the reason they need to get to him quickly is that he is also *fucked up.*

Loki can feel the other Loki’s energy and it’s *whirling,* a hurricane of emotions. Everything chaos - and not the good kind of chaos, a sea of possibilities, no; this is like drowning. Like the first days inside his cell on Asgard. Those days he’d spent looking perfectly calm on the outside, lying on the bed, sitting in the chair or on the floor - and his mind running amok all the while. Thoughts so overwhelming he had almost felt immobilized, physically.

The mind stone losing its grip on his psyche. All the confusion that led to. The complete meltdown of character.

Being free of Thanos, but not being *free.* Being home, but not being home. Turning out to be not-a-person, nothing at *all.*

It’s happening now, or starting, except this other Loki isn’t within the four walls of a cell; he’s roaming free, with the Tesseract, and he’s *terrified.* Also drunk, Loki is pretty sure. Or on something, maybe. That wouldn’t be unlike him.

“Stop feeling him out, Loki,” Valkyrie says, glancing at him sideways from the pilot’s chair. “His signature. You’ll only make it worse.”

Loki growls, pushing from his seat to walk in the back, sitting on the floor against the wall, legs stretched out and hands fidgeting.

Five minutes later, the Valkyrie puts the ship on autopilot. She turns in her chair and calls out to Loki, “so, what’s the deal, is this guy dangerous? Can we handle him?”

Loki scoffs. “He’s in possession of an Infinity Stone. That’s never good news.”

“So we’re in trouble?”

He shrugs. “We could be.”

A moment passes in silence. Valkyrie gets up to move to a chair closer to the others. Wanda is sitting in a seat by the long-wall, strapped in and playing with a ball of red magic. It makes Loki a little nauseous to look at, so he doesn’t.

Rogers is standing some seats behind the co-pilot’s chair, still facing forward and leaning with a raised elbow against the ship wall. Looking out at the vastness in front of them. He’d never been to space before, apparently.

“Our plan is to hold him down,” Valkyrie continues, “right? Sit on his hands, cover his mouth, the whole magic-shebang. And then, you say, you can extract the stone?”

“Hopefully,” Loki says. “Otherwise, I’ll have to talk him into giving it to us. Perhaps with Wanda’s assistance.” Said Wanda looks up for a second, smiling a little. Then back down.

“She can keep him in check, force him to give it up,” Loki continues.

That had been his first idea of a plan; bullying 2012-Loki into giving up the stone. Scaring him.
There was an especially direct and vulnerable connection between the magic of the Mind stone and his head, at the time. Wanda hadn’t liked it, and the other sensed the rawness of that topic immediately.

Loki, for some reason, doesn’t feel too good about it, either.

It’s not compassion, it’s not that he *cares*. It’s just .. understanding. Most of all, he doesn’t like the pathetic show it would no doubt make of his past self, were they to employ Wanda’s power on him. Some writhing on the floor and pathetic weeping would probably be the least of the humiliation.

“But that’s a last resort kinda thing,” Valkyrie says. Loki shrugs.

She pauses for a few seconds.

Then asks, “They used that stone on you, Mind, didn’t they? The ones who tortured you,” and Loki stiffens, gaze glued on her like a fish having swum unknowing into a net. Caught. Rogers and Wanda straighten, too, just a little. “Black Order,” Valkyrie clarifies with a throw of her head.

Loki’s breath is caught. No air is really coming in, as if it decided to just stop.

*Too sudden.*

He feels like laughing, bursting out in hysterical laughter. But doesn’t.

A moment passes before he can speak at all.

“They didn’t torture me,” he then says and his voice sounds far away. Dull.

Valkyrie looks at him for a long moment. She says, “the Mind Gem was used on you. That’s why you don’t like it, right?”

Loki clears his throat. “Something like that.” Looks down. “I’m not sure.”

“Because it messed with your head.”

He swallows. Everything feels dry, parched, but he’s not thirsty in the slightest. Swallows again.

He’s not sure why he’s sharing this information. After denying Thor every time he’s tried to talk about anything; as if it takes a ruthless ignoring of boundaries on Valkyrie’s part to get Loki to open up, while Thor being respectful to what he wants to talk about and what he doesn’t want only earns scorn and mocking.

Maybe it’s just that he doesn’t know what to say, doesn’t know how to dispel anything Valkyrie asks because he’s actually not sure of what the truth *is*.

“I don’t know,” he says after a moment.

They didn’t torture him. He’d wanted everything they did, he’d wanted to be stronger. He’d craved power. He’d enjoyed pain. He might’ve lost the ability, now; couldn’t stand to watch Thanos dig into his brother’s head on the Statesman - but back then he could’ve.

He’d prided himself on enjoying it. Having *fun* with it.

The power, the chaos. He could enjoy as his own body was ripped apart, he could and he’d proved it to the Titan.

If he could prove to be cold-blooded, prove to be *powerful* and capable, indisputable, prove it to
someone else powerful and cold-blooded, then he would be something real.

He could prove to be dangerous, and then there would finally be a meaning with his birth. He wasn’t
born to die; he was born a monster. Destined to live and wreak havoc upon the worlds.

He would finally be himself. And what Loki was, was twisted and wrong. A monster. A King, a
ruler; his only birthright except for the cold blood that runs in his veins.

He would have purpose again. Real purpose, this time.

Maybe it was always just the Mind gem that propelled it out of proportion like that. The anger his
own, the madness his own but turned overblown, twisted, to the point where he could barely
recognize his own voice. To make Loki into something but a blubbering mess, half-dead in the Void.

Or maybe it was the Void itself. Maybe it’d twisted his mind and the Mind gem never needed to
influence him because he’d already been broken and twisted when he arrived. Bloodthirsty. Or
maybe it happened before that, before Thor’s coronation, even. Maybe Loki had gone mad a long
time ago.

Maybe it isn’t even fair to call it madness. To blame it on anything but his own nature; maybe it was
always just him.

In the aftermath, though, he’s wondered if he never really did want to stay alive when he’d first
landed on Sanctuary. He remembers little from before he started working with Maw, but there are
glimpses of his body lying broken on rock and not a single gleam of desire to get up. To try and
survive.
He remembers not reacting to anything, to physical hurts - not defending himself, not having a care
in the world of what happened to him.

He’d meant to die in the Void. He never wanted to survive.

And then, all of a sudden, he did want it. He’d woken back up; he’d been resurrected, and he’s not
quite sure how exactly that happened.

He remembers the power of the Mind gem. Vividly. He knows Ebony Maw was in his head and he
knows Mind was used on him. It’s just that he no longer can tell which of it is his own and what was
fabricated.

It all still feels like him.

“I .. think so,” he finally manages to grind out of his uncooperative vocal cords. Coughs once.

Valkyrie hums in response. Loki keeps his eyes downcast but glances at her, quickly. He thinks he
sees a glint of something unsure in hers. Maybe she’s regretting asking directly like that. Who knows
- it’s too late, now.

And if Loki’s being honest, his chest feels a little lighter with having said it. Some of it.

A little while later, he goes to sit in the pilot’s chair. It feels eerily unfamiliar to be the one sitting in it,

He sets the ship off manual just to be doing something, steering calmly through the nearly empty
asteroid field.

The other Loki is really in a state. Loki can’t read his thoughts, but his emotions speak for
themselves; loneliness, fear, freedom, hollowness. Despair. He’s going to do something, something is
building up and Loki does his best to distract from it. Think of other things. Focus on the space in
front.
It’s incredibly difficult while still keeping up the connection.

Rogers plops into the co-pilot’s chair. He glances at Loki, who keeps his eyes straight ahead.

“Captain,” he greets with a barely perceptible nod in the other’s direction. Rogers snorts quietly.

“You can call me Steve, you know.”

“Only, it’s a little kinky with the titles, don’t you think?”

Rogers’ head turns to look at him, open-mouthed. Loki smirks. A whole array of possible replies come up in response to that particular expression.

“You’re really going there, today,” Rogers says, followed by a disbelieving chuckle. “And here I thought you were too shy to admit to enjoying the view of my butt.”

“Oh, Captain, I’m very shy,” Loki replies, turning his face for a moment to bat his eyes innocently at Rogers. “If you want me to be.”

It’s meant to be funny. That does it, though; the good mood snaps in Loki. Being in this ship, in this chair and telling someone, even if in joking, that he can be ‘whatever they want him to be’ - that’s too much.

He snaps his gaze back forward, swallowing, not sure about the rising quell of nausea; why it’s coming on.

He’s never really gotten clear on which things he did on Sakaar because he wanted to and what he did in order to survive.

Well, he did all of it survive. That’s probably what makes the picture a little blurry.

“Loki? Are you okay?” he hears and glances at Rogers. The other isn’t smiling anymore, eyebrows drawn together in confusion.

“Yes,” Loki says, hastily, eyes fixing on the horizon. “Fine.”

Rogers hesitates.

Then he says, “you know, if you ever want to talk to anyone about all this, then we are a lot of people here, ready to listen.” He clears his throat. “I get it, it can be hard to talk to the ones who are closest, sometimes. Thor, I mean. Maybe it’s easier with someone who isn’t involved like that.”

Loki finds himself unable to answer for the lump caught in his throat.

After a few seconds he nods, stiffly.

In the time following, the tension keeps building. He’s doing things, the other Loki. Drinking, Loki thinks. The emotions are a mess. He’s alone.

Loki sits back down on the floor in the back if the ship. Holding his head in his hands and trying to quench the sensation building of everything being wrong.

Wanda comes to his side at one point, asks if there’s anything she can do. He shakes his head, lowered between his knees. Eyes closed. She puts a hand on his shoulder, and for once it actually feels a little calm; calmer than the chaos he’s holding on to through the connection to the other Loki, at least. A lot more grounded.
Then the sorcerer and Banner materialize through a hoop of sparks in the middle of the craft.

“Finally!” Loki cries, stumbling to his feet. The tension has only been rising in the time passed. He very nearly topplings over, a headache making everything spin.

“Did you get it?” Rogers asks, sending a nervous glance at Loki, who clicks his tongue at the wholly unnecessary inquiry. They don’t have time.

“We got it, yes.” Banner holds up a necklace with the stone emitting a green glow from inside, triumphant but hesitant about it. He’s looking at Loki with a crease in his forehead. “What’s wrong here?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Loki spits. Rogers sighs. “We just need to go.” There’s a lurch in his chest. Something is happening.

Loki’s face falls. “Now. We need to -”

Another lurch. Something is - something is happening.

He doesn’t know what it is. But it’s overwhelming, the other Loki is overwhelmed and scared to no end, he’s doing something that spikes his emotions to sharp butcher’s knives in their chests. He’s doing something. Something stupid. There’s someone with him.

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“Now!” Loki yells, clutching at his chest.

His legs buckle and he falls to his knees but has enough presence of mind to hold out the other hand, letting wisps of the connection dance through his skin, out into the air. Open to grab. Flimsy and shaky from panic but there; the pathway to his other self.

The next moment, the entire ship is moved through space as Strange latches onto the magic, letting his own move them.

Strange falls to his knees with exhaustion, letting out a gasp just as Loki pushes to his feet. He stumbles to the opening of the ship, turning open the hatch, walking out, it’s here. He stumbles and falls to his knees, rock scraping through the fabric of his pants and his skin but he barely feels it because it’s here he can feel it -

He looks up and it’s a barren moon, dark in the night time. How ironic.

He can almost see the signature left from where his past self had been just moments ago. On the ground, huddled.

“He’s not here,” he whispers. His breathing speeds as he stumbles to his feet. “He’s not, He’s not there - he was but he’s - what is he doing - what --”

He’s on his way back into the spaceship when his legs give out again, ceasing to work, and he falls down onto the ramp.

His chest is constricting with pain. He manages to his back, ragged movement, clutching desperately at the fabric over his heart.

It feels like it’s failing. Like it’s going to stop right here and now - something is building up. Maybe it’ll explode out of his body. His eyes stare unseeing into the stars as he squirms to get the feeling out, something is wrong.

Something breaks inside him.
Then he starts screaming.

***

Thor sits beside the white-sheeted hospital bed, beside his very real, very tangible 2014-little brother. Loki had been walking around with a deadly wound in his chest, back then. Alone, entirely alone and literally dead to the world, gravely injured. He’’d survived, yes, but maybe the solitude of it all was only yet another slice into the wound that made him into the Loki Thor knows. Loki from the future.

And he’’s real, but this Loki is real, too.

This is Thor’’s real brother, the brother he knew from childhood - or at least somewhere closer to that than the Loki Thor knows now. He’’s twisted and sick but not as grey. Not as dull in the eyes.

This Loki has a chance, he’’s in danger but he speaks, he snarls, he’’s not already dead. This Loki can still be fixed.
And the other Loki is a possible future, an outcome of circumstance. He’’s dead behind the eyes.
He’’s a product of Thor’’s mistakes.

Now, Thor has the chance to make it right, to do the right thing for once.

He could stay here, could make it right. He could make all of it right.

Loki wakes up, later, and Thor has the call a healer when he gags on the feeding tube in his mouth. They get it out, and Loki throws up in a bucket by the cot.

“That’’s not legal,” Loki rasps, fumbling at his throat as if to claw out the rawness. Thor watches with fascination - this Loki hasn’’t ever been strangled to death. His throat is not an area that’’ll make him freak out if anything as much as brushes it.

“You are an official prisoner of Asgard,” Eir says, tone stern and readjusting the IV in his one arm. “That makes it very legal.”

Loki huffs, lying back against the pillows and pulling the blanket he’'s been draped with further up. He’'s been dressed in a simple tunic, long sleeved, so there'’s really no need to cover himself. He side-eyes Thor.

“Oh,” he mumbles. “Future-Thor is still here.”

“I am,” Thor says, carefully.

“Well, you don’’t have to be,” Loki continues. “You’’ve uncovered my deception, hoo-ray, good for you. Now throw me in my cell and leave me be.”

Thor feels his eyebrows pull together. He pauses.

Then he says, “You wanted me to,” and Loki stiffens minutely. Then relaxes back into a pretend annoyance; obvious if you’’re looking for the signs.
“Wanted you to what, Thor, use your words.”

“To find you. Uncover your deception.”

“That is ridiculous.”

“Maybe.”

"Why would I be hiding if I wanted to be found?"

That is, in fact, not an uncommon thing for Loki to do in the slightest, and Loki must surely know that Thor knows it. After all those years. Maybe it's what Loki is doing right now: disputing Thor's accusations, hiding the truth because he doesn't want to be the one offering it, doesn't want to ask for help, doesn't want to ask the world to understand him - but he makes the deception thinly veiled so Thor can guess.

"Leave it, Thor,” Loki says.

Thor says, “You couldn’t kill yourself knowing that no one ever knew you survived in the first place.”


“It’s not like that,” he then mutters, quieter. “It doesn’t matter.”

Thor laughs. He can’t help it. He’s the lightest he’s felt in such a long time - nevermind the cluster of tangled emotions clenching in his solar plexus, that’s secondary. He’s happy.

Loki looks at him like Thor has gone mad. Maybe he has.

“But see, Loki, it does matter!” Thor laughs. Cackles. It sounds wrong, ringing in the healing ward but he doesn’t particularly care. He has to wipe a tear of joy from the corner of an eye. “It matters, because look - I know everything, now, everything I did wrong. Or some of it, anyway; I mean, I’m ready to be here now. I can change it all, brother.”

Loki doesn’t say anything.

“I have another chance, see?” Thor continues, searching Loki’s face. “I can make it right, now. I can make you right - or, better, I mean. I can help, Loki.” He shifts his eyes to stare at a wall. “I’ve been given a chance to right everything,” he mutters.

“What are you talking about, Thor.”

It’s not really a question; Loki sounds tired. Too tired. Exhausted and in pain, in agony both physical and mental and Thor’s expression softens. He takes Loki’s hand. Loki looks at him strangely, like Thor is a stranger and not his brother, his hand limp in Thor’s grip. Not wrenching away, for once, but not really accepting, either.

“I can’t leave,” Thor says. Frowns to himself. “I can’t leave, you see, because if I do they’ll just throw you back in a cell. Forget about you.” He huffs a laugh again, but it’s entirely mirthless this time. “You don’t understand how angry I was at you at this time. If I’d found out you were alive, perhaps I would’ve never spoken to you again.” He pauses. Looks Loki in the eye, and his brother is looking back at him with a strange expression.

“I don’t mean to scare you,” Thor says. “I simply have to stay and tell them. Tell them the truth, what you need. Make up for all of it.”
Loki swallows. He removes his hand to clasp it in the other on top of the blanket.

“You’re not doing it for me,” he states.

“Of course I am, Loki, I’m ready to give up everything, don’t you understand? Everything I have. It’s all for you, because I want you to -”

“You did find out,” Loki interrupts. His voice is strange, thin, but Thor quiets nonetheless. “You did find out I was alive, in your own timeline.”

“Yes.”

“And what did you do?”

Thor looks at him. His eyes are stinging. “I ignored you. I was angry.”

Loki shrugs, eyes swimming. “You’re allowed to be. You’re allowed to ignore me, Thor.”

Thor shakes his head. “But I won’t, not anymore. Not anymore, Loki.”

And there’s a longing in this very real Loki’s eyes when Thor looks at him, a longing for someone to be there, a longing for Thor’s words to be true. Like Loki has been waiting, he’s been alone and hasn’t dared reach out, he's been distant from himself and everything, and all he's wanted was for someone to ask. Maybe ask again. Keep asking.

To come home without having to ask for his place there. To be welcomed.

So Thor takes Loki’s hand again, a cold, clammy hand against his own warm one, and he squeezes it, smiling with warmth at his brother.

For once, Loki smiles back. A hesitant smile, a little sad, but genuine. With genuine love.

He’s not lost.

He's still there.

***

Loki’s heart is burning. Literally burning, he’s sure of it. He feels hands on his arms, but he can’t hear anything, can’t hear anything but the water in his mind. It’s wrong, something is wrong -

“Highness, listen! I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me!”

But Loki can’t listen, he can’t hear anything for the screaming in his head. Or maybe he’s the one screaming. He’s not so sure.

“It’s going to be alright, it’s alright, come on - shhh, be quiet. There we go.”

He pants for breath. Slowly, the sensation of ridged metal under his palms comes to him. Under his knees. On all fours, still on the ramp to the ship. Someone is rubbing circles on his back.

“Come on - take it easy. Take a breath, Loki.”
“Something is wrong,” he tries, as the Valkyrie practically carries him up to lie him on his back. “Something is - something’s wrong.”

“Loki,” she says. A hand on his shoulder. “You need to give Strange the direction.”

He tries. He tries, but everything is shaking inside him.

“I can’t,” he says, voice wobbling. “I can’t, I can’t I can’t.”

“You can, you just need to calm down -”

“No, because - I can’t just - just sit here while - shit,” he grabs at his chest again. His heart is bleeding, pulsing out blood. Oozing it into places it isn’t supposed to go. There are holes in it, someone has taken a scissor to his heart and stabbed holes in it.

“Highness.”

“I’m not,” Loki hisses. Not sure if the Valkyrie was being ironic or if the name has just stuck. Or if she’s trying to comfort him.

A hand pushes at his upper back and shoulders, brushing the neck, and a strangled noise escapes him. He’s sitting up, now, and he can see the Valkyrie’s face in front of him. She’s sitting with a knee on each side of his legs. Loki breathes hard and shallow. His sight is blurry from tears and his head throbbing.

“We need to find him,” Valkyrie says, a hand on his shoulder. “So we can help you. Get this over with.”

He looks at her for a second more.

She’s right. She’s right.

He closes his eyes, lifts shaking hands to his head, his temples, to steady it all. Connect his body and mind and power, and let it work despite his raging emotions.

It doesn’t. It won’t work. His hands are unsteady, everything is unsteady.

“I can help, Loki,” someone says and it sounds like a question. The Witch. Wanda. Loki nods, frantically, and the next moment, her power is flowing through him.

It doesn’t even scare him. Not compared to whatever else is happening right now, her power is nothing. Just power. Why be afraid of that?
It gives him what he’s missing, the borders he can’t push with his diminished magic. It’s like fire, burning new life in his dead veins.

“He’s getting there,” Valkyrie says, but it’s not to Loki so he doesn’t take notice. He hears steps behind him. It’s all far away.

He just focuses on the magic, the connection, ignoring that his breathing is not working, face wet from tears. Something is wrong.

The space bends, he hears sparks flying, and they’re back on Midgard. A meadow. Beautiful; summer’s bud blooming in the grass. The sun is shining. He’s still on the ship, the ramp and can sense it all in his peripheral.
He looks up.

Everything becomes very clear at once.

In the grass, a little away from the ship, sits the other Loki quietly. His face is hidden in his knees drawn up into his chest. He looks subsided like that, small and insignificant. He doesn’t look up at the newcomers, doesn’t indicate to have noticed the ship arriving. Raven black hair is falling in front of his face, pooling on the shaking knees.

A little away from him lies Thor. His neck looks twisted, lying at an odd angle. There’s blood pooling around it and his eyes are open. There’s no life in them.

***

They get the stone. They leave the other Clint sitting in the water, quiet. Tells him they’ll be back in a minute and hope they’re right.

Peter Quill clutches the stone in its container like it holds his very life.

Maybe it does, in a way.

***

He’s going to stay. Thor is going to stay. His brother needs him, and he can stop everything evil from happening to him, here, in this time - he has the advantage, here. It’s too late for the other-Loki. Thor wants to help him but he can’t, he’s been trying and he cannot help future-Loki. Thor ruined their relationship because he couldn’t help, didn’t help, because ..

.. because he was too angry. Hurt. Caught up in himself.

And now the other Loki is broken. His only way to heal is for Thor to leave, Thor realises. It’s the only way.

Because Thor caused all this in the first place, anyway, didn’t he?

His little brother smiles at him from the hospital bed, and Thor’s heart breaks. He needs to fix this Loki, fix this while he still can. He’s going to stay here till he grows old. The other Loki is worse off when Thor is there; he can’t heal because of Thor, he sees it now.

His little brother smiles and he decides to stay.

He forgets that his own Loki smiled at him only hours earlier. He did, he smiled, but Thor forgets everything. Or it stops mattering, maybe.

There are more important things, after all.
Thor is dead. Thor is dead Thor is dead Thor is dead.

Loki can’t breathe.

He’s murdered his brother.

For a moment, he isn’t sure whether he’s the figure collapsed on the ramp to the ship or if he’s the figure hunched in on themselves in the grass - but then he’s sure again because he’s hurling himself against the one in the grass, crashing together in a crack of bodies, throwing a fist in the other’s face and tackling him to the ground.

It’s Loki’s face that his fist is colliding with, wide-eyed and scared and a snivelling mess and he looks just like Loki but it isn’t him.

Loki wouldn’t have done this. He would never.

The other Loki begins to fight back, wakes as if from the dead and hits the real Loki on the chin, and they tumble around on the grass. A fist to the stomach. Hair ripping loose. A jaw breaking. The other screams in grief, anger, madness, a shrilling sound from somewhere deep and horrible inside him, and Loki screams back, clawing at his opposer.

Clothes tearing, biting, feral snarling. Tangled limbs, and who would know who was who in the ball of dark hair and too-pale skin and animalistic growls and cries.

Loki certainly doesn’t.

Until someone pulls them off each other. He thrashes and screams. Through the haze of tears, he can see the other Loki, pale and gaunt and red from scratch marks in his face, the glamour he wore earlier for the sake of pride worn off and now all his weakness shows, bleeding and pale and injured, and Loki isn’t sure who of them did what. Whether the stab wound to his own side was actually delivered from his own hands, the blow to his head, the broken nose - something he did himself because he deserves it, with his own fists, or if the other Loki did it to him.

Whether other-Loki slit his own wrists, or if the real Loki did it. Long, deep and ragged gashes, gushing out with each pump of a dying heart.

Not-Loki's face goes oddly blank and he falls back. Someone catches him, holds his body as it goes limp; Rogers, staring at the blood. There’s a lot of blood.

Then it turns a dark, tar-like purple, mixing with the red already on the ground, the skin washing over with a wave of blue. Loki expects Rogers to cry out, but he doesn’t. The skin doesn’t burn him. He just stares at the blue face with wide, horrified eyes, clapping the cheek, trying to hold together the gaping gashes of his arms. He shouts for help and Valkyrie comes running. Helps him with the arms.

Then Loki finds his own body again and stumbles to his feet, falling back down immediately when his ankle twists with a sick crunching sound, his brain registering ‘broken’ - he doesn’t cry out, too taken aback to make any sound. It must’ve snapped while they fought.

He crawls his way over, getting to his knees next to Valkyrie. He holds out shaking hands over the arms, trying his best at the healings spells he knows. To knit the skin together, to regenerate the
blood and tissue faster. *His* blood, this should be easy, right?

But his magic is failing. He doesn’t have enough because his mind is aching, damaged, grey and wrong. It’s not working because he’s *not* *working*, and maybe, maybe if he *had* been, none of this would’ve ever happened in the first place.

It’s not a maybe, really. It’s a safe and sure yes; if he had been working right then none of all the terrible things in the last years would’ve ever happened. To the world, to his family and to his brother. Loki propelled them all, fueled them with his madness and he’s sure, now, he’s sure that he’s been a deciding factor. His involvement with the world has made it go awry.

If he hadn’t been here, everything would’ve been better.

The gashes reopen themselves each time he thinks he’s managed to close them, and then he’s out of power. There’s nothing left.

The blood stops flowing from the gashes in the other’s arms. There’s no life left.

Loki falls back, lightheaded. He looks up at Rogers, who’s covered in the purple, sticky, disgusting blood - it smells different, too, like wax and some other kind of metal, something colder, when it’s supposed to smell like iron. Rogers is looking at him with a strange look, like he’s not sure who of the Loki’s slit the wrists, either. Like he's looking at Loki and seeing a monster.

It makes Loki want to get out his knife. Cut deep, bleed out. Plunge under. Stop breathing.

He gets back on his feet (foot) and hobbles, stumbling away, in the opposite direction of Thor (neck twisted, eyes empty, *nothing*) as far as he can before his legs give out again and he falls back, landing on the grass. His hand brushes against the opposite wrist as he writhes his hands, against the watch. He stops.

Then frantically begins to fumble with it, searching the single trail of numbers stored in there and pressing the same button Thor pressed for him only hours earlier.

Thor, alive. He’s just somewhere else.

It dials.

***

Thor’s watch is beeping. He takes it off his wrist to hold it out, looking at it. It’s an unknown number.

*Loki.*

“It’s him, isn’t it,” the other Loki asks. He hides his emotions well, but it’s audible in his tone. The fear of rejection. The sorrow.

“It doesn’t matter,” Thor says, refusing the call. It stops ringing. “I’m here, right now.”

***
The call was declined. Loki feels something rip apart inside of him.

He wants to die. He wants to die.

He dials again.

***

“He’s trying to reach you,” Thor’s little brother says.

“Yes. But I’m here, now.”

Loki is sitting up, and he slumps with a little smile. His eyes are sad.

“You can’t,” he says after a moment. “You can’t be here.”

The watch beeps again, and long, pale fingers reach out for it, pressing the green button. They hand it back to Thor, just as a hoarse, panicked voice reaches out through it.

A different voice. Weaker, and so unnecessarily damaged.

***

“Thor?” Loki says. His voice is shaking. “Thor, please, are you - please, I need -- I need … Thor ..”

There’s silent on the other end.

“I’m here,” Thor then says. Loki’s gasping breath cuts off with a sob.

“I don’t know - Thor I don’t know what to - what to do -- I don’t.”

***

Thor sighs, pinching the bridge between his eyebrows. He can feel tears building behind closed lids, tears of anger and frustration and loss and guilt and fear and sorrow for his damned brother. For all of this.

“Do you have the Tesseract,” he asks, trying to keep his voice soft. Loki needs him. Loki is real, and he needs him. He needs someone, and he doesn’t have anyone but Thor because he won’t let anyone in.

“No, I - I .. Thor, Thor he’s dead, they’re both - they’re, they’re -” Loki cuts off with another sob.

“No, I don’t know what to -- please -”

Thor's chest constricts with pain. Who's dead?

Valkyrie? Wanda? Banner? Strange?
“Loki,” Thor begins, anxiety evident in his voice, but cuts himself off. Big brother. “It’s alright,” he says instead of the reprimand he was about to give. "You’re okay, you’re going to be fine. Is the Space gem in his pocket? Your special pockets?"

“I don’t - I can’t -”

“It’s okay.” Thor swallows. “It’s okay. There’s no hurry, Brother. Loki, you’re okay.”

“I’m not, it’s not okay. Thor, I ruined it, I’ve ruined it all -”

“It’s not ruined. It’s not. Come, Loki, breathe.”

***

Loki sits on the grass with the watch clutched in his grip. It’s okay, he repeats to himself. Thor asks who’s dead; if it’s Valkyrie, the others, and Loki can say that it isn’t but he can’t get himself to explain. So Thor just speaks to him, speaks to him in soft words. It’s going to be alright, he says. It’s alright. It’s alright, Loki.

But it’s not.

He wants to disappear.

Then there’s a hand on his shoulder, suddenly. Loki flinches and looks up to see the Valkyrie, blurry through the slits of his eyelids. She smiles a little. A sad smile. Then there’s another hand - Rogers, kneeling to Loki’s left side. Loki blinks, only barely noticing the feel of their hands.

But suddenly there are people all around him, behind him and by his sides. Banner’s hand on top of Valkyrie’s, Wanda’s on top of Steve’s. Strange’s hand on top of hers after another moment.

He can feel their energies. All of their energies, given freely, as if amplified by the three sorcerers in the connection. It’s all very complicated; complicated emotions. Fear. Grief. Anger. Shock. Anxiety. Pity. Despair. Affection. Sympathy. Terrible mixes of terrifying emotions.

But they’re there, close, no matter what they’re feeling. They’re all there.

Slowly, he filters back into the world. He can hear the Valkyrie talking to Thor. Thor is in Asgard, Loki hears, in the past, and his heart breaks with longing. Valkyrie tells Thor that they’re fine, that they just need a minute. Loki remembers that they’re sitting in a graveyard and he curls over his stomach, legs stretched out.

The hands fall away eventually, but the people stay around him. Like a wall of protection, safety. Then the Valkyrie wraps her arms around his form and pulls him sideways into her chest. He falls limply against her, eyes feeling glassy. Dead.

“Loki,” she says, a hand on his head. “Loki, he’s not dead.” And Loki’s heart jumps because for a moment, he thinks she means Thor. Thor, twisted neck, blood pooling. Then Valkyrie says, “Your - the other you. He’s not dead.”

***

It takes a while for his brother to come back to reality. There’s silence for a long time. Then Valkyrie speaks.
“Loki,” she says through the connection. “Loki, he’s not dead.”

It takes a while for Loki to understand who and how. Apparently, it’s another Loki. 2012 Loki.

Apparently, Thor is dead. Well. The alternate 2012-Thor, which feels strange. Apparently it looks like 2012-Loki killed him, then tried to kill himself. Very nearly successful, had it not been for Strange.

Then Loki is back on the phone.

“Hey,” he says, and his voice is but a croak.

“Hey there, little brother. How are you?”

“I’m .. okay. Good. I’m good.”

His brother sounds scared, Thor realises.

“Loki,” Thor says, “I’m not mad.”

“Thor, did you .. did you hear what -”

“I heard. I heard, and I don’t understand. But it’s okay, Loki. It’s going to be okay. We’re going to see each other soon.”

“But he - survived, Strange took him somewhere and he’s surviving and you -- you -” the sentence cuts off with a strangled gasp.

“Loki, breathe. Come, brother, take a breath. I’ll be there in a moment. I’ll see you in just a moment.”

And he will, he’ll be there. He just needs to figure out how.

***

The Tesseract had been in the grass the whole time, apparently. Past-Loki had taken it out of the hiding, dropped it at some point. Taken it out, maybe to give to Thor. To get rid of it. Maybe to get Thor to take him back to Asgard with it.

Somehow he’d ended up snapping his brother’s neck, instead.

And he didn’t even die himself, in turn.

How the Norns can be so cruel.

They gather in a circle. Valkyrie helps Loki stand as he activates his suit. Clicks the mask shut.

***
Thor ends the call and only looks up then to notice that his little brother is crying. Loki is staring glassy-eyed at the opposite wall, sitting ramrod straight as if pretending the tears streaming down his cheeks aren’t real. He doesn’t look at Thor, either. His breath is caught, eerily quiet, and his eyes are full of despair. Shame.

Thor remembers how this brother would never accept a hug or any kind of sentiment, always lash out in some way, instead. So this time, Thor reaches out slowly, at last clapping a hand onto the tense upper arm. 2014-Loki doesn’t acknowledge him, just sits with a slight frown as if lost in thought. Or trying in vain to stop the tears. They keep falling.
But when Thor puts his other arm around him, seating himself on the edge of the cot and pulling Loki in sideways he doesn’t object, leaning against Thor and hunching over his own legs. He’s shaking with unvoiced crying.

There’s a single gasp, choked and half-suppressed, and that’s the only sound he makes for the entire fit.

“It’s going to be okay,” Thor tells him, stroking his hair, and he knows it’s true, now. He doesn’t know if it’s any consolation to this Loki, but he tries to convey the hope he feels, himself. “It is. You’ll make it, brother. You'll make it.”

Eir comes in at one point, and Thor asks her to wait for him outside the door.

Eventually, Loki of 2014 tells him to go.

“I already have a brother,” he says with a wry smile that doesn’t reach his red-rimmed eyes.

Thor turns to him again in the door, and Loki gives a mock salute with the shackled hand. His face looks about to crumble apart again. The window behind him is getting darker.
Thor steps outside the door, where Eir is waiting. He tells her what Loki tried to do in the Gardens. To keep watch with him, his magic suppressed. She nods, expression not betraying any of what she thinks of all this, then leaves to a neighbouring healing room. To give Loki a moment’s privacy, perhaps.

Thor activates his suit. He closes the helm and presses the button to get himself back.

He thinks he hears a sob ringing from within the medical, just before the hallway disappears. Imagining it, maybe; either way, it haunts him back to the present.

***

Loki’s feet find solid ground, and he opens his eyes to see, first, glass underneath his feet and his own disheveled appearance mirrored. He looks wrong. That’s the best word for it. Then he lifts his eyes to face his brother on the opposite side of the circle.

There’s a moment of hesitation for everyone, everywhere; then the audience of gathered Avengers watching from the floor realise that everyone is back (everyone they can see here, at least), and they break into roaring applause - just as Thor breaks the spell and takes three long strides across the glass, smashing into Loki as he hugs him, tight. Loki realises his legs were just about to give out and it must’ve shown because Thor is holding him tight like he’s holding him together. Keeping Loki’s body from falling apart into nothing.
He is. That’s what it feels like, anyway. Loki feels empty, hollowed out from everything and all he wants to do is let go. He feels much like he could simply drift apart if his body was alone and unguarded.

But it isn’t. His brother is there.

He can barely make his way off the platform, his ankle refusing to hold weight and his magic giving backlash from using it up on healing the other Loki; or maybe it’s just that his mind is too far out to remember how to make his legs work. Either way, Thor has to hold him upright with an arm across his back, squeezing tight as they stumble down the stairs. Thor is off, distant, as well. Loki wonders what happened to him - he’d been in Asgard, which hadn’t been part of the plan. Loki is pretty sure he could name at least a few things Thor would be searching for in Asgard, 2014.

People part for them, and Thor walks like a true big brother, tall and stone-faced. It would be funny - in fact it is; Get Help is based on this exact situation except it’s just pretend. But now it’s real, has been a lot as of late. Loki is stumbling like a half-dead fish on land, and he half expects Thor to haul him up and throw him in the faces of the Avengers to get them to stop looking. He chuckles to himself and can feel Thor glancing at him. Thor, Thor was dead just moments ago, how absurd is that? How silly? He was ready to stay in the old Asgard, Loki could feel it, and he really should. That would’ve been better for him. Easier. And suddenly, Loki can’t stop the laughter bubbling up, he’s laughing; there are tears in his eyes from laughing and he can feel Thor lowering him down. Onto the floor, to sit propped against a wall.

“Loki,” he’s saying, and Loki cackles again, shaking his head in disbelief of all this ridiculousness. “Brother? Hey.”

Loki manages to stop the laughter, wiping his eyes. He sighs contently. “Sorry, sorry,” he mumbles, chuckling a little. “It was just .. actually, nevermind. It’s nothing. It was just - it was something funny.” He snorts.

“Okay.”

Thor is on his knees in front of him and they’re still in the Community Hall, a more secluded corner. He strokes hair away from Loki’s face to pull it behind his ear, but Loki pushes his hand away, grimacing.

“Leave it, just leave it,” he mumbles, eyes drifting shut, not sure why Thor is supposed to leave the hair alone. He’s shaking, it lingers from the laughing - but it feels hectic, uncomfortable. Maybe it’s not from laughing at all.

Then Thor is beside him, sitting against the wall, too, and Loki can slump against his shoulder before the lights begin to fade. He feels his brother’s clothes against the suit he’s still wearing, can smell Thor; he’s sweating and it reminds Loki of so many things at once, so much home, but he has no time to recall it all before everything drifts away. Into a deep, deep darkness.

He would’ve been grateful for it, had he had the presence of mind.
Reverie, Nearest

Chapter Summary

A calmer chapter than the last rollercoaster of a ride! Things got intense. But our people still got things to do.

By the way, I accidentally posted this chapter earlier today ... then deleted it again. This one is staying up, though :)

Chapter Notes

Your comments ... they give me LIFE!! THANK you all so much! For every comment, kudos and bookmark, you people are the BEST!

Please do enjoy.

In the following days, Thor tries to keep the atmosphere as easy and manageable as he can despite everything being absolute chaos.

He feels like a young boy again. Realising the weight of Asgard would one day lie on his shoulders; realising what kind of responsibility that entailed, if only for brief, terrifying moments, the rest spent in glorious ignorance of the cockiness of a first prince.

This is all day, every day. And the responsibility is real, present, here. For his people, his brother, his friends.

Valkyrie carries most of the weight, even. Thor is only second in command, yet he feels like every nervous jitter is on him, his to take care of.

The stones are all in New Asgard and it is creating a whole new kind of panic. Shuri working constantly on the Pathway. Soon is the moment of truth; whether their gauntlet-like machinery, their pathway, will actually work. Whether the lost friends are still connected, even. Or if it has all been in vain.

Loki is the one who’s able to access the deepest cores to find out; Strange’s magic is useful but of a different nature than Asgardian (or, Jotunn), and cannot work with the stones in the same way. They’re more aligned with the way Loki’s magic was created.

And Loki sleeps. And sleeps and sleeps and sleeps. And wakes and cannot sleep, but doesn’t get up, either.

His magic is drained, he tells Thor, who gives him water and makes sure he eats, sometimes, though never enough. ‘It needs to restore’, he tells Thor. Then sleeps again.

It’s obvious to anyone that that is far from the whole truth of it.

Loki doesn’t talk about his experience in 2012 at all, but Thor has heard the re-tell from Valkyrie,
Steve, Banner, Wanda and Strange. All of them, to get every side. To understand. He tries talking to Loki about the first part. The trick he did with Steve in getting the sceptre, the masquerade, hoping that it’ll be easier for Loki to start there. Something lighter. Apparently, it’s not. Loki answers in short, empty answers, giving absolutely zero effort to the flow of conversation.

Thor makes him practice his magic when he’s awake, and Loki lets him, building it up gently. Allowing Thor to push him to sitting when Loki respond to Thor's verbal efforts to get him up.

Thor sits with him, by his side, waiting patiently while Loki grasps for tendrils that slip through his fingers. When he lashes out in frustration and gets mad at Thor for making him do it. In the beginning, he’d paled at the slightest spell, all colour draining from his face. But it began building up, and it’s better already. It’s already there, it’s not like last time he had to build it up; this time he just used up the reserves, he didn’t lose the core of it over years of neglect.

It’s just obvious that he doesn’t care a whole lot about building it back up. As if the progress they make dulls again right after because he can’t be bothered to nurture it, hold it.

Thor forces him to sleep on the couch, plenty of pillows to make it comfortable. To at least not have him secluded, like a prison in the small bedroom all day. Ankle elevated, since getting the surgery right now seems like a daunting task on top of everything else. They need to get onwards, not sap his strength.

Thor watches his brother, though. Intently. He’s dead scared; has to sleep in the same room as Loki, leaving the house extremely seldom and only then if Brunnhilde or someone else stays behind. When he dreams, he sees Loki at the end of Gungnir. He sees him falling. He sees him landing on harsh rock, broken. He sees him jump from his mother’s beloved gardens, he sees the blood colour the water when he’s stabbed through by the cliffs underneath the fall. Thor dreams of his brother, bleeding out in a field from deep gashes in his forearms.

Thor is terrified: in 2011, Loki let go of Gungnir. In both the diverged 2012 and 2014, Loki tried to take his own life. Thor can’t help but feel like it’s only a matter of time for it to come due in 2027, too.

He dreams of 2014-Loki a lot. Wakes up panting or yelling, which terrifies the present Loki. Thor hasn't told him what happened but he thinks Loki knows, anyway.

It all feels so far, the memory from 2014 oddly blurred and replaying in fast-forward as if it weren't really Thor, there, but a series of film replaying. Not his thoughts. He doesn't know how he could've suddenly been so convinced it was the right thing to do, to stay. If he’s being honest, his head felt twisted and illogical at the time; as if his grief and longing for something better was making his thoughts go crazy. Almost delusional, maddened. He thinks he
should probably talk to someone, too, when he makes Loki do the same. When this is all over.

Brunnhilde has already found someone she believes is qualified, a therapist with an extension branch of psychiatric knowledge. She specializes in trauma and self-destructive behaviour including eating disorders and seems to have extensive knowledge of various spectrums of mental health. She didn't have any slots open this week, though.

They should've waited with retrieving the stones. Now they're in a hurry and Loki is not well, he should be getting help because Thor doesn't know what to do, this is out of his extent of knowledge but they need Loki. They don't have enough time to wait for him to get better before doing the spells. There's a lot of lives depending on getting the stones away from here again as quickly as possible.

Afterwards, Thor tells himself. Afterwards, he'll get Loki to .. talk to the therapist, at least.

They need to finish this now. After two days, they can't hold out any longer.

For each day that passes with nothing happening, the danger grows for everyone in New Asgard. For everyone in the universe. The risk of people coming for the stones growing.

Thor comes back from talking to Shuri and lets himself into the house. Unlocked. Loki doesn’t like for it to be locked, lately.
There’s quiet in there, the air stuffy. Thor’s little brother is on the couch under a blanket, dressed in soft, thin clothes and with his back turned to the room, and he doesn’t stir when the door opens.

“Good morning, Loki,” Thor calls, taking off his jacket. It’s afternoon, really. His brother still doesn’t move.

Thor pauses, holding back a sigh.

He walks over to the couch, sits down on the edge beside the still form, jumbling the cushions. Loki repositions his head, irritated.

“What, Thor,” he mumbles, head turned into the pillow. Muffled.

“This can’t go on,” Thor says. “The stones can’t stay here much longer.”

“Have Strange do it.”

“Loki.”

“Oh wait, I’m the only one of any real calibre on this entire damned rock.” The words are snarky, but his voice is just tired. No effort to the jab. At least he’s talking.

“Loki.”

“One more day.”

Thor sighs and reaches out a hand to stroke his hair, but his brother draws away. “Stop doing that,” Loki says.

Sometimes closeness is the only thing that will keep Loki together. Other times, he acts as if he’s never needed it at all.

“Your magic is better,” Thor states, softly.
“I just need a little more time.”

“But how much?” He pauses. “I won’t force you if your magic isn’t ready -”

“Then it’s not,”

“- but please, brother, be honest with me.”

Loki doesn’t say anything. Seconds pass.

“You only have to try,” Thor says. “If you can’t do it, we go back. You can come back here, sleep. But just try.”

Loki stays quiet. His back is tense.

Thor wants him to try. He wants Loki to have at least inner motivation enough to get up from the couch. He wants Loki to have the energy to try at what this whole mission had been about. He wants Loki to care, he wants him to care about the mission that he’s lost so much progress in trying to complete.

“Loki,” Thor tries again, a sigh. Loki is breathing deeper, deliberately, probably trying to fall back asleep to escape the situation. Not an unfamiliar strategy of his at all.

After a good ten seconds, Thor says, “I will literally carry you there if you stop speaking now.” He sticks out a finger to poke the unmoving back. “In the blanket, unwashed and grumpy.” He waits. “Your breath smells, too. See how you like that.”

Loki’s carefully controlled air escapes in a huff of a sigh. “I don’t care, Thor.”

Don’t you? Come on, brother.

Thor waits for a second more, then wraps an arm around his brother’s middle. Tight. Loki yelps when Thor hauls him up onto his shoulder, the blanket falling off to reveal pale and hairy legs beneath. Boxer-shorts, Thor’s. He’s careful not to jostle the injured ankle. Loki squirms half-heartedly as if only really waking up now, then begins to bang with his fists on Thor’s back.

“Allright alright, fine - fine, you’ve made your point.” Thor carries him towards the door. “Thor, put me down!”

Thor pauses. “Only if you say you’ll come and try. And then actually do it, too.”

Loki breathes through his nose, staying quiet, tense. Thor puts his hand on the doorknob, turning it.

“Fine!” Loki explodes. “I’ll come - I’ll come! Thor put me down, I’m serious!”

Thor does, setting Loki on the floor feet first, who staggers, shoving Thor away and then reaches for the wall with one hand while desperately trying to hold up the blanket with the other. It’s not going too well. Thor stands back, arms crossed and leaned against the wall. He’s not going to help with the blanket just to get shoved again.

Loki finally manages to get it wrapped around himself and scowls at Thor. “Well?” he says. “Clothes, then? Guess I’m up, now.”

“I’ll find clothes if you brush your teeth.”
Loki scoffs and limps into the bathroom, door slamming behind him.

The walk to the community hall is slow. Loki is slow.

Thor managed to get him to agree to use the crutches again. The healing will be faster, this time, it’s already better as far as Thor can tell. Just, it’s not healing optimally when Loki’s mind is like this.

“Does your ankle hurt?” Thor asks him, and Loki doesn’t spare him a glance. Today is really one of those days.

“No,” he says, shifting forward sourly on the crutches. Planting them firmly in the snow. He looks so tired.

Thor waits for a beat. Then, “do you think your magic is up for the task? It looked better, earlier.”

Loki shrugs in between steps. “I should be able to feel if there’s a connection at all.”

The hall quiets when they enter, people hanging out in their sleeping bags and comforters. In armchairs and sofas positioned in the hall. Loki ignores them all, going in a beeline for Shuri who stands by the Pathway, fiddling with cords sticking out of the back of it. Thor follows.

There are Wakandan guards all around Shuri, who look wary at their approach. One of them steps in front of Loki and he comes to a halt.

“What business do you have with the princess?” she asks, formal and neutral in her voicing of the words. It’s a required question.

“I’m here to work,” Loki says, regal as ever despite his ruffled appearance and the crutches on his arms. Back straight. Face just as neutral; it’s terrifying just how normal he’s able to act, seeing it from the outside.

Well. If it weren’t for how he looks like a walking ghost. That’s not simply covered up with good posture.

“Let him through, Okoye,” Shuri calls. She’s smiling at the soldier, but there are dark circles under her eyes. Okoye nods at Loki, then Thor, and steps aside.

“Good to see you back, magic-boy,” Shuri teases Loki as they near, winking, pressing things on the touch-screen of the machine. Loki raises an eyebrow and Thor nearly smiles.

“You’re really calling me boy. I’m over a thousand years old.”

Loki makes the words sound genuine, the jab. The first time he makes that effort since they came back.

“One would think you’d had enough time to sleep, then, in all that time,” Shuri retorts, but with amusement gleaming in her eyes. There’s also .. excitement in there. The whole village is excited aside from the fear, buzzing with anticipation. “Instead of making everyone impatient. Hello, Thor,” she adds.

“Shuri,” Thor returns with a nod and a slight smile.

“Well!” Shuri exclaims. “Banner should be here in a minute. And Peter. We should just get started.”
“Peter?” Thor asks, drawing his eyebrows together. “Quill?”

“Parker,” Shuri answers, while Loki sits down in a nearby chair, trying to look discreet about having to sit down. He’s not succeeding.

“Wasn’t he supposed to go home?” Thor asks, blinking.

She smirks. “I smuggled him in. Blind lab-passenger. He was too useful to just throw away like that - and if I’m allowed to be here …”

On cue, Peter Parker walks through the door accompanied by a sour-looking Strange. Shuri grimaces. “Well.. we might’ve only just told the others today that he didn’t actually take the flight home …”

And Peter Parker does indeed look sheepish. Thor catches Loki with a wry, just noticeable smile, watching the commotion and troublemakers, which is the first positive emotion he’s shown since .. well, that laughing fit after they returned doesn’t count, definitely. It sparks up a glimmer of hope in Thor.

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Thor had apparently told the princess beforehand that Loki would be coming down, today, and it irritates Loki to no end that he just got his way like that. By threatening Loki.

He’s a master sorcerer, for crying out loud. Or he’s supposed to be, anyway.

Shuri has called the other scientists to come, to observe the energy as Loki works with the stones. If there will be any - honestly, he doesn’t hope so, because that would mean the stones could be tracked by anyone looking for them.

Not Thanos, obviously, but maybe some of the many other lousy people of the universe.

He finds himself getting into the project again, like that. Captivated by things like those, if only sporadically; one moment he gets caught in some worry or thought about the project, the next it hits him like a brick to the face that he doesn’t actually care. His brain is telling him he doesn’t care, and so he doesn’t. But then the next moment, he forgets.

It’s almost worse to feel like nothing really matters when it’s constantly being put in contrast to believing that something does matter. Losing the purpose again and again. It’s easier to sleep on the couch.

Word has spread that Loki is going to attempt at establishing a connection. Rogers and Wilson arrive with Banner. Star-Lord comes prancing in on his own. Colonel Rhodes follows, and soon, every other Avenger is filing back into the community hall, conversation buzzing. Just like when they were ready to travel back for the stones, except now, the whole show relies on Loki and his magic, which is still not up to speed. He believes he’ll be able to do it, but he had expected a more .. private affair. Several tries. Now, it looks like any waver of his ability is going to be witnessed by a crowd.

That’s great. Just brilliant.

(It’s going to be fine. Fine.)

Strange comes up to him, by his side where Loki has moved to stand with the crutches, just because
he doesn’t like having to sit down like some old man. Having to use the crutches barely even bothers him anymore.

They stand facing the far end of the hall, back turned to the gathered people.

“Like we practised?” Strange asks.

“Like we practised,” Loki confirms, and he can hear the dullness of his own voice. Strange glances sidelong at him.

“Are you sure you’re up for this task?”

“According to Thor, apparently I am.”

“He wouldn’t force you to do it.”

“He threatened to carry me here in my underwear.”

Strange lifts an eyebrow. “You were still in your underwear at this time of the day?”

“That is none of your business.”

Strange turns to him fully. “Are you ready?” he asks. “Can you do it?”

“I promised Thor I would try. If I can’t manage then we’ll just have to wait again.”

Wait. For Loki. As always, the roadblock is Loki.

As if on cue at his name being spoken, Thor pushes his way past some people near, stumbling his way up to Strange and Loki. They both turn to face him, Loki with some shifting of the crutches.

“Loki, I’m so sorry about all these people,” he says, looking around nervously at the audience. “I didn’t know - I swear, I only told Shuri and Bruce - maybe Cap, but I didn’t think -”

“It’s fine, Thor. I guess I should’ve expected it.”

Thor’s eyebrows pull together. “You’ve had other things on your mind.”

Loki looks away from him. “Shall we get started?”

Shuri has definitely upgraded the scrap-heap of machinery Bruce and Loki had constructed, giving it a sleek exterior of black metal and a whole new look. The boxes are raised on the top, the same metal, and connected with copper wires. It’s still big as a desk but with rounded corners and retro elements, the buttons and knobs in colour, like a mix between a high-end spaceship and a nineties studio mixer.

“Nice work,” Loki says, running his eyes over it. His voice is calm to cover up the nervous fluttering in his chest. Everyone had turned to look once he, Thor and Strange walked over to Shuri.

He doesn’t like it. There’s a reason he’s been sleeping all day; to avoid feeling, to avoid, and now he’s smack in the middle of the world again.

“Yes yes, I know it looks good,” Shuri says with a dismissive wave of her hand, “but it’s much more efficient, too. I really hope we get to use it.”
For more than one reason, obviously.

“We’re going to use it to monitor the activity, too,” Banner says, looking at Loki. “Figured the stones could just be in here while you work?”

“Actually,” Loki says. “For this particular working, it would be a lot easier to have them out in the open. Undisturbed by electrical interference.”

Banner nods, slowly. “Alright. Sure. Shuri?”

“It’s fine,” she says. “We’ll just have him hooked up, instead. Read his brain waves and energy-emissions, that should work just as well.”

Loki doesn’t like that one bit, having his every move supervised. Every energy he sends out.

He looks up, and everyone is looking at him. He blinks.


This is just going to be him and Strange. They only have to search through the stones, check if the souls are attached. Or there, in some way or another. Strange to help guide Loki’s, if it falters. Which it will. Loki could’ve done it, had he been at full strength, but he isn’t.

The important thing is just they stay together inside the working. Locked into each other.

That turns out to be quite literal, too, when two chairs are dragged in. A pair of handcuffs, attached with a chain to one of the chairs, too. It turns out to be Loki’s chair.

He stares at them, disbelieving. “I can’t work with that.”

“You can,” Thor says, walking up to his side, voice gentle. He picks up the cuffs. “Look.”

They’re loose, with long chain in the middle. The third hoop is attached to the chair. There’s space for hand movement, free flow of seiðr.

Then Strange walks over, picking up one of the cuffs and clicking it shut over his own wrist. Loki frowns for a second, then understands; he’s going to be attached to Strange, in case he attempts to teleport away with the stones. He’d have to teleport them both, and Strange could just portal them back again.

“It’s only to make everyone feel safe,” Thor says, studying Loki’s face as Loki drops the crutches to the ground and picks up the cuff, eyes downcast and fastened on it. He leans on his good foot. “It’s not personal.”

“Of course,” Loki says. For who? he thinks, though. To make who feel safe?

It’s not that he doesn’t understand. He does have a certain history with these Gems, with taking things that aren’t his, with lying and deceiving. He is the God of Mischief.

It’s not that it particularly hurts. That Thor probably knew all along that he was going to be cuffed, and didn’t tell him. Loki doesn’t actually understand why he didn’t tell him.

“Loki,” Thor says. His voice is quiet.

Loki clicks the cuff shut. “It’s fine, Thor.”
Then he sits down in the chair, facing the room, and everyone is looking at him. There’s still murmured talking, but mostly, people looking. Nebula is there and his nerves prick. Wanda. Rogers, Wilson, Valkyrie. Pepper Potts, her daughter. All the rest; Star-Lord, his friends. Colonel Rhodes. The wizard’s friend, Wong. Barnes. Hank Pym, Van Dyne, Lang. Other people of whom he isn’t sure of the names. The Asgardian Einherjar and the Wakandan soldiers and officials. The shame burns, once again being the prisoner for all to cast their gazes upon. Even when he’s trying to help; still an enemy.

Loki glances at the chain connecting him and the other sorcerer. Strange catches his eyes, shaking his wrist so the cuff rattles. “There’s no escaping me, now,” he says with a wink.

Loki snorts softly, looking back down. He concentrates on gathering his sei∂r in a golden ball in his core. Ready to draw on, alive.

He doesn’t feel very alive.

Banner comes up, kneeling in front of Loki. Loki always feels so small beside the enormous man-beast. At least he’s stopped being scared of being in the vicinity of him.

Banner smiles, lifting a big hand holding a pad connected to an electrode. He places it on Loki’s left temple. Then another, the other temple.

“Take off his shirt,” Shuri calls from behind a screen, not looking up. She waves a distracted hand. “I need one on the heart.” Loki stiffens, looking over at Strange who stares back, just as appalled at the idea.

“Uh,” Banner says, half-hushed, half calling - so she can hear him at all. “Shuri, we have an audience.”

She looks up. Her face falls. “Oh come on. You are grown men, it is just bellies.”

Loki clears his throat, trying to keep his composure. “I’d really rather not.”

As in that’s not going to happen.

Shuri looks at him for a few seconds, eyes narrowed. Then sighs. “Fine. Place them in his hands and lower arms, then. You know what I mean, Bruce.”

Bruce does. One in each palm, each underarm, feeling for specific points with his thumb before sticking the pads onto the skin. Then he moves on to Strange.

A moment later, Thor comes to kneel beside Loki.

“What,” Loki sighs, not sparing him a glance.

“Are you ready for this?”

“You already asked that. Or. You declared it.”

“That was before the audience. They’re just - you know they just want to help, be here to show support. But I can tell them to go.”

Loki hesitates. That’s actually tempting. Then reconsiders: that would be even more embarrassing than showing weakness, being visibly ashamed of showing it. Doing the working in the hall while everyone waits outside, knowing it’s because Loki was too self-conscious to have them in there.
“They can be here. As long as they don’t interfere.”

Thor looks at him for a moment more. Then sighs. “This was a bad idea.”

“It’s not,” Loki says, still looking straight ahead. “It’s going to be over soon, so. It’s fine.”

The stones are carried in by Wakandan soldiers in six small silver cases. They’re placed on a table some ten feet from Loki and Strange, soldiers on each side of it. That’s actually nice, as it shields some of the room and the audience from Loki.

Loki swallows. Having the stones so close is prickling his anxiety. The mind stone, right there, and despite the magical wards and protections in the case created made by Strange most likely, he can feel it calling. And it holds so much stored in it. Memories. Pieces of his mind, other minds.

Time is scary. There’s no other fair way to describe what he feels; it scares him. The vastness to that stone, so quick to eradicate the boundaries of the world, the seams of reality. Soul, the same. Unreadable and mystical in its energy, like a ghost story.

He remembers Reality especially fondly. The power he felt in Jane Foster, how he wanted badly to possess it. The crazy schemes that had been building up in his mind in the time he was imprisoned; revenge scenarios, power-hungry fantasies, and how the angry power in Foster’s veins matched that perfectly, it could give him everything he desired. It had wanted to work with him.

So, of course, he’d sent it away at the first opportunity he got. As Odin. He couldn’t afford to have it close. At the time, he saw clear enough to understand that his mind wasn’t well enough to take care of that kind of power.

Space is the one he’s going to make his primary connection through. The anchor to his working with all the other stones.

He described he and the stone as being ‘friendly’, weeks back, and that still is the most accurate description; they’ve spent a lot of time together.


“Sure.”

He’s already gathered and readied his seiðr as well as he can. It’s not great. But it’s there. It makes him glad now that Thor has been forcing him to practice.

“Ready!” Strange calls to Shuri, standing by the Pathway machinery along with Banner, Parker, and Pym. She nods, pressing a few buttons. Then nods again.

“We’re onto you,” she says, and nothing in her words betrays the fact that if she’s onto Loki’s energy, she’s no doubt witnessing his heart beating fast as a rabbit’s. He feels his ears reddening. He doesn’t like to be monetized.

The cases with the stones are clicked open; a guard for each. More than a single stage, a case within a case. Locks inside. But then it’s finished.

Loki’s heart feels like it’s going to jump out of his mouth as the song of the stones is left unveiled. The edges of his mouth twitches.

He swallows.
“Can we have them closer?” he asks. Strange nods in agreement out to Loki’s side. “But a few feet.”

The Wakandan keepers look to Shuri, then Valkyrie, who both give a nod of approval.

The table is pushed forward, sliding over the polished metal floor.

“So,” Strange says, directing his voice to Shuri and the scientists. “It should only take some minutes.”

“Ten, maximum,” Loki adds.

“So no need to get impatient.”

Which means if we’re not back before then, we’re going to need help, and help is in the form of Wanda. Forcing them back out. Dragging them. They’ve practised in a simulated situation similar to this scenario, and she was a natural at it.

Loki locks eyes with her for a second. She’s standing by Thor’s side, close to the Pathway and Shuri. She smiles at him. He nods in greeting, then looks away. Doesn’t meet Thor’s eyes.

Strange asks, “ready, Loki?” and Loki nods, looking straight ahead at nothing. Then he closes his eyes.

He feels out Strange’s magic, first. It’s reaching for him, oddly grounded by the chain linking them together, in fact. Makes it more physical than otherwise.

He’s tense, the other. Anxious. Loki doesn’t know what he feels, but from feeling the energy of Strange, he’d say it has something to do with guilt.

Loki doesn’t want to ponder on what Strange feels in his magic.

Immediately, though, he feels his own being soothed. By the presence of other, stronger energy. Less frayed and fragmented. He feels his heart beat slower, calming. Strange’s magic like glue to his own.

Next up is the stones.

They’ve practised this. They know what to do.

Only, they don’t know what’ll happen once they’re in there. The stones could hold anything and everything, and it’s up to the two of them to navigate where they want to go.

Luckily, Loki knows himself to be somewhat of a skilled pilot in that area, a skilled improviser. That’s his element - navigating chaos with an agenda.

The stones are like a beacon, a shining light spreading out. Together in all their glory. Loki has to physically restrain himself from getting up and gathering them all in his arms like puppies.

There’s an inner circle of the energy; condensed around the stones, close to them. It’s up to Loki to guide them; he knows what to do.

He stretches his magic towards it, like clouds drifting over a sky, further, further - and Strange, as they’ve been practising, stays put, together with Loki’s energy. Like they’re holding hands. They near the inner circle. The light, condensed, the light of each stone swirling fast, like deadly sharks around the reefs of an island. He can almost see the energy for his inner eye, the stones each a dot of colour in the middle of a beacon, screaming out their power each of them. And whispering it at the same time. Like they’re trying to seduce him.
He’s good at this; leaving his body. He still feels it, knows it’s there, but it’s in the very back of his mind. The journey in focus.

He hesitates for a moment. Then dives into the beacon.

The stones’ energies are like land. A surreal, abstract and ever-changing land; of meadows, then endless cliff walls in a canyon, then of barren rock, then of sky, of sky under your feet, inside your body, you are the sky. There’s earth and forests, plants, strange hybrids of flora, and everything moves. Changes constantly.

Loki is distantly aware of the Power Gem’s force dominating the scenery, now; destruction, or the building of massive monuments. Volcanoes and tsunamis. Then it shifts to Reality as if the stones are showing off one by one, and its world makes Loki want to throw up. Everything changing, too fast, no borders - he thinks he might’ve thrown up, already, but nothing’s really there, so -

“Loki.”

There’s a hand around his wrist. Not his real wrist. His body but not his real body. It’s there, he’s in it, but he can’t see it. The scenery is eating him.

“Loki,” the voice repeats. The hand gripping tighter. Loki looks up and thinks he can make out the outline of Strange’s face. It’s wrong, of course, twisted, but it makes sense. He’s stabilizing their presence when Loki can’t. Where Loki’s magic is getting pulled away by the force, Strange stands steady.

There still are no real bodies, and the scenery isn’t really a scenery more than it’s a bizarre kind of 2-D movie, but it’s what they got. And it gets more even, the stones balancing out, Strange and their real bodies being the stabilizers.

Loki takes a breath. Thinks the thought, at least; it works to calm him, which is what matters. He gathers his focus around the cores of the Gems.

Eventually, they find themselves in water. Find themselves in bodies, their own, water reaching to the middle of their shins and the shallow sea stretching as far as the eye can see.

Strange is in front Loki; not the real Strange but his metaphysical body. He looks around, at the water, at the sky which seems .. oddly empty. Not really a sky. Too light and pale in its colour. Then he looks at Loki.

“Cool place,” he says.

Loki snorts. “I suspect you’ve been to the Astral Plane?”

“Quite a lot, actually.”

“I mean, this is a lot like that except it makes less sense.”

The corner of Strange’s mouth quirks.

“So,” he says. “We’re in the balanced middle-ground. Of every stone.”

“But we can manipulate it.”

“How?”
Loki smirks.

It’s been a while since he talked to the Space Stone. But its power feels like something returning home. A space in him, filled.

He knows it isn’t. He knows it isn’t *his* and never will be. The stones are their own creatures.

His eyes are closed, but he knows the water underneath them is beginning to glow. And then they’re sucked under.

Everything is blue. Icy blue, sharp, though not necessarily cold.

Loki reaches into the core of it. Grasping onto the familiar power he knows best and it engulfs him, wrapping him in blue power. He and Strange are no longer two bodies, their magics working so intimately together they’re both in the same place, same skin. Both of them feel the blue settling like an anchor in their intertwined selves.

And from there, they can really go anywhere.

Loki uses the Space gem to communicate with the other stones. It’s his way in, into talking to the stones instead of being pushed around by them. His intermediary.

The worlds of the stones become less tangible, like this. More like thoughts. Thoughts without words.

He searches, and then he finds what he’s looking for. Or nearly falls over it - like a line, a cut through the tranquility of the power. Reaching through where it isn’t supposed to be, stretched tight like a bow, holding on in two different ends; polar opposites that weren’t ever supposed to be connected together like that.

Loki seeks them out now that he knows where to find them and finds himself and Strange standing in front of six threads running over the shin-deep water, stretched like tightropes. In colours, pale and glowing; the colours of the stones.

The energy in them is obvious. It’s humming in the strings, like cords, like there are souls screaming in there. There’s no doubt as to what they are; they hold *life*.

Strange glances at Loki. “Are you sure about this?”

Loki shrugs, staring at the strings. “I guess. This is our way in.”

“What are you gonna do, just grab them?”

“I could,” Loki says. Then, after a second’s thought, “actually, yes.”

He grabs Strange’s wrist, yanking it down as he crouches (noticing his ankle is entirely unproblematic, here), wrapping his other hand around the lines of strings. Bundling them together in his palm.

It burns. Burns everywhere as they’re sucked along with the force, sideways. Like jumping onto a moving wagon, except *faster*. And more surreal, less physical.

Loki knows where they’re going. And when they stop moving, he knows what they’re going to see. The stones tell him:
Mirrors. Oceans of mirrors, over them, under them, mirrored in each other, bending and moving, everywhere. The water is gone, but it might as well still be there with how unstable the place feels. Everything is dizzying, like standing very, very high up.

There are shadows in the glass, and Loki knows what they are immediately.

“Is that..?” Strange says, standing by his side. Loki closes his eyes to blueprint the place.

He knows what he came here to look for. And the people are not hard to search out. The stones have helped him; the string presented to him were the ones he asked for. There are many more, years of death in the name of the stones, in their power, ancient history. But he avoided those; who knows what they might awaken?

Stark, Romanoff, the Vision, Gamora.

They’re clouds in the mirrors. They’re there.

He walks closer to one, holding out a hand. He can glimpse a face in there, unseeing, dead. His finger brushes the surface, and it’s soft like silk. Not glass. It’s Romanoff behind it, he thinks. She’s just there.

She’s dead. But she’s here, still connected. Something making her still real in relation to reality.

He can almost imagine her raising her eyes to look at him. Almost thinks he sees some glimpse of recognition.

Or maybe it’s just his own face, reflected in the glass. He feels himself drawing closer, leaning in. Drawn towards something; it seems so peaceful in there.

Suddenly, he’s alone.

He’s not sure why - he only knows that Strange is gone. Maybe Loki wanted him gone. Romanoff should still be in there, but everything is oddly far. Like she’s removed herself, sunk deeper. Maybe Loki is the one who’s gone, really, as if the glass already has drawn him in.

It’s nice, the quiet.

He doesn’t think. There’s only longing, a sense of it just being right. Had he thought, he would’ve thought of Thor. Of the waves under the hillside; why he hasn’t jumped into them, swum out to deep waters, out of sight.

He lets himself fall forward, thoughtless, towards the mirror, his own reflection void and but a shadow and it’s going to be him, soon. He falls, and he enjoys the weightlessness. The prospect of nothing awaiting him.

Then he wakes up on a floor, gasping for air.

“- rother. Loki. Are you there?”

His breath is caught and he swallows, eyes flickering. They won’t focus. But the voice is unmistakable.

“I’m - yes, I’m -- here,” he manages out. Blinks, rapidly, swallowing again. Thor’s face is a blob. Another blob beside him; Wanda. Bowed over Loki.
He lets his head fall back, a thump against the cold floor. He closes his eyes, just for a moment. He wakes back up a moment later, or what feels like a moment later, a hand clapping his cheek.

“Loki,” Thor is saying, sounding desperate. “Come on.”


“Yes, the Doctor said so -- Loki? Are you there?”

Loki nods, eyes closed. “Yes. Yes. They’re -” he sighs. “Yes.”

The audience has dispersed by the time Loki regains his senses. They’ve spread out, gone elsewhere. The Hall is quiet, only murmurs around in crooks and corners, people preparing to go to bed in their sleeping arrangements.

Apparently, Loki had disconnected from Strange. *On purpose,* Strange says with an almost combative tone, but Loki doesn’t remember making any conscious decision.

Nobody knows what he saw in the place with the cloudy mirrors except for him. And they don’t need to.

He’s sitting propped up against a wall and feeling like just lying right back down again. Going to sleep on the floor.

Wanda, Strange, Thor and Valkyrie are sitting, too, to be sympathetic. Cross-legged, in a circle. The scientists are still in the hall, studying the readings they got from Loki and Strange.

“You weren’t responding,” Wanda says. “When Stephen got back, you were still in there.” She hesitates. “Then you .. fell off the chair.”

Loki grimaces. “Dignified.”

“But I pulled you out of there. Could you feel it?”

“I honestly didn’t notice anything.”

“That’s a good sign,” Wanda says, eyes gleaming with pride. “I’ve been practising, you know.”

Loki gives her a smile. It turns into a grimace when his head gives a particularly nasty throb, and he shoots up a hand to rub at his temple.

“What even happened in there?” Valkyrie asks after a few seconds. "Why did you break the connection?"

“I got stuck. Not sure.”

He can feel Strange eyeing him.

“Well done, anyway. All three of you. Everyone is … well. More than excited.”

***
Strange grabs Brunnhilde when they’re all leaving the Community Hall to go back home and rest, just outside the door. Thor and Loki walking further ahead. Strange glances at them, then turns to face her fully.

“He needs help,” he says. Brunnhilde raises her eyebrows.

“No kidding.”

“I’m serious,” Strange says. “I know it’s been critical for a while but Thor needs to do something about this now. I swear, Loki kicked me out from in there.”

“Why would he?”

“The mirrors. The mirrors call to you.”

“And they’re like … mirrors of death.” She pauses. "That totally sounds like a metal band."

Strange glances back at the brothers making slow progress. “He has no self-preservation. Just - you know what happened when we were in 2012. 2014, too. And what Thor has said about their fight on the Bifrost, before New York. That's three times.”

Brunnhilde stays quiet.

"Three times attempted suicide,” Strange elaborates, raising his eyebrows as if to underline the point.

Brunnhilde sighs.

“I know, I know,” she says. “Thor was going to do something about it when this is all over. Everything has been happening so fast, lately, we were going to wait.”

“With what, making him see a therapist?”

“We have several connected to New Asgard who would understand.”


“I actually found one already, scheduled an appointment for him, but that's next week. We need to get on with the project tomorrow.”

She can read Strange’s face; what he thinks of that. It would be better to get Loki to talk to someone now. Reserve tomorrow for it. Get him started, have more of a web of security - they don’t know what might happen with the spell, inside the stones. It might be easy and it might not, and if the mirrors are a risk to him …

but they can’t afford to wait. Not with the most powerful objects of the universe gathered in one place.

“If we do it tomorrow,” Brunnhilde argues, “we can get his ass to therapy after. If it doesn't work with the passageway, he can talk to the shrink in between tries, right?”

Strange hesitates, then nods.

They hurry up the hill in the dusk to catch up to the others.
Heart of Snow

Chapter Summary

Loki and Strange confirmed the connection between the stones and the dead friendsies. Soon is the moment of truth: will they be able to get them back? Or are they lost forever in a drifting void between death and life .... Meanwhile, Loki is having a hard time after the time shenanigans. He's kinda essential to the project and having the stones in New Asgard is dangerous, so they really need to finish it. He's just not in the best place to be working on a magic-project, even if he does want to. Sometimes.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for every comment. I love love love it. Love it.

It's great how you all read... like, both things I'd meant to be in the subtext but also all these other things. That's terrifying. But really cool!! What is it people say, the reader is fifty percent of the work and how it's experienced or something? That makes a lot of sense. Super cool. You guys' creativity and minds are awesome.

Feel free to enjoy. I, of course, hope you will. We're delving into some dangerous territory in the next few chapters (I mean the characters, the whole quest. But also me, I guess, lol)

“Make sure to get some proper sleep,” Valkyrie says when they depart at the top of the hill. Loki is leaning heavily on Thor; almost entirely so. Her gaze flicks around on Loki’s face as if something is odd about it to her. She settles on his eyes, her own earnest. “We’re going to need you.”

“Aye, aye,” Loki mumbles, giving a jerk of his chin. She smiles, then goes.

He and Thor go straight to the bedroom back in the house. Loki takes off the outer layers of clothes and Thor does the same, both in silence. The only sound rustling of fabric. Then they curl up on the bed together as if it's a practised dance, Loki wrapped into himself on his side beside Thor, who's on his back. There’s just enough room.

He sleeps lightly once more. That delirious half-awake state. The mirrors show up again and again, like a constant cloud over his eyes, right there and yet just out of reach. It never feels as calm as it did back in the metaphysical land of the stones. Only clouded, like raging waters swirling in his head. It’s not calm like that, in the waves. Only under the surface is there ever peace.

He wakes back up, apparently having fallen asleep at some point, Thor’s hand wrapped loosely
around his wrist. It doesn’t feel imprisoning; on the contrary. It feels a lot safer than the entire night has felt.

Loki unravels himself from the sweaty covers and his brother, intending to get up, but then the hand shoots out again, this time gripping tight around Loki’s forearm. He looks back, startled. Thor is staring back at him, pushing up onto his elbows. His eyes are a little unfocused but widened.

“Where are you going?” he asks, and Loki could swear he can hear Thor’s heart beat wildly against his ribcage. Or maybe that’s his own heart.

“To shower,” he articulates slowly. Wiggles his arm with a grimace. “Thor,” he insists when it isn’t being freed; it only seems like Thor’s hand is getting tighter.

Thor looks at his own iron-grip as if only noticing it now. He releases Loki’s arm at once and there are red prints left from his fingers. The hand drops limply against the mattress.

“Sorry,” he says, a little breathless. There’s a moment of nothing. Then Thor pushes to sit against the headboard, and he puts his head in his hands, rubbing his face. “Sorry,” he repeats without any obvious reason to it.

Loki feels frozen in place. “Can I go?” he asks.

Thor looks up. His eyes are tired on Loki.

“Of course,” he says.

The warm water on his body is calming. Collecting. He’d showered after the Time Heist but hadn’t been totally aware for it. Thor had stayed in the bathroom, the curtain drawn, to make sure Loki didn’t pass out. Loki himself had sat on the floor in the shower cabin, washing shampoo out of his hair.

He sits down this time as well; it’s just easier, though it feels pathetic even when there’s no one there to see. Curled against the wall, one leg stretched out to protect the ankle.

He dresses in new clothes. The old ones are sweaty. Sends a blessing to Thor for doing laundry, which Loki never helps with. He really should help with that.

Valkyrie stops by for breakfast, which Loki very, very nearly throws back up, sitting with his fist pressed to his mouth, head bowed over the table. Stomach protesting. His body is sensitive after using his magic so recklessly yesterday. Everyone is grateful for the fact that they’re going to attempt the rescue today, Valkyrie says. The Pathway has been moved to a different location, a house up the hill in the opposite direction of Thor’s. It lies isolated, to minimize any possible damage that might occur when using the stones.

Loki only really needs to guide the working, and so his seiðr not being in great shape shouldn’t be an issue. He's supposed to guide them in, to find the others, work with the stones. Hope that the Pathway is engineered correctly, that their calculations aren’t off. The power of Wanda, Strange and Thor should be enough to hold him together.

“We can wait another day,” Thor says.
“We don’t have to,” Loki replies. He shrugs. “If the machine works to keep open a passageway then it should all work fine. My magic doesn't need to be all hale.”

“You need to sleep.”

“I can sleep now. We can do it in the afternoon.”

He does manage to fall asleep to something more or less peaceful. He wakes, later, and lies awake for a little while on his side, facing the wall. Thor comes into the bedroom, somehow knowing Loki isn’t unconscious anymore, and sits beside his turned back. Loki allows him to stroke his hair.

“I’m never going to force you to talk,” Thor says after a while in quiet. His voice is shaking a tad as he’s been rehearsing what he’s going to say. “I can’t. But when all this is over, brother, I’m going to try and figure out something. Something that can help you.” He pauses. “This cannot go on.”

Loki sighs, closing his eyes. “I know,” he says. Leans into the touch.

The house they're supposed to be in lies past the lab and far up the hill rising behind it. By a cliff wall and desolated on a bare stretch of snow-covered grass. It's made of cement, by the looks of it, a single story. It's maybe thrice the size of Thor's house; so big but small-seeming in regards to how many are going to be stashed inside. Loki and Thor pause outside for Loki to catch his breath against the cliff-wall, and already there are people coming and going through the door.

They walk inside and it is filled with people. Every Avenger and both Wakandan and Einherjar soldiers. There to protect the stones, the village. Bringing back the dead is no riskless affair.

It's cold, inside, no heating probably, what with all the people that are bound to be hoarding heat soon enough. It's nice the temperature, now, in Loki's opinion, shifting forward on the crutches, hands getting sweaty. He's glad they're doing it today, too, not waiting for him to slump further into his hole. It's probably good to get started, to be doing something. Honestly, in the face of all these people, he can't help but get a little bit excited; is it going to work? What's going to happen? The atmosphere rubs off on him.

It's crammed with all the people in there but there's a space cleared towards the back-end of the room where a large, round carpet has been laid out on the dark wooden floor. Belonging to someone in the village, likely. It's beautiful. No depictions of anything actual, but a lot of twirling lines. Soft colours, both warm and desaturated.

Valkyrie is sitting on it and gets up when Thor and Loki enter, folding out both her arms.

“Nice, eh?” she calls, gesturing at the carpet, the room. “Thought you’d like the whole hippy-setup, Lackey.”

Loki isn’t sure what ‘hippy’ means, but he does like the carpet. “Are we supposed to sit on the floor?” he asks, cocking an eyebrow. He deposits the crutches against a wall and limps to lean against the back of a chair near Valkyrie. The Pathway stands to the left wall, a good ten feet from the carpet.

“In a circle, yes. So that's romantic.”

Wanda is already there. Strange arrives a minute later.

They settle on the floor. Everything they’ve been working on is so close all of a sudden.
“Remember,” Banner says, loud enough for the entire room to hear and throwing out his arms, nearly hitting Thor in the process, “sorry, Thor. Remember that this is a test drive. It might not work. We might need more tries, we might not have the solution at all. We might as well have it, but there’s no guarantee - just a disclaimer.”

Then he turns to the group on the carpet. “We’re going to hook you all up together, right? To the machine. Loki, you’re going to ... your thing ...” Banner trails off, waving a hand in a circle.

Loki clears his throat. “I’ll search out the stones and get them working together. Guide us all to the energy signature of your attached friends.”

“And then you can prompt a passageway for them through the Pathway keeping the stones connected?” Banner grimaces. “That becomes confusing. Should’ve chosen another name for our little friend.” He gestures at the Pathway machine. ‘Gauntlet’ was just an easier title. But it’s ... not a gauntlet. Gauntlet 2.0, perhaps, though that has such negative connotations.

“I can, yes,” Loki replies. “I only have to establish my connection again. If the Pathway can truly harness the power of the stones to that degree, we should be able to do open up a passageway.”

He sees Thor take a deep breath by Banner’s side. The room is practically vibrating.

“If it can harness the power, and the stones will let us do it,” Strange finishes, seated in a lotus position across from Loki. An electrode is placed in his palm by a woman, then the other. Someone comes from behind Loki, a Wakandan healer, startling him. Though, he lets them place the pads in his palms, as well.

“If it’s at all possible,” Wanda says, to Loki’s left. Her eyes are distant.

Then Thor settles to his right, his legs crossed. Electrodes are placed in his hands, too. “We’ll see,” he says. “At least they’re connected to our world.”

Loki glances over his own shoulder. Everyone is quiet, looking at them. The tension thick in the air. It almost feels hotter in here, already, despite the afternoon outside being windy and cloudless, icy. Barton stands at the front. He and Loki briefly lock eyes before Loki turns back around.

Wanda blinks beside him, taking a deep breath. “I guess this is it, then,” she says, and her voice sounds oddly small. Loki glances at her. Despite himself, he reaches out a hand to squeeze hers briefly.

She looks at the hand, eyebrows raised in surprise before Loki draws it back. Quickly. He lifts it in a fist to his mouth, feigning an awkward cough. Heat rising in his cheeks.

Wanda’s face breaks into a little smile.

“Thank you,” she says softly. He shrugs, looking at the air behind Strange.

There’s silence for a few more moments.

“This is it,” Thor echoes.

“Are you all ready?” Valkyrie calls to them. She’s standing beside Parker and Shuri who are looking at the Pathway machinery with focused gazes, pressing buttons. “No no no, not that one,” Parker says, pushing away Shuri’s hand from a button and she hisses back, “who is the expert here. You’re still in high-school.”
“We’re ready,” Strange calls back.

Loki lifts a hand experimentally. The electrode is connected to Wanda’s hand on his left, the other to Thor, who smiles at Loki when his eyes follow the cord to his brother. Loki gives a smile back.

“Shuri?” Valkyrie asks.

“Ready!”

“Then let’s go,” Valkyrie declares.

The stones are carried in. They’re placed in the black cases connected to the machine with chords, and the machine hums as it registers their energy. Then they’re lifted off and carried to the centre of the carpet, placed there facing neatly outwards in a hexagon. The lids are opened, and Loki keeps himself from being sucked into their power at once. His magic longs to merge with them.

The guards leave them there, walking out to stand around the seated group.

“Loki, the floor is yours,” Shuri says.

He can feel the eyes on his back. Takes a breath, closes his own eyes.

Already, the power in the room is astounding. Kept in their corporeal forms like this, contained and managed, the fact is still that there’s a Sorcerer Supreme, a Reality Bender with powers from the Mind gem, The God of Thunder, all gathered around Loki.

The stones in the middle.

He takes another, deeper breath. Then lifts his hands. Everything goes quiet around him, the last murmur dying out.

And all of a sudden, the power gathered in the room terrifies him.

Being about to harness it. His hands falter.

He’d seen what the other Loki was capable of. No, actually, not really any kind of ‘other’ Loki - it’d been him, himself. Just in the past. And what if nothing has really changed since then?

What if that’s why he’s scared of Wanda’s magic? Because he knows it might trigger something in him, the wrong he’s been running from but which he knows, he knows is in him. He saw it. He saw it that day on Jotunheim, his arm, the blue, the cold; he felt it in the vault when his form changed.

He knew it when he let go of Gungnir.

He knew it as he fell, and he knew it when he was on Sanctuary, he embodied it because it was the only real choice he’d ever been able to make; it is what he is. He saw it in his brother’s twisted neck, Thor dead.

He saw the monster sitting in the grass. And he saw it in the monster attacking the figure in the grass with no compassion, no understanding or patience. And so they’re really not so different the two, are they?

What if it’s not something he can control?

His hands are hanging suspended in the air and trembling ever so slightly.

“Loki?” Thor says and it sounds far away. Loki has a feeling he’s been saying it for some time.
He opens his eyes, staring at the air. It's a little hazy. Eyes prickle on his back.

“I can’t do it,” he whispers, just loud enough for Thor to hear.

“You haven’t tried, yet,” Thor says. Loki can hear the frown. He shakes his head. Swallows.

Pull yourself together, a voice says in his head. His own, he thinks. You are what you choose to be.

“It’s not true,” Loki whispers back to it, barely audible. I am what I was destined to be. Always destined.

“Loki,” Thor says. “Take a breath.” And Loki realises he isn’t. Breathing. He hesitates, despite it. Not really sure that the air actually is his to take.

“Brother,” Thor says, and his voice is soft.

Loki makes himself swallow, then draws in a breath. It fits in his lungs as if it’s supposed to be there. He feels Thor’s hand on his upper arm. Maybe it was there all along.

“You’re alright,” Thor says.

Loki takes another breath. He closes his eyes for a second. What if I’m not? he wants to say. What if I’m not alright? What if I’m not good?

Instead, he nods once. This is what he’s supposed to do, and he can do it. They’re doing it. It’s fine.

He blinks and closes his eyes again. Takes a breath.

He lifts his hands back up.

Gathering himself takes a moment; to re-focus and ground his mind in the body of his magic. It goes alright, everything considered. He carefully pushes down the memories and thoughts in favour of just feeling. It’s fine.

Next, he takes hold of magics around him. The companions. They’re already reaching for him. He manages a focus that resets his mind to a calmer pace and allows his own magic to wrap into theirs. Holds on tight to Thor’s crackling power, even as it squirms in Loki’s control over it. It doesn’t want to be controlled - but Thor is soothing it.

Wanda’s is calm. Like a well-mannered animal. Strange’s is surprisingly wild for his pristine attitude; well-groomed but wild. Loki has felt that one before.

He begins the working, nudging the powers of the other people in towards the beacon in their centre along with his own. It’s harder with so many people, heavier, but he can feel their force powering up his own body like batteries. Like an extremely potent energy drink. His own magic begins to fire up with their merging, and it’s glorious. Even if it isn’t his power, there is power that he can use because the others are letting him.

The fear returns to him like a slap. With this power, he could level this entire building with … a snap of his fingers. Even with his own magic damaged.

He refocuses if it’s a bit shaky.

The beacon. Focus.

He plunges in.

It’s like a tidal wave, the force of the stones. They wash over him and the energy of everyone else,
knocking the meta-literal air out of his lungs. His real body disappears into the back of his mind as they’re all engulfed in the force of the Infinity Stones.

He can’t feel his body. Or his .. not-body. It’s as if he’s becoming the land of the stones, this time; out of control.

He panics.

_Here we go again_, he hears, but it’s not out loud, it’s inside his own head. That was Strange’s voice.

The landscape changes around him, nauseating, and Loki does vomit this time, on all fours in purple sand. Or maybe he is the sand. It doesn’t particularly matter.

But then he hears no - _uagh, stop that!_ and it’s Wanda’s voice. He lifts his head to find her, tears from gagging blurring his vision. He barely gets to register that she _isn’t_ there, in fact she’s nowhere in sight and _oh shit_, that means she’s - then his head drags back down to bow and he vomits again. That wasn’t him, moving. He hadn’t even felt nausea coming on.

_Bllluuuaargghh_ he hears inside his head, someone else’s voice - or was that maybe out loud?

No. No no no no no.

_Fuck!_ he thinks.

_Watch the language_, Strange says inside his head.

_Stop, everyone stop!_ he tries, a thought in his head, but the others are speaking over him.

Loki tries to move, and everyone reacts to the moving of their apparently shared body with equal horror. They react to someone moving their limbs without their consent or intention. But it’s _Loki’s_ limbs, _he’s_ moving them and they’re _his_.

_Why am I_ - he hears Wanda, then _Loki_, a low growl from Thor, _what did you do_. He manages to move away from the sick before collapsing onto his back. His arms begin to move in little spasms by his side as Thor tries to move the body he’s in but which isn’t his and which he, thus, doesn’t know how to maneuver. To further help the matter, the landscape changes, becoming a hill instead, snowed over, and they fall. Roll, more like; Loki has now been demoted to ‘professional snowball’.

As they're moving, Loki feels something stretch out from himself - like his soul trying to leave his body, except it isn’t _his_ soul. It’s Strange’s.

As they're moving, Loki feels something stretch out from himself - like his soul trying to leave his body, except it isn’t _his_ soul. It’s Strange’s.

And suddenly, they’re two people tumbling down the slope.

The land on a platform, Loki crashing against a tree. Something breaks and he cries out, but it mends just as quickly in this odd not-really-land.

There’s a hand on his shoulder, then, firm.

“Listen,” Strange says, hauling Loki to sit while Wanda and Thor freak out inside his head. Loki snarls out loud, closing his eyes in an attempt to shut out the chaos; except it’s inside his head, so it doesn’t work. “_Listen, _” Strange repeats, putting his other hand on Loki’s other shoulder.

Loki stays still, focusing. Or trying to. It's difficult when Wanda is hyperventilating through his
lungs.

“You need to break out,” the Wizard says. “You’re in Loki’s body. Thor and Wanda, you have to get out. It won't remain stable for long.”

Loki definitely agrees with that. Just the thought of the things Thor could do, being in his body. He can barely contain the idea of that for the space already filled in him with people.

I can’t speak, Wanda cries, and Thor agrees with an equal measure of frustration.

“That’s because you’re in me -- my voice,” Loki sneers out loud, grinding out the words. But that’s not even a fair thing to say seeing as it isn’t actually his body, right now. It’s theirs.

He’s going to explode. Loki is sure of it, now. He gasps for air. “Get - out,” he hacks. Coughs. “OUT.”

How? he hears inside his head, and then -- “How, how?” he says out loud, his mouth involuntarily barking out the words. Two different tones; a lighter one and a deep and panicked one.

“Focus - just focus,” Strange says. “On your own core, you need to separate yourself. Loki, maybe you can help them.”

He nods. He can. He just needs - needs space.

Despite it, despite his panicked breathing and Thor reacting to that with more panic, he manages to seek out the cores of the others inside him. And his own. Holding his own close like the rabbit he’d conjured on New Year's Eve; like a small, soft and fragile animal. Shielding it from the chaos in his body.

He pushes the others away. Sends tendrils of magic out, and his magic is strong in here, powered by three magic beings, wrapping them around the fluttering forms of Thor and Wanda inside his chest to help them find the boundaries.

There’s grunting from both of them in his head as they work, but eventually, they manage. They pull in two different directions, Thor stretching out of Loki’s body to the left and Wanda going right. He shouts in pain even though it isn’t even physical, but then they’re out. Loki on his knees, head bowed and arms wrapped around his middle, breathing hard. Wanda and Thor to each side of him splayed out in the snow and panting. Strange in front, he thinks.

“The landscape is changing again,” Strange is saying, and Loki nods.

“What - is - this place?” Wanda huffs out between gasps for air. “Why did we -”

But then the ground shifts under them again, like an ocean moving, the platform disappearing in favour of … another snowy platform.

Except this one jolts Loki’s heart. He recognizes the placement of trees further down the slope.

“We need to - Loki, we need to stabilize it,” Strange grinds out, hands raised and his green magic swirling around his hands. “Come on -- help me.”

“Not, not yet,” Loki says, meekly, lying in the snow. He doesn’t dare look over his shoulder, away from the scenery of slope and sky in front of him. “Not here. Let’s wait for the next one.”

“It’s going to kick us out!” Strange says, louder. “You need to stabilize the stones or they might not
invite us in again. Don’t you realize?”

And Loki does realize. If the scenery changes, it might change for good. The stones in control. You never know what they might do, and so you simply have to follow their rules.

Reluctantly, he closes his eyes. Sends out a thought to the space stone, and it reaches back to him. He holds on. Speaks to it.

It hears him, and he talks his way into getting it to reach out to the others. The Anchor. This place is conjured up by the Space Stone, he realises, this place is their anchor today. What the Space Gem has chosen. That’s why he couldn’t let the scenery change again.

Damn.

He opens his eyes as Strange releases a sigh of relief. The snow is bright in daytime. He sees Strange frown, back turned to the scenery.

“What is this place?” Strange asks, looking at something behind Loki. Loki keeps his eyes on the slope.

“It’s nothing,” he says. “We need to get moving.”

There’s quiet for a moment. Then there’s a hand on his shoulder, and Loki jerks with startlement. It’s Thor.

“Loki,” he says. “Where are we?”

Loki waits a second more. But they don’t have seconds to spare, the stones are too unpredictable for wasting time in their realms. He gets to his feet, Thor’s hand falling off his shoulder, turning around resolutely. He can see the wooden cabin behind Thor but doesn’t look at it. Wanda and Strange are standing in front of it, looking at him.

“Nowhere special,” Loki says. “Now.” He walks past Thor to stand in front of the house, arms crossed and facing the scenery again. “We need to find your friends.”

The others glance at the house again. Thor frowns. “Yes,” he says, slowly. Gaze drifting to Loki to study him. “And how will we do that?”

“Well, I need to …” Loki clears his throat. “This place is our anchor for some reason. I need quiet, is what I need.”

Then he walks to sit on the stairs to the porch. And he remembers the scenery from this place perfectly. He’s drawn it before.

“Wait,” Wanda says, taking a step closer to him. She’s wringing her hands in front of herself. “Why did we - why were we - we were in your body, before.”

“Not my body.”

“This .. almost-body, anyway.”

Loki sighs. “I lost control. Was overwhelmed by the stones.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“I didn’t have time to separate our energies into metaphysical forms before we were dragged in.”
“Hm. Okay.”

“Now be quiet,” Loki chides. Closes his eyes.

The stones are there, all lined up. This isn’t the hard part. Now, they just need to seek out the connection again - the hard part will be trying to get the lost souls back. You never know what the stones may demand in return.

The Space stone is more flexible today. They’re in the habit, so to speak, and it easily conjures up the connection he sought out the day before.

It works differently than with the strings, though. Nothing happens. Nothing changes.

Except everything does.

He opens his eyes, and he knows what they have to do.

“It’s in there,” Wanda says. She’s looking at the door to the house. Loki feels it, too.

“No,” he says, closing his eyes again. Trying to seek out something else, another way.

“Don’t tell me you don’t feel it, Loki,” Thor says. “We have to go into the house.”

Loki stays quiet. He doesn’t want to go in there. Even if they’re not actually there.

“Loki?”

He sighs explosively, re-opening his eyes. “What?”

All three of his companions are looking at him.

“Come,” Thor says, frowning. “We just have to go through the door.”

Loki can feel his face tightening. “I ..” he tries to speak, but loses his words. Sighs again, softer. Gaze moving to the scenery behind his companions.

Thor moves in front of him, kneeling in the snow. “What’s wrong?” he asks, and Loki has no choice but to look at him. He takes in a breath, holds it.

“It’s - I -” he stammers, swallowing. He tries again. “I’m the anchor, apparently,” he says.

“The anchor?”

“My .. mind, not this place. I'm the anchor because I’m connected to the Space stone, which is stabilizing our presence, and I don’t -” he cuts off. Looks at Thor. “This place is conjured up from my mind.”

“Right,” Thor says. “So you’re scared what we’re going to find in there?”

“I am not scared. I’m just .. worried.” He shrugs, looking back down. “I’m not particularly inclined to open up a door inside my own mind. It could hold anything.”

The wizard takes a step closer, interjecting. “Loki, we know what’s going to be in there. It’s just the same place as last. Don’t you see it?”

It’s likely the truth, he does see it for his inner eye. That's where they're going, back to the mirrors.
Loki just can’t shake the feeling of this all being too *intimate*. Being the anchor, his mind creating this place. It’s wrong.

“Probably,” he says. Closes his eyes for a second. Takes a breath.

“Fine,” he then says, pushing to his feet. The ankle doesn’t click, here, but the snow creaks underneath. “Let’s do it.”

He turns to walk over the porch, feeling Thor’s eyes stab at his back. He hesitates with a hand on the doorknob. “You better all come along,” he says to the others, who begin to move closer. “Or it might only invite me inside. That wouldn’t be ideal.”

Then he turns the knob.

Chapter End Notes

THANK you for reading! <3
Strange was right. It’s the mirrors again.

Only this time, it’s more like a grand hall than it feels like being outside. It feels like a dancing studio, a ginormous one, except more surrealistic. The halls on Alfheim, their more extravagant parties. Or the mirror dimensions but less unstable. This feels like a place.

Loki walks in, hesitant, seeing himself mirrored all around but in cloudy and dark versions. Then Wanda follows, then Strange, then Thor, and their figures are all projected all over. The door slams shut and Loki whirls to it, but it’s gone. Vanished.

Thor raises his palms in defence. “I didn’t close it,” he says, and Loki rolls his eyes.

Wanda is walking further ahead, disconnected from the exchange. “They’re here,” she says. It’s almost a whisper and there’s so much emotion laced into it, Loki can hardly bear it. He turns to look at her; remembers the sorrow in her magic. A grieving heart. Old and unhealed wounds.

“Yes,” he replies, slowly. It’s evident in the air.

Then Wanda is charging forward.

No warning; running towards the mirrors, clenched fist raised and ready to strike. His eyes widen.

“Wanda!” he cries, setting off after her. Thor and Strange are a second later to follow and luckily, Loki has his body’s full ability in here, his speed as good as if he were at full health.

He reaches her before her hand can collide with a mirror, glimpsing both their forms in the blank surface just for a second, Wanda’s face twisted with grief and Loki’s tight, focused.

He wraps his arms around her middle, yanking her backwards. She struggles, fights with claws and teeth.

“Wanda,” he grunts, breathless, tightening his arms. He winces when her nails dig into his arm particularly nastily. It shouldn’t be hard to hold her, his strength is superior by far, but she’s cheating,
using magic. More with each second. “It won’t work,” he tries. “You need to wait -” but then she yells, a loud, shrill and scary sound, and with it, her magic lashes out of her body. Deliberate or not, it doesn’t matter: for a second, it’s smothering him, filling his entire body so he loses control of everything, his limbs, his mind; a terrifying, empty moment at her will. Then it pushes him away again.

His arms have released her and he stumbles back. He just manages to worry what now as nobody is holding her; she’s going to charge for the mirrors, destroy them, he doesn’t know what that’ll do but it can’t be good to break the rules - before Thor tackles her to the ground. Holding her hands locked together, incapacitating her like he used to do with Loki in their fights.

Loki feels a presence to his right and flinches away, scrambling backwards on the ground, away from it and from the Witch. From all of them.
It’s Strange. He’s looking at Loki and crouches down, holding his hands out, palms down.


And Loki glances at the mess of red hair writhing under Thor. She screams again, cut off by a sob. Loki flinches, but Thor holds her steady. Loki nods briefly at Strange to indicate he heard, then focuses inwards on his own mind. He clamps his hands over his ears to get a moment’s silence. Everything is loud in here. As if souls are bouncing off the mirrors, travelling through him, shouting and crying inside his ears. As if everything is moving despite the floor actually being steady this time. He can barely feel his body.

He returns to the world. Eventually, he can pry off his hands and begin to open his eyes. He doesn’t remember closing them.

He’s cold. Even though that’s strange to feel cold in a not-real body. This whole thing is not-real, so all about this situation is strange. He’s used to that kind of thing.

“We have to hurry,” he says to no one in particular, blinking. He stumbles to his feet, turning to see Strange sitting on the floor a little while away, watching him with a slight frown. Wanda and Thor are further yet, sitting, Thor with a hand on Wanda’s shoulder. The jealousy flares and Loki is quick to clamp down on it. That’s ridiculous.


But Loki shakes his head, going to the nearest mirror. All he can see in it is his own obscured reflection. Where is Romanoff, this time? He runs his hands along the edges. Looks on the backside of it. Only another mirror. He goes to another cluster, to the wall, looks at the ceiling. Nothing in there but clouds.

“Where are they,” he hisses, or maybe whispers, mostly to himself. Stumbles, lightheaded, catching himself on a mirror.

“We have to do the spell,” Strange calls to him and Loki turns.

“Right.” He sits down where he is with a thump, cross-legged. They have to summon them, this time, apparently. “I hope you don’t mind my borrowing your power.”

He closes his eyes. Can’t concentrate on the working when Strange walks over to him, interrupting.

“You need help with this,” Strange says.
“I have help. I have your magic.” He coughs twice.

“Wanda will be ready in a minute.”

“I don’t need her.”

Strange stays quiet.

The truth is Loki would rather do this alone. If he’s the anchor, that means his mind is going to be creating the entire premise for this working. He’d rather not have anyone else involved in that, could he avoid it.

He tries to begin the spell. Strains to get the stones to work together, show him the way, open up a path to walk. He can’t. It slips through his fingers.

“Help me,” he sneers to Strange.

“I am helping you,” Strange says. “It’s not enough.”

Loki growls in frustration, dropping the spell.

He sits with his arms crossed, waiting. He doesn’t like being here. Things are going wrong already, too much is going wrong. The Stones seem like they don’t want to work with him, now, and he doesn’t understand why. Even with Wanda’s power, it seems like they want them to work manually, test their patience, something ... testing them. Tests. Or mainly test Loki, probably, him being the anchor and thus a sort of guardian for the entire journey.

Then Wanda speaks, breaking the streak of silence except for Thor’s quiet, calming muttering. “There are so many souls here,” she says. Snivels. Thor rubs her shoulder. “My - my brother -” she gulps for air. “My brother -” she cuts off with another sob and hides her face in her knees again.

“There's nothing we can do for him,” Loki says, fidgeting with a fingernail.

She lifts her head again, eyebrows set in a frown and eyes distant as if she’s not really present. She raises a hand, and red magic seeps from it. “But Vis, he’s …” she says, trailing off. “He's right there …” The magic stretches outwards as if searching for something in the bare air. Searching for a body, something living. Loki can't help but flinch backwards again. This magic, it just gets to him every time.

Her eyes land on him. Frown deepening. “I’m sorry,” she says, drawing the magic back into her hands. Her eyes are focusing slowly. She blinks. “Loki, I’m sorry.”

He straightens, brushing himself off.

“We should get started,” he says, frowning at a crease in his sleeve. He smooths it out.

“Are you up for this?” Thor asks, and Loki’s gaze snaps to him.

“Of course.”

“Okay.” Thor keeps looking. Staring. “I’m only asking.”

Loki looks away. “Let’s just get started.”

Wanda takes a deep breath, then gets to her feet. Fists clenched by her side. “What are we supposed
Loki rubs his palms together to create friction heat, standing up, too. “We could try to summon them, but I don’t think it will work, the Stones seem .. reluctant. Even with all our powers. We need to search out the mirrors that hold them.” He gestures around the hall with a vague arm-toss. “Your friends will be here somewhere.”

“We need to look into every mirror until we find them?” Thor asks.

“Yes, brother. So let us begin, how about it?”

It takes a long time. It’s fine because time runs slower outside than here - an hour here would only be about a minute out there.

Every mirror is cloudy, pathways to the other side. Glimpses into something that’s a mystery to the living; death is not cheated, not unless it isn’t really death. Loki hears it call and tries to ignore it while searching, keeping focus on the task. Looking shortly into mirrors in clusters, in walls, in corridors, in the ceilings. It’s as if Thor can sense how drawn he is to it, however, constantly staying close. Keeping an eye on him.

Loki doesn’t want to confront him about it. Pretends he doesn’t notice. Doesn’t want to have that conversation.

He knows they all see things in the mirrors; their own reflections. He tries not to cast too many glances, himself. The others seem to be managing as well.

“Here!” someone calls.

It’s Strange.

Loki and Thor run in the direction of the call, Wanda coming from a different way. There are tears in her eyes again. “There’s something in there,” Strange says, gesturing at a cloudy screen where, true enough, something far-away-seeming is moving. He looks a little pale. Everyone does. Loki wonders what Thor saw in the mirrors.

They stand facing the mirror, which is a larger variant. There’s a golden frame in antique style, ornamented with twirls and twisting tendrils.

The shadow moves in there again. Their own reflections are not clear, like in a dirty mirror except it’s just see-through, the space behind it is grey and misty.

“This is where we do the spell, then,” Loki says.

“Moment of truth,” Thor mumbles.

Loki closes his eyes again, concentrating. He holds out his hands.

The fact that his magic is whole in whatever relative circumstance this is, in borrowing the powers of the others, is truly wonderful. It moves like it’s supposed to, flexibly, glued together. The Space Gem enjoys it, too, holding onto his magic and searching it with its own power; where there are usually holes, now it’s hale. See? Loki tells it. *I’m not so bad, after all.*

It listens. Establishing connections to the other gems.

“Thor,” Loki prompts, and Thor sends power to him, which Loki directs through the connection to the stones. That should show out in the real world (though, whatever does ‘real’ mean), in the readings that Shuri, Banner and the others are doing. They’re ready for them to employ the Pathway.
Enforce the power of the stones and, hopefully, have it be enough for Loki to open up a passageway. As it powers up, it begins to work to get the stones collaborating like in the gauntlet. Now, what’s left to see is if it'll all function as planned. Function without sacrifices of health in return as with the gauntlet - because this isn’t forcing the stones, it’s working with them. There doesn’t need to be sacrifices.

The stones are awakening. Active. Movement intensifies inside the mirror, but still without form. No Romanoff, this time. There’s nothing to drag out of there.

“We need to walk into it,” Wanda says. Loki feels it, too.

“We can’t,” he says. “We shouldn’t.”

And yet a moment later, he takes a step forward and the others follow. He glances at Strange, then Thor, who holds out a hand.

“Take it,” Thor says with a stern rise of his eyebrows, voice irrefutable. Loki sighs. However, it’s a good idea; staying together. He takes Thor’s and reaches his own left hand out for Strange. Wanda takes Thor’s right one. Then they step forward, Loki first, and the mirror’s soft surface engulfs him. He falls forward and feels the others follow.

He cannot see. There’s something heavy on his chest, his arms, it's freezing like he's been plunged naked into a glacier den. He gasps for air, and nothing comes in. Or something does, but it’s too heavy to be oxygen - wet. He’s inhaling water. There are wild, icy currents everywhere, and he almost lets go of his brother’s hand and Strange’s in panic before they both grab tighter, Strange and Thor holding him with an iron grip and he’s pulled upwards. Or what he assumes is upwards, anyway.

They break the surface in a dark ocean and Loki’s heart feels like it’s trying to eat itself. He knows this place, he's been here many times before. Waves everywhere. Cold, cold water. Chaos of the sea, and they’re drowning, they’re out here to drown, they’re going to drown. He’s going to drown, he can’t stay above the surface because his legs are failing, his breath is failing, he can’t breathe -

“Loki - Loki,” Thor is saying, treading in the water and taking Loki by the shoulders. Hurriedly wiping wet hair out of Loki’s vision, placing one hand at the back of his head, the other tight on his arm, holding him above the surface. “Brother, calm down. Calm down.”

Loki’s breathes rapidly, short spurts of air, erratic, fighting to keep himself above the water with clumsy kicks of arms and legs. They’re stiff and immovable like they’re made of led; as if his body wants him to sink. He thought he wanted this but he doesn’t, he’s scared and he doesn’t want to die here -


Thor doesn’t know what this is. What this place is. It’s fine, they don’t know what it means.

Wanda is looking at him, and Loki feels like she can see straight into his head. With a jolt he realises that maybe that is just what’s happening - she’s seen this place before when she was in his head. From both dreams and nightmares.

This is where he goes to seek refuge in his mind when he doesn’t know what else to do with himself. Imagining himself out in the dark waters. Sneaking off, unseen in the night. No one would have to
know as he slipped under the surface to be lost in the waves. No one would have to know.

It’s not as calm to actually experience it as it is in the fantasy. Less tranquil.

“We need to - we need to get on,” he sputters, coughing up water. His eyes water from pain. “This is - the Stones, they’re stalling -”

He reaches for the connection, and the Stones are inflexible. They want him to prove himself.

Trials. Of course. Since Loki is the one doing this, in charge of the working, he’s going to be tried before they’ll let him have his way. They won’t do it for free, after all.

“We have to swim,” he says. Body gaining strength as his mind gains clarity.

They just have to swim. Swim.

“Ohay,” Thor says, and both Wanda and Strange nod. Then Loki leads the way forward. He knows the way, he can feel it. A pull in his core, an inclination of mind. He swims as if his life depends on it. Who knows, maybe it does. Maybe this is just as real as anything.

They reach a sandy beach, dragging their bodies up onto it. As they lie in the sand, the sun breaks through clouds - as if it wasn’t nighttime just before. It’s dawn, the light golden. It warms through their ice-cold clothes. Loki shivers violently, facefirst in the sand. The sun brushes his back.

“We have to travel through the stones,” He informs the others, panting and lifting his head a fraction. “Before they’ll allow us access to the souls we seek. To deem us worthy. Or whatever.” He snorts, pushing clumsily to his feet. “Good thing you’re here, Thor.”

But Thor doesn’t laugh. He takes Loki’s shoulder, hauling him up the rest of the way and turning him around, and Loki has to shield his eyes from the sunlight framing Thor’s silhouette.

“What was that place?” Thor asks, and his voice is harsh. As if he already knows just well what that place was.

“Brother...”

“This is all conjured from your mind, is it not?”

“Don’t - Thor, not now.”

“Is that where you go, Loki?” Thor asks, voice rising. He huffs, glancing to the side. “When you aren’t answering? When you sit by the cliffside, when you stare into thin air, is that where you go?”

“Please, not now.”

Thor looks at him for a long second, a deep crease in his forehead. He lifts a finger to point it at Loki’s face.

“You are not going to leave my sight, understood?” he says. Loki winces, embarrassingly aware of the other two standing on the sidelines. “You will stay close.”

Loki sighs.

“Do you understand?” Thor repeats, harder.
“Yes, Thor, fine. I understand. Now, let us go. We’ve more important things to do.”

Thor looks at him for a moment more. Then eases his stance, glancing behind Loki. “What is this place, anyway?”

Loki shakes off Thor’s grip which is loosening on his shoulder, looking around to make sense of the beach. Dread settles in his chest.

“We’re on Asgard,” Thor says, copying his exact thoughts.

"Asgard?” Strange asks. Wanda stays quiet, looking around warily.

“We are not on Asgard,” Loki hisses. "Asgard is gone. We’re in a memory.”

Thor glances at him.

“The Stones are testing us,” Loki continues. “We just have to keep moving. Go through each trial, one for each stone, probably. It's simple.”

Simple.

He hears something from farther away, then. A child’s voice somewhere behind himself.

“See, brother, I told you the sun would shine,” and it’s too familiar; Loki has heard that voice so often.

Thor’s head swivels to locate the sound, while Loki stays frozen. He doesn’t want to be here.

He has to. In order to move on.

He turns.

“He turns.

“On your birthday, of course, it would,” a tiny Thor says. “When you have been so good! Simply the best little brother!”

Where before there was nothing, there are now two children sitting in front of a large sandcastle. The one with blond hair sits with his back turned to the party of four. His hands are working behind him, fingers wiggling, something like dark winds and twirls dragging into them.

Loki has, of course, seen Thor do this before. Draw lingers of clouds and hurricanes into his own power to leave the sky open and the sun free to shine. Thor would do that to cheer Loki up, sometimes, even if it took a lot of power. It would leave him sick afterwards, and he would lie in his bed with a wet cloth on his forehead, a grin on his face. Worth it, he’d say.

Loki remembers this particular day, too. The dark-haired boy’s eyes are red-rimmed but he’s smiling tentatively. He gives a stuttered laugh. Neither of the two is more than a day over fifty.

As Loki watches, their appearances change. They’re adolescents, the sandcastle, gone. The sky is dark. The world blinks, and Thor is gone. Teen-Loki sits alone with a painfully expressionless face, eyes still red-rimmed.

The sky lightens again, and the two children are back. They’re playing, laughing. Kid-Loki knocks over the sandcastle in his eagerness and kid-Thor mock chides him, demolishing the sand-work further as he throws himself after his brother, tackling him to the ground. They both laugh.

The sky darkens, again, like a light has been switched off.
Loki doesn’t recognize the scene presenting itself but he quickly puzzles it together. Wanda gives a choked gasp beside him. Where child-Loki was a second ago, a grown Loki now is lying, Loki in a suit of Sakaarian leather, neck bruised darkly and head limp against the ground. His eyes are glazed and unseeing. Where child-Thor was, a bloodied, grown-up Thor is now hiding his face in Loki’s chest, shoulders shaking.

Then the scenery changes back again. Children, Thor holding down his fighting little brother, laughing. Loki laughs. And the switch flicks again with a blink; dark, dead Loki and grieving Thor. The world blinks again and they’re both standing, Loki is saying *I promise you, brother, the sun will shine*, and then the scene flicks back to his dead body. No more than a second, then the children playing. Blink, the dead body.

Children -- Death -- Laughing -- “The sun will shine on us” -- The sun shining, children -- Thor crying, darkness --

“Allright, stop!” Loki shouts, and everything disappears.

It’s over.

The sky is at dusk, everything quiet. An empty beach. The sun, gone.

“Loki,” he hears from behind him, Thor’s voice, choked, and he tries to turn but the sand is rising to over his ankles. He can't move, the ground like dry quicksand.

The next moment, he falls through.

However upsetting the scenes are, he begins to understand. He just has to regain his footing, every time. If he spends too long, he’ll probably get kicked out. What the stones choose to show is conjured up from his mind because he’s the anchor. And they’ve chosen for it to be that way.

Now, though, he has trouble gathering his mind - because he isn’t just falling, no, he’s falling, the world is dark and without substance except for something pulling him through space, down down down down down, and he understands what’s going to happen next. “Thor, don’t - this is not -” real, he tries to shout, but there’s no sound, here. It’s eaten up by the Void.

They land in a heap of limbs, and Loki realises that Wanda and Strange are gone. There’s very quiet all of a sudden, except for two pairs of ragged breathing.

“Thor,” he tries but there’s no answer. He groans in pain. “That was Time, I think. Must’ve been. And - ah, soul, maybe, before then.” Still silent. “Thor?”

Loki manages to lift his head. His brother is crumpled on the barren rock some steps away.

“Thor,” Loki tries again. Thor doesn’t even stir.

He elbows his way to the other form despite broken bones, grunting in pain and effort (it’s not even real) as he turns Thor to his back. Thor’s eyes are open, and he’s breathing raggedly.

“Brother?” Loki asks because Thor clearly is awake, but he doesn’t answer.

And suddenly, it’s not even Thor in Loki’s arms anymore. It’s … himself. Gaze empty, hair burned in places. Badly injured. Breath barely there. Clothes torn, revealing burnt skin underneath. Tear streaks over his cheeks and temples.
Loki lets out a noise of disgust and shock and casts the body (himself) to the ground. But then it’s Thor again, wearing the exact same expression as the Loki decoy just was, lying cold and alone on the rock, burned and half-dead. Loki reaches for him, regretting throwing his brother away like that, but everything changes before he can get to him.

Thor is hanging from a ceiling in a cold, moist room. A cell. Hanging - through a hook stabbed through his shoulder.

“Brother!” Loki yells but he can’t move, his feet are stuck, his legs frozen in place as if with a spell. He can only watch his brother, not unconscious but indifferent, as blood pours from the wound over his armpit. Dead to the world.

Not Thor not Thor not him. He’s not supposed to be here. Not here.

There’s a blue glow to the cell. The Tesseract on the floor in the middle, as if it mocks Loki, unable to move when all he wants is it. He wants to escape from here. He wants nothing. He wants everything. He doesn’t know what he wants, but he wants the power.

The scenery shifts, rapidly through scenarios. Tesseract, gone. Thor is screaming from pain though no one is causing it physically, bleeding from his eyes and nose and ears. Then he’s weeping quietly, alone, blood crusted on his face, sodded with dirt. Then he’s being flogged and not responding at all. They’re cutting into his flesh and he howls as they pour poison in the gaping wounds. The figure shifts every second to new and horrifying realities.

Except they’re not new: they’re all memories.

But it was never supposed to be Thor.

Loki clasps his hands over his ears as Thor screams. “It’s not real,” he mutters. “Not real not real not real not real. we’re not there, we’re not there. I don’t want to be here, I don’t want it.”

And the screaming stops.

He feels a hand on his shoulder and realises he’s on his knees. He can hear his brother from outside his palms, trembling over his ears. He slowly pries them off.

“It’s okay, brother - I’m okay,” Thor is saying, thumb drawing circles through the fabric covering Loki’s shoulder. “Nothing happened to me, I’m okay - you weren’t supposed to go through this, I’m so sorry -”

“Watch out,” someone interrupts, their voice hard and sharp-cutting. “Don’t get close to the beast.”

Loki lifts his head, blinking back to the now lighter scenery. It’s daylight, he thinks, but it’s hard to make out through the thick layer of dust in the air. He’s kneeling on concrete. There’s a woman, Midgardian he thinks, middle-aged. Hair starting to grey, face tear-streaked.

She lifts a shaking finger, pointing it at Loki.

“You took them,” she says with a voice of tremours. “You took my children.”

Something cold settles in the bottom of his stomach.

“Loki -” Thor begins, but the woman snarls at him. Like an animal.

“Do you see them?” she sneers in the same tone. As if something ugly and horrific speaks through
her mouth, distorts her voice to the near animalistic. Or maybe that is just grief for you. Her head snaps back to Loki. “Do you?”

And he does. The boy and girl lying in front of him, blood smeared on their clothes, skin. Half the face on the girl has been blown off and her bloodied cranium is bared. Loki doesn’t know if these are real children, real casualties, and it doesn’t matter. There’s blood on his hands.

Acid rushes to his mouth.

“Do you realise?!” the woman yells, and Loki looks back up, vision blurred. The front of her flowered dress is wet with a spreading patch of dark red. A knife sits there in her stomach, held firmly in her own grip. She twists it, crying out in pain, then lets go of the shaft, panting. It juts out like a misplaced limb.
She looks up again and now, the smile on her face is too calm for the situation. She speaks, and the voice that comes out of her mouth is too dark, too indifferent.

“This is your destiny,” Thanos speaks through the woman. Keeps smiling as more bodies appear beside the children. A field of dead people blooming from the ground around Loki’s knees. “This is what you were born to be, son of No One. This is your potential, fulfilled.”

“Loki …” Thor says, his hand slipping from Loki’s shoulder. Then he doesn’t say anything more. Loki feels the shame rise like sick in his throat, suffocating. Alone in a sea of his victims. Not even Thor can find anything to say to this.


Then the woman’s voice is back, and her face twists in agony, a hideous grimace of pain and loss and wrath. “Is this power?!” she screams, falling forward, and landing on her side amongst the bodies. She’s seizing, body convulsing on the ground.


“Nothing, Son of No One,” Thanos echoes through her one last time, voice calm as ever. “Nothing.”

Then she goes still.

“I know,” Loki whispers, gaze lingering on every face in front of him. “I know that.”
He closes his eyes, and the next moment, Thor is holding his hands. The bodies, the woman, it’s all gone. The brothers are both on their knees in the empty space as the scenery changes.

“Brother,” Thor says, and his voice is stern. “You are more than that. You are more, you know this. Loki.”

But Loki is shaking his head, eyes closed. He feels the scenery changing again, and he knows the next location by heart.

The explosion under his feet tosses him into the air, and he feels his body crash back onto the Bifrost. Hears Thor land heavily beside him.

He sees as Thor gets up. Feels it vividly as his brother steps on his fingers so the bones break, hears himself scream out in pain. He feels the boot break something inside in the vicinity of his stomach as Thor kicks him towards the ragged, broken edge of the bridge.
Hears, “For Asgard,” in Thor’s voice, looking up to see a hateful face. “Filth,” his brother spits, placing another kick to send Loki over the edge.

And he’s falling, falling and then lands back on the Bifrost.

He doesn’t bother trying to get up. He knows this memory.

“That’s not what happened! Loki!” he hears from behind his brother, his real brother calling but stuck somewhere unreachable. Loki glimpses him watching from behind something like a mist as memory-Thor hauls him to his feet, crushing the bones of his fingers in his fists. Loki’s vision obscures and he screams again, this time broken off by a sob of pain.

“Frost Giant,” Thor spits, this time. “Disgusting. Such a creature is no brother of mine,” which doesn’t even make sense because Thor hadn’t known of Loki’s heritage at this point, when they fought on the Bifrost and Loki fell. Or is that wrong? Did he know already? Memories are blurry.

He’s thrown over the edge again.

He’s not sure how long it goes on. Apparently, the stones are content with him being stuck in the loop, at least they haven’t kicked him out yet. He loses his sense of time. Space. He loses his mind for blissful, ignorant loops.

He returns eventually, too. Realising what’s happening. Hearing Thor’s cries from behind the veil, only matched in volume by the growls of the other Thor. The memory Thor. Mind-stone Thor.

His ribs cave in as Thor kicks him but this time as he falls, he manages to think. To compose himself somewhat before he lands.

It’s all in his mind. This is all in his mind, and it’s been tampered with, once upon a time.

It's been tampered with.

Loki gets to his feet, shaking. Nightmare-Thor stops, a raging storm in his darkened expression. Eyes on Loki, a strange hollow indifference to them.


The mist in front of the real Thor releases and he tumbles forward, running to Loki and catching himself on his shoulders. “This isn’t real,” Thor tells him. “You know this. Loki - it’s not real -” but before Loki can get a chance to say anything back, there’s a soft voice speaking from further in on the bridge.

“But aren’t we? Aren’t we real, sweetest two?” the voice says, and Loki’s heart melts.

When Frigga steps out of the mist, everything changes around them again. Where before things have turned cruel and harsh, this time, everything becomes soft. They are in her gardens, the sound of the fall merging with Asgard’s sea further down pluthering in the background. The scent of the jasmine and herbs, Frigga’s teas, her blooming pear tree. The cut grass, the warm stones, the sunkissed wood of the bench under the old oak filling his nostrils.

Tears spring to his eyes.

Odin is by his mother’s side and he’s smiling softly, too. Too soft; it looks wrong on his face. Loki takes a faltering step forward despite it and Frigga reaches him, wrapping her fine arms around him, around his entire form so his arms get stuck down his sides and all he can do is lean his head onto her.
shoulder and let the tears fall onto her silks. Let it all fall, slumping bonelessly against his mother. He feels larger arms on top of Frigga’s and recognises the closeness of his father. He doesn’t care about the realisticness of the scene, the Allfather and Frigga holding their grown murderer son while he snivels like a child. It doesn’t matter. He can’t control his body, he can’t stop crying and he wants it so badly to be _real_.

“But my son, dearest, it is,” Frigga says in response to his unvoiced thoughts, kissing his hair. “It is real.”

“Remember, always, that our bloodline is sacred,” Odin says, his hand is stroking Loki’s hair back, “and that blood cannot be altered. All the realms are within our power; we choose our own destiny.”

Loki snivels. “But I’m not,” he mumbles, burying his face further. “Not your blood.”

Then Frigga lets go of the hug to hold him out at arm’s length. “I don’t know what’s gotten _into_ you lately,” she says. “Are you sick?” She holds the back of her hand to his forehead. Brushes it with a thumb and cocking her head sideways, searching his face with worried eyes.

Odin holds his shoulder firmly. “Blood cannot be changed, son,” he repeats. Odin doesn’t ever repeat himself. Loki doesn’t care. “It’s the one constant; family.”

“But I’m -” Loki’s eyebrows draw together. He feels small under their eyes and gentle hands. His gaze flickers between his mother and father. “I’m Laufey’s. Laufey’s son.”

And Odin bursts out laughing. A loud cackle to the sky, before his gaze lands on Loki again. It turns serious.

“My son, you _must_ be falling ill. You, a Frost Giant? Laufey's son?” He scoffs. “You may have grown up tall, boy, but you are not _that_ tall. Nor could I ever have such a being sitting on the throne of Asgard! Oh dear! Do you really believe I would be making you king, were that the case?”

At the words, a warmth settles in Loki where it shouldn’t, shoulders falling when he knows he should be alarmed. He knows it isn’t real. Isn’t right. He knows. But it could be, couldn’t it? He could just stay here.

Not a Frost Giant. Crown prince. Thor’s equal or even superior. Loved. Inherently _right_.

It’s everything he ever wanted.

“Loki, this isn’t what you need,” he hears from behind him. “You don’t want this.”

He turns to his brother, and both Odin and Frigga’s hands stay on his shoulders. Behind him, supporting him. He can feel tears streaming down his cheeks. Everything is silent but for the birds and winds of the garden.

“But it _is_, Thor,” he whispers.

Thor’s face is constricted with pain. “It’s not _real_,” he says.

“Who cares?”

“I do. I care, Loki. You’re my blood. You are, it’s about more than .. biology.”

Thor’s head drops a little to the side. His eyes are sad. “This isn’t reality,” he says, and breaks the spell.
Loki feels the familiar hands on his shoulders begin to wash away at the words.

He turns, panicked, and just catches his mother’s confused and disappointed expression before it fades. He reaches for her, but his hand passes through, and she’s gone.

The garden is gone. They’re back in the hall of mirrors.

“Thor!” someone calls as his vision fades back in, “Loki!”

He feels new hands on his arms and he wants to tell them to back off, but his mouth is dry and uncooperative.

“You’re here. Thank god,” Wanda continues. Loki is hauled to his feet. A hand is clapping his cheek.

“We need to work fast. They’re inside the mirrors but we need to get them out now.”

Loki nods. They did it. He made it through the trials. They did it.

“It’s over now, Loki,” Thor says, dragging him along by the arm. Loki stumbles. “It’s over, we can get them back. It’s time.” Thor speaks fast as if the words are trying to get out all at the same time. “We can do it,” he says, nodding to himself, a frantic quality to the movement. “We can, do you not think so, brother?”

Something is off with Thor but Loki doesn’t have time to stop and think to point out what. Everything is still a little blurry. He’s hauled in front of a mirror.

Inside, there are four shadows. Figures standing side by side some ten feet from the entrance of the mirror. Gamora, Stark, Vision, Romanoff. All four of them.

Loki’s own face is dimly reflected in there, too. He looks hollow.

He tries reaching for the connection still pulsing but something is getting in the way. He reaches for it, to finish the job, get it over with, tries to tug the strings connecting the four lost friends to reality, and then it feels like he’s drowning again. A wave crashing over him while the strings burn. And he lets go of them.

The connection is there. He can feel the passageway trying to open up, the trials are finished. It should be working, the stones are cooperating - but there’s something …

“It’s the Soul Gem,” Thor says. “It doesn’t want to release them.”

Loki glances at him, then feels for the connection again, more careful this time. It’s true. It’s as if there’s a current dragging the other way, keeping the pathway from opening - Soul is the guardian of the dead friends, and it doesn’t want to let them go.

“But we have the machine, the Pathway,” Loki says, “to forge the connection, to open up the passage. To harness the power. It’s supposed to - and it worked with the trials, we’re almost there, I don’t understand -”

“Don’t you?” Wanda asks, and Loki turns to her, his back to the mirror. “Don’t you get it?”

Loki stays quiet. Strange, Wanda and Thor are all standing on a line some steps away from Loki and the mirror. Did they move away from him? They’re standing spread out like they’re blocking him from the rest of the room. Keeping him from escaping.
“You’re the anchor,” she says, softly. “The stones made you the anchor for a reason, Loki. They chose you.”

He swallows. “Chose me,” he echoes, as he begins to understand where she’s going.

“Your life in exchange for four others? Four loved, missed, cherished souls?”

Loki knows that this isn’t real. He knows what’s happening. But it doesn’t really matter because it only feels like these shadows of his brother and Thor’s friends are speaking truths that no one dares to in reality.

“It’s hardly a question,” Strange says. “Your life - is it even worth calling it a life?”

"But this,” Wanda says. “This is purpose.”

"Glorious, isn't it?” Strange says.

Thor’s eyes are sad, a little, but mostly .. indifferent. “You know me,” he says. “I’ll get over it. I have New Asgard. Brunnhilde.” He smiles, wistfully. “Your sacrifice would be a gift, even. I could finally give something to help win; my sacrificing of you saved the day. I would’ve won, for once. For once, Loki. You could give me this.”

Loki thinks he hears something, maybe from behind some of the other mirrors. Someone calling, shouting. He must still be inside the mirror, himself, still in the trials, and the others were kicked out. The stones wanted him alone for this reason; because Soul isn’t going to give up its captures without a proper sacrifice.

It’s trying to manipulate him. Though, it doesn’t really have to.

Is it really such a big thing, come to it? Everything Loki can think of in that second would be that it only leads to making things better. It doesn’t really matter, the loss of it. It's not that much of a loss.

It isn't, is it?

Death, on the other hand - death it calls. Has been for a long time.

He thinks of Thor for a second, the real Thor, and a pang of .. something shoots through him. He lets the thought go because it hurts, and it doesn’t matter. None of that is Loki’s to have, in the end, anyway.

He pulls the strings, and he can feel the four souls just about to burst through a veil. Just behind it; the only thing keeping them back the ominous orange glow, the veil of its power, only relinquished if the Stone wishes it so.

Loki hears it speak, and he understands. He knows what he has to do.

He sighs.

It was always going to come to this, wasn’t it?

He lets himself fall forward against the mirror and is engulfed by its surface. A mirror inside the mirrors.

Surely, he must now be at way’s end.
Ummm .. so about cliffhangers. As I said, I'll be posting the next chapter tomorrow, it's edited and ready to go. That's a promise!

...and I'm sorry!
Something Like Peace

Chapter Summary

Aaaaand here's another. Thank you all for your lovely comments and encouragements, always <3

Warnings for a suicide attempt.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The water enters Loki's lungs and he coughs, or tries to, inhaling only more water. It's heavy inside him, around him, though he barely feels it for his throat being ripped to shreds. As if it's bleeding and raw, his chest constricting with the panic. With the building lack of air.

It's so cold. Like a bath full of needles and blades cutting into his skin.

He wants to take a breath to steady himself, to keep calm and accept his fate. It's just that he can't take a breath. So he stops trying, stops breathing, but that doesn't calm anything, either. His body is protesting, attempting to suck in air when there isn't any and choking on it and surely, surely this must be his real body, now, because it hurts.

The end. This is the end. Truly, now.

No second chances.

He thought that would calm him, the prospect of that, but it doesn't. It makes his body struggle wilder, the force of water heavy and cruel against his rapidly weakening limbs. There's no one to drag him up, this time. No surface, even, or maybe he just can't see it. Everything is obscured by the raging dark.

Or maybe it isn't raging, maybe it's just his head, the shouting inside it making everything else appear chaotic as like. He feels smothered by the walls of water crushing him; only water, no escape.

Everything is cold. Cold and dark and terrifying.

His vision begins to fail, and he can barely hear his own already muffled screams in the dark heaviness.

And then, finally, it all begins to calm. He feels his mouth fall open, his arms and legs stilling as the fight drains out. Body floating with the actually soft and gentle underwater currents. Huh. He's seconds away from nothing, now.

His mind stilling, likely from lack of oxygen. He would weep, he thinks, had he the energy.

It is something like peace.
He thinks he glimpses something red, like watercolours whispering in the streams, or blood to draw in sharks, before the dark in his vision takes over and he is, both literally and not, dragged under.

Everything is quiet. Everything, gone.

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“I can’t reach him!” Thor cries, grabbing his little brother by the shoulders. Loki is dead to the world, sitting cross-legged on the carpet, still attached with electrodes to the others. Eyes closed, working underneath the lids. Body tense as a bow.

Thor closes his own eyes and can see his little brother standing in front of the mirror, staring into it. He can see the three shadow-like figures in the hall of mirrors behind him that are not Thor or Wanda or Strange. Loki knows this. Still, the energy is tangible, Loki’s body language unmistakable as he stares back at his own blurry reflection, leaning in a little. He is going to listen to the Soul Stone. He’s going to trade his life for Thor’s friends.

Thor isn’t going to let him.

He just doesn’t know how.

He’s back on the carpet, kneeling in front of Loki. The stones kicked him out. However, in his mind, he can still see everything that goes on; can still see the hall of mirrors as if Loki is anchoring them all to the place, still. They can all see it, Wanda, Strange and Thor. They’re still half there but they can’t reach for him, can’t restrain him, can’t get to him. Hold him down.

All Thor wants to do is hold him down. Scream at him, ‘you KNOW what you’re doing, you know it’ll break me, you can’t do this!’

Wanda is sitting silently, concentrating. Lips trembling. Trying to get back in. Strange is lending her power.

Then Loki in Thor’s mind lets himself fall forward, through the mirror, and Thor feels like his entire body dies. Every organ stopping, falling, halting.

He opens his eyes to find his real-life brother going limp and catches the crumpling body in his arms before it’ll fall to the floor. Loki is twitching as if in a nightmare, except now, water begins to spurt from his nose and over his cheeks, gurgling in his mouth. Thor can simultaneously see his brother struggling in the dark water they were all in earlier when Thor was there, there to haul Loki out; and he can have his eyes open, cradling the spasming body in his arms, Loki reclined on the floor.

His hair is wet, now, sticking to his forehead. Clothes soaked through.

“Loki, no,” Thor says, voice breaking, and a tears falls to join the wet. “Don’t do this. Don’t, please. Don’t.”

But nothing happens. Loki fights in the dark, cold water, screaming inside Thor’s head but quiet on
the floor. Thor’s brother cannot hear anything; he’s panicking with the last dying breaths of only water. He’s dying and he’s afraid, alone. Loki is going to die.

There’s another spasm.

Then the body goes still.

Thor holds him tighter, strokes sticking hair away from his face. “Loki,” he says, as soft as he can. “Come back, this -- it’s fine, it isn’t the end, now - ” and cuts off with a choked gasp because his brother isn’t trying to breathe anymore, not choking. Not moving at all. There’s water running in a thin stream from the side of Loki’s mouth.

“ - THOR!” Wanda shouts; as if she’s been saying his name many times and Thor is only hearing it now. The shout is near a growl, her voice almost distorted, amplified, and Thor looks up, startled.

Wanda’s eyes are a fiery red. Her hair is moving as if there’s wind inside the hall, like red flames licking around her face. Everywhere else is dark and she’s the beacon, drawing all light into her.

“I need your power,” she says, voice low. Insistent. “Now.”

Thor doesn’t hesitate. While still holding his brother, arms tight around his limp form, he closes his eyes and lets Wanda reach into him. Thunder rolls overhead and lightning crackles outside, and Thor isn’t doing any of it.

For a second, everything is red. Then it transforms into a blinding yellow like the sun is in the very room. Thor can’t see anything, can only feel his little brother’s wet and cold body in his arms.

Then the light disappears.

The first thing Thor recognizes is the sound of a wet cough.

The feeling of something moving where Loki’s dead body should be.

He looks down, eyes readjusting, and his brother is choking on water in his arms. Coughing.

Moving. Eyes opening and they are desperate.

Wanda got him out.

Thor is quick to move Loki to lie his side, holding his head steady as he throws up. He’s never in his long life been so happy to see Loki throw up; streams of water. He gags and the sounds he gives are wretched and absolutely pitiful, and Thor just wants to hug and kiss and hold him for moving and making sound at all.

While, of course, simultaneously wanting to throttle him.

Thor is dimly aware of commotion elsewhere in the room. He looks up for a second or two, his brother lying sideways across his lap and Thor holding his hair back, and sees people gathered over by the pathway some twenty feet to his left. There’s made space in the middle, the group keeping distance to where four figures are positioned on the wooden floor.

Barton is in the clearing, too, stroking Natasha’s hair away from her face, and Thor glimpses her raising her eyes to the Hawk, wide and filled with confusion.

Pepper is helping Tony to stay sitting upright and he’s blinking as if the world isn’t quite in focus, yet. Morgan isn’t there; kept back in her and Pepper’s house with Happy, to keep her safe in case anything happened. To bring her to Tony only if they were sure that his presence was real and
lasting. Peter Parker is there, though, eyes caught hungrily on Tony’s face and holding his hand. 
Gamora is sitting, too, Quill with his arms locked around her. Face buried in her shoulder. 
Vision is the only one standing, his eyes locked on something: Wanda, on her feet as well and facing 
him. Thor just glimpses them beginning to move towards each other before he redirects his attention 
back to his brother.

“There,” he mutters, brushing away the raven black hair. Loki isn’t throwing up anymore, and Thor 
realises the shaking is more than just cold, glimpsing his brother’s face. Loki’s eyes are shut and tears 
are falling sideways from them to the ground. His pale lips are trembling, and he has wrapped both 
arms around his middle. He weeps quietly, only the shivering, shallow breath making a sound. 
Thor wraps his arms gingerly around Loki’s torso to haul him up to sit, turning him into his own body, face against his shoulder. He holds his drenched brother tight, Loki’s legs stretched out to the 
side from where he’d been lying.

“It’s over,” Thor says, cradling his head. He buries his nose in the wet hair. “It’s over, now. You’re alright. You’re okay.”

Loki doesn’t calm down for a while, still shivering, complexion waxy, not seeming present at all. He throws up again, this time into a bucket brought over by someone whom Thor didn't really pay attention to. There's both bile and blood in the mix. 
Thor holds him, afterwards, lying face up in his lap. He’s awake, which is a good sign, even if his 
eyes are glazed and he isn’t speaking.

Two healers come over. They want to take him away, and Thor doesn’t want them to.

“He’s fine here,” he says, holding his brother a little closer. “He’s fine.”

“We only want to make sure everything is well, your Highness,” one of them says. “Be certain he’s safe.”

“Thor,” Brunnhilde says, crouching down beside him. “He needs medical attention.”

Thor doesn’t protest but doesn’t help, either, as she pries his hands off Loki, helping the healers lower him onto the carpet to lie. They take his pulse, begin their scans with portable equipment, and Thor can only watch as Loki lies motionless, docile to their probing and testing for once. They flash a light into his eyes and he twitches a little.

Brunnhilde puts a hand on Thor’s shoulder. He doesn’t pry his gaze away from Loki.

“Wanda says the souls released when he went through the mirror,” she says. “She’s not sure if it were just another test or if the Soul Stone was actually demanding his life. She had to overpower it to get him out.”

“He shouldn’t have done it,” Thor mumbles. Loki can probably hear them if he’s bothering to listen.

“Of course not,” Brunnhilde says. “We would’ve found another way.”

The healers take a while getting Loki to respond, his eyes having drifted closed at some point. The first sign that he’s even present is a little nod when they ask for the second time if he can hear them. 
Then he opens his eyes upon their prompt. His eyes still look hazy.
They make him speak and at first, it’s a croak that sets off another coughing fit. Then he begins answering their questions.
'Loki', he answers when they ask his name. 'one thousand and .. fifty-one, he answers when they ask him his age. Which is wrong, Thor knows for a fact that Loki is one thousand and sixty-two.

Brunnhilde goes to sit by Loki’s side. He seems very sleepy, and she helps with keeping him awake.

Thor stays back for the whole ordeal. Pepper comes over to hug him, and it feels surreal.

“Thank you,” she says in a tired sigh. She pulls away and smiles. It’s sad but mixed with ecstatic. “They’re all here, Thor. They’re all back.”

***

Valkyrie is sitting by Loki’s side and she’s very blurry. His throat hurts. His lungs are screaming and all he wants is to sleep.

“That was a decidedly stupid stunt to pull, Highness,” she says and while her voice is trying to be light, there are clear undertones to it. Doubt. Anxiety. Disgust, maybe; Loki isn’t quite sure.

“Mh,” he replies in a whisper. His voice won’t rise above that. “I thought it was - ah -” he cuts off with a wince, then finishes, “- rather dramatic.”

She doesn’t laugh. Not even a snort.

“Definitely dramatic,” she just mutters.

***

“Thor,” Natasha says, and Thor takes two long steps forward to embrace her.

“Thank you,” she says, held close to his chest. “Thank you.”

“It wasn’t me,” Thor replies. They draw back. Natasha keeps holding his arm. “I’ve barely contributed.”

She smiles, eyes sad, glancing at Loki. “Well, then, thank you for having that brother of yours.”

Natasha and Vision are faring best of the newly resurrected by far. Tony passes out in Pepper’s arms, and Gamora is taken to the healing ward. She’s not too coherent.

Thor sits down with Brunnhilde beside his brother. Loki’s cheeks immediately redden, and he stares hard at the ceiling. He’s conscious, now, alright.

Thor raises his eyebrows. “Oh, we’re going to talk about this, Loki,” he says.

Brunnhilde smacks him on the upper arm. Giving him a glare.

“Thor,” Loki says, and it’s so far from Thor’s tone, so vulnerable that it feels like Thor’s heart is falling to pieces. Loki looks at him, finally. His eyes are focused. “Don’t -” he begins. Coughs once and swallows. “Don’t be mad,” he says. “Please.”
It’s an impossible request.

Thor is not mad, he is *livid.*

But at that moment, all he can say is, “I’m not, Brother.” He takes Loki’s hand, squeezes it. Loki stares at him like he hungers for whatever is on Thor’s face, drinking his words up like sweet nectar. “I’m glad. I’m glad that you’re here with me.”

Loki falls asleep, or passes out, and the healers let him. He’s going to stay in the medical at least overnight, they say, to keep check of his vitals and recovery. Especially in his state, they need to keep an eye on him.

“He has nightmares,” Thor tells the healers, “bad ones. It might scare the other patients,” and they agree to get him a private bed.

Loki is carried out on a stretcher, still unconscious, and Thor follows. So does Brunnhilde.

The village can handle itself for a little while.

***

Brunnhilde walks silently by Thor’s side as his brother is carried through New Asgard in the evening’s blooming darkness. She followed because ... she thought that would be a good idea. For Thor not to be alone with this. The snow creaks under their feet, the wind howling further up the hills, and Loki lies on the stretcher, dead to the world.

Not dead. Just - unresponsive. Right now.

Thor doesn’t make a sound, and Brunnhilde doesn’t attempt to force him. He doesn’t look at anything; not her, not the healers, not his brother. Mainly the air around all of that.

Not that she particularly *wants* to talk. This is all messed up - and she’s not sure she has anything to say that would be even remotely useful for Thor.

They’re led to a room inside the infirmary and Loki is deposited on the bed. He complains slurred, inaudible words when he’s moved from the stretcher, grimacing, but he doesn’t open his eyes. He’s still wet all over, and he wakes briefly to struggle as the healers wrestle off his clothes. They dress him in a hospital gown. They wrap him in a crinkling blanket that looks like a thin sheet of metal. Brunnhilde glimpses his body before he’s dressed and quickly looks away. It’s scary; not just the fact that it’s so pale, bruised all over as if it takes nothing to damage it, that he’s so thin you could count bones - but the scars littered all over makes her sick to her stomach. Long lines, stab wounds, ominous splotches of disfigured skin that could be probably burns or poison. Whip marks.

He’s hooked up to a monitor to keep an eye on his vitals, and after some more minutes of working, checking, the healers leave. Thor and Brunnhilde are left with a button to press if they need assistance. Then the lights are dimmed, and they’re left alone.

Thor sits in a chair by the wall opposite Loki’s bed. He’s been looking at his hands for the past half hour, while Brunnhilde has been sitting quietly beside him.

“Thor,” she says, now, turning her head to look at him. He takes in a sudden, deep breath through the nose as if remembering that he’s supposed to remember breathing. He doesn’t look at her and he
doesn’t say anything back for a little while. Then he looks up at Loki.

“What,” he says, and he sounds so tired. Worn out.

“Do you need to leave?” Brunnhilde asks.

Thor’s mouth tightens. “I can’t.”

“You need a break. I can watch over him.”

Thor stays quiet, a little frown on his face. He doesn’t say anything else, just sitting there, now watching his brother intently. After maybe an hour, Loki whimpers in his sleep. Twitching. Thor is as paralyzed, frozen in the chair, so Brunnhilde gets up to brush hair out of scrunched eyes, clapping Loki’s cheek gently. She manages to calm him down without him waking. Speaking softly. A hand on his shoulder.

Who would’ve ever thought?

Thor leaves to get some air after that, coming back to ask if Brunnhilde meant it that she’d watch over Loki. He looks, honestly, ready to drop to the floor from emotional exhaustion. She answers that of course, she’d meant it.

He thanks her, glancing at Loki with a mixture of a bunch of complicated emotions in his face before exiting and shutting the door behind him.

It’s not so strange that he needs space. Brunnhilde would be pissed, too, and there’s just not a lot of arguing with emotions like that, no matter how blameless the entire situation is. She would be pissed. Horrified.

She sits in the chair by the bed. Loki doesn’t sleep a lot. He keeps waking, tossing and turning but never very lucid. At one point he sits up in the bed, seeing something in the room that isn’t there and is so terrified he won’t speak, doesn’t breathe - can’t acknowledge Brunnhilde’s efforts to get contact with him. She ends up getting him to lie back down, eyes still on the room, propped up on his elbows. Eventually, they drift closed as if the adrenaline of fear is no longer enough to keep them open, and he collapses back into the mattress.

At one point he mutters, “Thor,” while Brunnhilde has a hand on his hair, attempting to calm him down after he woke panicked. He leans into her touch, almost nuzzling his head against her hand. She stiffens.


He doesn’t seem to register her words, shivering under the blankets she has draped on top of the metal-like one. “I’m sorry,” he only mumbles, and she has a feeling it isn’t because he got their names mixed up. She’s not at all sure what he actually is sorry for.

He lies like that for a long time, curled up on his side with his arms wrapped around himself and eyes squeezed shut as if in pain. Brunnhilde presses the call button, then, because he isn’t supposed to be in pain, and the healers come running. They check his vitals, then wakes him up to ask him questions. She almost feels bad about that. They sit him up, and his eyes take a long time to focus. They ask if he’s in pain, and he says no; so there’s that answer.

A different kind of pain, then.
They let him go back to sleep. Even if sleep is only half that.

Brunnhilde does doze off in her chair by the cot at one point, Loki apparently calming down somewhat enough to let her feel calm, too. She’s woken by someone shaking her shoulder and blinks her eyes open to focus on Thor’s stricken face.

“I’m sorry,” he says, eyes flickering. “I’m sorry I left. I just needed - I needed …” he trails off as she straightens her posture and he staggers back to lean with a hand against the bedside.


“I shouldn’t have left,” he says and he sounds breathless like maybe he ran here. “I shouldn’t leave. I shouldn’t.”

“Thor,” Brunnhilde protests, pushing up from the chair. Damn, she thinks as her back cracks - you really shouldn’t sleep in chairs. “I asked you to go, remember?” She takes him by the shoulders, guiding him to sit down in the chair she was just in. Kneeling in front of him. “It’s good you left. You have to take care of yourself.”

Thor opens his mouth as if to protest, but she’s quicker, cutting off the start of his word. “I mean it,” she says. “Listen, you won’t be able to help him if you’re not paying attention to your own feelings. Setting boundaries.”

She stays in the chair opposite the wall with the bed, this time, while Thor sits by the bedside. At first, he looks uncomfortable and stiff. Like he doesn’t know what to do with himself. He looks at Loki’s sleeping form as if Loki is actually dead, or a stranger.

Loki himself sleeps more peacefully, finally. The first light of dawn is beginning to show, and he’s delved into something deeper, face less tight, hands unclenched on the blankets. Brunnhilde goes to sleep once more despite the chair being uncomfortable, despite the fact that she would rather be out, talking to the ones who came back. She has a feeling this is where she needs to be, though. She sees Thor caressing his brother’s cheek with a thumb, Loki’s face lax, just before her eyelids drift shut and she disappears from the world of the woken.

She wakes back up to screaming, and it takes her a moment to realize nobody is being brutally murdered. Just Lackey, the son of a bitch.

Thor is there already, talking to his brother, and Brunnhilde pretends to go back to sleep. She can hear confused muttering turn lucid as Loki regains awareness. Then he sounds embarrassed.

There’s some more muttering that she can only make out a bit of. “I can’t take this - cannot lose you,” she hears. Something indistinguishable back. “I was trying to help.” “Brother.” Thor’s shuddering breath. “Not - like that.”

More muttering, whispering.

Then Loki’s voice raises beyond a whisper to just above a croak. He sounds angry. “I’m not going to apologize, Thor, if that is what you’re trying for.”

There’s silence. Only the shuddering breath. Then the sound of Thor rising from his chair, footsteps towards the door. Brunnhilde blinks her eyes open as if she only just woke up, following the sound and just seeing the door slam shut.

“Why are you here,” Loki snarls at her, and Brunnhilde’s eyes go back to him. She raises her brows.

“To make sure you weren’t doing something stupid,” she responds.
“Well, apparently that’s all I seem to do.”

She looks at him for a moment. He’s breathing hard as if having exerted himself physically, sitting up in the bed, his eyes heavy. He’s very pale. Too thin.

This is all a mess.

“You brought them back,” Brunnhilde says. She’s glad her voice isn’t shaking because to be honest? She hasn’t got a single clue as to how she’s supposed to handle this conversation. Be gentle, she reminds herself. He doesn’t need chiding.

“I tried to, anyway,” he huffs, voice failing at the last word and he grimaces.

She decides not to comment on that. Had been attempting to bring up something positive but realises now that she’s implying that him giving up his life was somehow a good decision. She’s not sure how to correct that mistake without tearing up in his evident anger.

“Look,” Loki croaks before she can find something else to say. “I don’t particularly want to smalltalk. So you don’t have to force yourself to come up with topics.”

She feels herself bristle but his voice is wobbling just slightly, his arms wrapped around himself underneath the blanket draped over his shoulder. A hint of a collarbone is visible. She keeps her face neutral.

“I’ve made an appointment for you,” she says, changing tactics. His eyebrows knit; wary.

“What?”

“With a mental health professional,” she elaborates. “Someone to talk to.”

He draws back as if physically hit. For a moment his mouth stays open, fumbling for words.

“It’s tomorrow,” Brunnhilde continues, carefully. “If you want it.”

He inhales sharply. “No, I don’t.”

“You could try it,” Brunnhilde argues, leaning her head to the side a little. “It wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

His eyes glitter like he’s about to explode with rage. “I dont want to,” he grinds out between clenched teeth. “You had no right.”

Brunnhilde raises her hands, leaning back in her chair. “No, sure. Alright. You won’t go,”

He knows she doesn’t mean it, that she hasn’t let it go, expression getting impossibly more twisted. Apparently, though, he doesn’t want to take the confrontation and just huffs instead, turning his face away, halfway hidden from her vision.

He’s shaking, she notices.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“No,” he mutters after a second, face still turned. After a minute, he lies down, still facing away from the door and into the other wall. He doesn’t fall asleep, Brunnhilde can hear by the shallow breathing.
Thor comes back and drags her out of the room to stand in the empty hallway. He shuts the door.

“Has he said anything?”

She hesitates a few seconds. “He doesn’t want to go to the therapist.”

Thor scoffs derisively.

“Of course not.”

“Thor.”

He glances at her, then he sighs, closing his eyes for a second. He lets his head drop, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“We could admit him to a psychiatric hospital,” he mutters, head still bowed. “There are some that would probably be fit and he’s actively suicidal. Tell the authorities that he’s here. We could do that, we could get him - locked away. I just can’t -” he cuts off. “I can’t do this on my own, I don’t know what to do.”

The door behind Brunnhilde hurls open, slamming against the wall. There stands Loki, dressed in only the hospital gown, fists clenched and his expression on fire.

“You are not,” he pants as if just the thought of it is draining all his energy, “you are not going to do that.”

Thor looks at him with tired eyes. Brunnhilde winces. Loki scoffs.

“I’m not - I’m, I’m not suicidal!” he protests, then wincing as he accidentally puts weight on his ankle, snapping out a hand to lean against the wall. “It - Thor, it was practicality!”

Thor’s eyes widen. “Practicality?!” he roars, and Loki flinches. “Is that what you would call it?!?”

“Thor,” Brunnhilde tries, putting a hand on his shoulder but Thor pushes it away, taking two long strides forward to stand nose-to-nose with Loki. Thor is huffing his air in and out like a bull. Loki is shrinking back, trying to keep his face composed but his expression twitching at the edges.

“You were going to die, Loki,” Thor growls. “You were dying in my arms. Again.” Thor puts a hand harshly at the back of Loki’s head, and Loki twitches again, their bodies ignoring all comfort zones. “You can’t do that.”

“Thor,” Loki says with a small voice, swallowing.

“You can’t do that.” Thor’s voice is softening, hand still tight on the back of Loki’s head.

Loki is tense. His face hasn’t quite fallen but it’s well on its way and he’s paler than usual. “Thor -” he begins. ”Thor please, can you -” his breath is shallow, getting ragged. “Not this close. Please.”

Thor’s expression waters down to a frown, eyes flickering on his brother’s face. Then he lets go of Loki’s head. However loving the touch was meant to be, it definitely did look very firm. He takes a step back.
Loki is breathing too fast. He presses back up against the wall like a mouse caught in a corner, and his eyes get glassy.

“Loki,” Thor says, and there's shame and worry and anger and fear all laced in his voice in a terrible, heartbreaking mix.
“Yes,” Loki says, staring at thin air. “One second.” Then his legs give out as if a gust blew them weak and he slides to the ground. Face ending up hidden in his thighs. Thor is staring at the huddled form.

Then he kneels in front of it, and Loki shies away.

“Not now,” he mumbles, hands gripping tight in his hair. “I’m - I’m sorry, just - one second. I just need a second.”

Still, Thor reaches out a hand towards his arm, and for the third time, Loki flinches away. His head snaps up and he growls, pressing harder back into the wall, “I said, not now, Thor!”

It’s Thor’s turn to draw backwards.

Brunnhilde kneels next to him, putting a calming hand on a shoulder. Thor looks scared.

“Loki, is there anything we can do?” she asks, making her voice as . . . soft as possible. When did she get this soft? It was somewhere around the time she got sober, she thinks; started helping Thor get sober . . . it spiraled from there.

Loki shakes his head.

“Just -- a moment, please ..” he says into the fabric of the pants.

“I can’t do this,” Thor says, backing further away to lean against the opposite wall. “I’m doing everything wrong. I’m -” he cuts off, swallowing. Eyes distant.

So now, there are two panicking princes on opposite sides of the hallway. Brunnhilde sits in the middle, like a link between them. An emissary.

“You’re fine, Thor,” she says, turned to the older. “It’s going to be fine.”

Don’t shout at him, you idiot, is what she really wants to say to her idiot friend. Not when he’s this vulnerable. But she has a feeling she wouldn’t be doing much better herself, were she in Thor’s place.


She would expect a snarl of ‘I know that’, or something, but instead he just nods into his knees.

“It’s snowing outside, today. The sun peeks out every now and again; you should really go out, sometime, it’s nice. The village is safe, too. Everyone is safe. And you’re alright. Probably a bit tired; I know I am.”

Loki’s hands grip tighter in his hair but he nods again, twice this time.

She continues to talk nonsense to him, and gradually, he eases. Stays with his head bowed, but he stops shaking.

Eventually, he takes a deep breath, releasing it. He looks up.

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It is humiliating. He can only praise himself lucky that there’s no one else in the hallway at the hospital because currently, Loki is freaking the fuck out because Thor was standing too close to him.

There was absolutely no logical reason for that to trigger something like this. Nothing. He’s taken so much worse, so much worse. So why does it only take Thor shouting at him and getting too close, today, to get Loki’s body to cease functioning properly?

At the same time, a flaming rage burns inside him, consuming all in its way like acid. How dare they. How dare they. He helps them, he sacrifices his own life for their sake and they want to use that as an excuse to declare him mentally incompetent and have him locked away. He tries, and they denounce his efforts to something selfish, inconsequential. Destructive.

He’d meant to help. For once, he was helping.

Never doing that again.

While the prospect of being locked away angers him to no end he also can’t deny the little voice in him saying ‘come on. You know you want to.’ The feeling of calm at the idea of someone just … taking care of this mess. Locking him in so he can’t do any harm. So he doesn’t have to choose whether or not to do harm.

Valkyrie is talking to him. He’s thinking about her name; Brunnhilde. He wants to call her that, her actual, real name; that would be respectful and Norns know she’s been patient with him. Kind to him. The thought of that makes him want to crawl out of his skin. Pathetic.

Somehow, calling her Brunnhilde still feels too intimate, or maybe like too obvious of a transition if he did make the change. Acknowledging that she has been helping. That he has been needing her help. The thoughts of names are a nice distraction from the overwhelming fear.

And eventually, it does ease. He takes a breath, finally. Releases it. Looks up.

Thor is sitting against the opposite wall. His face is tight; maybe he’s trying to not cry. Loki doesn’t know what to do with that.

Of course, just then is when a door opens up further down the hall, out walking Peter Quill and - Gamora.

Loki very nearly sighs when he gets over the initial shock. What a damned sight they must make. Not that Gamora hasn’t seen him at worse, but still; Brunnhilde in the middle, sitting back on her shins, the former so-called royals on the floor and looking like hot messes on each side of the hall. Or different ends of a boxing ring. Quill and Gamora stop for a moment, dumbfounded. Then Quill nods curtly in greet, turning and guiding Gamora towards the door leading outside. She keeps looking over her shoulder at them. Loki looks away.

Next, he pushes to his feet. His legs are unsteady, or leg, the one he’s leaning on, anyway, but rather that than sitting on the floor any longer. Leaning a hand against the wall. The other two look at him, and he looks back, challenging. Valkyrie raises her eyebrows.

It’s not that he has any idea what he’s going to do. Even if all he wants to do is go somewhere to be alone, run off into the woods or hills, he knows that would only create more problems. Freak Thor out, then he’d go searching for Loki, then they’d have to have some big talk when he returned. Because apparently, Loki is suicidal.

No, rather keep it simple. As unproblematic as possible.

“I’m going to bed,” he declares and limps back into the room he woke up in.
They let him have some privacy for the next hour or so, which is . . . both nice and strangely lonely. It’s not that he wants them to come and disturb his peace. Not that he wants his bumbling bilgesnipe of a brother to be in the room, to maybe talk a little, to break the silence; it’s not that he’s afraid to be alone.

Thor does come back, eventually. Loki is lying awake on the bed, turned to the wall and trying to sort out his thoughts (which is not going well), and hears the door go, his brother’s unmistakable footsteps against the tiled floor.

Thor sits in the chair by the bed.

“Are you awake?” he mumbles, and Loki shrugs a shoulder.

“Mh-hm.”

“Natasha told me to say hi. The others, too. Tony said something about a reindeer . . . Rudolph, I think? He did not seem entirely awake.”

“Are they ecstatic to be alive again?”

“They’re grateful. Though, I think it’s difficult to be back.”

Loki doesn’t say anything to that. He keeps his back turned.

“Back then, just after you’d returned,” Thor says. “I wasn’t there for you. I’m sorry.”

“You had your reasons. It’s not like I was any better.”

“You needed me.”

Loki sighs irritatedly, pushing to turn and shifting to sit up against the wall. Thor needed someone, too, back then, and Loki couldn’t pull himself together to be there for his brother. Turns out he never needed to; Thor managed just fine on his own.

“Do we have to delve into the past? It is what it is.”

Thor is studying him. That’s annoying.

“The past seems to hold a great deal of influence over you, brother,” he says.

Loki knows he’s tense. He forces himself to level his gaze on Thor.

“And you saw, correct?” he says. “You saw my mind inside the stones, you know every little detail, now. Are you satisfied, then?”

Thor’s voice is calm, his expression irritatingly so, as well. “It’s not about satisfaction.”

“Then what, ownership - you want to know everything so you can feel like you own me? Thor’s brother. Missing the golden days, are we?”

“So far, you haven’t told me a single thing about how you feel.”

“Oh come on, you’ve guessed these things by now, Thor. You know all my sordid affairs.”

“We’ve never talked about it, Loki. How would I know anything?”
Loki is about to shoot something mean back, but Thor’s question is so honest and he can’t find it in himself. He looks down, stays quiet for a few seconds.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he says.

“What I know is that you wake from nightmares nearly every time you sleep. I know that you won’t eat. I know that you gaze with longing towards the waves under the hills.”

“I said I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You don’t have to. I won’t delve into your past if you don’t want me to.”

“Thor, please. Just - stop.”

“I just - Loki,” Thor sighs. “I need to understand. I’m - I’m scared all the time because I don’t, and I .”

Loki looks back up, interrupting, “if you want to be a good brother, then listen to me.”

Thor quiets. Seconds pass. He asks, “will you tell me how?”

Loki sighs, exasperatedly. “I don’t know, Thor, figure it out if you care so much.”

Thor is looking at him with those eyes again.

“I should’ve been there,” he repeats. “Back when you returned. I should’ve been there.”

“It was nothing.”

“You disappeared for three years.”

“I needed space.”

There’s quiet again.

“Was that your house?” Thor then asks. “In the snow, before we went to the hall of mirrors. Conjured by the stones. Was that where you lived back then?”

Loki hesitates, fidgeting with his hands. “Yes,” he says. He has no tangible reason strong enough to deny it. None other than 'wanting to deny it'.

Then Thor asks, “would you show me one day? We could go there together,” and that takes Loki by surprise. He looks up.

“Why would you want to go there?” he asks.

“Just to see it.”

“There’s nothing to see. It’s a shitty cabin.”

It’s Thor’s turn to look down. “I just would like to see it.”

Loki watches him for a few seconds. “Okay,” he then says. Thor looks up.

“Okay?”

“Fine, okay, we can go there. If you want to so badly.” He pauses, watching as a little smile begins
to grow on Thor’s lips. “It’s nothing worth travelling for, I promise you. Don’t get your hopes up.”

They sit in silence for a little while. Thor by the bed, Loki in it, both staring at floors and walls.

Loki feels the urge to tell Thor building in his chest. It’s not the first time. He wants to tell him, spill it all, about Thanos, about the time before all this, about his arm on Jotunheim and how he sometimes thinks he died that day in the vault. About the time in the isolation cell, how angry he was with Thor. How alone he’s been and how much he resents everyone for it. He feels it rising like vomit, but he’s not going to let it go.

It’s too vulnerable. Sharing everything - Thor might misunderstand. Might think he knows the truth but then it isn’t; might think he knows, Loki’s truths being twisted more than they already are. He’s afraid he might break if he begins opening up. Cracking like an overflooded dam; maybe he can’t stop the flow again. And then suddenly, he’ll be nothing because he’s given out everything that he was supposed to keep shielded. Because he has nothing left, everything he is and has is in question, in doubt, in other people’s uncaring hands.

He swallows down the urge. Though, for once, he searches for a compromise in turn. Something true but not too vulnerable. Something that won’t break the dam.

“I am …” he begins, trailing off. He clears his throat, not looking at Thor. “I - don’t like to talk about it.” Adds, “all of this. It makes me … afraid.”

He tries to keep a straight, unaffected face, but can't help glancing at his brother.

Thor gives him a little smile. “I see that,” he says, and Loki wants to hit him.

"Thor."

“No, I mean it. I mean to say - I probably don’t understand. But I see it.” He pauses. “It’s just - Loki, it eats you alive. And I don’t know what to do about it except try to understand it.”

“Can’t we simply leave it be?”

“It’s not a very good strategy, brother.”

“It’s a terrific strategy.”

“You’re not working through anything, so it stays. Rotting inside.”

“What, so you mean I need to face it?” Loki huffs a laugh. “Look at me. I’m not even able to face yesterday.”

It’s Thor’s turn to laugh under his breath. “Smaller steps, I’m thinking,” he says. For a second, Loki is sure he’s going to talk about the damned therapy again and his blood is ready to boil, but then Thor says, “for example, that ankle of yours. Getting the surgery.”

Loki blinks. Oh, right. That had not been on his top list of thought-priorities.

“You don’t need to be able to walk on it acutely, anymore, and you don’t need to spare your energy.” Thor pauses. “There’s time to heal.”

“Right. Well, I guess. We could do that.”

Thor is ecstatic about that, for whatever reason. It’s just an ankle. He calls the healers and they begin
to prepare, then goes out to find Shuri and Strange.

“Do they have to be here?” Loki asks when Thor shares that particular aspect of the plan.

“No,” he says, slowly. “I just thought - Strange was a leading surgeon of Midgard, and the healers are going to use prosthetic bone that Shuri designed. They could both be helpful.”

“...fine, then. Let them. Just don’t let anyone … do anything funny to me while I’m unconscious.”

They arrive just as Loki is being put under. Which is terrible timing as Loki is currently being reminded that he’d dead scared of that.

“Could you wait outside?” Thor asks them, pushing them along on their way while Loki hyperventilates on the hospital bed. "Thank youu."

“It’s going to be fine,” he then tells Loki, the door shut and returning to the bedside. “Shh,” he shushes. His hands are lifted in a terrible attempt at soothing. “Just a needle.”

“It’s not the *needle,*” Loki sneers.

“You’ll wake up soon, too. I’m gonna be here the whole time.”

“Will you -- stay?” The words blurt out involuntarily.

“That’s what I just said -”

“But I need you to, I need you to promise. I need you to promise you’ll be here.”


He can tell by Thor’s expression that he doesn’t understand what Loki is afraid of. Though, neither does Loki himself. That’s not what matters. He just needs Thor *there.*

When did he come to trust his older brother like this?

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Loki doesn’t make a sound when the needle is inserted into his arm. Barely breathes, staring resolutely at nothing. Thor holds his hand. Then the sedative is in his bloodstream and Loki’s breath quickens further, pupils dilating, before slowing again, his eyes drifting closed. Then he’s calm.

His bed is wheeled into a different room where Thor can stand on the other side of a glass screen and watch. Shuri and Strange have brought equipment from Wakanda. They keep the ankle suspended in a sling attached to the ceiling, fastened around both Loki’s knee and the base of his foot. Then they set to work.

Thor watches his brother, unconscious on the hospital bed. Loki’s face lax. It’s quiet inside the surgery room.

He swallows.
Where do they go from here?

Chapter End Notes

Don't woorrryyyy I'm soooorrryyyy, everything is going to be alright! We're going to hear more about the others who returned but I chose to keep it in the background for this chapter. They're all there, they're loved, we're just in Loki's head and vicinity rn and things are difficult, there.

Anyway, thank you for reading. I promise I'm not just a meanie, we can have some nice things, too, I won't break all of them. Or I'll glue them back together again at least.

It'll be a little while (a week tops I'd think) with the next chapter, since I've only just started writing it yesterday. I'm on it, though :)
Flowers, Parades, a Monument Built to the Skies

Chapter Summary

Eeeep, another chapter

Thank you for the overwhelming and much brightening support. And ideas. Those are always great! Here are some words, I hope they're nice

Chapter Notes

Soooo a little summary: we're in the aftermath of the actual mission of resurrecting the lost friends connected to the Infinity Stones. Tony, Gamora, Vision & Natasha are all alive. YAY!

Things are still difficult, though ... of course. We can't let all that stuff go un-dealt with, now, can we?

There are some different perspectives in this one. I guess if I would've written this again I would've included more outsider perspective but there is some, and .. well, every time I've re-written parts of the chapter I've sorta been ending up in the same places, wanting to touch onto the things I do in there. I swear I try to plan stuff but my brain just ... flies off and gets distracted. Very zoom-like. Goes it's own way, Vanessa Hudgens style.

Conclusion, writing is hard but very interesting and I hope this is somewhat satisfying .. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Did you know?” Loki asks, readjusting on the hospital bed. He lifts his eyes, finally meeting the Captain’s.

“Did I know what?” Rogers asks, carefully, head leaning sideways.

“About Thor,” Loki clarifies. “When you returned the stones the last time. When you visited the timeline of 2012, the one gone awry -” He clears his throat, blinking away momentary lightheadedness. Refocuses. “You knew Thor was dead, you said. Did you know I'd been the one who killed him?”

“You didn’t mean to do it,” Rogers says.

“You don’t know that,” Loki retorts, voice too sharp for his currently delicate state of consciousness. “Were you aware of how Thor had died?”

“No, I didn’t know.”

Loki studies the other for tells of a lie. He doesn’t know why Rogers would lie about this but either way, he doesn’t find anything profound. A bit of hesitation.
“Was he dead, then?”

Rogers hesitates again. “Who?” he then asks, a hint of frustration entering his tone.

“The other one. Me in 2012, the one who killed Thor.”

“...I don’t know, Loki. I didn’t see you anywhere.”

Loki snorts. “Then it is rather likely.”

Rogers studies him. “If you say so,” he says, slowly.

The Captain is sitting, on a chair by the end wall in the hospital room Loki has been designated. Loki himself is on the bed, managing to sit up despite his body protesting. As if he were at death’s bed. It’s just the stupid ankle, taking up his energy with healing. And .. well, his mind, but that’s a lot less tangible.

Rogers had come to visit. He’s going to return the stones to their original timelines, soon. Loki, for once, doesn’t mind the visitor. Though he's not sure why the Captain thought it important enough to take out the time.

“I was thinking you could come along,” Rogers then says, breaking the silence.

“What, on your little trip?” Loki asks.

“Yeah.” Rogers keeps looking. “If you want to.”

“Why?”

He keeps his eyes fast on Loki. “I thought you might get something out of it.”

“You mean 2012.”

“I do.”

“Thor is dead in that timeline.”

Rogers stays quiet.

“I killed him,” Loki says, keeping his face expressionless.

“I understand if you don’t want to come. I just thought maybe it could be helpful – to .. talk to the people there.”

Loki thinks on it for a second. Then says, with a sudden inspiration, “we could go tomorrow,” and Rogers raises his eyebrows.

“I’m pretty sure you’re supposed to go to Oslo, tomorrow.”

 Damn.

Why did he agree to the cursed therapy, again?

“Oh no, don’t worry,” Loki says, “I think it’ll be postponed, anyway, that little thing. Haven’t you heard?”

“Heard. About Fury, you mean.”
“It is most likely I won’t be permitted to go anywhere at all, much less the past of all things. Who knows when he is going to show up. Likely sooner rather than later, don’t you think?”

Rogers looks at him. “You know, you have a lot of people backing you up,” he says. “You’ve done more than your share of good.”

Loki scoffs. “Good,” he jeers. “Tell that to the governments.”

Rogers’ gaze is level.

“Yeah. I intend to.”

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“Therapy,” Thor says, drawing out the word to Sam over a glass of ale. He’s feeling the not unfamiliar tug towards more; to down the beverage and order another. And another and another. He’s barely touched this one, for that very same reason. He sighs. “It doesn’t feel like enough.”

“It’s the professional’s job to figure out how to best proceed with a client,” Sam argues, leaning back in the sofa in their booth with crossed arms. “To find something that’ll work.”

“But if it’s just talking …”

“That’s what you want him to do, right? To talk?”

“I know. I know.”

Thor is looking at his hands again. He can feel Sam’s eyes on him, but it’s as if his own gaze has been glued fast to his skin and can’t move, now.

“I know the therapist, Thor, and she’s fantastic,” Sam says. “Perfect for the job. It can become more than talking once they get started; she might have resources she can refer him to, stuff like that.”

Thor nods. Staring a little longer at creases of skin and veins twisting in his hand.

“He hasn’t eaten in nearly three days,” he says. Lifts his eyes. “I don’t know what to do about it.”

Sam pauses. Then says, “it’s not your job to do anything about it. You’re not supposed to be able to handle this.”

“Usually he tries,” Thor continues. “It’s as if he’s given up trying to pretend it isn’t a problem. While still pretending it isn’t a problem.”

Sam gives him a little smile. “You’re allowed to feel as you feel, by the way,” he says. “Be mad if you’re mad.”

“It’s not very productive.”

“You don’t have to tell him about it. That’s - not a good idea. So that’s why you have friends, right?”

Thor gives a little smile. “Of course. Thank you,” he says.
“Just say the word, man.”

There’s quiet for a few seconds. Sam asks, “how does he excuse the not-eating?”


“Those all sound like valid reasons.”

“That’s almost the worst part.” Thor crosses his arms, looking at the stained glass of the booth behind Sam.

There’s quiet for a moment.

“You need to do something else, sometimes, Thor,” Sam tells him. “Or you’re going to end up just as bad.”

Thor huffs. “It’s a hard case to match.”

“You’ve been there, right?”

Thor’s forehead creases. “That wasn’t -” he cuts off. Snorts. “I was eating like a bilgesnipe.”

Sam smiles but without mirth. He says, “we experience hard times differently. That doesn’t change the severity at all.”

Thor stays quiet for a moment. It’s uncomfortable to let that statement hang. “Anyway, I am doing other things,” he says, taking a sip of his ale. It tastes glorious. They’ve really worked out a nice recipe, the brewers in the village. “I’m in the pub with you, for one.”

Sam looks at him, head cocking sideways. “Yeah, I mean it’s good. But you’re talking about your brother.”

Thor redirects his gaze again to stare at the coloured glass. He’s finding it difficult to meet Sam’s eyes at all.

There’s a dinner planned for the evening in the Community Hall. Buffet-style, simplistic, more than enough.

It’s a celebration: to everybody’s surprise, they’re still gathered in New Asgard. Most of the Avengers, anyway. There’s become sort of a camping atmosphere to the whole thing, and people grow comfortable in the day-to-day of helping out in the village, going for walks and enjoying nature, sparring and training, talking to people they don’t normally have time for; a big, collective vacation.

The Community Hall has become the centre of it all. The sleeping quarters for most except for a few who have been designated houses or have their own ships (cough, Guardians) and the general hangout place. The time travel equipment and scene has been moved to the cement building also housing the Pathway.

Loki is still in the hospital. It’s his second day there, after the surgery, and he’s squashed all the time. It’s as if his mind eats up what energy and strength remain. His magic dulled, the healing magic he does have being spent on the ankle, taking from his overall energy levels. Helped along by potions fabricated to deliberately focus his energy on healing but thus leaving him drained when there’s
nothing left for everything else.

His moods wander from apathetic to aggressive, rarely with any kind of in-between. Sometimes, he seems more himself but he’s .. distant, these days. As if the energy after the first night in the hospital, the energy to talk to Thor, to get out of bed, even, was a fleeting spurt of adrenaline. He sleeps a lot.

And so, these things taken into consideration, of course, he isn’t coming to the collective dinner. Brunnhilde tried to convince him. He wasn’t cooperative with her attempts.

For Thor it’s strange, having these two parts of his reality. The two sides making up his world-view. On the one hand, there are his friends; his friends who are alive. Tony and Natasha are back. Vision. Gamora is reunited with her loved ones. Even if it’s difficult to be back, their psyches still adjusting to being alive, it’s all improving. Take tonight: they’re all well enough to participate. Celebrate. They’re getting better.

Then, on the other hand, there’s Loki.

And somehow his part of the equation manages to put a damper on everything else; like a poison fog, infiltrating every remotely positive thought Thor has, keeping it dull and never quite enough to make him feel alright. There's always a ‘but’ …

but Loki. Loki is in the hospital. Loki doesn’t eat. Loki might run, though Loki can’t, physically, run but he might try. Loki is in danger, always, Loki is always in danger and Thor is terrified. There’s nothing he can do except watch and try to prevent the worst.

And Fury is coming. Tomorrow.

It’s just chaos, all of it.

Thor talked to the Director on the phone, and he didn’t seem happy, not in the slightest. Despite having heard the news of Loki’s return from Tony Stark himself, alive, who blurted out something about ‘the pet-villain who’s apparently a little bit nice’ in another phone call. Tony hadn’t known Loki’s presence was secret, or he’d forgotten - that part was unclear. Maybe it wouldn’t have been able to have stayed secret for long, anyway, since Loki was what made all of this possible in the first place. Since nearly everyone but Fury knew about his return.

Either way, Loki is going to be sitting in the hospital staring at walls while Thor feasts with his friends. His friends, who caused Loki’s presence to be revealed to Shield. Loki, who was going to sacrifice himself for their very cause. Loki, who can barely walk because his mind is eating up his energy and he, in turn, isn’t eating anything.

Thor could run off with his brother, and the possibility weighed heavy when he first learned that Fury was coming. Then Fury himself had called, to find a middle ground; to prevent just that, likely. He’d promised that the Raft was out of the picture, so far. He wasn’t rushing into New Asgard with the military since any resident there would be under Brunnhilde’s protection of the newly independent state, and Brunnhilde had kindly informed him in the same phone conversation that Loki was very much so under said protection.

It had calmed Thor enough. Enough to not want to take Loki under his arm and disappear into the cosmos. There was too much to risk - isolating Loki from everything again, Thor being his only support system. The therapy. Sam Wilson, who has all sorts of ideas of what might help.

The prospect of things, maybe, a little, at some point, getting better. It's all tied to Loki getting to stay, here, in New Asgard, where Thor's system of support is. His home.
Loki isn’t in any state to run. He seemed frightened when Thor first told him about Fury, incapacitated by potions in a hospital bed. Hunted. Fury has the tracking on him, now, having alleviated Carol Danvers of the duty.

So Thor initially didn’t want to go to the dinner at all. Even if it’s just a dinner, eating, being with his friends for a couple of hours. It feels strange to leave Loki by himself to go and celebrate while the looming threat of Shield and governments and prisons hung over their heads.

Brunnhilde, Steve and Banner managed to convince him, though. They managed to drag him out of his hide in his house; literally curled up under a blanket in the bedroom and trying not to think, at lunchtime, knowing that Loki would be refusing lunch from the healers right this moment and he himself being too much of a coward to go down there and try to convince his brother otherwise.

It’s not like that strategy was very productive, either.

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Loki sits on a rock by the water, feeling the cold wind blow in his face and through the fabric of his clothes. Listening to the rustle and crash of the waves. It's been a while since he's been outside; a spontaneous trip after lunch (or not-lunch). Without healers, without supervision.

He's wearing a monitor underneath his shirt, though, hooked up to their system. They know where he is, they can read his heart and they'll know if he takes it off. If he, say, jumps into the water. Everyone seems terrified of letting him near water, lately.

Still. Freedom, somewhat.

She approaches him when he's been sitting there for a while. He feels the someone nearing and turns his head to see who it is, then, at the sight of her, cannot help the entirely involuntary toothy smile that spreads across his face.

"My, my," he drawls, turning his whole body on the cliff jut. She stops in her tracks. "If it isn’t the lovely spider, come to visit."

Romanoff stands still for a moment, eyes calculating, then crosses her arms. "Don’t try it with the attitude, Loki," she says. "You don’t look the part."

He chuckles, turning back to face the water. He doesn’t feel the part, either.

Somehow, the smile seems to have etched itself onto his face, though. As if the habit has overtaken. Except it’s beginning to tremble, the corners of his mouth twitching. He feels her to his right and discreetly turns his head away, pretending to follow the line of the shore with his eyes while really, working to get the ridiculous grimace wiped off. It's stuck.

“I wanted to say thank you,” the spider says. She’s standing to his right, facing him, arms still crossed.
Loki has managed to calm his lips to a somewhat neutral setting and turns his head back to face forward. He feels empty in the absence of the mask.

“You’re welcome,” he says because that’s what you’re supposed to say. The words feel... hollow.

“Why did you agree to help?” She asks. Blunt as always. He shrugs.

“Suppose I was bored.”

She huffs a short laugh. Stays silent for a few seconds.

Then she says, “you know, Tony is dead-scared of you.”

“Dead-scared,” Loki echoes, still looking forward at the waves. “That’s a bold choice of words.”

“He’s wanted to talk to you but he doesn’t have the balls.”

“While on the other hand, dear miss Romanoff, you do,” Loki says, throwing a quick smirk in her direction.

Then she moves to stand in front of him, a shadow over the sun.


Loki finds himself drawing back, just a little. Then she sits down, cross-legged on the grey and ragged asphalt. She’s looking at him, and he meets her gaze. He raises his eyebrows.

“Was that all? You came here to prove yourself in opposition to a dim-witted, wealth-obsessed narcissist.”

She smiles, a little. “Like I said. I came here to thank you.”

He rolls his eyes. He’s not going to repeat this sentiment again.

“And I wanted you to know that we have your back,” she continues. “When Fury comes.”

He swallows down the panic at the thought. Keeps his eyes level on her.

“Why would you speak my case?” he asks. “You know nothing about me.”

“No, I don’t,” she agrees. “I honestly don’t know what to think about any of this. I do know, though, that the picture is a lot more complicated than we used to think.” She shrugs a shoulder. “I’m living proof of that.”

He looks at the waves behind her, squinting. A headache has been building all day, and it’s nearing something shrill. “You knew I was here?” he asks, to change the topic. Also because he’s having a hard time focusing on keeping a conversation on track.

“I was looking for you. The doctors said you went for a walk.”

*Walk.* Ha. Sitting down after thirty steps on the crutches because he can’t stay upright for more than that, is what this is.

“Aren’t you getting cold?” she asks. She herself is dressed in a large charcoal grey coat; woollen, by the looks of it. Loki is dressed in simple clothes and one of Thor’s hoodies. His hands are hidden in the pockets. As a matter of fact, he is kind of cold.
So he tells her, “yes,” finding his energy for theatrics and smokescreens and word-games drained already. That might be the fact that he hasn’t been managing to eat at all, these last days.

Then the headache grows unbearable. A growing shriek in his head overpowering every other sound. He lifts a hand to his temple, closing his eyes with a grimace and bowing his head.

He hears something else, “Loki?” and it's Romanoff but she sounds far away, all of a sudden. His mind swims and he opens his eyes, black spots in his vision on the ground getting tunnel-like. His head feels heavy. Everything feels heavy, is too loud, too quiet, so cold and too hot. He distantly notes his head dropping sideways as his eyes drift closed again, this time against his will, body slumping into itself -

He wakes back up to someone clapping his cheek. “Hey. There we go, come on,” they say. Right, Romanoff. He can feel cold underneath himself; the ground, snow seeping through his clothes. He’s shivering.

“Come on,” Romanoff says, harshly. “Can you open your eyes?”

“No,” he mumbles after trying to blink, letting his lids go slack again. She quiets for a moment. Then he feels his entire body moving, up, up, hauled onto - everything goes black again.

Onto her shoulder, he belatedly registers when he next wakes. He’s lying across her shoulder. “Put me down,” he tells her, bumbling along as she walks.

“How are you so heavy? That makes - no - sense,” she grunts, making no move at all to put him down.

“Put me - eh,” he tries again, but his voice fails and all he can do is slump over her back as the world leaves him for the third time.

Thor is there when he wakes back up. Romanoff is gone and he's back in the hospital bed, an IV in the crook of his elbow.

“They're stabilizing your fluid balances,” Thor says as Loki looks at the needle. He turns his head to look at his brother. “Getting up the sugar levels.”

“Oh,” Loki says. He clears his throat.

They don’t talk a whole lot. Thor sits there for a little while. Then he leaves to go celebrate with his friends.

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Natasha is not soft. Anyone could tell you that, and no one would ever dare describe her so.

However, she does experience human emotions. She does have .. basic empathy.

She’s just really good at managing it.

Recently, she hasn’t found much reason to work so hard on managing it.
Recently. That’s such a strange thing to say when you’ve just been resurrected a couple of days ago. What is recent, then? Are the three years she hasn’t been present for, recent? Or would recent be Vormir, pushing off the cliff, falling, feeling her own skull crack against the rock before everything went black? She wasn’t supposed to retain that memory. But she does.

She knows there was a ‘recent’ in .. the mirrors, is what Thor had called it. He said they were inside mirrors. And she does remember - she remembers things vaguely. Dizzily. Like the world in there was slippery at best, and it kept vanishing in her grip a little more each day. She’s not sure how much longer she could’ve held onto whatever it was connecting her to life, still; because that’s what it was: a limbo. A place in between.

Maybe that’s why Tony is worse off, now, maybe he was closer to letting go. Dying, really dying. Who knows.

The worst part is how you still feel almost half-dead; how death pulls at you, as if it wants you back, like your foot is halfway in your grave and all it will take is for a gust of wind to blow you back in it. It’s as if everything is a little more grey than it used to be.

The fact that none of them knows if any of this is permanent, having never met anyone else who was resurrected before, it’s sort of a strange horizon. Hard to heal from something when you don’t actually know if the wounds can heal.

Well. There is one person who’s been resurrected before.

But Loki is in the hospital. And he is really not doing so good, Steve says. None of them wants to pressure or exploit someone in a vulnerable place; a stranger, barging in to obtain personal information and intimate details while he recovers.

And Loki is a stranger, that much is clear. They don't know jack shit about him.

When Natasha first saw him, after she came back, she was shocked. Her eyes had focused, her mind still wrapping itself around what was happening, Clint wrapping his arms around her, and she’d glimpsed Loki on the floor over her friend's shoulder. She’d learned that he’d tried to switch his life for theirs. For Tony, Vision, Gamora. For her. He was drenched, shivering, skin white as a sheet, lips tinged a little blue and much thinner than last she’d seen him and staring at the ceiling with desperate eyes.

He’d looked scary. It was supposed to be heroic, what he’d done, and it was; but the aftermath just looked scary. It wasn’t only heroic. It was also tragic. And definitely, it was a stark contrast to the Loki she’d met once upon a time. The cocky bastard with obvious self-esteem issues and, well .. a lot of obvious issues - but he’d still been the enemy, he’d been the bad guy that they had to take down. He'd been .. in control, it seemed. Making choices. An enemy.

Of course, he’d also been Thor’s brother. There had always been that sense of loss, of Thor’s grief in having to fight against his little brother, the shadow of the Loki he knew.

Natasha is beginning to understand that.

Knowing that Thanos was actually behind the invasion of New York, knowing what happened on Asgard before then, or at least what Thor has told of it, what Jane Foster has offered, the picture becomes clearer. Knowing how Wanda feels about Loki, having unwillingly seen large parts of his mind; even if she doesn’t talk about what, exactly, she’s seen in there. Knowing the things Gamora has reluctantly offered up.
This Loki, the Loki who would give up his own life for people he doesn’t care about or even likes; it’s very clear to everyone that he’s … different.

That isn’t to say he isn’t capable of terrible things, of course. Especially with a mind like his, war-trauma, suicidal tendencies and who knows whatever else; that makes him dangerous, not always in control. It just … sounds like he’s more of a danger to himself than anything else, lately.

But of course, there’s suspiciousness. There’s gratefulness, and there’s suspiciousness; he is Loki. He’s obviously not in a good spot, he’s obviously a victim, too. They just don’t have the full picture, and they don’t know him. They know him as war-criminal Loki, trickster and schemer, Thor’s lost brother. That’s just not all there is to it, anymore.

Loki was never innocent, is what Natasha has concluded so far. But he wasn’t necessarily always a perpetrator, either. He’s been through some stuff; Thanos wrought him like a washcloth, by the sound of it, his mind already vulnerable and then … a bunch of shit on top of that.

A bag full of cats, as Bruce would so thoughtfully have put it.

She can’t deny that she's reluctant. It lingers in her; the pictures of bodies in the streets of New York. How Tony wasn't ever quite the same after it. How Clint still had nightmares years after. It was just so close, the destruction, and Loki was so obviously the perpetrator. Except maybe he wasn't, not entirely.

They forgave Wanda; she was in everyone's heads, too. Look at what she did to Bruce. They accepted Nebula. Thor. Thor has caused mass destruction, he started a war between realms, and he's still their friend.

Isn't that kinda the same thing?

Wanda has visited Loki in the hospital. Steve has been there. He brought coffee. Thor is there a lot of the time and Brunnhilde keeps him company. But Loki being there in the hospital, it’s hard to find an opportunity to really thank him from the rest of the people. Show him how grateful everyone is.

“I’ve wanted to go,” Banner had said earlier that day, cramming himself into a couch in the community hall shoulders hunching. “But I’m scared. There, I said it.” He sighs. “I - I don’t want to do anything wrong, I thought I’d just say hi to him once he got out of the hospital, you know, he loves coffee, I could chat to him over a cup of coffee or something but now it’s taking so long and - and - I don’t know when or how to approach him! He doesn’t even know me like that, what if he doesn’t want to talk to me?”

Natasha figured, after two days of figuring out herself and her place in this new reality, being alive after three years of being in a not-very-conscious limbo place, that she should try it. Maybe he would enjoy the company. Maybe she had something to offer than he could use, even; she remembers seeing him. She remembers him from in the limbo, behind the mirror as Thor said, she remembers Loki and how she felt what he was feeling. How death called to him, even though it wasn’t his to have. How bad he wanted it and how scared he was. She remembers his face. And maybe he could use someone to talk to who sees him. Maybe he could use a friend.

So she’d gone to find him, and she’d found him. Boy, did she find him, she thinks, crouching with an armful of unconscious trickster-god splayed over her.

“He passed out on me,” she tells the others, plunging down into an armchair and propping her feet up on the coffee table. Tony raises his head from the pad in his lap to look at her, and everyone else
follows. Steve eating lunch at the table, Bruce on the floor against the wall, Wanda reclined in the sofa; all gathered in the house Tony and Pepper are staying at. There’s a big living room, perfect hangout spot. Natasha certainly makes use of it.

“Literally, on me.”

“Who?” Tony asks.

“Loki,” she says, picking at a nail. “I went to talk to him, found him by the harbour.”

“Ah, yeah, that happened to me once, too,” Bruce says with a grimace. “In the lab, he fell and cracked his head open on the table. A lot of blood, real nasty.”

Natasha watches him for a second, creasing her forehead and upper lip in disgust.

“I think he does that a lot,” Wanda says. “You shouldn’t worry about it.”

“... the healers said he was fine, anyway,” Natasha replies. Well. Except for the fact that he’s obviously not fine.

“We should send him flowers,” Tony says, leaning back with crossed arms and wiggling to get comfortable in his armchair. Natasha grimaces.

“I think he’d get offended,” she says.

“No no no, with a little card,” Tony illustrates with his hands, making a small rectangular square in the air. “See, to thank him. Thank you, dearest Antlers,” he reads, “for nearly killing yourself. That was very nice of you. End letter. Yes, that’s brilliant.”

Bruce frowns at him. “That’s not funny, Tony.”

Tony looks at him for a second. Then gives an ugh, throwing his arms out and slumping in his chair. “No, right, I’m sorry, of course it isn’t,” he says. “Sometimes I wonder if my sense of humor will ever return to me, like really. I swear it’s just been off, not itself ever since … since -” he cuts off.

“Maybe that’s just you who’s off,” Steve offers with a sly smile after the second of quiet, dragging Tony back into the present. Tony blinks, then gives a little jerk of his head.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s probably accurate, too,” he mumbles.

Quiet falls.

“See, this is why we need the bastard!” Tony speaks up again, looking at the others again with a sudden gleam in his eye. His mood swings are even worse than usual. “To tell us whether all these side effects are gonna last.”

“He might not know it, Tony,” Steve says, carefully.

No, he really might not. If Natasha were to deduce anything, it would be that Loki is .. terribly confused about everything.

“How is he, today?” Wanda asks, and Natasha’s heart breaks a little for her. How much care there’s behind the words.

It's strange, to have people care so much about Loki, New York Loki. Brunnhilde. Steve. Wanda. Strange, even. Bruce. They really care, as if they're sure he's good now, as if they're sure he can be
trusted.
They have, of course, spent a lot of time with him. Observed him for months. They've gotten to
know him. Heck, Wanda has been in his head.

“He’s ..” Natasha begins. “I wouldn't know. We just talked a little, very briefly. He was being pretty
arrogant, so that’s a good sign, I think.”

Wanda smiles back. Her eyes are haunted, though.

“Hey, how’s Vis?” Natasha asks to break the silence. “I haven’t seen him since yesterday.”
Wanda’s smile turns more genuine. “He’s .. he’s doing really good, actually. Very .. happy.”

“That’s strange,” Bruce says.

“No, we’re talking about Vision,” Tony says to him, waving a hand dismissively. “Not Strange.”
Bruce rolls his eyes.

“Why are you not with your wife and daughter, Tony?” Bruce asks him. “Instead of here, being a
pain.”
Tony glares at him. “If you must know, dear Morgan and mommy are at the beach, collecting shells
as decorations for tonight’s dinner. Isn’t that nice? I just don’t think rock beaches and crutches is the
best mix.”

"How is it going with you, Tony?" Steve asks. "Your legs and everything."

"Ooooh, it's going to be fine. I'm just a weakling after being dead for three years, don't mind me. The
doctor's say it needs time to heal, stuff like that, then I'm all good."

“So Vision's still doing good,” Natasha says to Wanda with a smile. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“It’s surprising,” she says. “I’m happy, too.”

“He’s with Sam, isn’t he?” Steve asks through a mouthful of spinach.

“Ugh, Steve, close your mouth,” Natasha groans, receiving a muffled sorry in return.

“He’s with Sam,” Wanda confirms. “They’re readying for Fury’s .. visit.”
There’s quiet except for Steve’s chewing.

“If he throws Loki in the Raft,” he says, then swallows, “we’re breaking in again.”


Pepper and Morgan return with an impressive collection of seashells. Morgan is very proud. Well -
Pepper is, too. Then it’s time to help set up for the dinner tonight. Cook and stuff. Natasha is in her
own opinion best at making peanut-butter sandwiches, which isn’t going to be on the menu, so she'd
really rather not be a part of that. An idea has been lingering in her mind, though, and halfway to the
Community Hall, she decides to go with it. She has the perfect partner in crime in mind.

“Morgan?” she calls, and both Pepper and Morgan turn. Natasha looks at Pepper. “Do you mind if I
borrow your daughter for ten minutes?” she asks. Pepper smiles.
“Sure,” she says. "As long as you’re not doing anything nefarious.”

“What are we doing?” Morgan asks.

She’s grown so much since Natasha last saw her, height reaching her mother’s waist. What was she, now, seven?

“Oh, it’s only that I couldn’t help notice your impeccable taste of colours in that seashell collection,” Natasha says, “and I wondered if you would help me pick some flowers. I just don’t think I’m artistic enough to do it on my own.”

“Flowers,” Morgan echoes, lights in her eyes. Then she frowns. “But there's snow everywhere.”


Morgan smiles, too, trying to keep it under wraps and failing. “Who’s it for?” she whispers back.

“Just a friend,” Natasha says with a chuckle. But at the words, a worry settles in her chest. She looks up at Pepper. “I - is it okay? It’s for him. It just thought .. to show some support. And I really am bad at organizing flowers. I think.”

More like she wouldn’t want to be found picking flowers on her own, honestly. That would be a serious dent to her image. She’s not sure she has ever plucked a flower in her life. It's just not her style, really, but since there aren't any stores around here ...

Pepper just smiles again. “That’s quite okay,” she says.

“I won’t bring Morgan to the hospital or anything, I swear. Just the flowers.”

“Really, it’s more than fine,” Pepper says, reaching out a hand to squeeze Natasha’s upper arm. “Just take good care of her.”

“Mom. I can take care of myself.”

“I’m sorry, of course, you can, sweetest,” Pepper quips, ruffling Morgan’s hair. She moves to turn and go but then pauses, facing back.

“Ms Romanoff?” she says, and Natasha raises her eyebrows. “It’s a good idea. With the flowers.”

Natasha smiles.

“Thank you, Pepper.”

“The hospital?” Morgan asks as the trudge towards the greenhouse. Snow creaks under their boots, Morgan’s ski-jacket crinkling as she moves. “Who’s in the hospital?”

Natasha opens the metal door, letting Morgan walk in first. “He’s sick,” she evades. “I thought he might need some encouragement.”

“Is it Loki?” Morgan asks, and Natasha stops, turning to her.

“How do you know him?”

“I don’t,” the girl mumbles, kicking dirt with her boot. “Not really. Mommy and daddy says that name a lot, and I’ve seen him before.”
“...well. Yes. It is Loki.”

“Why is he sick?”

“It’s something to do with magic. It’s making him sick.”

“Magic,” Morgan echoes, looking at the air as if seeing sparks. “Thor can do magic.”

“Loki is Thor’s brother.”

“Is he? But Thor is so nice. Mommy says that Lo-ki,” she pronounces the name carefully, in two distinct syllables, “is dangerous.”

“...he is,” Natasha answers, carefully. “He is dangerous.”

Morgan frowns. “Then why are we giving him flowers? Bad guys don’t get flowers.”

“Because he’s also good,” Natasha says. “And he’s helped us out .. big time. I want him to know that people are grateful.”

“He helped get my papa back,” Morgan says, frowning in thought. " Didn't he? Even though he's bad."

"Yeah," Natasha says with a little smile. "He did."

Morgan beams back. “Then I think he should have every flower in the greenhouse.”

Natasha grimaces.

“Ah, good idea - but I don’t think we can do that, Morgan,” she begins. “See, we have to be a little careful with which ones we pluck so no one will notice we took anything. It's like a secret spy mission. Here, for instance, you just pick a little there, this one, then you move to another bed - should we take this one? Would that look good? …”

It turns into a beautiful bouquet. Natasha thinks so, at least; she really doesn’t know a lot about flowers, but there’s a lot of colour, a mishmash of plants, a lot of different kinds, very .. lively. That’s appropriate, she thinks.

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Thor ends up drinking too much at the dinner. A lot too much. More than he has in years. Saying things he shouldn’t. Staying longer than he’d meant to, instead of going to stay overnight in the infirmary. Brunnhilde tries to stop him, many times, but he laughs it off, claps on her shoulder, then continuing with his stories. He's not very present at all by the time she drags him outside by the ear, and thus can't really take in the message she's trying to give him.

He ends up passing out in a corner and is helped by .. someone to a bed. He’s pretty sure the Parker kid is there, trying to get him to cooperate with the movement, and wakes up with the unmistakable sting of guilt and regret stabbing in his chest. The stench of alcohol lingering in his clothes and skin.

The former King of Asgard. What a bloody sight.
It’s nothing new, of course.

He ignores Brunnhilde who apparently slept there in the Community Hall as well. She’s awake, anyway, and as he gets up to stagger across the room, she looks at him from where she sits propped against a wall with a steaming cup of something. She doesn’t look hungover in the slightest.

Well, good for her.

He knows he should go home and shower but instead goes straight to the infirmary. It might have something to do with the fact that he’s still half-drunk. Mostly that he missed coming last night. Loki has been alone for the entire night.

His feet carry him there, either way, through the early morning, and he finds himself standing by his brother’s bed, staring at the sleeping bundle of blankets. Moving with breathing. Alive. There’s a bouquet of flowers on the bedside table which Thor frowns at for a moment.

Loki lies on his side, facing the wall with the door. His face is tight, scrunched up a little as if he’s dreaming something unpleasant (that’s pretty likely) but he frowns harder when Thor stands in front of the bed, and a moment later he’s blinking open his eyes.

“Thor?” he rasps. He sounds worn.

“Um,” Thor says, not sure what to answer. Why he’s there. “Yes.” He flops down in the chair by the bed.

“You’re up early,” Loki says, glancing over his shoulder at the still dark window up near the ceiling. “I think. What time is it?”

“.I don’t know,” Thor says. He looks at the wall opposite the bed. Loki’s eyes are on him, focusing.

“You stink,” Loki says.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’ve been drinking.”

Thor doesn’t answer. Irritation bubbling. Of course, Loki would begin digging, he should’ve just showered.

“Are you still drunk?” Loki asks, and Thor sighs heavily.

“Maybe,” he says. “Just go back to sleep, Loki.”

Loki watches him quietly for a few moments. Then he lies back down on his back, arms folded across his stomach. Thor doesn’t know if he falls asleep because his own world begins to fade rapidly.

He wakes back up to a hissed whisper, “Thor - Thor,” and squeezes his stinging eyelids. Ymir’s beard, what a headache.

“Thor,” Loki whispers again, accompanied by a rustling of Thor’s shoulder. Thor sighs, blinking open his eyes.

“Loki?” he asks, voice raspy. "What is it?"
“I need to piss,” comes back at him. Thor focuses on his brother. “The damned healers put my foot back up and I can’t reach the lock. Thor, come on.”

Thor sighs, vision still blurry as he stumbles to his feet. He works to open the latch on the bands keeping Loki’s foot up and then gently lowers it down. Loki proceeds to turn on the bed, legs dangling over the side. Thor moves to his side, hauling him off the bed to stand leaning half on Thor and half on his good leg. A practised movement in the last two days.

They move towards the hallway, and Loki leans against the doorframe to the bathroom, hobbling in to lean against the wall and close the door. It gets locked from inside.

It takes a while, every movement complicated by the foot and Loki’s general state. “Are you okay?” Thor calls through the door and gets a sneer in return, “yes. Shut up.” Then the toilet flushes, there’s the sound of the sink running. The door opens, and Loki limps out into the hallway, reaching out for Thor’s shoulder when he lets go of the doorframe.

“All right, let’s get going,” says Thor. “I need to go.”

Loki walks with half of his weight on Thor’s good leg, half of his weight on his own. They reach the door. Loki leans against it with a smile, and it gets locked from the inside.

“I need to go,” says Thor.

“I can go,” says Loki with a smile.

Thor looks at him, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Shut up,” he says, and then the door, the only door, opens and Loki limps out into the hallway, reaching out for Thor’s shoulder when he lets go of the doorframe.

“Everything is impractical,” he grumbles on their way back, his arm slung over Thor's shoulders.

“At least your foot will be better,” Thor argues.

“Hooray.”

They make it back to the bed. Loki puffs from the exertion, adjusting himself against the pillows, and Thor takes the moment to examine the messy band of flowers on the bedside table. They've been put in a seethrough vase, likely by the healers. He lifts them, inspecting the chaos of colour, very clearly home-made and all the more lively for it, and finds a card between the buds.

Thank you, Loki, it says in simple handwriting. We owe you big time. Get well soon.

Nothing more than that.

"Who are these from?" Thor asks, turning the vase. Loki sighs.

"I don't know," he says. "They were here when I woke up, yesterday evening. I think it might be a jest."

Thor frowns and lowers the vase so he can see his brother's face. Loki just looks tired, looking ahead.

"A jest?" Thor echoes. "Of course it's not a jest, Loki. Why would someone send flowers as a prank? That's like - the worst prank ever."

"Who knows," Loki grumbles, "just think of the irony of it."

Thor scoffs. "That's ridiculous. They're beautiful." He pauses. Looks at Loki, waiting. "Don't you think so?"

Loki finally looks at him. His mouth is tight. "I just don't see why anyone would get me flowers, Thor, can you really blame me?"

Thor's shoulder drops. "Yes. Yes, I don't see why that is such an impossible scenario, everything considered."

Loki stays quiet, looking back ahead.

“Fury is going to be here today,” Thor says.
“I know,” he replies, crossing his arms.

“You know, you have a lot of support, brother.”

“I don’t know enough about the rules here,” Loki says, eyes narrowed a little. “Earth laws.”

“You’ll be fine. And if not, we’ll figure something else out.”

Loki stays quiet.

“I won’t leave you anywhere,” Thor says. “I will not let them take you anywhere.”

His brother doesn't answer.

***

To Loki’s surprise, nobody has put handcuffs on him by the time Fury arrives. ‘Fury’. That’s still ridiculous. Loki would bet his old set of horns the guy made that up himself.

The jet lands in a clearing by the harbour, not far from where the Guardians’ ship is parked. Loki stands and would have his arms crossed in a show of defiance, were it not for the crutches he currently can’t stay upright without. He’s squinting in the bright sun reflecting its rays in the melting snow, head swimming.

He blames it on snow-blindness, anyway.

Thor is by his side, Valkyrie on the other. Or Val. He called her that, the other day, and she didn’t laugh or look at him with disgust. So that was a win.

There’s .. a lot of people there. The Avengers are gathered behind Loki, Thor and Valkyrie, like a mass of audience. Which is uncomfortable. Thor says they’re there as security, witnesses, even if none of them actually know anything about anything.

It feels like a massive showdown. Very dramatic.

The ship is large, blowing everyone’s faces off with its wind-hurling as it lands, feet folding out underneath it like hooks to the earth. It shakes the ground upon impact. Loki blinks away dust and snow, feeling lightheaded at the overwhelming soundscape and weather. He takes a couple of deep breaths while the sound is still masked by the ship’s roaring. Then the motor turns off, whirring down and while the wind is still blowing, the hatch opens in front on the ship.

Fury stands in the middle, calmly, while people dressed in black soldier-like uniforms filter out on each side of him. He takes slow steps while they hurry ahead. Loki draws back, a little, and feels Thor’s protective grip on his upper arm, then Valkyrie’s on the other.

The soldiers, or agents, probably, form a half-circle behind Fury and facing the gathered people of New Asgard and Loki, Thor and Valkyrie, hands ready at their weapons.

“I don’t want any trouble,” Fury declares, coming to a slow halt and raising his palms in peace-offering. The noise of the ship dies down, finally, leaving an empty quiet in its wake. He looks at Loki, angling his head. “I can only hope we’re on the same side.”

“What’s with the theatrics, then?” Valkyrie calls to him, nodding at a heavily armed soldier. Fury
“Safety measures,” Fury tells her. He nods his head at Loki. “Your laws will keep us from removing him from New Asgard,” he continues, “but international law says I can contain him however is deemed necessary within the borders. So, this is my compromise.”

Valkyrie’s mouth twitches. Fury turns to Loki.

“I only want to talk,” he says, slowly, almost staccato. His voice stands out like an echo in the quiet clearing. His eyebrows have raised a fraction.

Thor huffs beside Loki. “Surely, Director, nice company to bring along for a simple chat,” he says.

Fury shrugs. “I could say the very same to you.”

Thor's expression darkens.

“That’s enough of that,” Valkyrie breaks in, taking a step forward. “What’s the plan, Director? Are we going to stand here all day?”

Fury gives her a smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “I want him cuffed,” he says. “And then I wish to talk somewhere private.”

“A trial?” Valkyrie says.

“Of sorts,” Fury answers.

“What’s your end-goal?”

“To figure out the right measure of containment,” Fury replies. “That’s all I want.”

Val crosses her arms, eyes narrowed. “We have witnesses.” She nods her head back and Fury follows the movement with his eyes to the gathering of people. Loki knows who’s there; in front stands Strange, Wanda, Rogers, Wilson, Banner. Tony Stark is there, too, on crutches in bright red. Romanoff is beside him, Peter Parker and Shuri on her side.

Behind them, everyone else.

“The witnesses are valid and their statements will be taken into consideration,” Fury says. “But I need an interview with the guy himself.”

Thor exhales heavily through his nose. “Hilde,” he says, lowly.

Valkyrie looks at Loki. “Are you okay with this?”

Loki shrugs. As if his nerves aren’t flaring at the thought of ‘containment’. “Go ahead.”

There’s hesitation for a moment. The Valkyrie turns back to Fury.

“Alright, we can talk,” she says. “On the terms you have stated. But nothing more excessive than handcuffs.”

Fury looks at her for a second, then nods at one of his soldiers, who breaks the line to move forward. There’s an elaborate pair of shackles in his hands, black and shining. He moves towards Loki, holding them out. There’s a mask obscuring his face, so Loki can’t see his expression.
“Um,” Loki says, standing on one leg to avoid putting pressure on the boot-like brace on his right foot. He fumbles to get out of the crutches without falling. Then Thor’s arm is around him, keeping him upright. “Thanks,” Loki mumbles.

“You need to turn around,” the soldier says in a slightly harsh tone and Loki does, with some difficulty, ignoring the prickling at his back, having it turned to Fury and the soldiers. He’s faced with the gathering of Avengers. He can see Hildegund and her sons in the crowd, as well, and the woman gives him a little smile when he looks at her. He smiles back but it feels sort of grimaced as cold metal presses against his wrists, and he hears the click of the cuffs closing.

It feels claustrophobic and his breath rises in his throat, threatening to speed. He keeps it down, turning again to face Fury. Thor’s arm under his armpits and across his back, Loki leaning sideways on him. He decides to flash a smile, despite it all.


Fury narrows his eyes for a second. Then looks at Valkyrie. “We have a room in the jet we could go to,” he says.

“I don’t think so,” she replies. “Let’s go to mine.”

Thor’s arm across his back, Loki limps along with her towards the City Hall by the harbour. The officialness of going there is calming. Thor carries the crutches in his other hand. It's hard to keep balance without the aids and with his hands behind his back and Loki keeps stumbling, Thor catching him every time.

“This is ridiculous,” Loki's older brother grumbles lowly as they move, Fury some steps behind them, his agents following along.

“He’s right, though,” Valkyrie says in reply, voice low. “About the law. It's shit.”

Loki stays quiet. It takes up enough mental space, focusing to stay upright.

They make it into the building. There are stairs up to the corridor they’re going to. He halts in front of it, everyone else following.

Then he begins to move again, Thor walking along.

He stops in front of the first step, leaning on his good leg while lifting the other. Thor grips tighter. “I’ve got you,” he says and lifts Loki an inch above the floor as he moves the other foot up to the step. He sways once up, nearly toppling sideways, but Thor catches him.

“We can do it,” Thor says, and Loki nods, biting down hard. He ignores his vision swimming.

There’s a lot of hauling and carrying on Thor’s part, while Loki moves his legs to the next step, the next, the next. Luckily, it’s not a long staircase. Though, it’s definitely long enough.

It takes at least four long and embarrassing minutes, everyone else, Fury, Valkyrie and the agents waiting at the foot of the stairs. Then the brothers are up, and they all follow.

Loki tries to keep his breath quiet when it wants to explode both in and out, breathless and lightheaded. He keeps moving forward.

Val leads them into a room to the left. There’s a table in the middle and chairs around it, and Thor leads Loki to one, sitting him down. Brunnhilde sits on his one side, Thor on the other, Fury across
from them. Then the door is closed, the agents waiting outside.

Fury narrows his eyes at Loki. “I thought you guys were supposed to super-heal or something?”

Loki levels a stare. “That’s none of your business,” he says, voice neutral.

Fury raises his eyebrows. Then breaks it with a chuckle. “Alright, sure,” he says, leaning back. “No less prickly than ever, I see.”

There’s quiet for a moment. Then Fury sighs, rather demonstratively. “Look, I’m not an enemy, here,” he says. Gaze wandering between the three. “I’m - you know me, I’m all about that earthly security. I want everyone to be safe. And I mean everyone.”

“So how is this going to go down, then?” Valkyrie asks.

“We need to assess the level of the threat. That’s the compromise I’m willing to make, considering how there’s been spoken so fondly of you, Loki, as of late; the support this whole state evidently shows.” He pauses. “We also have to make sure it isn’t from a malfunction of psyches.”

Loki’s mouth twitches with a smile. “You mean make sure I’m not controlling their minds.”

Fury shrugs. “For all I know, this could all be some elaborate show you’re putting on.”

“Why would he reveal his presence to you if this was all a scheme?” Thor asks, a growling undertone to his voice.

“I don’t know,” Fury says. “That’s why I’m here. So you can either prove me wrong or right. Actually, in fact,” he continues, looking at Valkyrie, “I’d prefer it if the convict would wait in containment for this next part. This is really between the three of us.”

“Containment,” Thor says, and now it is a growl. Loki doesn’t say anything, just keeps his eyes fast on Fury, who crosses his arms.

“It’s really nothing bad, Thor,” he says. “It could simply be the other room with the company of my agents.”

“You can talk to Brunnhilde,” Thor says. “Then I will stay with my brother.”

Fury looks at him for a second. Then nods, edges of his mouth twitching upwards, mirthless. “Sure,” he says. “We can do that.”

“He wants an interview,” Valkyrie says, walking in through the door. Loki and Thor both look up at her. “With you, Loki.”

Loki sighs. “So I can tell him the truth, everything, right?” he drawls.

“That’s not going to work,” Thor says. He turns to Loki. “Brother, you’re only going to make things worse like that.”

Loki smirks. Valkyrie sighs.

“It’s part of the trial. The Shield kind of trial. Loki will be kept in custody here in New Asgard, contained,” she makes air quotes with her fingers and rolls her eyes, “until Fury has what he needs. Witnesses will be a part of the final decision, as well. He brought law personnel and everything.”
“And what about the outcome?” Thor asks.

“In the end, if he deems you enough of a threat, he can get a court order to remove you from my borders,” Valkyrie says to Loki. “I’m sorry, there’s nothing I can do about that. But if we can convince him you’re not a threat …”

Quiet looms in the room. Thor glances at the six agents standing along the walls.

“Loki,” he says. Hesitates. “If you tell them - the truth, about Thanos, about everything -”

“Stop,” Loki cuts in. He crosses his arms. “This is ridiculous. I shouldn’t have to be forced to volunteer personal information for the sake of them.”

“But it’s not for them,” Thor argues, pleading. “It’s for you, so they can judge you innocent -”

“I’m not innocent, Thor.” Loki is glaring at his brother. Thor looks back, his eyes tired and sad.

“Brother,” he says. Loki keeps staring.

“No,” he says.

Thor looks at him for a second more. Then sighs. “Then what is our other option?” he mumbles, resting his head in his hands.

“You could do the interview, Loki,” Valkyrie says. “Answer however you want, however much information you feel like volunteering. And our witness statements might be enough to alleviate the worst punishment. There’s a lot of evidence.”

Loki shrugs. “Sure,” he says. He’s feeling oddly indifferent to this whole thing, right now.


Loki stiffens.

Extracting his secrets through scientific measures. Inarguable results.

“I don’t want to,” he says, redirecting his eyes to the wall. His arms hurt from being forced behind him for so long. “I’ll do the trial and questions but I don’t want their probing.”

“Loki,” Thor says. “You know what they’re going to find. Why are you so afraid of the world understanding?”

“Don’t, Thor,” Loki warns, eyes snapping to his brother. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Thor’s brow furrows. He looks like he wants to say something but doesn’t.

“Actually,” Valkyrie says, carefully, “they .. they don’t need your consent.” Loki looks at her, now. “I’m sorry,” she says. “It’s Earth law. The procedure is not invasive, according to their ethics guidelines.”

“But - it is,” Loki says, his heart beating wildly. “It is invasive.”

“Loki,” Valkyrie says. “I’m sorry. You’re in their custody, now; they can’t do anything harmful to you, but they’re allowed to contain and question you based on your previous actions on Earth.”
Reading your energy, non-invasive medical procedures; it fits under those categories.”

“I’m - I,” Loki stammers, breath catching. He’s suddenly too hot, as if his skin is flaring, making an oven of his body. His throat is closing.

“I need to .. sleep,” he says, surprising himself. He really doesn't need to sleep. His voice sounds odd. “I'm - really tired.”

Both Thor and Valkyrie look at him. His eyes flicker between them.

“Alright,” Thor says. “We’ll find somewhere to lie down.”

In the end, though Thor had promised ‘no prisons’, Loki is not allowed to go back to Thor's house, and he doesn't want to go back to the hospital; so he is kept in one of New Asgard’s very own containment cells in a building across from the city hall. There’s a cot in there, positioned with its long-side against the wall, which Loki lies down on immediately. On his side, facing the wall, away from the bars. The metal clangs shut behind him and Thor.

“I’m going to stay, if that's alright,” Thor says behind him. “You don't have to be alone.”

Loki stays silent. He falls asleep in the early evening.

Chapter End Notes

Thank yyyooouuuu for reading ! Got some stuff written for the next one that I'm excited about. Should be up soon

Yeah, I just ... felt like I needed to deal with the whole fact that Loki is actually a criminal
Thoughtless

Chapter Summary

Things are reaching a real low point for our boy. But also things are happening. And Thor is there so what can go wrong, amirite?

I hope you enjoy! There's a bit of law stuff in this and the next chapter, which I know next to nothing about. Sorry about any inaccuracies. But also this is Shield, so how accurate should it really be?

And lastly - thank you all! I love you guys!! I've read every comment and you are all LOVELY. I'm working (like coffee-shop-work) more than I'd like to, lately, which makes me feel stressed out about the time I do have to do my own stuff (such as responding) but I will get to it <3<3

Thor is there in the room the next day, a makeshift lab in the City Hall, when Loki gets electrodes placed on his forehead, his arms, sleeves rolled up. To read his energies. He’s in a chair, facing away from Shield's scientists, and he’s definitely not shaking. His hands are still as feathers in quiet weather, that’s for sure. Nothing there. Because he isn't brittle like that. He's not.

They begin the procedure.

He doesn’t feel anything. It’s all over very quickly. Nothing hurts.

They’ve got the information they need.

They pull off the sticking pads, and he rolls his sleeves back down with not-trembling fingers, the end of scar-lines from his lovely time with Thanos once again hidden away.

Once they’re back in the containment cell, he immediately throws up into the toilet by the wall. He ends up on the floor with his head in Thor’s lap, crying. It’s been a good while since he’s last eaten, which probably plays a large role in that particular situation; his head feels fuzzy, everything unreal. Weeping while his brother holds him is far from anything he'd allow himself in normal circumstances but he finds he just doesn't have the strength to make decisions based on pride, right then.

He hasn't felt this weak in years.

Maybe back in his cell, after Frigga. He'd been pretty deteriorated there. But then, there's always been some level of preservation, precaution, at all times. Right now? ... everything is just wobbly inside him, like gel. His will, the fear, pride, it blurs together into a big, overwhelming blob of things he can’t handle. He's flooded.

That day is being spent talking to witnesses and doing tests on them, the same kinds they did to Loki, and he has to wait in the containment cell until it's finished.

In the afternoon, after a long nap on Loki's behalf, there's a visitor on the other side of the bars.

“Sam,” Thor says, getting up from his chair. Loki is on the bed and takes a moment before he turns.


“Name?” the agent asks.

“Wilson. Sam.”

There's a nod, then the door is unlocked.

“Hey, Loki,” Wilson says with a nod and a little smile. There are no more chairs and Wilson just goes to sit on the floor, against the wall. Loki watches him, pushing himself up with thankfully cuff-free hands.

“Do you not want my -” Thor begins, gesturing at the chair, but Sam waves a dismissive hand.

“No, no, it's fine,” he says. Thor sits down again.

Then there's quiet. Thor looks between Loki and Wilson.

“I just wanted to stop by and say hi,” Wilson says, looking at Loki, who is now sitting up against the wall in the bed, posture slumped. His eyes sting and everything is prickling. Imagines he looks a mess.

“Say it, then,” he says dully. It's not funny, and Loki wonders where his wits have gone to leave this in its place. But Wilson gives a smile.


There's quiet for a moment.

“So,” Wilson begins. “This whole Fury situation is pretty difficult.”

Loki shrugs. “It's just talking,” he says.

“I heard they did some tests.”

“That was nothing.”

“That's what they said, too,” Wilson says. He looks at Loki. “That doesn't mean they're right, though.”

Loki looks at him. He's all too aware of the camera in the corner of the room. The fact that every word he speaks can probably be heard somewhere else, too. “Why are you here?” he asks.

“Like I said,” Wilson answers, “I wanted to say hi. Talk, if you wanna.”

“I don't know why you'd think I want that.”

“Some people like to talk. They think it's nice to voice their thoughts and be heard.”
“You certainly do.”


Then he turns to Thor.

“Thor, maybe Loki and I could be alone for a minute?” He looks at Loki, adding, “if that's okay with you, of course.”

Loki shrugs again.

He knows what Wilson wants. For some reason, he has not yet gotten the urge to throw the guy out a window. If there was a window here, anyway.

Thor blinks between them. Then gets up in a hurried, stiff movement.

“Um. Sure,” he says, going to the bars. The guards let him out, and he glances back one last time before exiting the room.

“You know, it's actually my job, that,” Wilson says when the door is shut, and Loki looks back to him. “Talking to people.”

“Really,” Loki says.

“Well, it was. I still do it when I can.” Wilson pauses. “I talk to veterans, for instance. People traumatized by their experiences in war.”

Loki stays quiet. Looking at the other. He finds his eyes kinda glued there, in fact, as if the prospect of looking away could leave him vulnerable to something terrible.

Wilson stays quiet, too. Meeting Loki's eyes in turn.

Then he smiles. Just a small one, not happy, but not sad, either; just like he's mirroring something in Loki, recognizing something at projecting it back for Loki to see. As if they're the same. As if he understands.

Loki doesn't even understand.

“Those tests they took,” Wilson then says. “Do you want to tell me about them?”

“You already know what they were. Why should I tell you about them?” Loki asks.

“I don't know,” Wilson replies, “maybe it'd be nice to talk about it. I can tell you, for one thing, I wasn't happy when I heard about it.”

Loki's brow creases. “Why?”

Wilson cocks his head a tad to the side. “They think it's ethical because it's like reading your heart rate, your pulse. But this magic stuff is also new to them, signatures defining presence and person, all that; people don't understand it yet.”

No, they don't.

“There's information stored in those signatures,” Wilson continues. “And extracting personal information like that against someone's will is unethical. In my humble opinion.”
“It's not a big deal,” Loki says.

“I would've stopped it,” Sam says. “But I only learned about it after they'd done it. I’m sorry.”

“So that's why you're here?” Loki huffs. “Because they extracted some shallow information against the will of a war criminal.”

“It doesn't matter to me what you are or what you've done,” Wilson says. “It's basic humanity, and that's for everyone.”

“I'm not human.”

“You count as 'everyone', though.”

There's a pause.

“Taking your history into consideration, they should've known better,” Wilson says. There's a note of anger to it, but nothing directed towards Loki.

“You don't know my history.”

“I know you've worked with Thanos. I know you were a victim of his, too, on the Statesman after your home was destroyed. That's enough already. Though, I understand it isn't the full picture.”

“You don't know anything,” Loki tells him. The anger beginning to bubble is easier to hold onto than the blubbery mess.

But Wilson says, “I really don't,” and slumps against the wall, and Loki doesn't know what to do with that.

“Then why are you here?” he asks.

“I'm here as a friend,” Wilson says. Loki snorts.

“We're not friends.”

“Alright.” Wilson looks at him. “Well, then I'm here as support. I thought you could need some.”

Loki looks away, finally, at the wall to Wilson's left.

“I want you to know, Loki, that I'll be trying to make this thing as seamless as possible for you,” Wilson tells him. “That's why I'm here. To let you know that I'm keeping both eyes on Fury and Shield. We're a lot of people who are.

“And I'm here to tell you that I'm willing to listen if you ever want to talk. I'm here for the conversations, man. I have a background that might make it easier for me to understand what you're going through, if you want.”

Loki snaps at that.

“I'm not going through anything,” he snarls, eyes boring into Wilson.

“No?” the other asks, calm as ever.

“No.”

Wilson watches him quietly and Loki looks away again. “I'm not -” he says, cutting off. He looks at
a speck of dust in the air.

Seconds pass. Maybe even a full minute.

“I'm there all the time,” he then says, quieter. "It doesn't stop, it just .. changes."

His heart is beating fast.

There's silent for a moment after that and Loki spends every second regretting that he opened his mouth. He can feel his cheeks heating. He ignores Wilson, focusing on the wall, the air. Not the camera. Not the microphones he knows must be somewhere in the walls.


Loki still doesn't look at him.

“The woman you agreed to talk to,” Wilson says after a little while. “I know you're not super excited about it – but she's really cool. I want you to know that you are going to get to talk to her, no matter what happens with Shield. They're not going to get in the way of that. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“It can be good to have a space like that. I think it's really awesome, and important, that you're willing to try it.”

Loki's gaze snaps back to him. “Don't talk to me like that,” he says.

“Like what?”

“As if I am a child. You're trying to encourage me.”

“I'm sorry it felt like that. I didn't mean to.”

“You're still doing it.”

“Alright. Thank you for letting me know. I don't wanna do that.”

Loki looks away again.

“I want you to leave,” he says.

“Alright,” Wilson repeats. He gets to his feet, brushing dust from the ground off his clothes. “I'll go, then.” He stops to look up at Loki, who meets his eyes. “Thank you for talking to me, Loki. I really appreciate it.”

“You've gotten nothing out of this.”

“That's not true. I'm the one who wanted to talk.” He pauses. “I want to help if I can.”

* I don't need your help, Loki wants to sneer, but the blubbery mess inside him is too close to the surface, and he's afraid he might break down in tears if he opens his mouth.

The bars are unlocked for Wilson. Before exiting, he turns one last time. “We've got your back,” he says. “Even if we don't know you, like you say. Your actions have spoken a lot. You've got a whole village of support.”
Then he turns to leave.

The bars slam shut again, the guards regain positions along the walls. Loki's lega curl into his chest on the cot, a thoughtless and almost involuntary action, shielding his chest from the room as he's left alone. There's quiet in the cell in Wilson's leave.

He wasn't aware of the tears building before they begin to fall, heavy down his cheeks.

Huh. That's the second time that day.

Thor comes back in shortly after, and his eyes are on Loki immediately. Loki looks back at him. He feels desperate, desperate and alone. The bars open and Thor walks through. He's frowning, slightly. “Loki,” he says, almost a sigh before he goes to sit beside him on the bed. He wraps an arm around Loki's shoulders, and Loki lets himself drop sideways to lean against his brother.

They sit there for a little while. Then Thor says, “brother, you need to eat. It's only making things worse like this.”

Loki doesn't say anything. He knows. He knows, this is humiliating, he can't control his emotions at all.

“Please,” Thor says.


Thor hesitates, stroking Loki's hair. “Will you do it, if I bring some?”

Loki feels a fresh wave of tears press at the suggestion.

“I don't -” he tries, cut off by a strangled gasp. “I can't, Thor. Not now.”

He hates it. Hates the way the truth sounds from his lips.

“There are other ways,” Thor says softly. “You could let the healers do it for you. Help.”

“The . .. tube ... thing,” Loki says, repeating what the healers had recommended. Some strange Midgardian science they suggested when Loki wouldn't accept their potions of nourishment.

“We could try it.”

“Not while I'm here,” he mumbles.

“I think the healers could bring it here.”

Loki stays quiet, imagining sustenance brought directly into his stomach. The thought makes him sick. Like he's going to explode.

“Calm down, Loki,” Thor says, and he realizes his breath is speeding up. He takes a deeper one. Doesn't try to speak, that would ruin it. He feels like he's about to pass out.

He knows the not eating is making everything worse. And yet, the fog in his mind lashes out like a monster every time he thinks about bringing food into the picture. Despite how goddamn hungry he is, the anxiety at the thought overpowers it immediately, a constant pull between hunger and his body and mind saying NO, leaving his mind in a continuous limbo of weakness and desire and disgust and hollowness.
“We could try it before the interview is due,” Thor says, and his voice is so soft, like he's talking to something very small. “To get your mind back up and running, just a little.”

The tears in Loki’s eyes build again. Building, falling. His shoulders heave. This is ridiculous. He feels like a child.

“Please, brother,” Thor says. “You don't have to do anything. They could come here and you could just lie on the bed until it was over. It would make things just a little better.”

Loki manages from his choked throat, “okay,” and hopes that's enough for Thor to take over, take control away from him. Take it.

He falls asleep at some point, drained by the tears, tired and purged of everything. Empty.

They come the next morning. He lies on the bed and tries to keep calm, eyes on the ceiling. Thor holds his hand while the two healers ready the equipment by the bed.

“This is good,” Thor tells him. “You're going to feel more alive, Loki.”

_That's exactly the point_, something whispers in him. The little, hungry animal that more than anything just wants to be numb and forget everything._ That's why we don't do it._

The interview is going to be tomorrow afternoon, as far as Loki knows. He knows it's a good idea to get nourishment so his brain will function but currently it isn't functioning, which means is just chaos in there and the thought of everything scares him. Like everything is too close to the surface, fluttering just beneath.

He remembers days like these from his cabin, back of the slope. Most of them are a blur, especially towards the end. It was easier, there. With no food in reach, nothing to consider, no one to demand anything. Numb.

It takes a long time, getting in the plastic tube. It makes him gag and cough, his eyes watering from pain and flowing over but despite it all, somehow they eventually manage to get it through his nostril, down and into his stomach. They begin the procedure of pumping in the liquid, and he _hates it_. Thor talks to him, and Loki can't find it in himself to answer. He stares at the ceiling, focusing on keeping his breath under control. Listening to Thor's voice but not so much the words.

There's a lot of in and out of consciousness, the feeding small and distributed over a few hours so he won't get everything at once, to make it less likely for him to get sick. Well, he does feel sick, but it's not _as_ physical as for him to throw up what they've given him. More like a general sickness.

“The questioning is in three hours,” Thor says at one point. Loki had been lying on the bed, back turned to the room. “They're going to take it out, brother.”

He turns to his back. Then a healer kneels beside him, beginning to pull at the soft plastic. Earthly medicine is truly so strange - but it's his own fault, an alternative to the potions. Why was this better, again?

Afterwards, he lies panting on the bed, and Thor takes his hand. “Well done, brother,” he says. “That was good. That was so good.”
He does feel .. less likely to fall apart in tears, which is a good thing. He really wants to cry, it's just under the surface, but it is as if the nourishment has brought a little of his self-preservation back and he can keep the emotions there, underneath the surface. The pressure of it doesn't break the dam.

Thor watches him a lot for the next hours passing, just staring, and Loki snaps at some point, “stop looking, Thor.”

Thor looks away.

“Sorry,” he mumbles. Then, after a few seconds, he says, “I'm just - really proud of you, brother.”

Loki snorts. “Proud,” he jabs. ”There's nothing to be proud of.”

Thor looks back up, frowning a little. “Of course there is,” he says.

Loki looks away. Doesn't want to take up the argument.

“You were scared of this, and yet you did it,” Thor says, still looking. Loki’s insides curl in shame. “You're going along with Fury's program. You agreed to see the therapist -”

“Thar, stop it.”

“It's your fault my friends are alive. You haven't stabbed anyone the entire time you've been here.”

“I haven't been able to summon my knives a lot of the time,” Loki mumbles.

“You're alive. I'm proud of the fact that you're alive.”

“It's no thanks to me,” he blurts out, immediately clamping his mouth shut.

“It is, Loki,” Thor says. He leans forward on his bed a little, a second one they had brought in. “It is thanks to you. You've had moments of weakness - but the rest of the time? That's your doing.”

“It's nothing,” Loki says.


Loki is brought to a new room for the questioning, thankful to get out of the cell. It's still inside the City Hall but in a lower level, a small and dark room, with a mirror on one side; a mirror, but really a one-sided window.

Loki is positioned facing it, and he startles at his own reflection. He quickly looks away but the view lingers in his mind. He's lost weight again. That can't be good. His skin is grossly pale, waxy, everything looks waxy. Ashen and desaturated and all jutting edges. He doesn't remember ever looking worse than this - but then, he did avoid mirrors when he’d first come here.

“Loki Odinson,” a man sitting across from him says, glancing at a piece of paper over the brim of his glasses. Loki cringes at the name. Hasn't been comfortable with any last name since he found out about his heritage.

The man is the lawyer, he was told. Small of stature, dark hazel hair just reaching his ears. Swedish, Loki thinks they said. Gr – Grand – Greg – his name something with G.

The man looks up. “My name is Lundstrom, Karl,” he says. Oh, well. “I will be the ambassador and
arbitrator of Scandinavian and American law, today, and during the length of your trial.”

There’s an agent there, too. Fury no doubt stands on the other side of the mirror. Loki glances at it, then quickly away again when the only thing looking back is his own dark eyes.

“Fischer,” Lundstrom gestures at the agent, “will be asking the questions. You are obliged by law to answer truthfully. Do you understand this?”

“Yes,” Loki answers.

He’d promised Thor he’d answer truthfully. He’ll see if he can keep it. He’s not going to answer anything he doesn’t want to.

Which is difficult since that would be just about any question these people could ask him about any private thoughts and experiences.

“Let’s start with the invasion, then,” Lundstrom says. “Fischer?”

Fischer nods. He has blond hair and would probably look about Loki’s age, a little younger, if it weren’t for the fact that Loki is one-thousand and fifty-three years old. Or was it .. fifty-four? It's gotten all mixed up, these recent years.

“Mr Odinson,” Fischer begins, and Loki interrupts him.


Fischer hesitates, mouth open a little. “Ah, I'm .. afraid I can't do that. Is there any other title you would prefer?”


“No, thank you. Odinson will suffice.”

The agent waits a second. “Mr Odinson,” he then begins again. “You led the Chitauri invasion in 2012, guiding an alien army through a wormhole opened over New York to attack. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Loki answers. His skin prickles.

“You did this to gain control of Earth and – rule it.”

Loki hesitates for a second. “Yes,” he then confirms. That had been the official intention, at least.

The agent watches him. The lawyer scribbles on his paper. Loki notices his own hands clenching into fists on the table, joined together by the cuffs in front of him, and releases the muscles carefully.

“How did you gather this alien force, to serve your cause?” Fischer asks.

“I didn't,” Loki says. Fischer nods.

“We've received notion that you were working under the command of Thanos, at the time. Is that true?”

The room feels too small, too dark, and Loki tries to ignore it. The sensation of the walls wanting to smother him.

“Not .. entirely,” he says.
“Did Thanos have command of the Chitauri?”

“Yes.”

“And he gifted them to you.”

“In exchange for my service,” Loki says. He swallows nervously. The agent notices.

“Is everything alright, Mr Odinson?”

“Is that part of the formal questioning?”

“Just making sure we’re both on board.”

“Then yes. Please continue.”

Fischer nods again.

“So you are saying it was a mutual agreement. You worked with Thanos of your own free will.”

“Yes.” Loki's face feels tight.

Fischer scribbles something. Then asks, “how did Thanos come by the Chitauri? How did he gain control of them?”


“Thanos could do magic?”

“It wasn't ... his.”

“What kind of magic, then?”

Loki doesn't let his face betray anything. “The Mind Stone. The Tesseract. He had both, and he used them as incentive and manipulation of the Chitauri.”

Thanos is dead. You don't owe him anything. You don't owe him loyalty, secrecy, anything.

The agent watches him with painful neutrality. Then he looks down at his notes again.

“How did you come by the alliance with Thanos?”

Loki hardens his eyes, hoping they can't be read. “I don't feel comfortable answering that,” he says.

The agent looks at him. “I'm afraid it's crucial to our further investigation.”

Loki looks back. “I know you've interviewed my brother. He has no doubt already given you a sufficient answer.”

“We need your side to the testament.”

“I do not wish to answer that question.”

The agent looks at him for a moment longer. Then down.

Loki's head is beginning to swim again. Despite the recent meal. Or maybe because of it. Maybe both. Just as he thinks the thought, his stomach growls, loudly. His mouth tightens, and he can feel
heat rising in his cheeks.

“Excuse me,” he mumbles.

“That's alright. Shall we continue?”

“Mh-hm.”

“State all answers clearly, please.”

“Yes. Continue.”

Fischer nods.

“After your capture, you were brought to your home-planet, Asgard, for trial. Is that correct?”

Fischer asks. Loki shrugs.

“Yes.”

“Was there a trial?”

“Not really, no.”

“What do you mean by that statement?”

Loki sighs. “The King sentenced me. There was no trial.”

“And what were you sentenced?”

“Originally, death. It was changed to a lifetime of imprisonment.”

“Isolation prison, is that correct?”

“.I guess. Yes.”

“The King was Odin Borson, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Your father.”

“I don't think we have time to go into that.”

“He isn't your biological father.”

“Wasn't. And no.”

“My apologies. Do you know who your true blood-relatives are?”

Loki frowns. “I fail to see how that's relevant.”

“We're only trying to get a full picture of the situation, Mr Odinson.”

Loki huffs. “I thought we just agreed Odin wasn't my true father.”

“According to your brother, an official adoption under Asgard's law took place while you were an infant.”
“Well, we don't have any proof of that.”

“No, we don't. Do you have any other formal titles you would prefer?”

Loki bares his teeth with a sharp exhale, leaning back in his chair. Fischer remains expressionless.

“I don't want to talk about my heritage,” Loki says. “You can take that up with my brother if you wish. Sounds like you already have.” He shoots a nasty glare at the mirror, getting confirmed just how nasty it is when he meets his own eyes – but Thor undoubtedly stands on the other side, so that’s all well.

“Then let’s go back to the invasion, the crime you are currently held accountable for,” Fischer asserts. “Can you tell me where you were, during your time of conspiring with Thanos?”

“.Sanctuary,” Loki says after a moment’s hesitation. “It’s called Sanctuary. And I didn’t work directly with – Thanos.”

The word feels strange on his tongue.

“Let’s get back to that in a moment.” Fischer scribbles on his paper. “Sanctuary is …?”

“An asteroid field. It is where the Chitauri took home.”

“So .. rocks.”

“Mainly, yes. Some buildings .. stairs, constructions. Primitive.”

“And where did you reside during your stay?”

“That varied.”

“Could you elaborate?”

“There were … rooms. I was mainly in those.”

“Did you have access to basal needs of survival in these ‘rooms’? Kitchen and bathroom facilities?”

“Well .. no. Not exactly.”

“Could you come and go from there as you pleased?”

Loki hesitates. Looks at the table. He doesn't want to answer because he knows what they'll derive from it.

But then you'll be free, something says in him. They'll know. The world will know. Maybe they'll let you off lighter if they know that it was nuanced, you weren't a victim but it wasn't all you, they would see and you’d be relieved of the burden of having to carry -

Then there's that other part of him.

You? You deserve every punishment the world could throw at you.

“Mr Odinson?”

Loki looks back up. “I don't feel very well,” he says. “Could we take a break?”

Fischer glances at Lundstrom, who nods.
“We can leave you in here for five minutes, then we return to the questioning. Would that be alright?”

No. No, not alright. I need **air**.

But he says, “yes. Yes, that's quite fine.”

The two get up and leave the room. It's almost more uncomfortable like that, with the door closed, alone and knowing he's being watched; exposed.

He gets an idea after a minute of fidgeting and takes a chance, speaking out loud, “Thor?”

There's no answer, of course. “If you're there -” he begins, but then the door opens and Thor enters, closing it behind him.

“What are you alright?” he asks, sitting down in Lundstrom's chair and leaning forward, elbows on the table. Loki keeps his own hands in his lap, now, while he's not being ordered to keep them on the table. He shrugs, looking away.

“I don't know what to tell them,” he says, already regretting calling Thor in here. What's he supposed to say to **him**, now?

“You don't have to tell them anything,” Thor says. “But – you're doing good. Really good.”

Loki looks up. He can feel the desperation in his own eyes.

“Thor, I don't - ” He cuts off, not sure where the sentence is going. *I don't want this? I don't know what is the truth?* Repeating his last sentence, maybe, *I don't know what to tell them?*

Thor leans forward, a little closer.

“You're almost done, Loki. You're almost done.”

The door swings open.

“Thor Odinson,” Fischer says. “If you could please leave the room.”

Thor gets up, still looking Loki in the eyes. Loki's are glued to his.

“It's alright, Loki. You're doing well.”

Then he’s rushed out the door, which Lundstrom shuts behind him. Loki swallows, looking down. Fischer and Lundstrom sit back down.

“Who's watching?” Loki asks, looking back up. “Behind the screen.”

“I'm afraid I cannot volunteer that information, Mr Odinson. Shall we continue with the questions?”

Loki sighs. Then nods.

“You were on Sanctuary. Have you changed your mind about telling us how you arrived there?”

*You don't have to tell them anything.*

It's not that big a deal. He doesn't have to tell them **everything**.

“I fell,” Loki says.
“Fell?”

“From Asgard. There was – a bridge. It broke, and I fell into Yggdrasil.”

“The Life Tree.”

“Yes.”

“How did that bring you to Thanos?”

“He picked me out. Sanctuary was located in the Void between Worlds and he .. found me.”

Fischer scribbles.

“So Thanos wanted you for his cause. Correct?”

“I guess.”

“State clearly, please.”

“Yes, he wanted me.”

“Why was that?”

Loki hesitates. “I’m … not sure.”

Fischer looks at him. “How long were you scheming on – Sanctuary?”

Loki swallows. “I don't know.”

“Our sources claim a year passed between your fall and your reappearance on Earth. Is that correct?”

A year? Only one year?

“I suppose. I don't know.”

“Why is that?”

Loki sighs. “I do admit I was bordering mad at the time. It didn't make for the most accountable depiction of reality.”

“What is meant by that statement? Have you ever officially received any kind of diagnosis?”

“Diagnosis?” Loki asks, frowning. “Of .. what, exactly?”

“You make use of the word, and I quote, 'mad'. On Earth, at least, that's an outdated and derogative term for mental illness. Varying kinds.” Loki stiffens.

“That's not what I meant.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, my version of reality was rather distorted at the time,” he says, and it’s nearing a sneer. “I'd almost died, you know.” Maybe I did die, he doesn’t say. Maybe it never stopped, he leaves out.

“Distorted how?”
“Well I couldn't tell time, for one.”

“Anything else?”

“This is not something I wish to discuss.”

“It is rather crucial to the full picture,” Fischer says, adding quickly, “but perhaps we could approach it from another angle.”

“Of course,” Loki mutters. He tries to cross his arms in defiance before remembering the shackles, the metal clanging against itself with the movement. He grits his teeth.

“You say you weren't working directly with Thanos?” Fischer asks, unbothered.

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“You say you weren't working directly with Thanos?” Fischer asks, and Thor licks his lips involuntarily. He's immediately grossed out by himself; as if he's hungry for the information currently leaving Loki like rivers.

Thor gets to hear it all. Everything Loki hasn't been telling him. Or. Some of it.

“No, I wasn't,” Loki answers behind the screen, amplified by a speaker in the wall into the room Thor is in. Loki looks terrible in there, in that lighting, opposite two, normal and healthy people (well, except for their unnaturally short lifespan they're healthy). Shoulders sharp and angled underneath the sweater, his neck frail like the body of an underdeveloped birch. Face deep with shadows.

Beside Thor stands Director Fury.

“Did you have an intermediary? Someone connecting you to Thanos?” Fischer asks inside the interrogation room.

“I only met Thanos later,” Loki says.

“Later?”

“After ...” he trails off. “Later,” he repeats. “After I'd been there for a while.”

“And what had you been doing in that time?”

“I don't wish to discuss this.”

“You won't discuss your time on this Sanctuary at all?”

“Preferably not, no.”

“Loki,” Thor groans under his breath, and Fury glances at him. It's not the first time Thor has muttered commentary.

Loki looks at the papers each the agent and lawyer are scribbling on. “Who is going to have access to this transcript?”

“Only the higher ranks of Shield, Mr Odinson. The people relevant to this case.”

“Shield, the collective files of which was made accessible on the internet only years ago. That
Fischer hesitates. “That's not what we're here to discuss,” he says. “The transcript will be used intentionally only for purposes relevant to your case.”

“And unintentionally?” Loki mutters, looking away. He seems … resigned. Thor's chest clenches.

“I have no choice but to give up this information, do I?” Loki continues after a moment.

“You are currently on Earth's premises, thus under our law,” Lundstrom breaks in. “That means we can contain you with whatever means necessary unless you are proved more or less guilty of your crimes than originally assessed.”

Loki stays quiet. Thor knows what he's thinking. He could just run, leave the planet. Except he can't. And where would he go?

“Mr Odinson,” Fischer continues. “Could you come and go as you pleased from Sanctuary?’”

“You'd need a ship,” Loki answers, dully.

“And could you? Leave by ship, if you wanted?”

“In theory.”

“The 'rooms' you stayed in, as you say,” Fischer continues. “Could you come and go as you pleased from them? Were they locked or barricaded in any way?”

Loki stays quiet for a few seconds. Then he blinks, slowly, as if blinking some thought away, eyes on the table.

“No,” he says, quietly.

“No, they weren't locked?”

“No; I couldn't go as I pleased.”

Fischer scribbles.

“Was that where you were kept until you would meet Thanos?”

“At first, yes.”

“Why was that? Their reason for keeping you prisoner?”

Loki scoffs softly. “I was acting insane,” he says, and Thor's heart clenches. “They needed to contain me.”

“They?”

“Thanos' underlings.”

“And did you then initiate an alliance with them from there?”

“I suppose.”

“Elaborate?”
“I don't remember it very clearly.”

Fischer pauses to scribble.

“Mr Odinson, in your opinion, were you ever harmed, physically or mentally, during your stay on Sanctuary?”

Loki’s jaw tightens. He stays quiet for a few seconds. “I won't answer that question,” he says.

“Did Thanos or his allies ever use the power of the Mind Stone on you?”

Loki looks up. His eyes are hard and dancing as if with flames.

“I think you already have gotten your answer to that. I will tell you that I don't know.”

“Did they use it to harm or manipulate you mentally?”

Loki draws in a sharp breath. “You already know,” he snarls, voice rising. “Why do you ask me? You've already talked to the witch, and she told you everything.”

“I'm not allowed to discuss our witnesses,” Fischer says.

Then Loki slams a fist on the table, hard, and both the lawyer and agent and everyone behind the screen jerk. Thor's breath catches. Don’t. Don’t, Loki.

“What have they told you?” Loki growls, voice raised. “What do you know?”

“May I please ask you to keep calm, Mr Odinson,” Fischer says with an impressive poker face while Lundstrom struggles to keep his own expression under control, glancing at the control room. Thor doesn't blame him. Loki looks positively deranged. “We have guards right on the other side of that door, and they will not hesitate to incapacitate you. There is an electrical current running in the handcuffs, as well, which can be activated at any given moment. You would be on the floor within milliseconds.”

Loki breathes hard for a moment or two, leaned over the table. Staring at them with deadly eyes. Then he relaxes a fraction, leaning back.

“You already are aware of these things,” he repeats, voice lower but trembling a bit. “She's already told you.”

“Wanda Maximoff has offered her side to the story,” Fischer says, breaking his own rule from seconds ago. “That is no secret. She has been reluctant to offer up information gained from the involuntary use of her powers, but it's a blurry line between her own observations, thoughts and experiences, and what is taken directly from your head.”

“It's not fair. It's never been fair,” Loki mutters, eyes flickering on the ground. Thor wants to run in there and give him a hug. He settles for fidgeting.

“What is it that isn't fair?” Fischer asks him.

“You always take things,” Loki says. His eyes are growing wilder. He's speaking like he's not really addressing anyone in particular. “You take and you take and you take, all of you. Always. There's nothing left.”

“Mr Odinson. Can you elaborate on that statement? What has been taken from you?”
Loki looks up. He's breathing a little too fast, raggedly. “No,” he says.

“You're refusing the question?”

“Yes,” Loki says. He swallows. Looking like a hunted animal.

“Okay. We will move on to another, then. Did you desire to gain control and rulership of Earth when you conducted the invasion?”

Loki breathes hard, still, shoulders rigid, rising and falling. “Yes,” he says.

“Were you in full control of your mind at the time?”

“Yes,” he says. Fischer frowns.

“You weren't under the influence of the Mind Stone.”

“No.”

“Damn it, Loki,” Thor growls. His fists clench by his side. Don't panic now.

“Mr Odinson, just before you said you weren't sure about these things. Why the change of statement?”

“I was lying. I do know,” Loki says. “My mind was coherent. I was - fully myself, and I made the choices because I... because I...” he trails off, looking back down.

“Because you ..?”

His eyes snap back up.

Then he smirks. An unpleasant, calm, too familiar smile that only makes the angles and deep shadows of his face worse.

“Because I'm a monster, you see.”

Thor groans. “Loki.”

Fury glances at him again. “Please, Thor, if you could refrain from the commentary.”

“But he's lying.”

“You are here on the simple condition that you do not interfere with the procedure. Trust my agents.”

Thor quiets. Fists still clenched.

“A 'monster', you say?” Fischer asks, cocking his head. “That's a peculiar statement.”

“Oh, but I was born this way,” Loki says, body language all of a sudden relaxed, loose. “It is my only birthright, after all, dearest Fischer.”

“Do you speak of your heritage?”

“I suppose you already know about that,” Loki says in a voice near a drawl, shrugging. “Then you should know that I am best left contained. My nature is simply to do monstrous things.”

“A moment ago you said your perception of reality had been at times, and I quote, distorted. Does
Loki's face falls. “That's irrelevant,” he says. His stomach growls for the second time and it really is loud. He looks down at it as if it's a separate thing from himself; an obnoxious animal attached to his body.

“It isn't, in fact,” Fischer says once the growl dies down. “Irrelevant.”

“I was lying,” Loki says, and it's got to be the worst lie he's ever told. He looks so damn tired. Ready to keel over, tired, and Thor doesn't blame his wits from not functioning optimally. In fact, right at that moment, he's a bit grateful for it.

“I was lying before,” Loki repeats, teeth grinding as if irritated with his own inability to be coherent. “I was never mad, I was lying.”

“You could be lying now. Which could seriously compromise both your statement and the entire trial; are you sure you want to do that? Before this questioning, you swore to be honest in all answers.”

“Well, I take it back,” Loki snarls.

Thor turns to Fury. “He's not well,” he says, nearing a hiss. “He's not. We need to stop this.”

“Let them finish the interview,” Fury says, still facing the screen. But his eyes hold something more than what his words convey. Pity, maybe.

“Mr Odinson,” Fischer says through the speaker from inside the room. “If you will answer no more questions about your time before the invasion honestly -”

“No,” Loki breaks in, and now it sounds childish, so far from the sneer he produced just before. His eyes have widened a little. “Ask me again,” he says. Swallows.

“What question would you like me to repeat?” Fischer asks, studying him.

“Ask me – ask me about ..” he trails off, breath getting quicker. “No, never mind. Nothing. It's nothing.”

“About Sanctuary, perhaps?” Fischer insists. “Who was the intermediate between you and Thanos?”

“He's dead,” Loki answers. “The Other.”

“Was this his title?”

Loki nods, and Fischer apparently takes the informal answer as 'good enough'.

“What about Thanos' other allies?”

“Ebony Maw,” Loki says, voice thin. He's staring at the table again.

“Ebony Maw?”

Loki doesn't answer.

“Mr Odinson.”

He looks up.
“I don’t have anything more to say,” he states.

“Understood,” Fischer says. “If we could, before we finish, touch onto the recent events surrounding the resurrection of Anthony Edward Stark, Natalia Alianovna Romanova, Gamora --” he hesitates on the name on the paper, “Zen – Whoberi .. Ben Titan .. and the being they call ‘Vision’.”

Loki stares blankly at him.

“What would you like to know?” he asks, the aggression once again faded to an almost apathetic demeanour.

“Why did you assist in and initiate the mission of resurrecting these people, still connected to life through the Infinity Stones?”

This agent has really done their homework, Thor notes with impress.

Loki doesn’t look too impressed, on the other hand. He says, “I was bored.”

“You were bored.”

“I was asked how I returned from the limbo, myself, and I answered. I had nothing better to be doing than assist, at the time.”

“Were you personally invested in this mission?”

“No,” Loki answers.

“You did not have any personal stakes.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then why ..”

“I had nothing else to do,” Loki repeats, eyes sparkling a little through the fog that seems to have settled in him.

“Was there any other reason? Did you have anything to gain from it?”

He sighs. “I wanted to help, I guess,” he says, and Thor could cry from how childish he sounds, how much like the boy getting caught in more or less harmless mischief, sneaking out in the night, doing his meticulous studying and yet mouthing off every teacher presented with, crying in their mother’s arms …

Thor swallows.

“Thank you, Mr Odinson,” Fischer says. “I believe we’ve finished for today.”

Loki is led out of the interrogation room by a pair of guards. He doesn’t look Thor in the eye. He doesn’t look at anything but the ground, seeming entirely disconnected.

He’s let out of the handcuffs in order to walk on the crutches but they fumble in his grip, and he can’t seem to hold them in place at all. As if his coordination is entirely off. So Thor moves to his side, once again sliding an arm behind his back in a by now familiar hold, taking the crutches with his other hand. Loki seems to lean into the touch, limping along as they move, body heavy and lethargic
in its movement, the brace around his foot making soft metallic noises.

“We're going back to the holding cell, for now,” Thor says. “The trial is tomorrow. Then it'll be over.”

“Trial,” Loki echoes. His voice is soft, too soft for him. Like he’s drugged, except he’s not. It makes worry crawl in Thor’s gut. “Do they have everything they need, then?”

“They have witness statements, readings. Yours,” he adds after a hesitation. “It's not going to be a big affair.”

“Good,” Loki says, voice nearing a whisper.

Then his eyes roll into his head, his legs buckle, and he topples forward.

Thor catches him.
Hello everyone! Sorry about the wait!

I blame Mercury in Retrograde. That must be it. Some people say the Retrograde thing is a theme of learning and I feel that, like, I've gained some perspective in not being able to just barrel along and post and post and post, the control-freak in me paired with crippling indecision just turned up a few notches this past month .. anyway. I hope this is fine. I feel like this story is very much just me playing (though of course trying my very best to have it all make sense and stuff too), going out of tangents and exploring them, full-on self-indulgence because I feel like .. what is writing even if it's not self-indulgent? Maybe that's my Cancer in Sun talking - wait, is it Sun in Cancer? Should I capitalize Sun? I know nothing about Zodiac things. I think that's enough talk about ...zodiacs/Zodiacs for now. Enjoy the chapter, if you will! <3 I love you all so very much.

Thor manages to get his brother back to the cell, Loki half-awake. The healers come, called by the guards. There's nothing wrong except the usual. He's exhausted, his blood sugar is low. They make him drink sugar water, and he's pretty compliant to it in the halfway delirious state. Or maybe just too tired to put up a fight.

Then they hook him back up to the tube. He doesn't complain. It's clearly uncomfortable with all the grimacing it provokes but easier than the last time, and he ends up on his back in the bed, the plastic in through his nostril and his eyes closed. He's not asleep, Thor can tell by the breathing kept carefully under control.

This is a mess. This is one big mess.

Thor remembers a different time; a time before this. The Statesman, the week they had before Thanos came and wrecked everything they’d rebuilt after the destruction of their home. The time on Sakaar.

He’d never realised. Loki had been .. he hadn’t been fine, that much was obvious, but he’d been functioning. Better, saner than he had been in many years. Speaking. Smiling, even. Eating. Was this lurking under the surface the entire time? This subdued, fragile-like-glass version of his brother?

Loki had always been strong. Always. Even when beaten down he would get up, and he would fight. He would snarl and kick and bite, and he still does, but then there’s this side to the picture, as well, which is just …

It’s like something is missing. Something has been taken. Something is .. hollow, now. Or maybe it was always there and the hollow has just grown big enough so it can’t be kept under wraps, anymore. Maybe it was always there, maybe that’s what drove him to let go of Gungnir in the first place. Stay quiet, to begin with.

Loki hasn’t told Thor much about his time in Hela’s hands. Well, he’s told him that much; that Hela is in charge of the souls who pass, but he doesn’t talk about it, doesn’t talk about those five years he’d been alone, working to get out. Then, when he did come back out, all it took were a few gusts to make him fall; Thor being ignorant and blind. Unfocused, not present. Then Loki fled to Norway
and disintegrated into this.

It feels as if it has just been .. building *up*. Everything, over the years. Loki’s figuring out his heritage on top of what Thor later realised had been the early stages of a profound existential crisis and eventual literal mental breakdown. The attempted genocide on Jotunheim. When he attacked Earth to kill Thor. Everything that happened before then, how Loki had been slowly getting worse and worse, and Thor hadn’t even noticed. How his brother had been falling apart before their very eyes; it’d been hidden too well behind lies and manipulation and false demeanours.

Did Loki really hide it so well, though? Would Thor have noticed if he’d been simply *looking*?

Everything that happened after. Building up, building endlessly, endless scars and nightmares to stuff on top of the old ones; Thanos, Svartalfheim, isolation prison, *alone*, their mother, Sakaar, Ragnarok. That’d been piled on top of a mind already broken. Splintered, fragile, not sane. He tried to kill himself from the Bifrost. He tried to kill himself, and they’ve never spoken about it.

Loki lies on the bed with a tube through his nose to feed a mind that rejects nourishment, a mind that wants to *die*, and Thor mourns his brother. He knows he’s there, he knows his brother is in there, but he mourns the sly child he once knew. He mourns everything that Loki has lost. That he can’t seem to become again.

He would never tell Loki these thoughts, of course. They’re not true, in the end. He knows Loki can heal, and he *will*.

But the Loki before him is a shadow.

*Things get worse before they get better,* he remembers his mother saying. Soft and kind. *Allow time to work its magic.*

But those are sayings, not truth. Time is *not* magic, it’s just … reality, the world. And the world can be so endlessly cruel.

Thor has changed, too. He has grown to realise that his brother perhaps needs more than apathy and dismissal to get better, that Thor is the only thing Loki *has had*. But this pressure, that responsibility - what if it is for naught? Not what Loki needs, either? All the energy Thor has spent on now trying to be there, understand, change, so Loki can get better. What if it won’t even help?

At least he won’t be alone. At least he’ll be home.

Thor remembers something easier. He remembers leaving Loki convulsing on a cold floor in the ship hangar on Sakaar and his little brother returning to him from it. Choosing home because Thor showed him the alternative. Easy. He remembers telling Loki stay on Sakaar, to stay bitter and lonely and miserable, telling him that he didn’t *want him*, and Loki would follow him instead, because Loki couldn’t stand to be dismissed. *Easy*. Loki needed him, Thor understood it, and he just needed to seem indifferent enough that Loki would realise it, too. That he would *try* like Thor had tried for years. Like Thor had yearned for the family that was ripped apart.

He needed to be cruel enough so his brother would understand that he needed love. Family. It was simple.

Except it wasn’t.

It wasn’t simple at all.

“Brother, was it my fault?” Thor whispers to the form on the bed. The healers have left some time ago. Loki doesn’t move to indicate he heard, eyes still closed. “Is it all my fault?”
Loki doesn’t answer. He looks almost rigid, breath carefully systematic.

“I’m sorry, Loki,” Thor says. His voice catches a little on the name. “I’ve done wrong to you.”

Thor wraps his arms around his own middle without thinking.

“I’m so sorry.”

Loki still doesn’t answer. His eyes are closed, but he isn’t sleeping. As if he’s just gone, distant from the world, right now. Thor wonders if he heard anything at all.

***

The trial the next day is not a grandiose affair. A designated courtroom in the city hall in which it will be conducted is readied. It’s a closed trial, and there are few people there when Loki arrives, Thor by his side. There’s a judge. The lawyer. The interrogator from yesterday, Fury by his side. There’s a table in the middle with a chair by it, its back to the room and facing the judge at the high-table, which Loki is led to by a guard. He’s cuffed, the metal rubbing against his wrists and heavy on his arms.

He is sat down. The judge lays out his crimes on Earth, his subsequent punishment on Asgard. They begin drawing in witness statements. Agent Fischer gives a short summary of his report. Loki listens as they lay out the evidence; his own conflicting statements in relation to the readings they’ve done.

“Do you have anything to add, Mr Odinson?” the judge asks him. He shakes his head, keeping himself from sighing.

“A formal answer, if you would.”

He says, “no.”

His fingers are tingling on the table. Of course, he was right about Wanda. She’s told them things. Furthermore, the energy signature of her powers matches traces lingering in his mind, but stronger; which they derive to thus be footprints of the Mind Stone itself, proof of it having affected his psyche. It’s really just to back up what they’ve been told already. Apparently, Gamora has snitched. Told them about his time on Sanctuary, and then that’s the base of their judgement since it matches with Loki’s testament. The beginning of it, at least. Which is judged to be the sanest part, based on his choices of words, general expression and body language, as judged by a psychiatrist monitoring the whole affair.

Loki is not listening too closely when they proclaim his judgement. To be honest, he’s getting a bit bored. The gist of it is something about ‘reduced mental capacity’, which is frankly insulting, and his mind being ‘influenced’ to an uncertain degree. They’re saying a lot of things about him in a very objective way.

He is apparently, instead of being locked in a prison, to be on probation, due to the secure nature of New Asgard and its inhabitants being trusted to be a safe environment for him. He’s to stay within the borders of the state in this period, and if he is to leave, he will be accompanied at all times by one or more officials approved of Shield. He’s banned from the US unless invited there by the government or Shield. He is to attend obligatory sessions for assessment and status on mental health; kept restrained in the company of any professionals.
It’s for an unknown time, for now, the probation. He can work his way to higher privileges and will attend regular check-ins with Shield’s law department, including Fury. Frankly, it all sounds a lot more overwhelming than simply being thrown in a cell. Loki doubts his brother would agree to that sentiment.

Then they’re finished. He’s taken to a room to get an electronic tagging clamped around his non-injured ankle; one which is also able to suppress his magic. It will when he’s out of New Asgard, but not to such a degree that it’ll affect his natural healing. He doesn’t feel it, really, when it’s locked on him. It doesn’t weigh much and doesn’t irritate his magic a lot, only if the suppression degree is turned up. They try that, and it leaves his sei∂r smothered. It’s a lot claustrophobic. He’s grateful when they turn it down to standard setting again; uncontained.

Fury steps in his way at the door before he can leave.

“Hey, there, Big Bad,” he says, scrutinizing Loki’s face. “You’re off the hook for now. But remember, if you make trouble for us, we will not hesitate to strike. That clear?”

Loki rolls his eyes and pushes past. He has no obligation to answer that. It’s more a threat than it is anything else. The tag on his foot beeps once to indicate that it’s active, and then he’s out the door, shifting towards the stairs on the crutches.

Thor is right behind him. “Loki?” he asks, and Loki realises he, himself, hasn’t spoken a word since they asked him in the courtroom if he had anything to add. He stops before the steps.

“Hm?”

“Do you want to go home? We can go home, now.”

Loki sighs, barely. “Sure.”

He spots them from a bench. He didn’t even mean to spy but realises too late that his place is shrouded in shadow from the church his back is leaning against, the nighttime hiding him effectively there. First, one figure comes running, or more like power walking, determined and rigid; then a second, jogging after them.

“Nebula. Come back.”

“Go away, Gamora,” Nebula snarls over her shoulder. She heads for the water and stops at the edge, looking over it. Arms crossed and body taught like a bow.

Gamora ignores her wish and follows. Slowing down when she nears.

“Sister,” she says from behind her, like a sigh. “I didn’t mean to exclude you.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Nebula says, hard, but her voice sounds brittle.

“You’re as much a part of the team as I am -” Gamora begins, but Nebula interrupts her,

“- though that is not actually true, is it?” she snarls. Seconds pass. More silence.

“I’m never going to belong anywhere,” Nebula then says, and her voice is quieter. A moment later, Gamora closes the distance between them to envelope her sister in a hug. It isn’t rejected. Loki would’ve honestly expected her to get stabbed but rather on the contrary, soon he can see Nebula’s
shoulders shaking.

Despite his entire body being rigid with fear (alone in the dark. Thanos’ daughters. Vulnerable), the intimacy of the scene touches him. His next reaction is to feel extremely self-conscious. He had never in a million years thought he’d see Nebula cry. Gamora (!) and Nebula (!) hugging.

But then there’s a snarl and a metallic, “you,” and he focuses again, realising he zoned out for a second with his eyes still on the sisters. As if he was just watching. Well, he kind of was. He gets to his feet in a hurried movement and sways, shooting out a hand to steady himself against the bricks. He swallows and hopes it isn’t visible in the dark.

“What are you doing,” Nebula asks, all trace of quivering gone from her voice and taking a threatening step forward, and Loki denies himself the urge to press back flat against the wall.

“Nebula ..” Gamora begins, glancing at Loki and putting a calming hand on her shoulder. Nebula looks at the hand as if disgusted by it, despite being held close to Gamora’s entire body just seconds ago. She looks back at Loki.

“He’s spying on us.”

Loki gives a strangled sound of protest. “Ah - excuse me, I was just sitting here - I was here first, actually,” he says, sputters maybe, voice giving away the anxiety. He grimaces at himself.

Nebula narrows her eyes. “Why would you be sitting out here? It’s late.”

“Not everyone can have a perfect sleep schedule, dearest Nebula,” he manages and it almost sounds a little smooth if you ignore the slight tremble to it. “You should know about that.” She scoffs.

“Leave, both of you,” she says, crossing her arms again. Gamora sighs and Loki draws back, affronted.

“Did you - did you not catch the part about me being here first?” he asks. Nebula takes one more step closer, and this time he does scramble back, further away to stand beside the bench and further in shadow, against the wall.


Loki swallows. Now, this is just irritating. Here he was, a calm evening, nice and quiet to collect his thoughts after an argument with Thor - and then this.

“Nebula, let’s just go back to the ship,” Gamora says, turned to her sister. “We can sort this out there.”

“I want to be alone,” Nebula says.

“You can be in the bedroom. Come, sister - will you not join me? Please.”

Nebula stands still for a few seconds, seeming to consider. Her jaw clenches. “Fine,” she says. Then storms back in the direction they came from.

Gamora turns to Loki for a moment, just looking, quietly, as if trying to come up with something to say. He stays still, frozen. She clears her throat.

“We should … talk, sometime,” she says, and it sounds more unsure than Loki has ever heard her
sound, even if the hesitative words are still underlined with an always hard nuance to the tone. “I mean. Just catch up.”

Loki almost laughs. He decides not to. Not sure if the decision is out of fear or something else.

“Catch up,” he echoes, flatly. She grimaces. Hesitates.

She sighs through her nose. “Look, I - just.. thank you, okay?” she says. “I owe you a great debt.”

“You don’t owe me,” he says, careful.

“I owe you my life.” Her eyes are steadfast on him. After a moment, she says, “the past is what it is. I’m not proud of it.”

Loki stays quiet. She looks at him for a moment longer. Her expression softens, though a crease of her eyebrows grows pronounced. “Thank you, Loki,” she says, and it sounds too sincere coming from the murder-weapon Loki knew so many years ago. He glances away, uncomfortable.

“I’m going to go back,” he says. Meets her eyes again. Then he smirks, just to stay on top, even if it feels a little weak. “Say hi to your sister for me.”

She smiles back, some emotion glittering in her eyes. “Say hi to Thor.”

He nods. She nods. Then they walk each their separate direction.

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“Why do you even care so much about this guy, anyway?”

Steve sighs. “He’s a friend, Bucky,” he replies.

Bucky makes a face, glancing at the ceiling. “You sure he feels the same way?”

Steve just looks at him. Bucky looks back.

Then Bucky gives up, throwing up his arms, palms turned out. “Fine!” he says. “Do what you want. I’m just saying, he’s sketchy, alright?”

Steve has decided not to bring Bucky’s own history into this. He doesn’t want that argument. Even if it is pretty obvious what the resistance is about.

“All I’m going to do is take him back there, deliver the stones, leave. Thor is coming. Nothing is going to go wrong.”

“I just don’t get it,” Bucky mutters. “But whatever. Do what you want.”

Steve studies him, crossing his arms as Bucky stares out the window from his place on the couch. “You know, I actually think the two of you would get along pretty well if you gave each other a chance.”

Bucky turns to give him an exasperated look. “I think it’s enough that one of us is befriending a rehabilitating ex-villain. I just -” he cuts off with a huff. “I mean, who knows if he even is ‘ex’? If all
that Mind Stone stuff is just some bullshit? Who fucking knows! He could go right back to that shit once he’s better for all I know.”

“Bucky,” Steve warns. “I know this is a touchy subject for you -”

“it’s not a ‘touchy subject’ -”

“- but you haven’t been here. Talked to him. Besides, there’s not really a lot he can do. He’s being supervised, his magic suppressed, he’s not going to harm anyone like this.” Steve pauses. Bucky rolls his eyes and looks away. “All I’m doing is taking him back to 2012, that’s it. I think it might give him some perspective, some .. closure. I think it’s important.”

Seconds pass. Then Bucky says, quieter, “yes, yeah, I know. I know. It’s not - it’s just .. I worry about you, Steve.”

He looks at Steve, who gives him a quiet smile. “I know. I appreciate it, Buck. But you don’t have to.”

They haven’t returned the stones yet. The smaller-scale time travel equipment has been readied, but Steve has waited; there’s still unfinished business.

He wants Loki to come back to 2012 with him. He’s not sure why the idea is so important to him, but something about the way things ended there was just .. it was wrong. And then everything that happened after, it felt as if things were piling on top of each other, all ending with the Loki’s of three different timelines nearly dying. It feels a lot like there’s something that needs dealing with. He knows Loki of 2012 is going to be in custody of Shield. He knows Strange told them how to contain him, about the connection with Thanos and about the Mind Stone. Firstly, he wants to make sure they’re treating that other Loki alright. Secondly .. he just thought it might be good for the Loki of his time to come along and see it. To understand better, see it all from the outside, get some perspective and maybe face a thing or two. It was just an idea.

He’s not sure when this started, why he feels like .. not like it’s his job, just like he wants to do what he can to make Loki better. With all the pain the situation causes Thor, how obviously difficult it all is - if there’s anything he can do ... even though it’s Loki. New York Loki.

It’s obvious a lot has changed, of course. Still, Steve can’t help but wonder: does he has some sort of rehabilitating-supervillains-complex?

Thor wants to come with him to 2014. He has his own things he wants to do, there. Which is perfect because then he can transport them around with Stormbreaker.

Anyway, the brothers are going to Oslo today. Tomorrow, they’ll go and return the stones. Steve thinks it’s all going to work out fine.

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Part of Loki’s sentence is, as it is, ‘obligatory sessions for regular assessment of mental health’, which is, firstly: embarrassing as hell, and secondly, it means he no longer has a choice as to whether he wants to go to the sessions or not.

Somehow, that makes it a little easier to actually do it. Not that he would ever admit to that.

It’s been four days since the trial, and things are … going better, if he may so himself. He’s begun
eating again, the latest days. It’s not a lot, but it’s something. He drinks a supplementary potion with it, liquified and concentrated energy, and he feels less lightheaded all the time. Less like the world is a shipwreck in a storm and he’s being pulled down with it, on deck, everything breaking, in a continuous, endless loop. Thor looks a little less like a kicked puppy, so that’s something.

“Are you ready?” said brother asks. “The car is here.” Loki is on the sofa, foot up. A still healing ankle is a good excuse to put your feet up just about anywhere. He shrugs.

“Sure.”

Time to go to Oslo.

The car ride there is awkward. There’s a driver in the front, Loki and Thor both in the spacious back-seat. Spacious, but still … close. It feels too close. Being locked in the tin can, doors likely locked due to his status as apparently mentally incompetent criminal (though that first part perhaps had been in past tense, in the trial), it reminds him of too many things at once, and he works to keep it all under locks. He manages not to freak out. The plane is another thing.

It’s supposed to be a covert way of travelling, instead of making a spectacle with the Bifrost that might alert media to Loki’s presence on Earth. He refused to fly with Thor on Stormbreaker, piggyback style or anything-else-style, for that matter. It’s been many years since they’ve done that, and Loki would prefer to keep it that way.

It’s a private jet but it leaves from an airport, scheduled to land in Oslo’s. Having to travel the mortal way, Loki repeatedly condemns the fact that his magic is suppressed for the trip.

“It’ll be different soon,” Thor had said. “Once you prove you’re not a danger - just give it a little time.”

But as it is right now, he’s only allowed to use magic within New Asgard and even then, they’re keeping an eye on his readings through the ankle bracelet. He hates it. He hates it he hates it he hates it, not being able to keep even his own readings private. Not that there’s much juice in his magic. Yet.

“Can we not fly it ourselves?” Loki asks, hesitating in the door to the jet, on top of a deployed flight of stairs. The smother on his magic is uncomfortable, stifling, making him feel claustrophobic even in the open air. Thor looks at him, pausing as well, a hand on the metal rail, wind in his hair.

“We’re not authorized. The pilot is specifically educated in flying these crafts, Loki, it’ll be fine. Come.” He puts a hand on Loki’s shoulder, pushing him gently inside.

They take their seats, opposite each other. Thor begins to instruct Loki in how to fasten his seatbelt and Loki snarls at him that he can do it.

“Are you alright, brother?” Thor asks as the engine turns on. Loki realises he’s sweaty, breath coming a little shallow. He grimaces at Thor.

“Are you alright, brother - of course I’m ‘alright’, you dweeb. It’s only a ship.”

“You seem nervous.”

“Well I’m not. It’s not .. it’s only that - that we can’t see the pilot, it bothers me, that’s all. Do you even think they know what they’re doing? With their lifespan, I mean, how can you expect them to know anything to any kind of professional level? I’m only worried, it’s not like I particularly like
being stuffed in a tin can that’s likely to implode from poor construction as soon as we enter -”

“You’ve never had problems with flying before,” Thor says with a little frown, interrupting Loki’s rant. Loki looks out the window. The plane begins to move, and his stomach jolts.

“There’s no problem,” he says.

It’s not anything new to him, that small spaces aren’t exactly his favourite thing. Small rooms. Closed doors. It’s just manageable, usually. Right now, it’s as if his magic being closed in and his body being so, too, is too much.

“Loki? You look pale.”

“It’s fine, Thor.”

It’s a very fancy ship, apparently. Government issued. Loki is not sure why, since he’s a convict; which is evident from the metal around his ankle, visible from under the hem of his slacks. Either way, they’re offered drink and food up in the air even if the flight is only an hour, and so he orders a Bloody Mary and a cup of coffee. Thor gets a Coke, whatever that is. To be honest, Loki had thought that was an entirely different substance than the dark fizzy drink Thor receives.

“That’s a weird combination,” Thor comments with a wrinkle of the nose as Loki is presented with the glass of red drink with something green sticking out at the top, and the white paper cup of coffee. Loki shrugs and sips his cocktail. It’s surprisingly good.

“You know it’s made of tomatoes, right,” Thor continues, eyeing the drink. “Is that how I can get you to eat? Blending the food with alcohol?”

Loki scowls. “Shut up, Thor, if you don’t want me to throw you out of the plane.”

“We both know who here has the best track-record of throwing the other out of planes.”

And isn’t that true. That time when escaping from Asgard certainly hadn’t been the first.

The office is dark in color scheme. Loki can appreciate that. Dark wood, leather armchairs, elegant curves of the furniture. There are high windows looking over a stretch of garden, tall pines layered with remains of snow.

“Loki Odinson,” the woman across from him says, her eyes on a piece of paper in her lap, a folder underneath it serving as writing board. She looks up. “Welcome to my office.”

She’s looks .. pleasant enough. Maybe in her fifties for a Midgardian, with curly, dark hair gathered in an ornament collection of a bun on top of her head, deliberate strands hanging down to frame her face and reminding Loki of the hairstyles favoured in Asgardian court. That association makes him a little sick, for some reason, and he pushes it out of his mind. She is not Asgardian court. Her eyes are a soft hazelnut, skin a few shades darker than Brunnhilde’s and she’s wearing a pale blue dress, a well-fitted suit jacket on top of it. All in all, she fits very well into the slight solemnity of the room. She gives him a soft smile, and he gives a short nod.

“Thank you.”

She nods back. “Mr Odinson -” she begins.
“Just Loki,” he interrupts. “Please.” He’s a little surprised when she doesn’t object, given the otherwise seemingly bull-headed determination on this planet to call him by that last name.

“Just Loki,” she agrees with a smile. “Well, I’m Dr Madeleine Harkins, as you likely noticed from the sign on my door. You can use my first or last name, title, it doesn’t bother me. Whatever works.”

He nods again. Then struggles not to fidget in the moment’s silence that follows.

He’d thought of straight-up lying, all of the time or some of it, weaving it in with some truth to make a wholesome picture hard to puncture. It’s still on the table. He could craft some good tales that would leave everybody happily none the wiser, but something is making him reconsider. Despite the fact that he is ordered to be here, he did agree willingly before that. Something about it seems … okay. He could just … just see what it is before he condemns it. Why not? What does he have to lose?

“So, we had an appointment scheduled a couple of weeks back,” Harkins begins. Her voice is nice. Harmonic. “This new one, however, is of a slightly different character.”

Loki chuckles lightly and sends her a smile. He rattles the good ankle, crossed over his other leg, showing off the bracelet. “You’ll recognize there has been taken certain precautions,” he says.

“I do,” she says with a smile. “I received notice from Shield. You do know I work in collaboration with their organization, right?”

“So I’ve been told.”

“I’m not from Shield, however. I think it’s important to discern that. They can draw on me as a resource in cases like this, but I am not under their command.”

“Sam Wilson knew of you already,” Loki says, cocking his head slightly. She nods.

“He got me the opportunity of collaboration in the first place.”

She pauses.

“Still, everything we speak of here is confidential. I will not share it with anyone outside of your treatment, and only any within if you’ve allowed me to. I will share nothing without your consent. It’s important for me to make that clear: this is a safe space, and you can speak freely. Only if I suspect you’re planning to harm yourself or others may I share that concern with the appropriate people.”

“And who would that be?”

“That would be your brother, first and foremost, since he is listed as your next-to-kin. Perhaps the law enforcement of New Asgard, if it’s at all relevant. I would, however, share only the fact that I was concerned; not content of the rest of any conversations we might’ve had.”

“Might’ve had,” Loki echoes, pursing his lips slightly. “I was under the impression this is obligatory.”

She gives a nod. “Of course, yes. That is if you’ll talk to me. That’s not in my control.” She smiles. Loki has the urge to shudder, though he’s not sure why. Something about her makes him feels like he’s caught in the spotlight and yet somehow becoming willing to shed all his defenses. Like she’s breaking him down, and he wants her to.
“Today is mostly going to be an introductory conversation,” she says, “just to get to know you a little. Begin circling what it is we’re here to talk about. People are different; if you want to just barge ahead and talk about your feelings, go ahead. I’m here for it. You might not desire that, which is quite alright.

“So,” she continues. “I find it easy, sometimes, to start in the small. I, of course, know a little about you based on your references here but I don’t know you. How about you tell me a little thing to get started? Such as … something that has happened recently, or something you’re planning to do. It could be anything as small as a cup of coffee, or an animal you saw somewhere, or something you’re planning on doing tomorrow.”

That question surprises him a little. He would honestly have expected her to go straight to the ‘so why did you murder innocents in an attempt to take over Earth’-thing. He’s not so used to this therapy thing.

“Um,” he says eloquently. Crosses his arms and leans back a little. “I ..” he hesitates. Then decides to play. “I had a cup of coffee,” he says. “This morning.”

She nods with a little smile. “Okay. Good start. Was it a nice one?”

“Not especially.” He shrugs. “It was filter. I think the beans had been left ground and unattended for a little too long, and the brewing process was poorly executed, but that’s my own fault for drinking coffee someone else made.” She smiles.

“Did you have company as you had the coffee?”

“No.”

“Who made it, then?”

“My brother’s friend. She sometimes visits his house.”

“And is this where you live?”

“Currently, yes. Someone has to keep an eye on me for the government.”

She smiles again in slight amusement. Loki can’t help but cross his arms a little tighter. They’re talking about coffee and for some reason he feels more exposed than he has in days.

“I’ve been told you’ve been in New Asgard for .. according to the official statement, a week. I think to avoid further complications of the law, since I got a very different impression when I’d first talked on the phone with the Queen of the district. There will be no risk in telling me the truth; I’m not going to snitch to Shield, and it can’t affect your trial, what you’ve told me in confidentiality, here.”

Loki has released his arms and pinches the fabric of his pants between thumb and forefinger, nuzzling it. “I’ve been there for … two months, I think.”

“So you arrived in start December of 2026,” she clarifies.

“I suppose.”

She studies him for a moment, eyes narrowed a little. Then asks, “why are you here, Loki?” and pauses. “I know it’s obligatory because of the sentence, but it was my understanding that you’d agreed to come here yourself, before that.”

He doesn’t know what to say to that.
He .. wants to be honest. That’s why he’s here. He wants someone to listen but he’s afraid, afraid of what he says getting out, afraid of this woman’s reaction, afraid of his own reaction to the truth. It’s been like that for a long time.

He’s just so tired.

“I’m not especially eloquent at .. this,” he ends up saying, adding, “speaking. About .. these things. My brother wouldn’t leave the matter, however, and since I live with him I decided I might as well indulge the desire.”

“Your brother is here with you, today?”

“.yes. Since Shield requires me to have an official guardian with me if I leave New Asgard,” he clarifies. There’s a bitterness to it that doesn’t escape his notice. She scribbles on her pad.

“How do you feel about that?” she asks, not looking up yet. Loki tenses.

“I don’t know,” he answers. Fidgeting with the fabric.

“Is it .. irritating? Does it make you angry? Upset? Or does it not bother you, maybe?”

He looks at her for a long moment. Then shrugs. “It doesn’t upset me terribly,” he says. “It isn’t much of a bother.”

It occurs to him again in a flash what it is they’re doing, a punch to the gut. Why they’re here, in a room with closed doors and sitting opposite each other. Because he, a fool, agreed to the idea that talking for an hour about himself would somehow be agreeable. The feeling makes him want to clam up like an oyster. That’s not productive.

“Truly, I don’t know what to say,” he says, and the words seem a little distant to him. “There really isn’t much to talk about.”

She gives a little smile. “We’re here for two reasons,” she says. “I am to do an assessment of your mental health, firstly. That’s the official reasoning, but I need surprisingly little to do that. The bigger reason for us being here is for you to have a safe place in which to talk. About anything. I’m here to help you maybe sort some of it out.”

“What does it say?” Loki asks. “In your reference here. Your file on me as it is, now.”

She studies him, hand stilling on the paper. “We’re here for two reasons,” she says. “I am to do an assessment of your mental health, firstly. That’s the official reasoning, but I need surprisingly little to do that. The bigger reason for us being here is for you to have a safe place in which to talk. About anything. I’m here to help you maybe sort some of it out.”

“What does it say?” Loki asks. “In your reference here. Your file on me as it is, now.”

She studies him, hand stilling on the paper. “It doesn’t say a lot, as of yet. Only the basis upon which your friend referenced you here in the first place, and then Shield’s summary of your trial.” She pauses, glancing away in thought. Then back. “We can do that. I can find it real quick, if you want to hear?”

“Yes.”

What does she know?

She gets up and goes to a computer on the desk by the window, a little while later printing something out. She walks back, eyes on the page.

“Okay, so what it says here,” she begins, sitting down, “is that your name is Loki Odinson. Your brother is Thor Odinson, and you were presumably born in the year … I will never get over this - in the year 965. Born in the realm of Jotunheim and not much later adopted by the King and Queen of
the kingdom Asgard at the time, Odin Borson and Frigga Freyrðdottir.”

She clears her throat, looks up. “This is all basic information I got from Shield, from your trial. There was no way to confirm it officially, so do correct me if anything sounds wrong to you.”

Loki shrugs, glancing away. She continues.

“It says here that you are referenced from Shield based on your previous crimes on Earth. I quote, the accountability of the mind and full sense of personal judgment at the time of said crimes is in question. That’s the official statement. I have, too, a transcript of your interrogation and a more detailed trial description, which I’ve read through before we met today. From Brunnhilde of Asgard, I have put down ‘concern about a friend’. That includes symptoms she described that could be in the depressive and anxious genre, it includes mentions of trauma, eating difficulties and more than one suicide attempt.” She looks up again. “I’m aware that there’s more to it than this. This is only what you were referenced upon, your friend’s and Shield’s reasons for referencing you. How does that sound?”

Loki’s throat won’t work for a few seconds. Mentions of trauma, he wants to ask, what does she mean by that, but finds he doesn’t really have it in himself. He doesn’t particularly want to know the answer.

“Is there anything in this that stands out to you, in particular?” Harkins asks

“No,” he answers. It’s irritatingly a little breathless. “Not in particular.” She looks at him for a moment. Then looks back down in her notes.

“Do you wish to, perhaps, tell me a little about yourself? In your own words, rather than all these objective things.”

Loki frowns. “I don’t -” he begins. “What do you want me to tell you?”

“I want to hear who you think you are. Not your friends, not Shield. You.”

“It’s not as simple as that.”

She keeps looking at him. “No, certainly not.”

He finds he can’t really keep eye contact, flickering to the wall behind her. There’s quiet for some time.

“We could start with things you like and don’t like,” Harkins prompts. She cocks her head a little. Loki takes a breath, careful of letting it reach all the way into his body. It takes a moment.

“I like … I do magic,” he says, a little lamely. Still not looking at her, eyes narrowed a hair under the guise of being lost in thought. Maybe he is.

“What do they call practitioners of magic, such as yourself, where you come from? Just so I can get the terminology right.”

He shrugs. Meeting her eye again. “It varies. Mages, sorcerers. Witches, seiðkonur. Seiðmenn, too, although that has different connotations.”

“How so?”

“Social stigma, I believe you would call it. It’s a woman’s practice.”
Ergi had not been an infrequent slur in Loki’s presence to be flung around on the playfield.

“She’s a woman, apparently,” she says. “You do it.”

“I am not most men.”

She pauses. Then says, “but you cherish it. Magic brings you joy.”

He shrugs. “It is.. I don’t have much else.”

She glances at his ankle bracelet, blinking with a red, dull lamp on the side. He follows her line of sight, then looks back at her with raised eyebrows. “I can’t use it now, no,” he answers the unvoiced question.

She gives a little sympathetic nod. “But you can in New Asgard?”

“When I’m healed, yes. I can do little now.”

“He hesitates. “My magic is affected when my - when I’m not functioning optimally. It drains.”

“What do you mean by that, functioning optimally? Is that physically or mentally?”

“..both.”

“I notice your foot is in cast.”

“Yes. That’s - the energy is using itself up on healing. I have nothing left for magic.”

“Then are there other things that bring you joy in the meantime?”

He narrows his eyes. Joy, he suddenly wants to sneer. You don’t know what you’re talking about, joy.

He stays quiet instead, the fight draining like sand through his fingers. Looks away.

“Do you not feel joy at all?” she asks, voice gently probing. His jaw tightens.

“It’s of no relevance. There’s been bigger issues than that to take care of.”

“But not anymore. If I remember correctly, you state in your trial that you had no personal stakes in the resurrection of the lost Avengers. So why, then, prioritize it over your own interests and sense of joy at all?”

“Because I don’t know how to find it,” he finally snaps, looking back at her with hard eyes. She returns the gaze, however softer. He clears his throat. “Excuse me. I do not mean to be rude.”

“You aren’t rude. What do you mean by that, you can’t find - happiness, is that it?”

He shrugs, looking away. There’s not any point in trying to hide these things. She’s read the transcript. She knows his secrets.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says.

“Doesn’t it? Is that not why you’re here?”

“I’m here because Thor wants me to be here.”
“It seems like this is exactly the thing your brother worries about.”

Loki looks at her. “I’m here because you are to assess my mind, am I not? That is the state of things, now, that I have no choice but to be here. If I do not cooperate, this privilege will be revoked and I will have to undergo further punishment. I wish to avoid that, seeing as I am not able to escape it in my current state.”

“To have a look at your mental health is all I’m trying to do. I’m attempting to get to know you a little, so I may have a better chance of understanding.”

Loki stays quiet. Watching her. She scribbles something in her notepad.

“Do you sleep well?” she asks. He keeps himself from frowning.

“Well enough,” he says.

“What is a normal and healthy sleep schedule in your definition?”

“That would depend on the individual.”

“For you.”

He pauses. Shrugs. “It differs not much from human needs. Six hours for me, perhaps, on a regular basis. Though I can go without sleep longer than humans.”

“And do you get these six hours each night?” she asks.

“Much more than that.”

“You sleep more than you believe you need to?”

“There’s not been much else to do.”

“How much is that you’ve been sleeping, if you had to place a guess?”

“Maybe .. eleven, twelve hours. I wouldn’t really know.”

She scribbles something.

“Is your sleep uninterrupted? Do you sleep for these, let’s say eleven hours, uninterrupted?”

“It depends.”

“On what?”

He hesitates. “I don’t see how any of this is relevant.”

Of course he sees it. He just doesn’t want to talk about it.

“Sleep is a basic functioning. I’m starting there because it might be relevant to discerning what it is you feel.”

“I experience - unpleasant dreams,” he tells her after a second. “They interrupt sleep.”

“Most nights?”

“Yes.”
“Do you remember them all?”

“No.”

“But they wake you up.”

“Sometimes. Most times.”

“Do you want to talk about what’s in them?”

“No.”

“That’s alright.” She scribbles. “Let’s move on, then. We can always come back to this. I hear you are having difficulties eating?”

Loki stiffens, barely. “That’s not important.”

“I’ll need to be talking to you about it, or a more head-on treatment might be considered.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“No. I’m only telling you how the state of things are. We’ll need to do a regular weigh-in at each session, too.”

“I am eating,” he says.

“That might be the case, but it could still be an issue that needs addressing. You know, I specialize in this topic, aside from others. You might find my resources and knowledge helpful.”

He stays quiet. It’s not a problem, he wants to tell her, but there’s just no point in denying the obvious. Had he only had his illusions.

She looks him in the eye. “We could try to work through it together, here, and that could perhaps be helpful. To an extent. However, I think it might be a good idea if you see a dietician on the side.”

“Someone to .. decide what I ... eat,” he asks, voice halting.

“Talk to you about it. Help make decisions, more like. And then we can talk here about how to manage those propositions.
It doesn’t have to be right now. From what I can understand of your medical records, you were reintroduced to nourishment with a feeding tube and have gone back to managing intake yourself by now. That sounds like progress to me.”

He doesn’t answer. It’s ridiculous, is what it is.

“Loki, I have many questions that I want to ask you, to get a sense of where we are and how you feel in general. That’s what we’re going to work on, and I hope you’ll work with me. We don’t have a lot of time left, for now, but we can still get some of them in, get started. Are you okay with that?”

He shrugs, feeling a little detached. “I suppose.”

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Loki comes out into the waiting hall looking tired and grumpy, and Thor’s stomach sinks. There’s a
small stack of papers in his hand, flapping with the movement.

“Let’s go,” he says, limping past Thor who gets up in a hurry, following him. The ankle is getting better, it would seem; Loki certainly can set a better tempo than a few days ago.

“What happened?” Thor asks as they make their way out the front door. Loki is looking at the stairs as they move down, supporting himself against the rail.

“Nothing,” he says. “We talked.”

They walk along on the crunching gravel towards the car supposed to take them to the airport. “Well, did you - did you like her, the therapist?” he asks, ducking under to go in the backseat. Loki does the same on the other side, surprisingly smooth for the metal contraption on his foot.

“She’s fine,” he says, slamming the door shut. “She’s .. nice. I guess.”

The car begins to move. Thor waits a little while before he continues, entering a forest road as they move out of the city.

“What are those papers?” he asks, softer, nodding at the downturned pages in Loki’s hand resting in his lap. Loki looks out the window and shrugs.

“A list of questions,” he says.

Thor nods, forehead creasing. “Are you going to come back here? Talk to her again?”

Loki keeps staring outside at the dark green trees rolling by. “I don’t have much of a choice, do I?” he mutters, and Thor decides to leave it.

All in all, it’s not entirely terrible. Loki seems at least resigned to the idea. At least doesn’t seem angry or … murderous.

“Did you talk about anything that resonated with you?” he ventures to ask after another moment, but that snaps Loki, who turns his head to point a fiery glare.

“Stop prying, Thor.”

Loki is silent for the rest of the car trip. He folds the papers to a little square and stuffs it in his pocket at one point. He falls asleep on the plane, head resting against the side of the seat, lax, mouth hanging open a little, and the vulnerability of it is almost too much to watch.
They go to Vormir first and find Clint of 2023 kneeling in the lake by the foot of the mountain. He turns his head to watch the three figures as they approach, eyes obscured by the darkness.

Steve carries the Soul Stone in a protective case in his satchel, slung over his shoulder, and steps into the water. He stops, turning to his companions.

“Maybe wait here,” he says. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

Thor nods and Loki shrugs, leaning on his brother for support. Steve gives them a little smile. Then he turns, water sloshing around his ankles as he wades towards the hunched figure.

Maybe twenty feet away, he stops. “We get her back,” he calls to Clint. “You’re going to get her back.”

The other turns to him. His eyes look .. dull, and the word he speaks next sounds uninterested at best. “When?” he asks.

“2027. Her and .. others. They survive.”

“Vision?”

“For one. Yes.”

Clint blinks, looking back down. He takes a breath. “Why is he with you?” he asks, slight emphasis on ‘he’, and Steve glances over his shoulder at the brothers.

“Do you mean Loki?”

Clint doesn’t answer. Steve takes that as a yes.

“It was his idea, how to do it. His plan.”

“I thought he was dead.”

“He was. We got the others back the same way he did himself.”

Steve can see Clint's eyes flickering on the water, little ripples in the surface standing out from his knees. “I’m not sure I can believe anything you say as long as he’s involved,” he finally says, turning his head to look at Steve. Steve hesitates, then walks a little closer, next lowering himself down on his knees as well. The water is cold through the fabric of his suit.

He returns Clint's gaze. “I don’t know how to prove it to you. I’m ... here to give you back the Soul
Stone. Even if it means nothing, if you don’t believe me, I’m here to promise you it will all end well. You’ll get through it, and you’ll get her back.”

He keeps eye contact for a moment more. Then breaks it to rummage through the bag, searching out the holster containing the Soul Stone. He bends forward to hand it to Clint, who mimics the motion and takes the little parcel gingerly. He studies it for a second, then opens the bindings to look inside. Orange light floods from it in the dark to illuminate his features.

After a few seconds, he closes it again. His eyes are narrowed a little like in thought, at thin air. He turns to Steve and gives a smile.

“I guess the Loki I know wouldn’t ever give up an Infinity Stone of his own free will,” he says. “So maybe you are telling the truth. Or some variation of it.”

“I hope you’ll come to believe me,” Steve says with as much conviction as he can. Pauses, and adds, “2027 is really not that far ahead, Clint. It’ll come, sooner than you know it.”

There’s silence for a little while. Clint makes no move to get up. Steve clears his throat, shifting. “So you ..” he begins, trailing off. “Do you - have any questions? I can’t stay here much longer, but if there’s anything ..”

Clint blinks at him. Swallows hard. “Right. I .. guess, how did you do it? Maybe I can - maybe if I can get it to happen faster -”

“I don’t know how it happened, honestly. Bruce and - um, Loki, they were really the heads of the mission.” He pauses. “Loki will come back, eventually, and that’s when it begins.”

That’s a stretch. Loki will come back and then disappear for three years. But maybe if Clint knows what Loki can do, help with, they can avoid driving him away in the first place. Maybe it can turn out better for everyone.

Clint frowns, eyes still distant. “Why?” he asks. “Why would he help with that?”

Steve glances over his shoulder at the slanting figure besides Thor. They’re too far to see their expressions. “He’s - different,” he settles on, turning back to the archer. “I know it’s not - you’re not supposed to feel bad for him, or anything. But he’s not in a good place. I think .. I think maybe he needed to belong somewhere. Do something.”

Clint looks at him for a long moment. “I guess, I mean, if it brings .. if it brings - Tasha back ..” his eyes get glassy again, and he looks away. Steve’s heart jerks with sympathy.

“Clint,” he says. “It’s going to be alright.”

Clint nods, though tears are beginning to dribble from his lashes.

“You gave it to him?” Loki asks, eyes still on the figure in the water when Steve gets within communicating distance. He nods. Once back on the rocky land, he turns just in time to see Clint get to his feet. The other doesn’t look their way before activating the Quantum Suit, disappearing in a dull flash. Then it’s all dark and quiet.

Steve turns back to the brothers. “I guess Asgard is next up, then,” he says, not quite smiling, but hoping his expression is reassuring enough.

Thor came along on the trip because he wanted to go to Asgard and deliver the Stones. Steve
personally would’ve preferred a more covert mission, simply leaving the Stones and sneaking off, but Thor wants to talk to the people there. He wants to alter the timeline.

Steve can work with that. Even if it’s risky, all of this.

They appear in a flash of the Bifrost. Loki stumbles upon landing, and Thor steadies him with an arm behind his back.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Loki mutters, straightening back up. His eyes narrow at the landscape. “Where are we?”

“An old escape route of mine,” Thor says with a sly smile. “I would use it to sneak out at night. We’re behind the palace.”

And true enough, behind a line of trees further ahead, sand-coloured walls begin to tower.

“Oh,” Loki says. “Of course, I’ve - I’ve been here before.” And then his eyes seem to get a little distant, fixed on the walls. He’s standing perfectly still, almost rigid in posture.

“It’s all here,” he says, voice quiet, not speaking to anyone in particular.

“But we don’t have a lot of time,” Thor says. Loki shakes his head, expression clearing a little.

(Of course,” he says. Eyes still glued towards the palace.

Thor studies him for a moment. Then says, slowly, “I need to speak with Volstagg. And .. father. Prepare them for what’s to come. Loki, do you want to come with me?”

When Loki turns to look at him the movement is jerky and he looks almost .. frightened, eyes a little wide. “No,” he says quickly. “I think I’ll - ah, stay here. Here is fine.” The words are curt. He takes a step back, continuing to sit down promptly on the grass, the leg with the brace stretched out. “Here is good,” he repeats, patting the ground awkwardly.

“That’s alright,” Thor says, eyes still on Loki, a little crease in his forehead. He looks at Steve. “You, my friend?” he asks, and Steve can see him pleading .. something. He’s guessing that Thor wants him to stay with Loki and keep an eye on him, but something is conflicting with it. Thor not wanting to do this alone, carry that responsibility alone, the responsibility of saving Asgard. Steve falters.

“Maybe - Loki,” he says, turning to the other. “Couldn’t we go, all three of us? You could wear a disguise, right?”

“Odin will see through it,” Loki says. “I’d rather - I’d rather be here. Waiting. I can hide myself, you can just go, it’ll be safe enough.”

“He will not see through it,” Thor objects, “especially not if you shift your form entirely. You could simply be .. I don’t know, a bird, watching from a windowsill, staying close to me.” He hesitates. Then sighs. “Loki, it’s dangerous for us to part. You could be found, you could be taken while I was not here. That would complicate everything.”

“I will not be -” Loki begins indignantly, but then cuts off. He huffs. “Fine. Okay.”

Then he’s getting to his feet again, brushing off his clothes. Steve wonders about the clothes both the brothers are wearing; how they’re going to fit in here when it’s so different from what they wore in the past, their battle armour. It feels strange to have them in Asgard dressed in ordinary Norwegian
clothes. Thor in a large sweater, hanging loose, Loki in a knee-length bourbon jacket and black clothes underneath. Steve feels like he’s seen that particular jacket before.

The illusion is shattered a moment later, when Loki flicks a wrist and seems to jump up a foot, except he doesn’t, he’s just - imploding upwards, retracting into himself, until -

A magpie flutters its wings, suspended in the air for a second where Loki just stood before it lands elegantly on the ground. Its beak opens and a very unpleasant screech emits from it. Steve feels like it’s somehow oddly Loki-like, that screech. Like he can almost hear the snark in it.

Thor grimaces. “That sound is horrid, brother,” he says. “You always choose such strange creatures to be.”

The magpie is back in the air the next moment to next land clumsily on Thor’s shoulder, and promptly nip him in the earlobe.

“Loki!” Thor cries, head jerking away. The magpie almost falls off his shoulder, losing its balance with the movement. “Oh,” Thor says, standing straight and lifting a palm to steady his brother, and Steve notices that the bird’s one leg is halting, drawn up in the air. Broken. “Sorry.”

Steve feels like the bird is scowling. Can birds scowl?

They find Volstagg first. Or, they find his house, a wooden cabin by the outskirts of the palace walls. It’s surrounded by trees growing into a forest behind it. Thor knocks on the door, Steve a few steps behind him. Loki has taken stance on a nearby branch, occasionally flapping his wings to keep balance.

The door opens. Volstagg’s eyes widen.

“Thor.”

Thor nods. Volstagg glances over his shoulder, into the house. “Let’s talk outside, my friend,” he says, pushing past the door frame and patting Thor’s shoulder distractedly. The door shuts and they move away, Volstagg’s hand on Thor’s arm, dragging him along to a thickening of trees. Steve follows, glancing back at Loki who flies along, landing on a new branch in a safe distance.

“Who’s this?” Volstagg asks lowly, glancing at Steve. “Norns be damned, you bring new outsiders every time you come here ..”

“This is my friend, Steven Grant Rogers,” Thor cuts him off.

“Steve is fine,” Steve adds, with a little grimace.

“He is the Captain of the Avengers of Earth,” Thor says.

“Oh,” Volstagg breathes. “Right. Thor,” he continues, a hurried note to his voice, “I do not think it wise for you to be here.” He glances around as if afraid they’re being watched. “After the last time you were here .. the Allfather has been retrieved from Loki’s prison for him on Earth, a retirement home of all things, can you believe it, and he’s - he is grateful as such but he does not appreciate your interference with his dimension -”

“I have come to warn you,” Thor interrupts again. “To return the stones, and to warn you.”

Volstagg looks conflicted as to which topic to grasp onto first. “You - you cannot give me the stones,
he’ll know I was in contact with you -- Thor, I could be banished for it! The King truly is not happy with you and your little plays in our time.”

“IT is alright, my friend,” Thor says, clasping a hand on the other’s shoulder. “I will speak to the Allfather myself.”

“He will have you thrown in the dungeons to extract information,” Volstagg insists. “It is not a good idea, my Liege.” He frowns, looking around again. “Did anyone else come here with you?”

Thor hesitates. Then says, “Loki is here.”

Steve glances at the bird on the branch, which gives … almost a hiss. Who knew birds could do that. Volstagg turns to look at it, giving a nod. “Oh - hello, Loki,” he says, sounding a little unsure. He turns back to Thor. “That is Loki, is it not? The bird.”

The magpie screeches, now. A very loud and indignant sound. Everyone grimaces. The bird looks almost smug afterwards. Maybe Steve is imagining things.

“I should think that much obvious,” Thor continues, “but Volstagg, I do not have much time,” but Volstagg cuts him off.

“I appreciate it, Thor, I do. But please, let me insist. Talking to the Allfather is not a good idea. He is blinded by the loss of his Queen, still, and his ruling, the laws as of late have been strange.”

“Very well,” Thor says. “Then you will be my trusted companion. I will let the future of Asgard rest solely in your hands, and you are to be responsible for either her survival or absolute destruction.”

Volstagg pales a little. “I think perhaps we should meet up with the Lady Sif and have her on board,” he says.

They meet in a tavern closer to the palace gates, closed up for the day. Or rather, in the basement of it. Sif shows up soon after they’ve settled down there around a table by the wall, Loki perched on a windowsill to a window up under the ceiling and hidden partly in shadow. You can just see the lawn in front of the tavern from there.

“Thor,” Sif says on an exhale, emerging from the stairwell. “You came back.”

Thor gets up, enveloping her in a hug. “We are here to return the stones. And I am to warn you of a coming future, in the hope that Asgard would be better prepared, this time around.”

He explains. What happened the last time. Odin on Midgard, Hela using the Bifrost to get back, slaughtering Asgard’s army. Thor and Loki stranded on Sakaar. The destruction by Surtur’s hand. Steve listens to the story in its entirety and is vaguely nauseated. Everything had happened so fast, the way Thor tells it. He’d lost everything in the span of only days.

“My father in your time is old. He has not much time left. Perhaps three, four years from now,” Thor says to Sif.

“The Allfather is returning to his senses. Gradually,” Sif mutters with no little amount of bitterness. “I do believe he would agree to make the preparations.”

“I think not the destruction of Asgard can be avoided,” Thor says, voice eerily neutral for something so shattering to say. “You will need to be at the ready with Bifrost, have Heimdall in command. Perhaps begin to make evacuation plans already, now.”
“And leave our home? Thor, we cannot simply let Asgard fall without a fight.”

“There is no fight, Sif. Hela is unstoppable. Surtur is the only force that will end her.” Thor sighs. “It is up to you, what you will do. Just be ready to evacuate the realm at the very least. Perhaps the Allfather will know of another way to stop Hela if he is included in the planning.”

Volstagg frowns at empty air. “Are we, then, supposed to - what, go talk to the King? Profess that we know about his bastard child?” There’s a sound from the bird almost like a laugh. If birds could laugh, that is. Volstagg glances at it before finishing, “He would have us executed.”

“You will not talk to the king, at first. You talk to me,” Thor says.

“You mean .. Thor of this time?”

Thor nods. “Tell me what I’ve told you. Tell me, tell Heimdall, and tell Loki.”

Sif and Volstagg glances at each other. “That might work.” Sif says. “Our Thor would undoubtedly talk to the King. The secret would be out, and we could begin preparations with the Allfather on our side of the battle.”

“Where is he, anyway?” Thor asks. “The Thor of your time.” It almost sounds like how is he to Steve’s ears, but more in a ‘is he behaving’ kind of way. Steve knows what happened when Thor was here last, in 2014. It makes sense that Thor would have a few trust issues, with how much is currently riding on this other 2014-Thor’s shoulders.

Sif hesitates. Glances at Volstagg. “He’s .. he’s off-world, currently. Earth, I think.”

Thor frowns. “How much time has passed since I was last here? I mean - since I visited here from the future, last time.”

“It’s been .. five months, I think,” Volstagg says.

“Thor of your time has been back since then, has he not?”

“Many times,” Sif hurries to say. “He visits often, but he .. he goes away often, as well.” She’s silent for a moment, then sighs. “Thor, Asgard is healing. The Queen is lost,” Thor twitches, “and the Allfather is still regaining his senses after being imprisoned. I think it is difficult to see your home realm mending only slowly.”

“What of Loki?” Thor asks, finally. The thought has been gnawing at the back of Steve's mind this entire time. Last time, Loki had been suffering from some near-deadly wound, posing as Odin, and finally tried to jump from some waterfall which may or may not have killed him had he succeeded. He ended up strapped to a hospital bed, as far as Steve knows.

Volstagg glances at the bird in the window. “He is still here,” he says. “On Asgard.”

“Is he back in the dungeons?” Thor asks, a darkness growing behind his eyes. The bird in the window shifts uneasily.

“No, he -” Sif glances at the bird, too. “That is Loki, there, is it not? It feels strange to talk about him if he’s here, listening.” Thor shrugs. Sif levels a gaze at the bird. “Why are you hiding like that?” she asks. It screeches defiantly back at her. A moment later, though, it shimmers with green, and then Loki is sitting hunched over in the window, leaned forward with his elbows on his knees.

“Simply thought it would be more pleasant for everyone as such, my lady,” he says with a shrug.
“But if you insist. So, do tell, what has happened to the wreck of my self that occupies your timeline? Can’t say I’m not curious.”

Sif narrows her eyes at him. “You look different,” she says, instead of answering.

“We do age, our kind,” he deflects, near a drawl. “However slowly. Bound to change in appearance over time, aren’t we?”

“What happened to your foot?” She glances at the brace.

“None of your business.”

Sif looks back at Thor. “You asked to make sure your brother received help. You left him in the care of Eir.” She pauses. “She has him in treatment.”

“The Allfather allowed this?” Thor asks.

“Eir spoke convincingly. Really, it could be heard all the way to the city walls.”

A smile tugs at Thor's mouth. Steve glances at Loki, who looks a little uncomfortable.

“What kind of treatment?” Steve asks. “How does it correspond with the punishment Odin assigned him in the first place?”

Sif turns to him. “Eir got him out of the isolation imprisonment, however, Loki is still confined to the palace. His rooms, which are sealed. He can walk around escorted only by two guards and a healer, and his magic is suppressed at all times.” She pauses to think. “The treatment is .. I do not know exactly what it entails. It is a mixture of magic, medicine and psychology. An attempt to right his mind.”

The Loki of 2027 snorts from the windowsill. He leans back when they look at him, palms raised and a smirk on his face. “Oh no, please do continue. Don’t let me interrupt. Right his mind,” he jabs. “Can only ever be an attempt, I suppose.”

“It seems to be working, actually,” Sif says, something like a sneer in Loki’s direction. “You’re a lot less cruel than you used to be, almost even tolerable at times. That is when you aren’t throwing temper tantrums in public. You do that rather a lot.”

Loki’s ears actually redden. He crosses his arms.

Thor gives a tired eye-roll. He turns back to Sif. “It is good to hear, Lady Sif,” he says. “Thank you. Please do continue to ensure he is receiving aid. He will be crucial to Asgard’s survival when the time comes.” He pauses but then lifts a finger. “Oh, and one last thing. If it comes to it and you have to evacuate by ship - do not let Loki bring the Tesseract onboard. Under any circumstances. He will do it, and he will not tell anybody until it is too late, and it will be disastrous.” Thor turns to level a stare at his brother in the window. Loki grimaces irritatedly.

“I’d say it’s time to go, by now, is it not?” He says. Or grumbles. Then there’s a flash of green, and his form is once again replaced with the magpie. It flaps its wings. And screeches.

As they leave, Thor grabs Sif’s arm before she can follow Volstagg and Steve up the stairs. Magpie-Loki has already flown up, no doubt waiting impatiently for someone to come and open the door for him. Steve hears a snippet of a low and quick conversation.
“Please, make sure he goes to see Loki,” Thor says to his friend. “That they may build up .. some family again. Tell him there’s still hope.”

Steve glances back to see Sif nod. She looks determined … and a little taken aback at all the responsibility suddenly heavy on her shoulders.

Loki lands on Thor’s shoulder when they’re outside again, once again nipping him in the earlobe. Thor winces but it seems more for show than actual pain. He says goodbye to his friends, and Steve thanks them for their help.

Sif has agreed to get the stones into the vault in a covert mission. “Or I might just give them to your deranged self,” she tells Loki with a smirk. He has changed back and is standing arms crossed, face tight. “You already are arrested, after all. They won’t exile you for having been in contact with future-Thor. They’ll just up your medicine and guards.”

“That’s … not a good idea, Sif,” Volstagg says, looking uncomfortable.

Then they’re left alone by the forest again, Steve, Loki and Thor.

“I’d have thought you wouldn’t pass up an opportunity to go see the Allfather,” Loki mutters, eyes on Sif and Volstagg, out of hearing distance. Thor looks ahead, too. His eyes are a little distant.

“We’ve more important things to do,” he says. “It is no use, getting stuck in the past.”

Loki glances at him.

“Let’s go, then,” Steve says, breaking the silence. “To 2012.”

They knock on the New York Sanctum twice, and then suddenly they’re .. not outside on the street anymore.

There’s dark wood around them, a staircase in front. Steve blinks; he’s never been here before but assumes they must be on the other side of the door. However that might work.

Thor sighs beside him. “They could just open the door in the normal way, like everyone else,” he says under his breath. Loki scoffs.

“At least I’m not falling my way here.”

Someone walks down the stairs. A woman, shrouded in a yellow, oversized robe. She lets the hood fall.

“So you have returned with the stones,” she says, voice light like air and yet the tone unreadable. Steve hesitates.

“You are .. the Ancient One?” he asks, cautiously. That’s what Bruce and Strange had told him.

“I am,” she agrees with a gracious nod. She reaches the end of the stairs, and stops, raising her eyebrows. “So? Will I have what you owe me?”

Steve reaches into his bag and finds the little package, a faint green light emanating from it. It’s warm from the power humming inside, and he looks at it for a moment. Then steps forward, reaching forward his hand.

She gives a tight smile. “Well, it was brought back safely the first time around. I trust your Doctor Stephen Strange. Though, I’m beginning to think I should have a lending fee applied to the Gem.”

Steve huffs a quiet laugh. “Thank you, nonetheless. We will not interfere further.”

“You better not,” she says. “All this time-hopping is bound to collapse something sooner or later, should you continue like this.”

“We know. This is our last visit, I should hope.”

“Otherwise, you better consult with Stephen. He knows better than most about these things.”

Steve pauses. “Actually, about that ..” he begins, narrowing his eyes at the air. Then looking back at her. “Stephen Strange used the stone to revert someone’s body back in time a few minutes, someone close to death, last time we were here. He saved them. Do you know where this person might be found?”

“The same friend you brought with you, yes?” She casts a glance over Steve’s shoulder and he follows it to Loki, who’s tensing up under the gazes. He stays quiet. Thor stands a little too close to him as if ready to jump in if anything should happen. “Loki,” the Ancient One says slowly, with a strange profoundness to the word, eyes still on him. Calculating. It lasts for a long moment.

“The same friend,” Steve confirms, and her eyes travel back to him. She nods.

“I know where he is. I would suggest you talk to this Director of Shield, Nick Fury. He’s in charge of the imprisonment.”

“Do you .. know where Nick Fury is?” Steve asks tentatively.

“I can take you to him, yes. As thank you for bringing back the Stone. Good luck.”

And then she’s waving her hands in a fluent, sleek movement in front of her chest, light beginning to shine from them. Steve opens his mouth to protest, but the next second there’s a flash, everything turning a blinding white. Then the Sanctum is gone.

“The hell?” someone says, a slight hysterical to the tone, and Steve turns to face a gaping Fury. There’s the click of several guns being cocked, and Steve takes a step back, raising his arms slowly. Shit.

“Fury,” he says. “We mean no harm. Please take a second to think -”

“I thought we had that guy in lock-up,” Fury clamours. His own gun is pointed at Loki, who looks impractically smug, hands raised but a fraction in mock-innocence. Steve sighs.

He manages to get Fury and his lackeys to not shoot with a few well-considered sentences. The weapons are still raised, though.

“So you’re the bastards that took the weapons,” Fury says, eyes narrowed at Steve after he’s explained where they’re from. Briefly. Fury has talked to his affiliates and can confirm that Loki of their time is, as it is, still in whatever lock-up they’ve got him in. “And you say Stark figured out time travel?” He shakes his head, eyebrows raised. “It’s a goddamn crazy world. Even more so in the future, it would seem.”
"We’re here to return the - weapons," Steve says, almost saying stones. Then he’d have to explain that whole thing. “Although they’ve been separated from their holsters. The Sceptre and the Tesseract. Just the power sources are left.”
He reaches into his bag and plucks out the two packages. Fury stares at them. Then looks back at Steve.

“Then why did you bring the godlings to play along?” He raises his eyebrows at Loki, who’s currently held by the upper arm by Thor like Thor is either protecting Loki or protecting everyone else from Loki. Steve can’t quite decide the intention. Maybe both.

“You have the Loki of your time in captive. We want to speak with him.”
Fury glances at the brothers again. “Why?” he asks, drawing out the word.

“Things ended badly the last time we were here,” Steve says, deciding to just be honest. “I thought returning the stones would be an opportunity to tie up some loose ends.”

Fury’s eyebrows shoot up impossibly further. “You mean like rehab for this psycho?” He nods at Loki without removing his eyes from Steve. Loki huffs but otherwise thankfully stays quiet. In Steve’s eyes, he actually looks a little nervous. He’s right to be. This is not good. This is not good.

“I should take him in and lock him up along with his alter ego, more like,” Fury continues.

“Fury,” Steve says. “Things are different in the future. If you’re not intending to cooperate, we can leave. Whenever we want.”

“I could just shoot you all right now,” Fury says, cocking his head and eyes intense on Steve. Who denies the urge to sigh again.

“We won’t cause any harm. That’s why Thor is here,” he says, an extension of the truth. “To keep Loki in check.”

“-hey,” Loki protests from behind him and several guns click and readjust in his direction. He freezes, expression tightening with irritation.

“Loki,” Steve warns, turning his head to give him a look. Thor is shifting, increasingly uneasy.

“Steve, I think we should go back,” he says lowly, and Steve grimaces. He’d thought this’d be easy; if only that Ancient One hadn’t sent them straight into Shield, if Steve had had a little more time to explain -

He notices the figure jumping out from shadow behind the brothers too late, feeling his eyes widen.

“Thor!” he cries, but Thor only gets to turn halfway before the figure whacks him hard on the head with a large block. Loki stares wide-eyed for a second as his brother crumbles, falling against Loki so he stumbles, and he just manages to look up at Steve before an arrow hits him in the base of his left shoulder. Steve sees him blink, something like panic creeping into his eyes before they begin to fall shut, his legs buckling. He goes the same way as Thor.

Then something hits Steve's own head, and everything goes black.

Steve wakes up to banging, something slamming against .. metal, he thinks. Something like a continuous growling accompanying it. His head hurts, damn, it hurts, and he blinks dizzily, trying to focus on the blurry grey in his vision. The first thing he makes out is that the wristband with his suit
is missing. Fuck. Shit. Shit.

The next is a figure, Thor, standing and .. banging his fists against a wall of metal bars.

“Come back, you cowards!” he’s shouting. “This is absurd -- we have done nothing to elicit this kind of response!” Then he growls, turning into an outburst of irritation, giving an especially hard slam to the bars. They still don’t budge.

“Thor,” Steve begins, cutting off with a grimace of pain and blinking again. He leans back on the cold floor, another hand going up to grasp at his temple. “Oh god, my head ..”

“They knocked us out,” Thor says, voice still laced with anger. “With no reasoning whatsoever. They knocked us out! That Fury, I am going to strangle the bastard -”

“Now we can’t have any of that,” a voice rings out from the high-ceilinged room outside the bars, and there’s the sound of heels clicking against the floor. Fury walks in through a doorway, across the room and towards their cell. Steve glances around. It is a cell. A small, square room, three walls and the fourth the metal bars.

“Where are we,” Thor growls, anger simmering under the words like water so near to a boil. “Where is my brother.”

“Hm. So I see the knockout did nothing about that unfortunate fondness,” Fury says with a little grimace. “That’s too bad. Must be a new kind of spell he’s using, then. Unless we didn’t hit you hard enough.”

“You think we’re mind controlled,” Steve says as it dawns on him. “That we’re under Loki’s control.”

Oh damn. He should’ve thought of that. How suspicious doesn’t it look, wading into Shield, with Loki, to get access to the other Loki, who is imprisoned? Damn. Damn.

“Yes, that would be a pretty logical conclusion to come to, don’t you think?” Fury says. “How about you, Cap, how do you feel? You were knocked out by .. yourself, so that should’ve been pretty effective.”

“I’m not under any spell,” Steve says. “So nothing has changed. I understand why you would think -”

“Hell yeah, I’d think,” Fury interrupts. “But thankfully, everything went alright despite it. Baby brother is locked up nice and safe, and we’re going to get out of him what he’s done to you two.”

“You will not touch him,” Thor snarls, fists going at the bars again.

“That’s not really your call,” Fury says with a shrug. “Seeing as you’re locked up in a, let me tell you, utmost secure cell. But enough about all that. Tell me, now, Thor: how are you at all alive?”

“I will tell you nothing,” Thor begins, and Steve cuts him off.

“Fury, we’re from a different time. What you’re living in is a diverged version of our timeline - or, I guess, the other way around, depending on perspective. I don’t know. All we wanted was to return the stone and talk to Loki. See how he was being handled.”

Fury studies him for a moment. “He’s being contained,” he then says. “He is declawed and kept in a secure mental facility for criminals, secluded most of the time. As was suggested to us by your friend
Stephen Strange. Who, by the way, has no idea who we are and is a huge sceptic of anything magic-related - my guess is that the guy we talked to was from your time, as well. Right? The future,” he drawls.

“That’s right,” Steve says. He pauses. “Fury, we can go back home. This doesn’t have to get messy. This was my idea, I thought - I didn’t think it would be a complication, but if you’re uneasy with letting us go see the Loki of your time, we won’t.”

He’s beginning to feel like this was the stupidest idea he’s had, like, ever. He’s not sure why it was at all so important, it was just an idea, for god’s sake, because everything else in this last time had been so chaotic, to just get some sort of closure. To take this opportunity to help Loki as Loki has helped them. He brought Natasha back, Tony, Gamora, Vision. Steve just wanted him to give something back.

“I would let you out,” Fury says, “but I’m sorry. I simply am not in any position believe you. Let you and your little puppet master run off just so he can plot out some new nefarious plan to free his - his alter ego? How does that even work, that there’s two of you -”

“Director, with all due respect,” Steve interrupts, keeping his voice level, “isn’t this kind of a terrible plan, if Loki wanted to free himself? To barge into Shield and ask for permission?”

“I would agree, Rogers, it does seem like a terrible plan. But then, you never do know with this guy, do you? He let himself get captured one time around before. That worked out alright for his cause. So you tell me, then - why would you barge into Shield like this?”

Steve hesitates. “We were sent here,” he says. “By an associate of Stephen Strange. I didn’t choose our way of approaching you.”

“That’s a cute excuse,” Fury says.

“Just let us out, you moron,” Thor interjects, hands gripping with white knuckles at the bars.

“That’s not the way to go about it, Thor -” Fury begins. Another voice cuts him off.

“Director Fury,” it calls, as the person behind it walks with steady, determined steps across the room. Steve can’t help a groan, leaning back and closing his eyes. “Oh, great,” he says under his breath. “This guy again.”

The next moment, Captain America is standing in front of his cell, levelling a gaze at Steve, who slumps on the floor and meets his gaze with raised eyebrows.

“So, you’re the pal who we fought in Stark Tower,” 2012-Steve says, hiding the bitterness poorly. And there’s still that stoicness. “Along with Loki,” he adds with a raised eyebrow.

Steve nods grudgingly. “I am,” he says. “Yeah, sorry about that. We really needed the Scepter.”

“For what?” 2012-Steve asks.

“We found a way to bring back someone we lost. Loki found a way.”

“And did it work?”

“Yes,” Steve says. It warms a little to actually be able to say that. “It worked. That’s why we’re here, to return what we took.”
“These power cores,” the other says. “We got those. While you were unconscious.”

Steve grimaces. “Well. Mission accomplished, then, I guess.”

2012-Steve narrows his eyes. “So you’re .. me?”

“Yes.”

“From when?”

“2027.”

He hesitates. “Who did you lose?”

Steve pauses, too. He says, slowly, “we were fighting a war, and we won. Things are very different in that time. We lost … Natasha. And Tony. And two others whom you haven’t yet met.”

“But you brought them back.”

“Listen -” Thor interrupts with another irritated bang at the bars. “Fury. I need to be with my brother, and we need to return safely to our own time. He is not well.”

“Just calm down, Thor. We’re talking, moving forward towards our shared goal, right?”

“I don’t want to talk, I want you to get your hands off of Loki -”

“Nobody is doing anything to him,” 2012-Steve interrupts, with a strange look on his face. “He’s in a cell, like you. They’re just questioning him.”

“But he won’t talk,” a fourth voice calls out, and Natasha Romanoff walks into their view from the side. “He’s got a lot of unhelpful snark, for sure. Otherwise staying quiet.”

“You’re blowing your cover, Romanoff,” 2012-Steve grumbles. She shrugs.

“Hi, Steve,” she says to actual-Steve. “Hi, Thor. Good to see you both.” Steve nods at her, and Thor mutters a sullen ‘hello’, before turning to go and sit on the bench along the back wall.

“So,” Natasha continues, “a blow to the head didn’t work, huh?”

“What’s your diagnosis?” Fury asks, stepping back and crossing his arms.

“I think they’re telling the truth. If I had to place a bet.”

“Well I don’t,” a fifth voice calls, and a moment later Clint Barton is descending from the ceiling, easing down by a cable. “This is Loki we’re talking about, guys. May be another one of the kind, but Loki nonetheless. Fucked up Loki. Magic-shit Loki. I don’t trust anything that’s been in his hands.”

“You’ve been in his hands,” Thor grumbles, earning a mean stare in return from Barton.

Steve wants to shout at the ceiling in frustration. “Look, I understand why you think this is suspicious but we - we can’t stay here. Please, let’s find a compromise. We have only hours before we need to return to our own time.” He groans, turning to Thor and rubbing his face. “Thor, I’m sorry about this. It was a bad idea.”

“We were all on board with it,” Thor mutters. “We couldn’t know this would happen.”

“But we could’ve,” Steve mutters. He should’ve thought of this. He’d thought they would just ..
sneak in, maybe. Or have a talk with Fury, but they should’ve disguised Loki, they should’ve not barged into Shield. He wonders if that’s just the Ancient One’s kind of humour. It’s not funny, anyway.

“Man, it’s like watching theatre,” Clint says. “Do you think they rehearsed this part?”

“Clint,” Natasha warns.

Steve turns back to them. “Fury. Please, listen, we need to find a compromise. We don’t have time for this.”

Fury studies him. “I’m pretty sure that would be up to me and my team,” he says and Steve draws in a low breath, holding back an outburst. “Now, we’ll have to go and talk in private. I think you’ll do fine for so long.” He turns and begins to walk away. “Toodles,” he parts with, waving a hand over his shoulder.

Natasha watches them for a moment. Then her, Clint and 2012-Steve turn to follow the Director.

“Toodles,” Thor echoes, once the door to the room slams shut. “What a complete arse.”

They sit there for at least an hour.

Then there’s a ‘pop’, a flash of green. Thor jumps up from his seat and Steve turns in a jerk from where he was pacing in front of the bars.

“We have to go,” Loki says. Then he janks Thor to stand by the arm and towards Steve, and as soon as Loki’s other hand touches Steve’s upper arm, the world twists into itself.

The next moment, they’re standing by a bland wall, asphalt underneath their feet. It’s raining, a little.

“- Loki!” Thor bursts, a little like a sputter, jerking free of Loki’s grip and stepping back to stare at his brother.

“Get over it, Thor,” Loki sighs. “We’re out. Their security is really not nearly as good as they would like to believe, you’d know. Oh - by the way,” he adds, going on to hold out his hands to each Steve and Thor - opening them to reveal the watches for the suits. They both take it.

“That’s .. amazing,” Steve says, glancing at Loki’s own wrists. The watch for his suit is firmly planted on there. “You’re not cuffed. Nothing. You just - teleported out of there?”

Loki shrugs.


“They had me contained. Took me a little while to break free, if you would excuse it.”

Thor steps closer again, looking him in the eye. “Did they do anything to you?”

Loki leans his head sideways with a sigh. “Thor. No.” Thor keeps staring. “Stop. They were just asking me questions. Now, let’s focus, we don’t have a lot of time.”

“Time?” Steve asks. “For what?”

Loki lifts an eyebrow. He nods at the building they’re standing by. “Why, for visiting our old friend, of course,” he says, and if his voice is light there’s an evident tremble just underneath. Steve looks up
the brick wall through the drizzle of rain, spotting several square windows further up. They’re rigged with bars; like in a prison. He looks back at Loki.

“Shield is going to come here,” he says. “They’ve noticed we’ve escaped by now."

“Which is why we have to hurry,” Loki says with a hint of a smirk.

“Loki - maybe this was a bad idea ..” Steve begins but is cut off.

“Do you really think I would’ve gone along with your initiative if I wasn’t invested in it?” Loki says, voice hardening. “I want to speak to him.”

He holds out a hand to each Thor and Steve again, this time empty. Waiting for them to take it.

“Well?” he asks when they both hesitate. Thor sighs and glances at Steve.

“I suppose a quick visit ..” he says. Steve nods after a pause.

“Alright,” he agrees. “A quick visit.”

They both reach out to take hold of Loki’s hands. The skin is cold, a little clammy, Steve registers as he touches it, just before the world swirls and most sensation gets obscured. The hand stays constant, though, Loki’s tight grip on his.

Then there are wooden planks underneath their feet.

The light is soft and dim inside the room, a quiet platter of raindrops on the window, the only source of lighting, overhead lamp shut off. There’s a figure by the window, in a chair and facing the three of them, Loki in the middle. Well. Loki is the one in the chair. But Loki is also by Steve’s side.

The next thing Steve registers is that his hand is still in Loki’s hands. The skin is cold, a little clammy, Steve registers as he touches it, just before the world swirls and most sensation gets obscured. The hand stays constant, though, Loki’s tight grip on his.

Then there are wooden planks underneath their feet.

The sight of him breaks Steve’s heart a little, along with an uncomfortable eeriness to the whole thing. He remembers this Loki. He has very different connotations to this Loki than he does the one by his side; connotations of war, of the enemy. On the other hand, this was also the Loki rapidly losing consciousness in Steve’s arms after he’d slit his own wrists. And it shows.

2012-Loki’s face is wan, almost lifeless. His hair matted and limp. He would look a perfect mirror of the current Loki, the way they’re both gaunt and oddly desaturated, but he’s younger, too young and somehow hardened in a way that doesn’t match with this, the years that shouldn’t have worn on him yet.

Steve’s eyes flick thoughtlessly to his wrists, noticing the metal bracelets, like sleek handcuffs but not joined together. Keeping his magic in check, it must be. Then his eyes catch the lines of two pink and ragged scars stretching the length of each underarm and reaching up under a rolled-up sleeve. Immediately, he looks away, back to 2012-Loki’s face, but not before the other has noticed his gaze, catching it briefly.

The Loki beside Steve seems at a loss. His mouth opens, but no sound comes out and for a minute,
there’s just quiet. Then Thor clears his throat, and Loki blinks back into the room. Steve notices how 2012-Loki’s eyes are glued fast to his other self, pointedly avoiding Thor. Not even a glance since they arrived.

“Well?” 2012-Loki repeats, crossing his arms gingerly and leaning back in the chair. “I know who you are. I don’t particularly want any of you here. Will you get on with it?”

His voice is mock-bored but cracked while his eyes emit a hard, jeering glint towards present-Loki. Who finally seems back in control of himself, his eyes narrowing.

“You’re a mess,” he says. There's nothing especially vicious in the tone, though. More of a fact-stating.

2012-Loki snorts softly. “Can’t say you’re much better off,” he says. “I’m taking it you’ve continued to fuck up things in the future?”

Present-Loki stays quiet. His jaw is clenched.

“And Odin didn’t execute you, in the end?” 2012-Loki continues. "I do admit, I was surprised when that first occurred to me. I’ve been stationed here, which Asgard seems content with, but you were supposed to go back to them, weren’t you? And you did, you did because in your timeline the Tesseract never got into your hands, did it? But they didn’t kill you, the nobles. Surely, it must be that soft-hearted Allmother you so cling to who’s at fault. She always has been ignorant of the truth, that woman, even when it is so very clearly painted all over -”

“Don’t you dare,” Loki cuts him off, voice raised, “speak of her.” He takes a deep breath. “You have no right.”

2012-Loki raises his eyebrows in mock, neck loose as he cocks his head. “I don’t? Are you sure you’re not projecting, now, dearest self?”

The situation makes Steve extremely uncomfortable. Despite the snark, it’s very clear what kind of state this other Loki is in. His voice is .. almost breathless. Speaking just a little too fast. That hoarseness. The words seeming unhinged like there's no filter from his thoughts to his mouth.

“Loki,” Steve says, quietly, to the Loki beside him. “We don’t have much time.”

“No, because they’re coming for you, aren’t they?” 2012-Loki quips. He smirks. “You’re not allowed to be here. I could call the healers and have you locked up immediately, you know.”

“We’d be gone before you could say the words,” present-Loki snarls back. He takes a step closer. “You’re not in charge here. You have no weapons. I do. I’m choosing to be here. And I’m here because I want to know why you did it.”

If it weren’t for the twitch, 2012-Loki would look wholly unaffected. “You’re going to have to be more specific than that. I’ve done a lot of things, you’d know, most of which you already are cognizant of the motivations for, I’m sure, if you dig deep enough beneath those layers of ignorance you so love to -”

Loki cuts him off. “You have no doubt noticed that my brother is alive,” he says, and now the tone is getting vicious. “I am not you. I wouldn’t pretend to know what goes on in your twisted mind.”

Steve is beginning to think this wasn’t a good idea, after all.

The other Loki grins, but it looks brittle. He leans forward, hands on his knees and perhaps gripping
a little too tight. “You are,” he says. “You are me. You know it is a fact. I know not what went differently for you, in your time, but you are me, and had you ended up in the same set of circumstances, you would’ve made the same choices.” His voice is beginning to shake, just a little. With anger and something else, something more vulnerable.

Meanwhile, present-Loki is beginning to seethe. He takes two steps forward, raising a hand and pointing a finger at the other. “Do not pretend to know who I am,” he says, voice low and dangerous. “You know nothing. You are a child.”

The other narrows his eyes, and he smiles. “We’re the same, you and I,” he says, words picking up pace as he speaks. “There’s nothing different about you. I know your innermost hurts and desires and shameful needs, and I can tell you this with surety: there’s nothing you can do to run from me, or what I am. Neither of us can, you cannot run, you cannot hide and you cannot change —”

“Just tell me why you did it!” Loki explodes in a shout, taking another step forward, and the other actually draws backwards in his chair, paling a little. Fragile as glass for all that big talk. His mouth tightens.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says, voice small. Steve looks at Thor, exchanging a glance, while present-Loki looms over his younger self.

“You know,” he sneers. “You know perfectly well what.” He draws closer. “It was the final straw, wasn’t it? What made you choose the cowardly option. Because you couldn’t stand to live in a world where you would’ve made such a choice. That choice. You might as well face it, you deserve to face it, face the truth of what you are -- so tell me. Why did you do it?”

The other Loki is breathing shallowly, entire body wound tight. Steve very nearly interjects before present Loki draws back a hair, giving the other some space. Steve catches sight of 2012-Loki’s face, then. He looks scared. A little distant. His eyes are shining.

“What, so you can be different?” he eventually responds. “You want to know because - because you think you can change anything? You can’t,” he says. “Let this forever be your proof.” He looks up, meeting Loki’s eyes, and suddenly his own are mad with desperation. “This cannot be undone. What happened here, this is your reality, this is what you’re capable of. This is what I live with being every day. And nothing you can do will ever change the fact that I am you, this is what you are, and this is what you have done.”

Future-Loki draws back. He stumbles a little over the step.

“I’ve changed,” he says. Takes a steadying breath. “I’ve changed,” he repeats, words catching on a panicked edge. He takes another breath, seeming to reason with himself. Both metaphorically and, then, literally: "You - you didn’t mean to do it.”

The other Loki’s eyes harden as if struck by the assumption. “What does it matter?” he says. “It happened. And it’s your fault, whichever way you look at it. It’s your fault, your fault for interfering, your fault for being what you are, your fault for making these choices. And yet, you get to have him, have Thor, as if you’re any more worthy than I am -- you’re not. This world has to live without him, all because of you. The sun is gone and it’s your fault.”

There’s the sound of a helicopter whirring in the distance. It has, in fact, been growing in volume for a while.

“Loki,” Steve says, and the other twitches, still turned to face his past self. Steve shifts on his feet. “I’m sorry, but we need to go. They’re coming.”
“You have to go,” 2012-Loki echoes, eyes wild, “and have you gotten what you came for? What answers is it you seek? To assure yourself that you are nothing like me? To distance yourself from the monster, is it?”

The helicopter is close, now. “Loki,” Steve says, warning. Loki’s head turns to him in a jerk, eyes panicked, before whirling back to watch his past self.

“Why did you do it,” he repeats.

“You know why.”

“You killed him. He’s gone, he’s dead, and it’s your fault. Your choice. You twisted his neck, you let him fall to the ground, and you watched the life leave his eyes. You. You killed him. Why?”

Past-Loki breathes hard and raggedly, eyes glued to his older self. “Shut up -” he begins, cutting off. “I -” He swallows, opens his mouth as if to speak, but ends up only repeating, “I...I -”

And then his eyes flick to the right, finally to Thor, and seem to get glued there. Everything about his posture and expression impossibly softens and tenses at the same time.

“We have the building surrounded,” it sounds from outside, an electrically amplified voice. There’s the sound of boots on the stairs outside the room. “Surrender now, or we will take you by force.”

“Loki, we need to go now,” Steve says, rushing forward as he activates his own suit from the contraption on his wrist. It sweeps over his body as he presses Loki’s as well. The other is faltering in his stand and stumbles as Steve moves them both away from the window to avoid getting hit by anything.

Past-Loki’s desperate eyes are still glued to Thor. They’re shining. The boots outside get louder, nearing their floor. Steve looks briefly to Thor who looks completely at a loss. He has activated his own suit, as well, and is hovering between his two brothers.

Then, just as Steve is about to shout a final command, force Loki to activate his suit and go back to their own time, 2012-Loki tears his eyes off of Thor and revert them back to his alter-ego. They’re wide but insistent, and for a moment, despite the increasing threat of Shield barging in at any minute, it is as if time freezes. The two Lokis lock eyes.

2012-Loki speaks, and it comes out in a rushed blurt, breathless, as if the words are suspended in open air for a timeless moment. “I didn’t mean to hurt him,” he says. “I didn’t mean to. Please. Please believe me, I didn’t mean to -”

Then the door behind them is kicked in. Steve reacts instinctively, reaching out and activating both his own and Loki’s suits. The room swirls and disappears into raging colour before the Shield agents can react.

Then they’re back in the hall, the world crashing into their feet. Steve sways for a second, steadying himself into the new reality.

It’s quiet, is the first thing he registers. Helicopters, gone. A silence almost tense with suspension. He blinks dazedly and reaches up to take off the helmet, taking a deep breath when it pulls back.

“Did you do it?” a voice calls. Steve looks up and around to locate it and spots Banner off the platform by the control panel with eyes dancing between Steve and the two others. Steve looks to his side just in time to see Loki deactivate his mask as well, a stricken, distant expression etched in his features. Steve looks back to Bruce, and nods.
“Yeah. We did it.”

He takes a breath. Glances to the side again, to find Thor now holding his little brother by the upper arm.


Loki’s eyes flicker to his brother. Then he nods, looking away again almost as if … shameful. He and Thor walk off the platform together, and towards the exit. Steve follows them down a moment later, going instead towards Bruce, Peter Parker, Strange and Shuri by the control panel. There are other people in the hall as well but they’re keeping their distance for now.

“What happened?” Bruce asks quietly once the door has closed behind Thor and Loki. “Did everything work out alright?”

Steve grimaces. “I’m not really sure why I thought putting two Lokis in the same room would ever in a million years work out alright,” he says. Bruce looks at him for a moment.

“Did they fight?”

“Not like that, no. I-” Steve cuts off for a moment. “I think they might’ve both gained something from it. I don’t think it was all bad, in the end.”

“I’m still not really sure why you thought it was a good idea,” Bruce says.

“Me neither,” Steve admits. “It was just an idea. Loki wanted to do it, so I went with it.”

“I take it everything didn’t go exactly as planned.”

“You could say that.”

***

Thor gets his brother to sit on the couch back home, once they’ve made it up the hill and inside. He sets a kettle to boil with water, preparing two cups of herbal tea. When finished, he gives one to Loki, sitting down by his side with the other himself. Loki sips the beverage carefully, steam rising in front of his eyes as he holds it loosely in both hands.

Eyes narrowing a little as if in thought and looking straight ahead, he mutters, “Thor, I’m okay. You don’t have to baby me.”

“I’m not,” Thor replies, leaning back against the cushions and cradling his own mug. “I just thought you might like some tea.”

Loki replies with an unconvinced “hm.”

A few seconds pass. Then Thor says, “you know he isn’t right, yes?” and Loki stiffens a little. Then he shrugs, and nods.

“Yes. Yes, I do know.”

“You were in a different place in 2012,” Thor continues. “Even if something might seem static - you
know things change. You’ve changed.”

There’s quiet for a moment. “He’s not so different from me, really,” Loki then says.

Thor waits.

“He’s .. he’s more confused. But not so different.”

“Loki …” Thor begins, trailing off. “Do you think - was the Mind Stone influencing him? When what happened that day happened?”

Loki shrugs, finally breaking eye contact with thin air and looking down.

They’ve never talked about this. Loki doesn’t talk about these things.

“Partly, maybe,” Loki says. Hesitates. “Either way, he wasn’t .. well.”

“The way he reacted ..” Thor pauses, choosing his words carefully. “It didn't seem like he meant for it to happen. At all.”

“But it did happen, despite whatever regret he may hold,” Loki replies, a hard note to his tone. Thor glances sideways at him.

“Are you afraid, Loki?” he asks. “Are you afraid of something like that happening?”

Loki takes a sip of tea. His posture is almost rigid.

“I may be mad, myself;” he says, “but I am not as mad as he is.”

“You’ve changed,” Thor agrees. Adds, after a moment, “and I’m proud of you for it, brother.”

Loki finally looks at him. “Even if it means fearing for your life? Being in constant danger?”

Thor looks back evenly. “I don’t have to fear for my life, not at all. I never did.”

“You should’ve.”

“Maybe. But I don’t regret it.”

“I wonder if your - if Thor of the other timeline would say the same, could he say anything at all,” Loki says with a distinct bitterness to his tone.


“Do you -” Loki begins, voice raising a little. He huffs, setting down his tea on the floor with a thud. “But Thor, do you not realize? All it took in that timeline for me to run off with the Tesseract, then my mind fled entirely. I killed you, Thor. Do you not realize how close to death you were the entire time I was in your vicinity? Had I not been locked up? The tiniest changes in the flow of events, and you would’ve ended up dead, because of me.”

Thor’s jaw clenches. “I realize, and I knew back then as well,” he says. “I think you know how that made me feel.”

Loki swallows. Then pushes to his feet to limp to the opposite wall, pacing the room. “I could’ve killed you, Thor,” he says, eye contact broken again and instead flickering on the floor. “I did. He did. It’s the same thing.”
“It’s not. Here, you didn’t. Not in our reality.”

“But I could’ve. I still could.” The last sentence sounds smaller, somehow, and Loki’s expression gets a panicked tint to it.

“You’re not there anymore, Loki. I think you know that well.”

Loki stops by the window, looking out. He doesn’t say anything. Thor can practically feel the tension radiating through the room.

“Brother,” he says. “Come sit down. Drink your tea.”

“I don’t want the stupid tea.”

“Please. Just for a moment.”

Loki stares out of the window a little longer. Then pushes back to stagger to the couch. He sits down in a heavy thump, hands wrought together.

“We’re dealing with it,” Thor says. He lifts a hand, and though Loki jerks when Thor places it on his cheek, he doesn’t move away. Thor turns his head gently to look him in the eyes. “That’s the difference. Loki, you fell, you - let go. You were alone.” Loki twitches again, lips tightening.

“Things were bad. But you’re not alone anymore. That’s the difference.”

Thor bows down to pick up the cup of tea beside Loki’s feet. He places it in his brother’s hands and Loki sighs but complies, taking hold of it and letting it rest in his lap.

“You’re not alone, brother,” Thor says. “And you’re in a new place. You have a choice. That’s the difference.”

Chapter End Notes

look ... I tried to make it a therapeutic conversation between the Lokis of two different times ... neither were being especially cooperative

eh
The next days pass in a blur.

An indecisive calm has fallen over the village with the stones being gone, the immediate danger out of the way. They’ve succeeded in their goals, and yet it feels as if they’re still supposed to be on watch, at the ready. For that same reason, most of Earth’s Defenders are still lodging in New Asgard, simply .. hanging out. A little rootless, but calm.

Loki avoids them if he can, settling into somewhat of a routine in Thor’s house of sleeping, eating, bathing, reading, walking … thinking. He begins going to the greenhouse to re-train his magic. There’s a nice, gentle atmosphere to the rooms there, the life of the plants humming and strengthening his own with their continuous thrum of energy. Plus, it’s mostly quiet. Rarely does anyone else come in, what with all the spells already in place to keep the plants thriving.

He still sleeps a lot; in weird, sporadic patterns. Waking up in the night, unable to fall back asleep and then staying up until morning when finally he’s able to doze off again, sleeping until the afternoon if not longer, and then not going to bed until the middle of the night. Thor makes sure there are somewhat regular meals despite the not-rhythm of sleep, and Loki complies as well as he can. Has fallen back into the utmost useful habit of eating on sort of an autopilot, just getting it in and getting over it. If he can first conquer nausea, that is.

“What is that?” Thor asks one day, entering the house and shaking off the snow of his clothes. He kicks off his boots and hangs his jacket on the coat stand. Loki glances to him from his seat at the table, pencil still in his hand resting beside a small stack of papers.

“What is that?” Thor asks one day, entering the house and shaking off the snow of his clothes. He kicks off his boots and hangs his jacket on the coat stand. Loki glances to him from his seat at the table, pencil still in his hand resting beside a small stack of papers.

“Questions,” he says, looking back down at the line of boxes to tick. Two options of answers for each question. There’s already an illogical pattern of X’s over the top half of the page; yes, yes, no, yes, no, yes, yes, yes, no, no.

Thor pauses by the door and Loki can feel him looking. “Oh,” he then says. “For your next appointment with - what was her name again?”

“Harkins.”

“She seemed nice. When we met with her before the session.”

“I guess.”

Thor doesn’t pry anymore than that, thankfully, though Loki can feel the curiosity bubbling unvoiced under the surface. He just goes to pour himself a cup of tea, then settles on the couch quietly, eyes fixed towards the window in the kitchen.

He doesn’t interrupt, either, as Loki keeps ticking boxes. The questions themselves are rather
harmless-seeming. Just ‘yes’ or ‘no’, not any demands of elaborate exhibiting of his past experiences or innermost thoughts, only ‘do you sometimes feel this’, or ‘is this specific experience part of your everyday life’, or maybe statements like ‘I often feel xxx’. Pretty easy.

Some of the questions are strange. ‘When I was a child, I enjoyed cutting up worms to see what would happen,’ for instance, or ‘My thoughts are audible, intrusive and can feel at times exterior to myself,’ the latter to which he just writes a little note, ‘sometimes’, beside the boxes. Then there is ‘have you had experiences with telepathy, psychic forces or fortune-telling’, to which he answers ‘yes’ and writes a note of obviously in the margin. Harkins did say some of the questions might not apply to his specific situation.

There are, too, the more physical sorts of questions which he brushes over quickly, praying that the therapist won’t want to go into further detail about his various bodily functions.
He finishes and wonders what she might get out of that mess of answers. Whether a Midgardian psychological assessment can ever even apply to someone from another realm.

“What were they about?” Thor asks after a little while, not looking up from his book. Loki suspects all that reading his brother is doing lately is really just a cover for lounging around.

Loki looks up from reading through the questions for the second time. “Various things,” he says. “...emotions, as such, mostly,” he adds, to not leave his brother entirely in the dark.

Thor nods, gaze wandering lazily over the page in front of him.

Loki feels suddenly .. restless. As if the last few days have gone by in a haze of just managing by, sleeping, whatever, and now he’s beginning to wake up a little more. Like something has loosened up and let go, and now there’s space in him to actually .. notice the world.

Thor, for one.

“Um,” he begins, eloquently, not at all sure what it is he wants to say. Thor looks up from his book, eyebrows raised.

“Yes?”

Loki clears his throat and averts his gaze. “I was just,” he says after a moment. “Simply - wondering how you are doing?”

Thor’s eyebrows stay up and he studies Loki for a moment, while Loki feels heat rising to his face. He’s not good at this kind of thing.

But Thor says, “Thank you,” and gives a little smile. “It has been .. a trying time,” he says, slowly, like he’s choosing his words carefully. “But I think we’ve managed well.”

Loki wraps his fingers into each other on the table. “I mean you, though,” he says. “Not .. the village. Not everyone else.”

Not me.

It is no secret that Thor is .. well, he’s managing, but he’s subdued. This new Thor, this very soft Thor somehow born out of his own trauma and healing and then evolved into this, he both seems stronger but also somehow, simultaneously, a lot more breakable. Like the way he’s laying himself bare for the world leaves him exposed, too vulnerable for Loki’s liking. The old Thor would stomp on people in his wake, in a reckless battle for his own will and enjoyment’s sake, overlooking the trails of destruction left in his wake - but at least he didn’t get stepped on himself, that way.
“I’ve been worse,” Thor says, diverting his eyes to the wall.

It’s Loki’s turn to study him, now. “Was it difficult?” he asks, genuinely interested and not wanting to leave the matter now he’s started it, but also feeling like he’s plunging himself into a deep sea where he has no idea how to really navigate. “I mean,” he thinks to elaborate, “healing. After you’d won.” He gestures a hand vaguely. “That time.”

Thor shrugs. “I guess it was,” he says. Hesitates. Then looks back at Loki. “The five years that went by after the Statesman, after the battle of Wakanda - have you heard of that?”

There’s an almost childish shyness to the way Thor asks. That’s new, too. Or maybe not new, maybe just ... resurfaced. Loki hasn’t seen that side of his brother for many, many years.

He shakes his head. “A little,” he answers. “Not much.”

Thor’s upper lip twitches. “Thanos was there,” he says. Loki stiffens a little at the name. Still, after all this time. “He .. had five of the stones. He killed Vision, got the last one. Mind.” Thor pauses, a distant look entering his eyes. “I could’ve stopped him, then. I had a chance.” He blinks, momentarily distant. “I blew it. Plunged Stormbreaker into his chest, and it did nothing. He used the gauntlet.” Thor huffs softly, shaking his head with a mirthless smile. “I should’ve gone for the head.”

Loki swallows. He waits a second before asking, “then what happened?” He notices his knee bouncing under the table and forces it to stop.

Thor looks down to his hands lying limp in his lap. “Five years went by, as you know,” he says. “New Asgard was rebuilding while I was being of no help.” He clears his throat. “I drank a lot. Ate a lot. Slept a lot. You saw the product of that.”

They stay quiet for a little while. Loki narrows his eyes, keeping his posture straight. He asked for this, himself.

“Did your magic work?” he eventually asks. “During that time.”

“Not very well,” Thor admits. “Didn’t really have the energy for it. It got better, though,” he is quick to add. “The time before you came back when we started working on the time travelling, bringing back the ones who were dusted. That gave a new sense of purpose. You know, friendship, that sort of thing.”

They fall into silence again. Then Thor speaks up. “Loki, I can’t help but wonder,” he begins, trailing off. He looks up, locking eyes. “On the Statesman. Did you - did you know Thanos would be coming? Why didn’t you tell me you had the Tesseract, back then?”

Loki hesitates. He brought this on himself, what with starting a talk about emotions. But it’s no matter. He owes Thor.

“I would’ve told you at some point,” he says. “I thought I had more time.”

“Were you planning to run with it?”

“No. Not - planning. I didn’t plan on it.”

“But you might’ve.”

“Had I known what would happen from me staying, yes, I would have.”
Thor cocks his head. “Do you know how Thanos found us?”

Loki shrugs, diverting his gaze. “I suspect he could track the Tesseract. I just didn’t know that.”

“That .. makes sense, I guess.” Thor pauses. “So you .. you didn’t know he would come?”

“If I did, I obviously wouldn’t have stayed.”

“Why did you take it, though? The Space Stone.”

Loki grimaces. “I .. it was there. I didn’t want it floating around for anyone to take. It felt safer with me.”

“I wish you would’ve told me.”

“We had a lot else to worry about, the week before Thanos came. I was distracted.”

“I suppose we did.”

He’s sitting cross-legged in the greenhouse later that day, focusing on gathering the strength of his seiðr in his core, when suddenly there are voices coming from the front hall. Footsteps. He barely manages to open his eyes before they enter into the room he’s in, the one with the flowers, dropping his hands back into his lap.

It’s three people: Romanoff, Pepper Potts and Stark’s daughter. They all stop dead in their tracks in the glass entrance, eyes on him, and he feels foolish. Sitting there on the ground, most likely terribly dishevelled from messing with air particles. He reaches up to smoothen down his hair while pushing to his feet clumsily, ankle brace clicking.

“My apologies -” he begins but is cut off by the child.

“You were glowing,” Morgan Stark says. Her hand is caught in her mother’s and while her eyes are glistening with interest, she’s also standing halfway in hiding behind Pott’s thigh. Loki stops where he stands, brushing off his clothes and eyeing both Romanoff and Potts warily.

“I’m sorry, we didn’t know you were here,” Romanoff says with the usual chilly edge but something else, as well. She raises her eyebrows just a hair. “Are you doing …” She clears her throat just barely. “.. magic?”

Before he can answer, Morgan speaks again, “can you do that again? The glowing?”

Loki glances at Pepper.

“Can you make me glow?” the girl asks.

Pepper draws in a breath, face tightening. Loki opens his mouth.

“I was just leaving, I’m afraid,” he says with a hopefully apologetic-seeming smile, and the girl’s face falls. He debates for a second whether to just go for the exit the others are currently blocking or wait until they move for him; which move will seem less threatening.

“Actually,” Potts says, “if you do have the time, Loki ..” She pauses. “You could show us the glowing .. thing, if you want to? It looked pretty cool.”
Loki blinks. “I can - yes, I could do it again. Sure.”

Morgan’s face brightens again. Potts ruffles her hair.

Loki carefully sits back down. It’s easier like that, not having to balance with his foot while concentrating, and he also suspects he might seem less threatening like that. He closes his eyes and ignores the prickling in his hands from being watched. Then he lets the power flow and support itself as he was practising a minute earlier. It’s not a difficult exercise by far - mostly about focus. He allows it to extend into the flowerbeds beside him, like a beacon stretching out to nourish the soil, climb up through the stalks and into the buds and crowns.

He hears a squeal-like gasp of excitement from the girl (he’d think, at least), and can’t help a hint of a smile slipping into his own expression. He lets the power extend, running it through the air, the plants, expanding his beacon and then holding it there, a pulsing power-core. He hadn’t realised his magic had gotten this strong again, to be able to extend to a radius such as this. It feels more alive than it has in long, and he cherishes it, nearly forgetting where he is as he lets the power just move.

He’s snatched back out when something cracks in the smooth waves, starting as a fracture and then splintering through the entire beacon. He jolts, eyes flying open. It’s a brutal transition back to reality. At first, he’s hit by the panic of three people watching him, exposed, until he remembers a second later where he is.

Then the girl starts laughing. Clapping her hands. “Do it again!” she says.

A startled halfway-laugh bursts from his throat. He quickly stifles it with a cough. He’s not sure he actually could do it again, as he's getting rather drained. He tries to blink the lightheadedness away.

Romanoff perhaps notices. She puts a hand on Morgan’s shoulder, saying, “another time. That was enough for now, I think.”

Loki looks at Potts again and she looks .. wary, mouth a little tight, but also maybe a little pleased.

“Glad to deliver,” Loki says as he gets to his feet again. The others make no move to move away from the exit just yet, so he just stands there waiting for a moment. “What are you all doing here, then?” he asks, to fill the silence. He would really rather get going.

Romanoff gives him a little smile. “Oh, just here to look at flowers. No picking, right, Morgan?” The girl gives a sly smile, barely hidden. Romanoff looks back to Loki. “You got our bouquet, right? Back a few days,” she says, a glint of something in her eye. “We worked hard on that, you know.”

Loki blinks. “Oh,” he says. “That was - you -” he cuts off. “It was beautiful. Thank you.”

“Well, I mean, it was supposed to be from everyone. But Morgan and I picked the flowers.”

Loki nods. Shakes himself out of the trance.

“I really better be going. A pleasure to talk to you, Romanoff, Lady Morgan Stark. Potts,” he adds with a nod at the woman, who gives one back. Then he heads for the exit - thankfully, they move to let him pass.

"Mom, am I a lady?" he hears behind him just before exiting the outer house.

“My place, seven o’clock,” Brunnhilde declares, swaggering into Thor’s living room. A gust of cold
air blows in with her before the door slams shut with the wind. She stops, arms crossed and looking between the brothers both on the couch.

Loki sits with his legs drawn up under him, a controller hanging loose in one hand, Thor beside him leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. Thor pauses the game, which .. Loki still hasn’t quite grasped what it even is about.

Brunnhilde sends a withering look. “I swear, Loki, you need to get your ass up off that couch every once and again or you’ll grow into it.”

Loki shoots a look back. “I go to the greenhouse.”

“Spend your days hiding, is what you do. Which is what I’ve come to interfere with.”

Thor puts down the controller. “What’s at seven?”

“Movienight. For everyone still hanging around.”

“I’m not coming,” Loki mutters, rearranging his arms to cross in front of himself.

Thor grimaces. “Last time we watched a movie Loki got so scared he had to sleep with the lights on.”

Loki turns to him, eyes widening in disbelief. “Thor. Shut up.”

“Well we’re not watching horror movies.” Brunnhilde clarifies with a dismissive wave of her hand. She frowns. “What did you even see?”

“It Follows!,” Thor says. Loki very nearly pouts. That was one time.

Brunnhilde lifts an eyebrow. “That garbage? Serious?”

“That’s off the point,” Loki objects. “They’re designed to make you - uncomfortable. Either way, you can have your movies in peace, I’m staying here.”

“What, playing Skyrim?” Brunnhilde counters. “It’s one evening. You can survive sitting squeezed in a couch between me and Captain America and laughing a little for one evening. I bet they’ll even choose some shitty comedy if you ask nicely.”

Thor turns to him. “Loki, don’t you think it could be good?” he says. “These people like you. You can get to know them better.”

“I’m a convicted felon, Thor,” Loki snaps, getting irritated of this narrative Thor repeatedly tries to impose. “They don’t like me, they don’t even know me. They’re tolerating my presence because you insist on my staying here.”

“Steve likes you,” Brunnhilde says, her forehead set in a frown. “Bruce. Wanda. I like you. Nobody hates you, at least, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“Can I not just not want to be part of these get-togethers you attend? It’s not my scene.”

“Please, Loki,” Thor says, turned to him fully on the couch, now, cocking his head and batting his eyelashes. The whole shabang. “You’re my brother. I want my friends to know you.”

“You don’t have to do anything,” Brunnhilde adds on to the argument. “You just show up, eat some dinner and watch a movie. Or you could eat at home and just show up for the movie, that’s fine, either way, you could just be there for a little -”
Loki sighs heavily, throwing up his arms in surrender. “Fine, alright! I’ll join your arrangement.”

Brunnhilde pumps her fist in the air. “Yes,” she says. “Wouldn’t be the same without everyone’s favourite trickster-dickhead to spice up the mood.”

“Thanks for that,” Loki says, slumping and leaning back with his arms crossed.

Loki dresses in a sweater and pants. Simple. It seems appropriate, and not too .. flashy. Plus, a good bulky sweater is really not so different from armour .. in how protective it feels, at least. Not as effective, surely, against sharp blades and heavy axes, but the illusion of layers leaves one none-the-wiser.

He’s quiet as he and Thor make their way out of the house. It’s evening, dark outside, and he feels uncomfortable, to say the least. He’s not sure how a ‘movie-night’ as such is supposed to play out, but if it is anything like at Thor’s, only including the ten to twenty so people still left in New Asgard, then he supposes it’ll be something like sitting too close for his liking, talking, stuffed into sofas and chairs and the floor. He’s hoping to get a chair, personally.

“You don’t have to be so nervous, brother,” Thor teases as their boots crunch in the snow, making for the cluster of houses. He’s carrying a large bowl with a salad he’s made this afternoon, Loki a decanter of lemonade. “She promised it won’t be a scary movie.”

“Ha, ha, Thor. Very funny.”

They make it in between the first houses. Then someone calls “Thor!” from further away, and Loki squints in the darkness to make out two figures coming towards them. One is waving. Captain Rogers, he deduces as the shroud of dark lifts gradually and beside him, Bucky Barnes. The Captain's friend. The latter is wearing something very near a scowl. Or maybe that’s just his face. Loki feels himself stiffen instinctively. There’s just something .. something about the man that unsettles him.

“Hey, Loki,” Rogers says with a smile. He’s carrying a dish himself, Barnes a couple of utensils.

“Didn’t know you were coming,” Barnes says, glancing between Thor and Loki. He doesn’t seem outright hostile, but wary. A little unsure, perhaps, of how wary he really should be.

“Of course we are,” Thor says in his best booming voice. “Wouldn’t miss out on all the fun, now, would we, brother?” Then he smacks Loki on the upper back, who refuses to stumble under the otherwise substantial weight behind it. He sends Thor a sidelong glance.

“Never in a lifetime,” he replies, intentionally dryly.

There’s silence for a moment. “Well, Bruce is choosing the movie, anyway,” Barnes then says, “which should be alright. At least it isn’t Strange. He definitely picks some weird shit.”

“Or Natasha,” Steve adds. “I mean, they would maybe be good if I could understand them.”

“They are,” Thor clarifies. “She has very good taste, actually.”

“Oh. Should’ve guessed that.”

There’s quiet again. Loki feels awkward already. He knows how to do a lot of things, but this? Playing nice, not making trouble? It’s really not what he’s most adept at.
“Should we .. go in there?” Steve says, and Loki clears his throat, averting eye contact.

“We better,” Thor replies and heads to the right. Loki follows on his side, keeping Thor between himself and the others.

All sorts of warm scents reach out through the door when it’s opened. A glow lights up their faces out in the cold, and greetings are called as they make their way inside, Loki going in second last, just before Thor. There’s a lot of people in there. His heart starts beating involuntarily faster.

“Finally,” Brunnhilde’s voice calls and Loki enters to spot her crouching by the oven with mittens on, carrying something out and then to a long table by a large set of windows further inside the house. “We’re hungry!”

Though there’s conversation buzzing it seems to die down, and Loki can feel eyes settling on him. It makes him want to either crawl out of his skin and into hiding, or stand up straighter and stare them all down with the meanest glare he can muster. Maybe give them a little scare of a magic trick. That, sadly, would likely only serve to get all his probation privileges revoked.

A quick glance around the room tells him who’s there and who isn’t. Sam Wilson, Romanoff, Scott Lang, Peter Parker and Banner are all present, scattered around the room. The Wakandans have gone home not long ago, along with a handful more people throughout the last days, such as Strange, who had things to do, Barton, the same, and Scott Lang’s family. Wanda is positioned on one of the couches and gives Loki a smile. They haven’t talked since he was in the hospital. Vision’s arm is around her, in what Loki has been told is his ‘human form’. He gives Loki a nod. There’s a little crease in his forehead as if something is concerning to him.

Pepper and Morgan are absent, but Tony Stark is there, and he’s staring shamelessly from the chair he’s in. He looks .. diminished. Frail, for lack of a better wording; still healing from the resurrection, Loki has been told.

Nonetheless, Stark gets up from the chair, pushing to stand as if it’s a little difficult and then he’s walking towards Loki. Or rather, limping. He stops at an arm’s length away.

“So there he is, the man himself,” he says, eyes narrowed on Loki as if in slight disbelief. Loki resists squirming, keeping his face neutral and body rigid. “Out of hiding.” There’s entirely quiet in the room. Stark gives a huff. “I gotta say, I never did imagine I’d be having a movie night with you, of all people,” he continues. Pauses. “But man, to heck with it. I can’t not thank you. Good to have you in the gang, I guess.” He holds out a hand. Loki hesitates for a second. Then takes it, shaking it lightly.

Then someone half-whispers, “did you just make him an Avenger, Mr Stark?” and Loki snaps his gaze to the spider-kid looking on from a chair behind Stark with wide eyes. He opens his mouth to protest, but Stark beats him to it, lifting a pointing finger into the air.

“Now - I did not say that, kid. There’s a - a big difference, there, that’s not what I said. Alright?” he looks back at Loki with stern eyes, and Loki turns his own up with a sigh. “That’s not what I said. You might be pardoned and all but we’ve still got things to work through. Right? Relationship issues. Can’t be an Avenger before we’ve sorted that out. You gotta be besties with me to be one, you know -- Cap and I once fell out and he had to go rogue, undercover, just to handle the embarrassment of no longer being part of, eh, what is it, the world’s greatest - no wait, mightiest, isn’t it -”

“Okay, Tony, I think that’s good for introductions,” Rogers interrupts, clapping Stark’s shoulder and turning him back to the chair.
“I’m just saying!” Stark continues over his shoulder on as he’s pushed back. “It’s good to have you here, Lokes! If you continue this style I might even consider forgiving that one time with the window. A bit of a stretch, but it might happen.”

“Now I think it’s time for dinner,” Brunnhilde calls, clapping her hands together and breaking up the reverie of the room. “Thor? You brought salad? And Steve, lasagna, right?”

The chatter begins again, slowly filling the room with a more pleasant buzzing as people get to their feet, going to sit around the table. Steve and Thor carry their dishes to the table, and Loki finds himself standing back, hesitating with the decanter in his hands.

“Lackey?” Brunnhilde asks, approaching him with a smile. “Wanna join?”

He opens his mouth, lacking a response. Lifts the decanter up. “I have .. lemonade,” he says, articulately. She pats his shoulder.

“That’s nice. Put it on the table, I’ll get glasses.”

The living room is so big the dining area is almost an entire section to itself. There’s room enough for everyone around the table which has been folded out to be longer. Loki spots an empty seat beside Thor, towards the end of the table and with its back to a wall, and goes in a beeline for it. He sets the lemonade by a stack of glasses, then after an indecisive moment of hovering lets his hands drop into his lap. Brunnhilde sits down by his side, and Loki wonders if she and Thor orchestrated that specific placement. And to keep who safe; Loki or everyone else.

It’s a chaos on the table. Not much unlike the feasts he grew up with on Asgard with their many dishes, drinks, sides, baskets of bread and fruit, and whatever else everywhere.

His heart is climbing into his throat at this plethora of options.

Shit. Why is this overwhelming, again? He’s lived for over a thousand years, he’s kept calm in much more complicated situations than this. Much more.

People are beginning to pass around dishes, take plates and fill them up, chattering excitedly about it as they go along. He feels like they keep glancing at him. Like he can’t move. Like they’re looking.

Stop. You’re being ridiculous.

Suddenly, the plate in front of him is taken away. He jerks his head to follow it with his eyes and watches Thor scoop boiled potatoes onto it, then a piece of some kind of pie. “Can you pass the salad?” Thor calls across the table and a moment later, the bowl makes its way to his hands. He sets it on the table, scooping a handful onto the plate, then sets it back in front of Loki.

“Do you want sauce?” Thor asks, simultaneously handling a large piece of .. some sticky dish onto his own plate.

“Um,” Loki says, eyes flickering on the people currently acting like animals battling around a waterhole. Albeit a slightly friendlier version. “Yes,” he finishes. Thor gives him a smile before diverting his eyes to Bruce who is in the process of handing him a saucer. He pours a spoonful of the rich, dark liquid over first Loki’s potatoes, then a very generous amount for himself over .. well, everything on the plate. It is passed on to Romanoff.

“Thank yououuu,” she sing-songs with a distracted nod, eyes on multiple dishes at once.

Loki stares at his own plate all of a sudden filled with foods. Potatoes, the sauce, the vegetable pie, the salad. It feels almost vulgar, the look of it.
Don’t do it don’t do it don’t do it don’t do it something is whispering inside his head. Hissing. Like an alarm bell going off repeatedly and forcing all attention to itself.

Loki feels a hand grasping onto his underarm underneath the table and swivels his head to look at his brother. “It’s alright,” Thor says, voice quiet but just loud enough for Loki to hear. “Eat what you can. I’m simply glad you’re here.”

Loki gives a curt nod. Reverts his eyes back to the plate.

“You should try Brunnhilde’s pie, though,” Thor prompts, while stuffing a large bite of potatoes in his mouth, himself. “It’s extraordinary.”

The whole scene is so eerily familiar. Thor stuffing his face, the eager chatter, boisterous laughter, clinking of cutlery and drinking mugs. It’s a lively crowd. The Lang guy really can laugh voluminously, though the spider-boy very nearly matches his might at times. Thor, of course, is louder than any as he participates in conversations all across the table. Loki for a second nearly forgets where he is.

He grabs the cutlery, cutting off the pointed end of the pie slice. Spinach, he thinks, at least for one thing. It’s green. He pierces it with his fork and puts it in his mouth. Chews carefully.

It tastes good.

He swallows. The nervousness flutters in his chest, and he grabs the fork a little tighter. Relax, he tells himself. It’s not a big deal.

“How do you like it?” Thor asks, voice lowered a little again. Loki looks at him sideways.

“It’s good,” he says.

Thor smiles. Leans forward to address Brunnhilde on Loki’s other side. “See?” he says to her. “Even Loki thinks it’s good. Told you.”

Brunnhilde smacks Loki lightheartedly on the shoulder. “That’s a good boy,” she says. He huffs a chuckle, if it sounds a little stuttered.

After a moment, when Thor and Brunnhilde both have redirected their attentions elsewhere, he cuts off another bite and eats it. It’s fine. He focuses on the taste, on eating carefully to not get nauseous, instead of all the other .. reactions. It’s fine. It’s delicious.

He’s eaten half the piece when a snippet of conversation stands out to him.

“What are we watching, then, Bruce? Have you decided?” Thor asks and is joined by a chorus of ‘ooohs’ and, ‘tell ’-s.

Apparently, it’s something called ‘Back To the Future’. That receives some exclams of outrage.

“Come on, guys, it’s fiction!” Banner argues. “It’ll be fun to revisit their version of time-travel, right? It’s called perspective, you know.”

The conversation carries on from there. People opt for refills of their plates continuously while Loki finds himself sitting quietly, focusing on the salad, the pie and the potatoes.

He feels extremely foolish, of course. That’s not new. Partly the anxiety of being at a casual dinner with people who used to be on the opposite side of the battlefield, and partly the pressure of having to put food into his body despite everything in his saying no, both making him quiet, anxious and on edge. Until all he can do is sit idly between Thor and Brunnhilde and try to keep it all ordered inside
his head. Organized, as if it is some complicated puzzle of cause and reaction that he needs to stay on top of, or else … he’s not sure what. His mind is certain something terrible will happen. Not talking to anyone, taking careful bites of his food. Everyone seems to be leaving him to it. As if they know, as if they know or can see it, see that interrupting would be a bad idea, that he’s currently not able to even get in ordinary substance without tattering on the edge of a breakdown.

“This lemonade is bomb,” Brunnhilde says at some point while Loki is working on a potato. She nudes him with her elbow and it startles him. Like his skin is prickly, overly sensitive to even the slightest touch. “Did you make it?”

“I helped,” he says.

Stark shouts up somewhere along the middle of the table, apparently overhearing the exchange, “who would’ve ever thought! You made us lemonade!” He cackles once, then raises his glass with the pale drink. “Cheers to that!”

Glasses are raised all over the table, and Loki knows this, at least, raising his own glass of wine which he has yet to touch. He takes a sip, resolutely ignoring the eyes flicking to him. He meets Wanda’s, though, and gives her a short smile when she does him.

At some point, the eagerness begins to die down. Loki is halfway through his plate when the obligatory exclamations of ‘no more!’ begin sounding from around the table, people clutching their stomachs and groaning in both satisfaction and the unease of overstuffing. He forces himself to get another mouthful of pie in, then cutting up another potato. He stops, too, when it seems everyone, even Thor, has reached their limits and are no longer eating. He looks down: good two-thirds of the plate is finished. So that’s something.

“Dibs on an armchair!” Stark exclaims, pushing up to go hog a fluffy chair with a good view of the TV. Romanoff sighs, eyes turned to the ceiling.

People begin carrying their plates to the sink inside the kitchen. Loki gets up to follow. There’s such a strange camp atmosphere to the whole thing and he feels like a child again, by Thor’s side, wary in a crowd of loud and chattering peers. He finds himself standing in a line to throw the leftovers from his plate in the bin, and then Romanoff takes the plate from his hands, depositing it in a dishwasher. Those are really neat.

“Make waaay,” someone calls behind him, and Loki moves to the side jerkily. Sam Wilson comes into the kitchen wearing a grin and dangling three paper bags of some sort from his fingers. “Time for the popcorn-team to get to work,” he says, depositing the bags on the counter. “And by team I mean me. Important business, anyway.” He plops one of them into the small oven-thing. Microwave. It turns on and begins humming.

“Where’d you get those, Sam?” Brunnhilde asks, pushing past a few people to get to Wilson, peering into the microwave.

“From your cupboards, of course,” the other replies with a sly smile. “Can’t watch Back to the Future without popcorn, Brunnhilde.”

Loki finds himself standing to the side, not saying anything, not quite knowing how to position himself. Brunnhilde glances at him. Where is Thor? The noise from the microwave, the talking, the washing off of dishes, the people walking in and out - it’s a lot of activity. It reminds him of battle-zones. But this isn’t a war, it’s a social gathering, it isn’t war, they’re friends. They’re Thor’s friends, and Thor is here .. somewhere. Safe. Loki finds himself becoming very aware of his own breathing like
his chest is pressed too tight and he can’t get enough air into it. He opts for the exit into the living room before it gets bad, gets worse, pushing past shoulders, people talking, drying things off - there are people everywhere.

The living room is not a lot better, though. There’s fighting for the good seats in the two sets of sofas and various armchairs facing the television. Too many people and yet not many enough to get lost in the crowd. Loki’s eyes flick around, not finding Thor, his heart rate increasing; he meets the Vision’s eyes for a second, and he’s watching Loki. Loki looks away. Vision, he doesn’t get Vision, he doesn’t understand him. He must be programmed, in some way, not really his own - and that could mean anything, he could have any intention, anybody could have placed anything in his artificial psyche, really.

He can’t move. If he keeps standing here someone will approach him, ask what he’s doing, and he doesn’t know. He doesn’t know anything, he doesn’t understand this situation, he doesn’t know. He can’t trust any of the people here. They’re the enemy, they’ll get too close, closer, too -

“Brother?”

There’s a hand on his shoulder. Loki whirls to find Thor standing just by the entrance to the kitchen. His eyes are too slow in focusing on the face and he blinks, trying to force it.

“Want to go sit down?”

There’s a second’s pause. Then Loki nods. “Hm,” he manages in agreement, and it sounds embarrassingly like a whine. His heart is beating wildly.

Thor steers him in direction of the sitting area, hand subtly staying on the shoulder. A patch of warmth, keeping him grounded to reality, to the room. Nobody else seems to pay notice to them, busy with securing their own spots as Thor places Loki by the armrest in the middle sofa, himself on the other side. Then Rogers sits down in the armchair to Loki’s right, just as Banner joins them in the sofa. Loki is glad for the armrest between himself and the Captain.

More people sit down in the chairs, the sofas, and he feels like he’s trying to keep an eye on all of them at once. He doesn’t like this. It’s supposed to be casual, a fun gathering, and yet after these latest years of his life, all he can muster up is wariness, wariness of every movement, every person, every sound, every action. Like everything is a threat. He grabs onto his core of magic like it’s a safety blanket, the knowledge that he could use it. He’s not entirely helpless. He could teleport out, were it necessary. He could escape. He could attack.

Thor’s hand is still on his shoulder. He hadn’t been aware and zones back in on the sensation.

“Loki,” Thor says, low and under the plethora of voices and sounds of settling in. “Nobody here is out to hurt you. You’re safe.”

Loki nods again, attempting to control his own expression to something indifferent. Wishing Thor would stop talking. He’s absolutely sure at least both Banner and Rogers can hear him, make out the words, and he has no wish for this horrible vulnerability to be made any more obvious than it already is.

“It’s fine,” he says, though his heart is fluttering. Thor squeezes his shoulder before letting the hand fall. Loki works to keep his breathing more or less constant.

He’s glad that it’s Thor by his side because everything feels stifling, close, and yet his brother’s presence is more like something holding it all together. The anchor. He’s warm beside Loki, dips the cushions. Heavy. There. Real.
Just as his heart is beginning to slow again, his skin less tingly and everyone in general settling
down, **calm**, the front door opens. Two figures walk in. Loki resists the urge to groan, half in
annoyance from the instinctual fear that seizes up his heart once again, half from just that fear in
itself.

Nebula.

Her eyes lock on him for a moment. Then she looks away, going straight for an armchair. Peter
Parker is currently occupying that one.


His mouth opens. “But I -”

“**Move**.”

He stares at her for a moment as she towers over the chair with crossed arms. Then he huffs, getting
up with an angry glare fastened on her the entire time. He sits on the floor, arms crossed, back to the
other end of Loki and Thor’s sofa and next to Natasha’s legs.

“Not cool, Nebula,” Stark comments. “You can’t **own** Brunnhilde’s chairs.” Nebula’s head snaps to
him with a piercing glare. He glares back for a moment, then gives up with a sigh.

Loki looks back to the second figure, still hovering by the door. The one with the antennae. He
hasn’t ever talked to her.

“Mantis,” Natasha says, patting a space between her and Banner. “You can sit here. We’re going to
watch a movie.”

This Mantis’ eyes widen. “A **movie,**” she says, dragging the vowel, in the next word as well. “I **love**
movies.” She pads over to the couch, sitting down gingerly. Loki watches Brunnhilde fiddle with the
TV controller while Mantis turns to Bruce in his peripheral.

“You are looking forward to it,” she declares, eyes wide. Right. She’s the empath. Loki makes a
mental note to stay as far from her as possible. “Is it a good .. **moovie?**”

Banner smiles. “I think you’ll like it.”

“Have you made popcorn,” Nebula says, arms crossed and leaning back. More of a demand than
anything else.

“Await no further!” Wilson calls, strutting into the living room with three large bowls balancing in
his hands, one on the flat of his under-arm. “Your rescue -” he pauses the statement as the third bowl
nearly topples off, tongue sticking out of his mouth as he rebalances it, “- **has** arrived.”

The movie begins. It’s nice to have everyone’s attention glued to the screen rather than flying in all
directions all across the room; a centering.

There’s chattering and shushing in a steady flow from all directions. Popcorn bowls being hogged
and handed over. Thor is constantly telling Loki things, coming with facts, discussing with Steve,
and equally much being shushed by Banner and Natasha. Peter Parker is an avid talker, as well. He
and Thor know surprisingly a lot about these movies. So that’s what Thor was doing those five
years, aside for playing video games.
All of it makes Loki relax a little more.

Then the plot begins to thicken. Apparently, they’re not just travelling in time. No, by travelling back in time, they’re also changing their own future. Not just a future, but their own, which already had been created, already a timeline and actually, really, this Marty Mcfly’s past, if anything.

Loki blurs out "but -" eyes glued to the screen where a photograph of the kids is beginning to blur and change. “That’s, that isn’t how it works!” He leans forward, elbows on his knees.

There are several snickers. Loki turns to Banner, indignant.

“You know it’s factually incorrect. Why would you watch that?”

Banner chuckles. “To get exactly this reaction,” he says with a wink. Loki turns away with a huff. Back to watch the stupid movie.

His outburst prompts a whole new conversation about the workings of time, which, Loki often has to break in to absentmindedly correct ignorant statements, however disturbing it is to the flow of the film he’s watching. Eventually, Nebula snaps at them all to shut up so she can watch the damned movie, and so quiet reigns again.

“Flying car,” Loki comments when the automobile rises in the air. “How impractical. Why not simply use ships, like everyone else? They’re much more spacious, for one thing, less destructive to the environments if you do it right, and -” the screen turns black. A bunch of names begin to roll past. “Is it - is it over now?” he huffs. “What? But what about the children? They just said -”

“There’s a sequel, Loki,” Banner informs him. “Actually three in total. Commercial movies have to be a certain length - it’s called a cliffhanger, to end it like this.”

“We need to watch the sequel, then,” Loki declares. Several heads turn to him, and there’s an awkward silence. “I mean - it can’t just stop there.” He gestures at the rolling credits. “In the middle of the story! That’s like stopping, what would I know, a tune after the second verse!”

“Anybody wanna watch the sequel?” Romanoff asks. There are agreeing murmurs from around the room.

“Okay, then,” Romanoff says when no one is making move to leave, at least. “Solid crowd. We’re not watching the third one though, that’s garbage.”

“Aaahhhh,” Stark says, “that’s debatable, Spider-girl. It does have cowboys.”

“You can’t call her Spider-girl,” the spider-kid mutters. “It’s confusing, she doesn’t have spidey-powers.”

They leave when the sequel is finished. Some are debating to stay and watch the third one, but Thor insists that they go home. Loki suspects he’s trying to get them both back into something resembling a normal sleep schedule. Though Thor knows very well that has never been one of Loki’s strong suits. Mantis and Wanda decide to leave at the same time.

It’s nice to get out in the cool air, the wind blowing gently between the walls of houses. Loki turns when there’s a hand tapping him on the upper arm, to be faced with Wanda.

“I’ve missed you,” she says. Gives a little smile. “We should talk soon.”
‘Talk.’ Such a strange thing for him, of all people, to be invited to.

“That would be nice,” he says. Because he means it.

She hesitates for a quiet second. Then she’s taking a step closer and curling her arms around his back, pulling him a little closer. It takes him a second to realize he’s being hugged, and he deliberately releases some of the instinctual tension, forcing his shoulders down an inch. Manages after a few seconds more to get his arms to cooperate, circling her waist carefully. It hits him that her power is not bothering him at all. Could even be comforting.

“You’re not alone, you know,” she says into the crane of his shoulder. “You’re not. We’re here for you. I am.”

Loki finds himself a little dumbfounded. This whole evening has been so strange. She retreats, and he watches her face. She keeps a hand extended and squeezes his arm.

“You, too,” he eventually manages.

Wanda turns to Mantis. “Want to walk back together? Are you going back to the ship?”

Mantis breaks into a smile. “Yes, very much. I would like that.”

Loki is tired, and so his ankle is a little worse on the walk back. He finds himself blinking continuously to focus on the ground in front of them, black creeping in at the edges.

“You can have the bed again tonight, if you want,” Thor says as they’re nearing the house. “You look tired.”

“It’s alright,” Loki says.

“Well it’s yours. I’ll take the floor.”

They brush their teeth together in the bathroom. Loki goes into the bedroom while Thor finishes up, changing into a big Tshirt. His body feels so heavy. It really just does, lately, despite the excessive sleeping. Maybe it’s because of it.

He has just positioned himself on his back, eyes closed and already drifting when Thor comes in. He lets the door to the living room stay open.

“Thank you for coming tonight, Loki,” he says.

“Mh-hm,” he replies absentmindedly. "It was .. alright, the movie.”

“Not at all scary, was it?”

“Shut up, Thor.”

Thor chuckles, comforter rustling as he settles on the mattress. “Goodnight, brother,” he says.

Loki sighs, letting his head drop sideways onto the pillow. “Yes, goodnight.”

Everything fades rapidly from there.

Chapter End Notes
Sorry about any possible 'Back to the Future' inaccuracies. It's been a while since I've watched that one. Please don't destroy me, I swear I try to be a good person in general.

Also Tony Stark was being a weirdo, I don't know about that, I feel like he was just in some kind of mood. Getting resurrected like that I think might make you a little cuckoo.
So.. this is way's end!

This has been so much fun. Such an experiment - and I thank you all for coming along on the ride! It really has been ... a ride, definitely a ride.
As mentioned in the first chapter note I think, I haven't really written anything fictional since I was a kid (besides a single chapter of an unfinished, angsty glee fanfiction a good eight years ago, but there's really no need to talk about that), have been focused on other stuff, and so this has all been TERRIFYING, to post pretty much my initial steps of writing online. But I mean it's been FUN and I've created something that I think I somewhat like and that you guys have seemed to enjoy, too, so! Then again, I did also write a post-Infinity War thing at the start of 2019 that got up to I think 110 000 words, so there was some time for practising there ... OH BOY did I practice! It's real bad!
My point is just ... if I've written something amazingly stupid somewhere in this gigantic mass of words I've produced and published throughout a relatively short amount of time, then I'm terribly sorry (it must be a very painful memory) but please, for my own bruised ego's fault, know that in general I try very hard to be 1) a good person and 2) not amazingly unintelligent, but mistakes are occasionally made and I have .. well I don't have very definite ideas of where and what they are in this work, right now. That'll probably hit hard in a couple of months .. x')

Anyway. THANK YOU. Thank you all for being here for the process! It's been so much fun and I think I've learned a lot. I hope you enjoy this last part! I mean, just .. thank you. Thank you for reading.

Ok so a single little note on the chapter: I feel like this last thing is like a little 'story within a story', ya feel? Like, I wrote the very first chapter as a oneshot, and I've been feeling like .. when I've been writing the other chapters that they're like .. little oneshots in a grander story. So this one especially feels like a little saga, you know, not to be pretentious, but a little story. Idk. Something with a beginning, a story, and an end. I just felt like I'd share that because I think it's so much fun with this whole chapter thing. It's certainly very long, this last one, so there's that. Ok, enough rambling, now onto it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

People begin to go home, eventually. The mission is completed. They’ve succeeded. Now, it’s time for the world to go back to its routines.

Wanda comes to visit before she leaves, but mostly Loki hides while the whole goodbye-affair goes on. He has no wish to be included in it, and more times than not is he successful in being absent whenever people come to say goodbye to Thor. He doesn’t hide inside the closet anymore, though. That feels like stooping a little low by now, even to him.

One day when he’s returning from a trip to the greenhouse, he steps into Thor’s house to be met with the unpleasant sight of four people sitting around the table, all with mugs of tea in front of them, and all turning to look at him upon his entrance. He stops in the door.
“Hi,” he says, eyes flicking over Thor, Romanoff, Brunnhilde, and Stark. Thor’s face lights up.

“Brother,” he greets. “Do you want tea?”

Loki hesitates. No escaping now without it being painfully obvious that he's avoiding them. Well. Avoiding everybody. “I'll help myself,” he says. "Thank you.”

There’s quiet as he walks to the kitchen counter. The brace has been taken off his foot, but he’s still limping slightly. He stops, finds a mug, pours tea into it. It looks like black tea of some kind, which the scent matches. He takes a sip. It's nice.

“I’m never getting used to this,” Stark says, and Loki turns to lean on the counter and face him. Stark is staring with half-open mouth. Romanoff sends him a look. “What?” he continues. “Really, no offense meant, Dumbledore, I of all people think it’s great you’re here, I mean, great. Just weird is all. Come, sit down. Join.” He gestures over the table at an empty chair with its back to the kitchen. “We’re just saying our goodbyes. Chatting. Completely harmless, I promise.”

Loki waits for a second, watching Stark. He’s not going to betray that he has no idea what in the world dumbledore is. Then he prances to the chair, sitting down quietly.

“I’m definitely coming to visit here again,” Stark declares, looking back at Thor and Brunnhilde. “It’s so great, what you’ve managed to make of the village.”

Brunnhilde smiles. “Everybody works together. We’re just doing what we can without interfering too much with the general population of Earth.”

“Fury seems happy enough, anyway. Like you’re all managing to stay out of trouble. Even you, wonder-boy,” he adds with a pointed finger at Loki. Loki draws back a little.

Romanoff sighs. “Tony, come on, it’s like you’re obsessed with him. You've already given him two new nicknames in the span of a minute, it’s getting embarrassing.”

“Alright, alright, fine. I'll let him off the hook. The world is just wild, is all I’m saying.”

“Will you tell the general population how you came back, yourself?” Loki asks. Four heads turn to him. “People might start looking for ways to bring back the dead, themselves, I mean. Once they know it’s possible.”

“But it isn’t actually, is it?” Romanoff asks with slightly narrowed eyes. “It was only because we were attached to the stones. Not really dead.”

“Yes,” Loki agrees. “Only they won’t know that unless you tell them.”

Stark is quiet for a moment. Then nods. “Hm. Yeah. That’ll be good for the press-conferences, actually. Might wanna bring Strange along for some of those. Thanks for that, Lokes.”

“Don’t call me that.”

Stark narrows his eyes, though a smile is creeping onto his lips. He turns to Thor. “You do promise you’re keeping him on a lease, right? We wouldn’t want a repeat of last time.”

Thor’s face sets in irritation. “Tony, I’ve told you -”

“I know, I know, I’m just making sure. That we’re all on the same page. Right?” He looks pointedly at Loki again. Brunnhilde leans forward, blocking Stark’s view and raising her eyebrows at him.
“We’ve got it, Stark,” she says. "Don’t fret."

Loki mostly stays out of the conversating, sipping his tea and staying quiet while they discuss what they’re going to do, now. Romanoff is watching him, subtly. When they’re leaving, she stops, facing him.

“Thank you for everything, Loki,” she says. “We’ll come back to visit. Stay good.” Then she holds out a hand. He shakes it after a second. A strange flash of a glass cage shows itself in his mind, banging his fist against it, shouting, spittle flying. Romanoff’s startled expression (an act). He must’ve looked deranged. He certainly felt deranged. The memory is pretty blurry.

He suppresses a shudder.

Stark stands with his arms crossed for a long moment, eyes narrowed on Loki. Who refuses to squirm but is definitely uncomfortable. Then Stark bursts out, “alright, fine, let’s have the friendly shake then,” and breaks the stance. They shake hands as well.

Soon enough, everyone has gone. Steve Rogers stays a little longer, along with Barnes, Wilson and Banner but eventually, they leave as well.

It’s only Thor and Brunnhilde left. Well, of those ‘Avengers’ or whatever, that is. And Loki has signed his own prison sentence, bound to stay in New Asgard unless he wants to really piss off the governments, though it calms him to know that he always could escape if he wanted. Go to space. His magic should be well enough, by now, functioning as well as it did back before the Statesman (or perhaps before Sakaar, more like - there were a lot of destructive [though admittedly very entertaining] substances floating around in that place; his magic definitely wasn’t at its best.) He knows people who would be able to get the ankle-lock tracking-device-thing off him, shady people in backwater planets, and he could even tell Thor first so he wouldn’t have to just run off like last time.

He doesn’t really want to run off, though. Everything is .. confusing, and sometimes he thinks he does, but he doesn’t have a whole array of other places he wants to go and so it feels safer to simply .. stay. It’s a little like the time he’d returned to the Statesman. Returned to the people, to Thor, to their family. He’d had a backup plan in the Tesseract but that had mostly been to make himself feel safe, to know that he could leave at any given moment if he wanted to. A way out. The reality had been that he’d felt safe with Thor. Thor, who would battle the universe itself for his causes. Thor who would sacrifice his own safety to that of his people’s. Thor who had no fear. Loki had needed to be with Thor because Thor was safe.

No matter that he hadn’t been. That Thanos had caught up, anyway. That wasn’t, really, the point of staying, and that had been Loki’s own fault, besides.

If he’s being honest, it was probably more the thing about not being alone, too.

Loki wants to stay. He doesn’t want to admit to wanting to stay, not entirely, but the truth is this is where he feels most safe and secure in the universe at whole. Rather than floating, nameless, faceless; he knows he would fuck it up. He knows he can’t handle being on his own, not right now. He’s slowly coming to accept it, too.

At night, they sleep in the same room. Thor acquires another bed not long after the others have left, to stand alongside the other wall. Loki sleeps in that one. When he does sleep, anyway. Not rarely is a night spent awake because words and feelings will haunt him every time he closes his eyes, dark eating into his mind and stifling his senses, his thoughts, making everything blurry and
incomprehensible and mixing up dreams and reality.

Thor is there when he wakes up from nightmares. Sometimes he is awake, there very physically, sometimes Loki lets him sleep. Sometimes he’s asleep, but Loki wakes him because he needs someone to talk to, someone to make the world real again. They end up, after not many nights, pushing the beds together instead of falling asleep by or in the other’s all the time.

Spring comes, or the beginning of it, and Loki helps out in the greenhouse. Casting spells or doing manual gardening. It’s therapeutic, in a way, and reminds him of childhood springtimes spent with their mother. The therapist likes that he’s doing it, anyway.

He goes fishing with Brunnhilde. She likes to do that as leisure time. It’s a nice activity, too, and Loki enjoys to be able to provide dinner for himself and Thor whenever he catches something. Like he’s doing something of help.

At times, the world becomes overwhelming. The collar on his jacket is too tight, the wind sounds like whispering voices, the shadows in corners or crooks and the edge of his vision have faces, they grimace. He becomes convinced he’s cursed. People have ill intentions, Loki thinks, and later he might realise that there was in fact nothing suspicious about them at all. All in his mind.

Thor is good at getting him away from the source of it when it hits, getting him to sit down, work through it in a calm environment. Loki always feels stupid and exhausted afterwards. Making a scene out of nothing at all. He used to be able to hide these things better, too, working them out on his own, but living with Thor has made that near impossible. A further complication is the fact that Loki doesn’t really want to hide it. He’s becoming addicted to having that grounding presence with him when he gets overwhelmed.

Once in a smaller one of the fishing boats with Brunnhilde, he’d become too aware of how near the water was. It’d hit him how only the thin hull of the ship was separating the dark, hungry waves from their fragile lungs, warm, breathing bodies. How violent currents ran deeper down, how dark it would become down there, he kept imagining what it would be like to sink with a boulder tied to his foot, down, down, down and down. He’d stopped throwing out his line, sitting quietly and trying to focus on the real world and failing because the real world was in the middle of the water.

Brunnhilde, sitting with her back turned, had noticed when his breathing had become erratic and shallow and he didn’t respond to her speaking.

He’d ended up with his head between his knees, Brunnhilde’s arm over his stretched back. He hadn’t been able to breathe. He hadn’t been sure if he were just imagining being there in the boat with her and was actually already underwater and sinking, being eaten by the dark, and that was why he couldn’t breathe. She’d been talking to him and he hadn’t been able to concentrate, hear anything at all, the water quiet around them and the quiet so loud.

He’d come back and didn’t know how much time had passed. It had been darker; where it was dusk before it was now almost nighttime. His head had been hugged tight to her chest, her other arm around his back keeping him steady and onboard, and she’d been stroking his hair with a thumb, murmuring soft words in a steady stream. His face was wet. He didn’t remember the last many minutes at all.

Things like that would be set off, strangest things being the catalysts. Sakaar had had things that could repress most unwanted things. Posing as Odin had its privacy perks. Loki always has had his illusions.

But he feels raw, now. Still does, since he came back those years ago. Like something has been dragged to the surface, and now he can’t keep it down even when he wants to.

Madeleine Harkins calls it PTSD, some of it, when he finally begins telling her about it. That’d been embarrassing, describing how it felt. What thoughts he would have, during. Everything about those
sessions is embarrassing, in general, telling her how he .. feels. But he does, he tells her. About the world that doesn’t always feel real, about the things he’s afraid of, about his thoughts. He likes to think he’s getting better at it. She, at least, seems to understand pretty well the things he still is trying to make any sense of for himself.

For a period, he goes to see her twice a week. He’d been feeling .. low during that time, and she’d expressed the desire to see him that more often. They’d talked a lot about strategies and support systems. Thor had talked to her as well, though she’d promised she couldn’t disclose anything Loki had told her. It was just to give Thor some tools for himself. Loki had stayed in bed a lot, those days. Things hadn’t really been feeling especially coherent.

Eventually, it began to brighten a little. His thoughts clearing. He went back to seeing her only once a week.

Sometimes, he thinks it feels like the world has collapsed around him. Because he used to be able to keep it together at least somewhat. Now … it’s just as if the space he has here, the fact that he has near-zero responsibilities whatsoever where he used to always have something to do, live up to; continuing to appear to the public as Odin, running from Death and getting back, the invasion on Earth, keeping up appearances on Sakaar; the current situation gives him space to sometimes just .. collapse. And it’s good that he’s here, with Thor, because that’s what happened in the mountains, too. He’d had space to give up on all the appearances. Only there, he’d been alone and free to basically disintegrate a little more each day. It’s good he’s here because 'here' is structured. Here has people.

He spars with Brunnhilde, still, and has begun sparring with Thor in the latter days. His older brother holds back, which is annoying but also a little comforting. It never feels too realistic, like that.

He’s gone to two checkups at Shield, too. Flown in to America, meeting up in a bland room, cuffed and declawed, magicless, to talk to Fury. There are tests done to him to check if he’s figuring out ways to work around the magic restriction. Which he isn’t. Well, he isn’t trying; they’d find out if he was. He’s being good.

Then there’s a psychiatrist asking him absolutely ridiculous questions. ‘Do you ever feel the desire to take over and rule Earth’ and ‘what are your personal opinions of Thanos, the Destroyer of Worlds’. Plus other, more intimate things, to which he lies more often than not.

“You look better,” Fury comments at the latter of those visits, the insolent twit. Loki raises an eyebrow.

“Oh, but I am simply ecstatic that my appearance would please you, Director.”

“Bet your ass you are.”

But it is true, anyway. He’s been eating more and gaining back lost weight. His body feels stronger, has been progressively getting so throughout the last months. His skin isn’t as gross of a complexion. He isn’t constantly jittery and hazy from low blood sugar and exhausted cells, and the mood swings are getting better. The world feels a little less heavy like that.

Sometimes, it’s as if he simply cannot stop eating. That’s not a first-time experience by far; say, if in the past he hadn’t eaten for a while and was then given access to food, but this feels somehow more profound, and his brain is irritatingly focused on it. It’s like there’s a hole in him, something that just can’t be filled, hollow and starved, and so sometimes he eats and eats because he’s so hungry and feels sick before he can get full. Then he can’t eat, but he’s still hungry. Harkins says his body is waking up, that it’s a good sign. Hunger is good, she says again and again, in all sorts of different ways. It’s fine, anyway. It helps with what he’s trying to achieve. And Thor smiles every time Loki wolfs down plate after plate of food.
Thor seems … happier, in general. As if the stronger Loki gets, the brighter his brother seems. Thor doesn’t drink. He works, he does manual labour for the village, helps Brunnhilde with management, he goes with Loki to Oslo. He’s very much present. Extremely perceptive. But also calmer.

The budding spring brings life into the village, as well. Asgard is a people used to many sorts of weathers, but they stay inside during the winter months. Unless they’re going to hunt or otherwise gather supplies from the winter landscape. The harbour and streets are more lively the lighter the weather gets.

In March, Wanda comes to visit. Her and Vision are travelling together, apparently, but she came alone to New Asgard to give Vision a little time on his own. She wanted to see how things were going.

That day, sun is shining, and they end up on the boulders a little away from the forest, the same place they were once trading magic, once. She shows him the control she’s practiced. She’s extremely talented. But he knew that.

She explains to him about that day, when she got him out of the Stones’ grip.

“The stones let go when you made the sacrifice,” she says.

“That was rather what I was going for,” Loki says.

“I had to overpower the Soul Stone to get you out. I think the Mind Stone helped me.”

Loki smiles. “Maybe it likes you.”

She returns the smile. “Maybe. It’s spent a great deal of time with me, at least. We work together well.”

There’s a pause. “You could’ve waited,” she says, now looking him dead in the eye, smile faded. “You knew they weren’t us, the shadows of the Stone.”

He shrugs. “I knew. That didn’t mean what they were demanding wasn’t real.”

“We could’ve done it. If I could overpower Soul to get you out, I could’ve overpowered it to release the others, too. The next time, Loki, let us try an alternative before you rush in to take your own life.”

“I was giving it,” Loki says, face tight.

“I know,” she says. “But you didn’t have to.”

His first instinct is to get angry. Well it worked, didn’t it? But it seeps out of him as quick as it came, and he sighs instead. He’s had this conversation with Thor too many times to bother. “Sure,” he says. “Next time, I’ll consult with you first. Try to, anyway.”

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“It’s somewhere around .. here,” Loki mutters, pointing the tip of his finger at a spot on the map Thor has folded out on the table in front of them. He lingers his hand for a moment, tracing the landscape and trying to feel out .. where exactly it was, but he isn’t sure. He can’t feel it clear enough. Then he removes it to tug at the hem of his sleeve; the jacket Hildegund had gifted him, which is both practical and nice-looking, but also entirely too warm to be worn indoors.
“I’m hot,” he declares. “Can we go outside?”

Thor glances at him. He’s dressed in both a large, bulky jacket, fingerless mittens, fur-lined boots and what he, himself, calls a ‘beanie’. There’s a satchel slung across his body containing gods know what. Loki hasn’t asked. “Sure,” he says. “I guess we’ll just find it when we’re up there.”

Loki pushes back from the table, walking with long strides towards the door. He janks it open for a calming gust of cool to welcome his heated face and immediately steps outside. It still is cold out, but the last of the snow has melted weeks ago. He opens his jacket to let the wind blow in on his body and sighs in relief.

“If we find it,” he corrects his brother, not looking back but hearing Thor exiting the house behind him. “Allow me to remind you that it wasn’t my idea to go searching for a lousy, abandoned shed in the mountains.”

“If you just had your magic . . .” Thor grumbles, shutting the door and fumbling with his keys in the lock.

“Well I don’t,” Loki replies, “so stop rubbing it in. Not out there, anyway.”

Thor turns to him. “I can’t believe they wouldn’t turn off the restriction just for five minutes,” he says, and Loki sighs, turning his eyes to the sky.

“So you’ve said. It’s no matter, Thor. We’re going to have to search it out manually.”

The thing is, Loki would easily be able to find this particular shed and a certain slope if he had his magic. Well, he does, but not outside of New Asgard. He would be able to teleport there if he could only reach his magic out beyond the borders, but alas, his radius of workings is so extremely limited. He can’t reach and search the energies of any nearby villages, for instance. He can barely even reach the harbour from Thor’s house. Makes it difficult to play the simplest of pranks.

“Whatever,” Thor says, bending down to pick up Stormbreaker, leaned against the house. “Are you ready to go?”

“I suppose.”

Loki takes a step closer to his brother to stand by his side, reaching up to take hold of a shoulder. Thor’s jacket is soft and thick to the touch, giving under Loki’s hand.

“I’m going to take us where you pointed,” Thor says. “Then we’ll search it out from there.”

“I know, can we just go now?”

Loki doesn’t look at his brother but can feel the exasperation radiate nonetheless. He checks himself to perhaps be a little less grumpy than this. Then New Asgard disappears in a gut-wrenching tug of gravity, or something like gravity, anyway, swirling the world into oblivion until it re-steadies and ground is once again solid under their feet. Immediately, Loki can feel the lock of his magical restriction tighten like a noose, quickly like someone pulling it in haste, and he feels almost clammy inside his own skin. He never does like this part of leaving his probation area. They have, of course, asked for permission to go on this particular excursion from Shield. Otherwise, the metal around his ankle would likely be beeping like a mad alarm just about now.

“Loki?” he hears, and becomes aware that he’s swaying slightly. He blinks, attempting to re-steady.
“Yes,” he replies. “Just a moment.”

There’s a hand on his upper arm. Loki glances to the side to find Thor’s eyes on him.

“Seiðr being repressed,” he explains. “Never exactly pleasant.”

“I’m sorry,” Thor says.

“It’s fine. You know it doesn’t technically hurt.” Loki blinks again, narrowing his eyes at the landscape. Wind blows against his jacket, thankfully icier up here where they stand, looking over a decline of windswept pines, gnarled and twisted from harsh weather of the higher altitude. “This isn’t the place,” he adds.

“Well, we knew that was going to be the case, didn’t we? Better begin looking.”

Loki shivers, shaking off the last of the confusion from Bifrost travel, and stomps his boots for no particular reason. He feels like there should be snow to stomp off them, up here, but the ground is clear, if bare and sparsely vegetated through the pale grass. “I still think this quest of yours is a strange idea,” he mumbles, but stalking off in the first direction that occurs to him.

“And yet you came along,” Thor calls, walking after him.

They walk in quiet for a little while. Then Thor asks, “do you have any idea where we’re going? Or are we just walking?”

“Just walking.”

“We could use Stormbreaker, you know. Try out a few different locations. Is your foot okay for all this walking?”

“My foot is fine.”

“You have to be careful with it. You’re still limping.”

“It’s fine, I told you.”

“Why are you so prickly today, Loki? Did I do anything?”

“Not everything is about you, Thor. And I am not prickly.”

“Sure,” Thor replies, dragging the vowel.

A little while longer passes in silence, Loki very deliberately not responding to his brother’s bait. Only the chirping of birds, the blowing of winds and the soft crunch of grass under their feet sounds. He keeps his jacket open; the sun peeks out from behind clouds occasionally, a true spring day, and he’s glad he didn’t wear a sweater underneath. The wind is cooling nicely.

“So the plan,” Thor speaks up again eventually, “you say you know the routes surrounding the area, right? And we’re hoping to hit one of those.”

“Yes,” Loki says, keeping his eyes ahead. He doesn’t recognize this at all. And he would; he spent three times every season in those familiar surroundings.

“What if we just went to the village? And walked from there.”

“It’s a seven-hour hike. But I suppose we could.”
“I brought coffee if that helps.”
Loki stops, turning to his brother. “Coffee? You have coffee?”
Thor’s grin tells him he clearly waited for this exact moment of unveiling his great arrangement.
Loki turns away again, continuing the walk. Thor follows, hurrying to get to his side. “Well, I suppose that … should keep us going for a while, then.”
“That, along with lunch.”
Loki eyes him. “What kind of lunch?”
“Sandwiches. Different kinds - there’s one kind with .. eh, egg, there’s cheese and ham, there is .. tomato, humus and basil. At least two of each. Brunnhilde helped me.”
“All in there?” Loki asks, sending a pointed look at the, not too spacious by the looks of it, satchel dangling by Thor’s waist.
“It’s Hildegund’s bag,” Thor replies. “A lot more space in there than you’d think.”

They land in the outskirts of the village, and he is not sure if it’s the travelling with Stormbreaker making him suddenly vaguely nauseous, or if it’s the fact that he recognizes this place and his body’s first reaction is wanting to leave. Either way, for a second he can’t quite catch his breath. He swallows it down. He never used to get ill from travelling with Bifrost, and he’s not about to make a habit of it, now. He won’t have Thor think that’s what’s happening, at least, since … well, fifty percent says that isn’t it.

Thor of course notices. He looks at Loki for a long moment, but then reverts his gaze and doesn’t comment.

“Right,” Loki says, shaking his head to clear it. “If we take out the map, I could .. point as far as I can remember the walk from here. I used to just walk from the feel of the places but seeing as I can’t feel them right now …”

“We’ll have to do with memory,” Thor finishes, folding out the sheet he’s fished from his bag to hold in front of them both. Loki ignores the prickling anxiety on his back as he focuses on the lines of mountains and hiking trails. He points a finger, trailing a particular one.

“Yes, well, this one ..” he begins, following the line with his eye, “it takes a turn around the mountain .. here, and that’s where I would go .. upwards, instead. If you took us there ..” He looks up, meeting Thor’s eyes. “I think I’d be able to find the way. It shouldn’t be too long of a hike, either.”

“Do you think we can make it before sundown?” Thor asks.

“Definitely, yes. It’s only, what, two in the afternoon?”

“Something like that.” Thor clears his throat, studying the map. “Well, could you point the direction? That would help if I am to transport us to that specific point.”

“Right.” Loki looks up, orienting himself. He spots the signpost leading upwards and towards the
fjäll. He points. “There. It turns along the way, but we’re heading for a mountain behind … yes, that one.”

Thor nods. “Are you ready to go again, then?”

“I guess so.”

They’re taken, for the third time that day, by the swirl of Bifrost, and land in a steeper, harsher terrain than the village’s. Thor sways for a moment.

“Phew,” he exhalles. “Travelling with Bifrost every other minute is taxing.”

Loki rolls his shoulders, blinking away dizziness. “We won’t have to use it again immediately, now,” he says. “I should know the way from here.”

They’re standing on a rugged path, further ahead leading through a cluster of close-standing pines. To the left the mountainside is rising, a steep terrain of alternating rocky ground and patches of low bushes or trees. Loki takes an abrupt turn off the path, putting his hand on the first rock and casting a watchful glance over his shoulder out of habit to make sure there are no wanderers watching his detour before he hauls himself upwards, gaining footing in the terrain and reaching for higher rocks. He pauses to look back at Thor, whose brow is furrowed in a slight grimace.

“Is that where we’re going?” Thor asks.


Thor hesitates for a moment. Then shrugs, making for the incline as well and hauling himself up with no difficulty whatsoever.

Loki climbs further, making sure to get proper hold of the rocks. “It’s not this steep for long,” he calls back to his brother. “We just have to make it past the first incline, to separate from the marked hiking routes.”

“I don’t mind,” Thor replies, making his way upwards with the admirable routine of a well-seasoned climber.

They climb in silence. Loki feels heat flushing his cheeks from the constant movement, the cold gifting the contrast of a slight bite in his flustered skin, and he has to keep himself from smiling openly. They should be invisible from the main route, by now, hidden by treetops, shrubbery, and cliffs they’ve already passed, and the movement and altitude are making him feel alive in a way he hadn’t realised he was missing. Mountaintops tall enough to still be layered with snow are visible in the distance, white peaks and ridges piercing the sky, and Loki can almost feel the cold radiate just from looking at them. The wind gets wilder the further up they get.

They’re both breathing harsher, by now, from the tax of hauling their own bodyweight up the cliffside. Thor stops for a second, taking a deep breath. “How did you make this trip when you lived here?” he asks, and Loki who’s a little ahead right now pauses as well to hear him better. “I swear you had no muscle mass when you first returned.”

Loki hesitates for a second. “I didn’t,” he says, continuing the climb. He can see the ridge up ahead for where the terrain evens out, becoming less of a climb and more of a hike again. At least for a while.

“Should’ve guessed that,” Thor says from below, following. Loki puts his hand on the edge, feet stepping up until he lands on his knees on the edge of a shelf. “You really just - stayed up there,”
Thor continues, grunting with the effort of the extra steep part just before the platform, “all alone - in the mountains.” He hauls himself the rest of the way, getting a foot planted on the flat surface and rising to his feet beside Loki. He plants his hands on his sides, looking over the valley.

He glances at Loki. “I always did know you were a hermit,” he finishes. “Guess I didn’t figure just how much until now.”

Loki gets to his feet as well and crosses his arms. “If you’re just going to make fun of me we can stop this trip right now.”

Thor turns to him, punching him lightly on the shoulder. Loki lets himself stumble for Thor’s amusement. “Ah, I’m only joking.”

He turns away from his brother. “We are to follow this ledge,” he says, looking along the now too-steep mountainside. There’s a narrow path alongside it. “Don’t you dare push me off.”

“But I would catch you again, of course,” Thor snickers behind him as Loki begins making his way across the narrow path.

He doesn’t look down over the edge, keeping his gaze firmly planted on his own boots and ignoring everything else. He’s not going to fall, despite all jokes of the scenario. He’s not going to.

It’s just, with his magic suppressed, it really isn’t a pleasant activity to be balancing on the edge of an abyss like this. He probably would survive the fall, even if Thor wasn’t fast enough with flying down to get him, but it wouldn’t be pleasant. Not in the slightest.

They make their way off, regardless, Loki suppressing a pathetic sigh of relief. On the other side is an uphill path (or, well, not an actual path, but he knows the way through well enough) going through a meadowy landscape of low trees and lush vegetation. They’ve made their way around the mountain, now, and the wind is still here. It’s nice. Quiet.

And yet, Loki finds himself feeling more and more jittery, when the walk should be doing him good, fresh air, all that. More stiff with every step he takes. Maybe it’s because Thor is here. It’s only strange, being back in this place. Everything he remembers from that time feels distant and blurry. And yet very, very personal.

“So you okay?” Thor asks him after a while in silence when Loki winces after a minor twist of his ankle. That goddamned ankle.

“It’s nothing,” he says, continuing to walk. It’s beginning to hurt again. Fucking hell.

“You seem … tense.”

“I’m not. So shut up.”

There’s silence for another minute. Then his ankle twists again, just a slight misstep but enough to give a little crunch, this time worse. “Fucking - fuck,” he snaps in a shout echoing through the valley as he hobbles on one leg, bowing down to take hold of the hurt one and nearly falling over.

“Brother, let’s take a break,” Thor says, putting a hand on Loki’s shoulder, but Loki wrenches away, stumbling with the force of the movement.

“I don’t want to take a break,” he snarls, righting himself and straightening his clothes. “I want to get this over with, let’s just go.” He tries to walk on but his ankle is sensitive after the twist and he’s limping worse than before. He stifles a growl of irritation. “I can’t believe this ridiculous foot, why isn’t it getting any better -?”
“You let it heal poorly the first time around,” Thor argues, “it grew back wrong. It just needs time to re-set everything to its proper place.”

“A lot of goddamn time,” Loki grumbles, still moving onwards, limping heavily and wincing with each step.

“Loki. You’re worn, let’s just sit down for a moment.”

Loki doesn’t answer. Thor has stopped behind him.

“Loki.”

Loki stops. “Fine, then!” he exclaims, throwing out his arms. “Let’s have your stupid break!”

They end up on a boulder by a couple of trees, looking over the edge of the meadowy incline they’re still walking, albeit less lush now, in the higher air. There’s the faint gurgling of a fall of water not far away, audible in the quiet when the brothers sit down.

“Do you have the coffee?” Loki asks sourly, settling back. Thor glances at him.

“You should eat something,” he says. “I think you would feel better.”

Loki’s stomach constricts with that thought. He’s really not very hungry, what with the nervousness of all this.

“Let’s have coffee first.”

Thor doesn’t answer for a second. “Can you just eat a sandwich? Please?” he says, and his voice is strained.

Loki almost lashes out in irritation. He should’ve never gone along with this ridiculous idea. Then he stops himself, just barely, forcing his shoulders to go down a notch. An argument wouldn’t make anything better.

And Thor is probably right, too.

He throws out a hand in a lazy gesture at Thor’s bag. “Give me one, then.”

Thor goes into the bag and hands Loki a bun wrapped in that cellophane thing. Loki had tried wrapping something in that, one day. He’d gotten so irritated with it he ended up going for a walk to let off steam after realizing shouting profanities at inanimate wrapping foil wouldn’t get him anywhere. Thor is somewhat at a natural with the sticky hell-wrap, to add to the frustration.

“It’s egg,” Thor says. “Is that alright?”

“Yes.” Loki peels back the wrap, going straight for a bite and ignoring any doubt accompanying the act of having to eat. He chews irritatedly while Thor gets out a sandwich for himself. His mouth fills with saliva and he’s afraid the nausea will get worse for a second, but then his body begins to calm already after the first bite is swallowed.

They eat in silence. Thor was right. The rest is good for his ankle, and the blood-sugar rise puts a damper on the uproar of emotions.

“We were further away than I remembered,” Loki says at some point, looking over the valley. “It’s probably going to take a while, getting up.”
Thor repositions on the stone. “We’ve already been walking for a good two hours. How much longer?”

“Don’t know. We might’ve .. taken a detour at some point. But I’m fairly certain I know where we are, now.”

“You’re fairly certain.”

“We’ll find our way.”

“Is your foot healing?”

“Yes. It’s better already.”

“We shouldn’t put too much strain on it, though.”

“Probably not.” Loki shrugs, and eats the rest of his sandwich.

They decide to move on and save the coffee. Dark clouds are drawing in, shielding the sun and it would indeed be neat to get to the house before both any potential harsh weather or even sundown. It sets early, and if Loki is being honest with himself as they move along the mountainsides and up, he’s not … entirely sure where they are, exactly. He didn’t use to navigate like this, mind you. He used to have his magic. Which, also, could give them light if the sun set and could shield them from the rain.

“I can always turn Stormbreaker into an umbrella,” Thor suggests, rather unnecessarily, seeing as he could also simply draw in the weather and stop the rain if it should come to that. But that’s one of his tricks, hiding his weapon in a disguise. Therein included changing his clothes and, for instance, braiding his beard instantaneously. Also known as the ‘makeover’; at least in Loki’s book. It's a good trick. The accompanying thunder and lightning also really gives the transformation that extra flair.

Hours pass. The sky gets darker.

“How close are we?” Thor asks, eyeing Loki’s ankle. It hasn’t caused problems again so far and aside from a little strain, it feels fine.

“Not far,” Loki tells him, keeping his gaze straight ahead.

Thor stops. “You have no idea where we are, do you?”

“I know where we are,” Loki objects, squinting at the surrounding trees and bushes “I’m just, I’m just not entirely sure .. it was supposed to be .. and we might’ve made a wrong turn at some point, but I think I recognize ..”

“We can’t just keep walking and hope it’s the right direction,” Thor says. “We won’t have a chance out here.” Loki turns to him.

“What do you propose, then? You’re the one who wanted to see the damned house in the first place. Which, it’s not even a house, it’s no more than - you know what, maybe we should just stop and go home, this is ridiculous and a stupid idea, anyway -”

“No, I want to -” Thor cuts in, pausing to search for words, “I want to see it. We’re all the way out here, now. I just wish it were easier to find.”
“Well I’m sorry I don’t have my magic but it wasn’t exactly my choice.”

“No, I’m .. I’m sorry,” Thor says. “Let’s keep walking, it’ll probably be fine.”

“It’s getting dark,” Loki says, looking away and feeling on the verge of pouting. “There are wolves out here.”

Thor raises his eyebrows at him. “We don’t have to worry about wolves. I have Stormbreaker.”

Loki shrugs, just barely resisting the urge to kick at the ground. “No. Fine. Let’s go, then.”

And they do, but the sky continues to get darker as Loki gets less and less certain of their direction. He thought he had it. Soon, the sun is setting, and he can’t recognize their surroundings. It’s getting colder, wind increasing. His jacket is closed. Light is still lingering, but the dark is already crawling in everywhere, like shadows; like long, slender fingers reaching through the cliffs and trees to touch their death-cold skin to anything living and breathing. To suck in warm breaths to their own icy heaviness. Loki finds himself focusing pointedly on the path ahead, on making it around the mountain and to the next valley. He’s pretty sure the shed must be somewhere near the next valley but the darkness is increasing and maybe he’s wrong. Maybe they’re lost and they’ll keep walking in the dark, thinking themselves safe but who ever really trusted the dark? The dark lurks and twirls and everybody knows it is the reign of the shadows. And shadows could be anything, really. The fabric of reality is thinner in the shadows. Shadows could ... be an endless void, just for one thing.

“I think it should be - somewhere around here,” Loki mumbles to his brother further ahead, breaking the silence, for no particular reason other than wanting to say something out loud. To hear it not get eaten by a smothering absence of senses. He can’t help but glance over his shoulder for a second, not able to shake the prickling sensation on his back. Nothing but creeping dark meets his eyes.

Thor looks back at him a second later, turning to walk backwards for a few paces. “Are you okay?”

Loki sends him a glare. “You keep asking that. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know.” Thor turns back, facing ahead. “Is it the dark?”

“It is not the dark,” Loki objects. Casting another glance back, just a quick one. There’s nothing there. “I only worry about finding the damned place.”

“We’ll go back if we can’t find it,” Thor says, looking around. The trees are thickening, here. “Come back another day, with a new permission from Fury. Or tomorrow. We’ve got two whole days to do this.”

“I don’t understand why you care so much,” Loki mutters, peering up the mountainside. There’s nothing there. It’s only shadows, there’s nothing there. Although, isn’t nothing exactly what he’s worried about?

“I told you already,” his brother replies, pushing away a tree branch in his way, and holding it out for Loki. “Watch out for this one.”

Loki moves past him and ahead, secretly thankful for having Thor at his back again.

“If you don’t think there’s any chance of us finding it, we can go back,” Thor says a few paces later. “We don’t have to search around in the dark like this.”

“I think we’re close,” Loki replies. The truth is, he’d rather get this over with than have to come out
here again. Or .. he’s not really sure why he’s not calling it off, actually. They could just go home. Maybe it’s the fact that somehow, the thought of leaving the dark, leaving it unsupervised and to its own devices; he’s not sure but somehow the idea of shifting place, environment, stance, is almost scarier than just staying.

The mountains get colder and the wind harsher.

“Loki, we can leave if you want to,” Thor says at a later point, trudging along behind him. Loki jumps a little at the words. There’d been quiet for a while. Space for sinister thoughts and imaginings to bloom in his mind.

“No, I want to find the stupid hut.”

“Right. I just don’t think we’re getting anywhere. And you’re scared of the dark.”

“I am not. I’m just concentrating. If I only had my magic, I could feel ..”

“We won’t be able to see anything when we arrive.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’ll have seen the gist of it, been there, you’ll be satisfied.”

“We can simply go somewhere to sleep for the night. Return tomorrow.”

Loki glances around. It’s gotten so dark he can barely see ten feet ahead. “It’s fine,” he says, continuing the hike. “We’re almost there.”

Hardly a minute later does Thor catch up to him, taking a light hold of his shoulder. Loki flinches. He didn’t mean to.

“Brother, you’re trembling. I think we should go home.”

“I don’t want to. It’s fine.”

“Loki. We’ll do it tomorrow.” Thor stops them both, turning Loki to face him by the shoulder.

“Stop that -” Loki protests, trying to wrench free, but Thor holds him fast. It doesn’t help that his body feels like it wants to shake out of itself, apart, perhaps crumble to merge with the forest bed and go into one with the scenery in an attempt to hide.

“This was my idea.” Thor says, placing his other hand on Loki’s other shoulder. “I thought it would work out like this, but we can wait. If you’re uncomfortable -”

“I’m not, Thor,” Loki tries to deflect but his voice is thin and shaky and betraying him despite his best efforts, “it’s only a little hike, a little cold -”

“You’re not feeling well.”

“I’m feeling absolutely fine, it’s nothing I cannot handle!”

“There’s no reason to walk around in the mountains aimlessly like this, Loki, and in the dark, I do not know why you insist!”

Loki draws back, or tries to, and resists the instinctual urge to shout something back and let the argument rise further. He swallows. “Just let me - it’s just around the corner, I know this place, I really think I do ..” Loki takes a step back, squinting at the dark. “Really, it should be close. If we just ..”
Thor looks at him, mouth half-open as if he wants to say something. But then he sighs. “Alright. Fine. We’ll look a little further. But not for long. If you start panicking worse than this, I’m taking you home.”

Loki turns his back with a huff, walking ahead to better ignore his brother. Thor follows.

The dark is heavy and feels almost foggy like it has texture of its own. Loki knows that isn’t the case. It isn’t anything and it isn’t alive. It is just the absence of light, is all. He keeps his eyes on the ground. Ignores his heartbeat threatening to race ahead. There is nothing to be afraid of. There isn’t.

Something stands out to him. A placement of trees. Something about the way darkness falls on the ground, the grass between plants, the bushes, the way the hill inclines. There might as well have been his own footprints drawn in the murky ground from how familiar it suddenly all feels.

“It’s here,” he says and it comes out quiet. “Thor - Thor, I know where we are!”

He turns back to his brother with a startled smile, and Thor raises his eyebrows. “Yes?”

“Yes, we just - we only have to go up here, really, it should be just over -” he cuts off, going for the incline to climb it. It’s not very steep and mostly mushy grass and vegetation. Thor follows behind him. Loki’s chest flutters with the excitement of finally knowing where they are along with the anxiety of the dark pressing in all around, and from where they’re actually heading.

They make it through a line of trees, and Loki can see a much familiar ledge - he used to sit there to look over the valley. Sit for hours. He used to walk down where he and Thor are currently working their way up the hill to harvest whatever plants he’d managed to get growing. To talk to the trees, or when he’d return from a hunt, he’d walk this same route.

He puts a hand on the grass. Last time he was here, snow was covering everything. He doesn’t look back at Thor before raising his foot to a higher ledge and pushing from there, hauling his body up, one foot on the platform, the other leg following, pushing with his hands to get both feet firmly planted and his back uncurling, head raising -

His stomach lurches at the sight of it.

How underwhelming this place is.

Thor hauls himself up beside him, to his feet, eyes caught on the house further up on a less steep hill. It’s hard to even make it out entirely in the dark; only a faint outline of something solid, raised, and tattered.

“This is .. it?” Thor asks, though Loki knows he saw it inside the stones (inside Loki’s head) back then. Admittedly, it had been winter in that particular vision.

Loki shrugs. “Not much, did I not say?”

His voice is oddly quiet. As if the dark and the wind a little wilder up here is swallowing it. Like a wall that makes it go only a few inches out and then not any further, the sound turning flat and stale.

He doesn’t move from where they stand. There’s something .. odd, about the place, ominous in a way, that makes him stay pinned where he is. Like it’s a cursed place and going near it would be a bad idea. As if it’s maybe .. it’s better to stay away.

“I do wish we could’ve seen it in daylight,” Thor says, glancing at Loki, but staying where he is, too.

“Now you know where it is,” Loki says. Thor can come back here if he wishes to. Loki himself
won’t promise anything about ever returning here again.

There’s quiet for a moment. The dark feels oppressive, even more so with the almost nightmarish vision of the hut further ahead, like a tunnel of stifling, thick absence of light and that house at the end of it, the only option of where to go if you are not to be eaten by whatever lurks in these folds of night.

“Could we go to it?” Thor asks. “Just for a quick look.”

Loki stands rigidly. It’s just a damned house.

“Yes, alright,” he says eventually. He doesn’t really mean it, though, and so his legs don’t obey when Thor begins to move. He stops after a few steps, turning back.

“Loki?”

“Yes. I’m coming.”

There’s a long, awkward pause of frozen limbs and non-movement. Thor cocks his head and Loki’s face heats. Then the message from his brain manages to reach his legs, and he takes a step. Another. He moves past Thor, who quietly follows a moment later. At first, it gets scarier the closer they get. It’s probably some combination of the darkness flaring his anxiety, the exhaustion of hiking for hours and walking on sore legs, and then revisiting this place actually making him nervous, making his body and mind react in an irrational amount of fear.

Growing, growing, growing, with each step he takes.

But then, suddenly, the shed getting closer and larger, the porch only feet away, close enough to make out details, it suddenly seems … harmless.

Just a house.

He stops in front of the steps to the porch.

“It is really the place from the Stones,” Thor says, catching up to stand by Loki’s side.

Loki nods. He glances at the pole to the left; that’s where he’d been sitting when Danvers went to collect him. Wrapped in blankets. Extraordinarily pathetic, that, but how should he have known someone would be coming to witness it? “Well, yes,” he says. “I did tell you that.”

“It looks different,” Thor says.

“It’s dark.”

“And the snow is gone.”

There’s quiet for a moment more. Then Thor says, “I can’t believe you lived in this for three years.”

“Don’t you say a word about the house. I warn you.”

“It’s just a little tattered, is all, even you could see that.”

“Of course I can,” Loki half-hisses. “It was functional. That’s what mattered.”

Thor squints. “I do wish we had your magic so we could see something.”

“Actually,” Loki says, pausing in thought. “I think there is … or, there should be a light inside, somewhere.”
“Oh?”

“Yes.” He takes a tentative tread onto the first of the steps. It creaks under his weight, having gone unused for months. Then he goes for the next one. Up onto the porch. Then across. Thor follows.

Loki doesn’t hesitate to open the door. He’s tired of the hesitation, now. It swings inward, revealing a dark room, only dimly lit by the night sky shining through the lone window in the right wall. It looks .. oddly underwhelming. As if he’d expected something to spring from the dark and attack, or for something ancient to sit and brood in a corner, but all that meets him are familiar floorboards, musty walls and the frayed ceiling. The dusty window. A small stack of books in a corner. The bed in the back left corner.

He goes inside. Ignoring Thor’s lingering in the door and going straight for the books beside the window. Behind a stack, he finds what he’s looking for: a dark-green petrol lantern. The joint of the handle creaks with rust when he picks it up, swinging faintly in his grip as he gets back to his feet from a crouch. He turns to face the opening of the door.

“You could ignite this, couldn’t you?” he asks Thor. “There’s petrol in it, should be more somewhere outside. All it needs is a spark.”

Thor casts a wary glance to each side inside the door before taking a step forward. The floorboards creak as he walks slowly across the room, inspecting what seems like every nook and cranny of the room before he finally reaches Loki, turning to look at him, instead.

“Well?” Loki asks, nodding down at the lantern in his hands. Thor drags his eyes off Loki’s face and down, taking the object into his own grip. He turns it gingerly, examining the glass and metal with a slight frown.

“Just -” Loki interrupts, impatient, taking the lantern back and holding it up. “You lift the top. See?” He turns the lid a notch to the left, then lifting it up, the metal frame inside following until a sodded wick springing from a container at the bottom is revealed. “Light it,” he prompts. When he lived here, he’d use his magic, himself, and later when that didn’t work too well, matches. He’s not sure where those are, though.

Thor lifts a hand, two fingers extended. He flicks them towards the wick which sputters with a sudden, bursting flash of light. Then a flame erupts from the sparks, calm, a soft wave. Loki lowers it back down into the lamp where it continues to dance softly behind the glass.

The glow from the lantern casts a soft light to their immediate surroundings. Loki lets it dangle from his hand gripping the handle, flickering a little as it swings with a faint creak. He looks up.

Thor is frowning at the stack of books. Then the wall, dirty and uncared for. Then the place by the door where some of the floor is missing. Then the ceiling; same state. He narrows his eyes at the bed, the only place suitable for sitting, and the next moment he has grabbed the lantern from Loki’s hand and is walking towards it. Loki blinks, before hurriedly following his brother.

Thor holds up the lantern to cast its light over the mattress. There are blankets splayed near the foot of the bed, sprawling onto the floor; exactly where they’d been left many months ago. So there hasn’t been anybody here. Perhaps some of the shrouding spells and avoidance compulsions have stayed in place, after all.

The mattress itself .. well, it really is kind of disgusting. Dirty, literal dirt from when he’d slept with his boots on, and littered with rather comprehensive splotches of yellow sweat-stains from sleepless, feverish nights. Generally very .. greasy-looking. He wouldn’t in a million years so much as sit on it, now. Back then it hadn’t really mattered.

“That’s gross, Loki,” Thor says, wrinkling his nose. Loki grimaces.
“Stop looking at it, then,” he objects, reaching for the lantern to take it back with perhaps a little more force than necessary.

Thor turns from the bed again. Loki honestly feels a little nauseous looking at it, remembering nights spent there and so he turns as well.

“This is really where you lived,” Thor says. Their eyes are getting used to the dim light, by now, and it’s easier to make out the whole of the room. It really isn’t much. Rather embarrassing in its sparseness, but Loki knew that when he agreed to let Thor see it.

“Yes, well, I did warn you about it.”

“It’s not ..” Thor begins. “It’s just so lacking. There isn’t - there is absolutely nowhere to store food. No water.”

“There are streams from the glaciers nearby, there are suitable containers outside. And I would .. cook over fire. Smoke meats outside. I grew vegetables and fruits.”

“Just admit you weren’t eating, Loki.”

“Well, I was rather sick for the latter of the while.”

“I wonder why.”

Loki refrains from retorting. It’ll only end worse for himself. They stand for a minute in silence, just watching the pathetic excuse for a home; it never was, really. It was a place he lived, but it was never a home.

Loki feels a yawn coming on and attempts to stifle it but without luck. He holds a fist to his mouth as it overtakes, deep and long. “Sorry,” he mutters as it wears off. “A bit tired.”

“Should we sit down for a minute outside?” Thor proposes. “We could take the blankets. I only .. I mean, we’re here, now, we might as well stay a little.”

“Do you think the coffee’s gone cold?” Loki asks with a pointed eyebrow.

“I’m afraid so, yes. A thermo can only really keep it warm for so long.”

“Oh, well,” he yawns, another one coming on. “Probably for the best. Yes, let’s sit outside if you’re so keen on lodging in this dump. Not that I get it.”

“Come now, Loki,” Thor says, picking up the blankets and inspecting them, probably for holes or any other .. disgustingness. “It won’t hurt to stay for a little while.”

The blankets seem to pass the test. Loki feels himself flushing red in the dark; he wouldn’t have been caught dead living in this mess, had he had the choice. But, well, he probably would have eventually precisely been caught, or found, very much dead in this exact mess, had Danvers not located him before then. He shudders to think about it, and he’s not sure if it’s fear, some odd nostalgia, a combination, or something else entirely.

Loki gives Thor the lantern and goes for the door, leaving it open for his brother. He stands leaning sideways against the pole by the stairs, faint light creeping out the house behind him. Suddenly, he’s feeling very tired. Muscles heavy, eyes drooping. Everything feels a little unreal; the stars on the sky, the familiar creaks of the house, the sounds of Thor shaking out dust of the blankets and all the well-known views. Like it’s an illusion, or a dream, everything tranquil and oddly .. distant, airy, yet
somehow still too close and .. loud. A little overwhelming. He jumps when Thor suddenly stands by his side, realizing he was getting caught in yet another fixation with the shadows surrounding the house, irrational thoughts of things hiding there, illusions and thin folds of reality and - whatever else. He looks at his brother instead, a quick glance. It feels safer already, with the familiar figure by his side.

Thor hands him a blanket, then sits down. Loki wraps the coarse fabric around himself before following the movement, sitting with his legs hunched on the bottom step and blanket tight around his body.

“I can see why you chose this place,” Thor says after a little while. Loki blinks, forcing himself to focus. “The view is beautiful here.”

“You mean the night sky.”

“Right now, yes. I imagine the valley is magnificent during the day, though.”

“...it is.”

Next, Thor frees an arm from his own blanket-cocoon, and then it’s slung around Loki’s shoulders, pulling him closer to lean in sideways.

“What are you - Thor,” Loki complains, wiggling under his brother’s strength, but Thor doesn’t relent. His arm stays, only getting impossibly firmer as he hugs Loki close to himself.

“There, there, brother,” he says, amusement clear as day in his voice. “Just relax. Let us enjoy this cherished moment of brotherly love.”

“Let go of me.”

“We’ve got to keep each other warm in this horrendously chilly night!”

“Stop it.”

“Not to mention safe, Loki, who knows what might be lurrrkking,” he lifts his other hand to Loki’s face, irritatingly close, waggling his fingers like spider-legs, “in the dark out there. No, better to stay together, surely.”

“You are a pestilence,” Loki sulks, but giving up the struggle and letting himself lean stiffly against his brother.

Thor wiggles him in his hold like a reluctantly held cat. “You love me regardless,” he says cheerfully.

“That’s stretching it a bit far. Currently, I’m tolerating you.”

“Oh, shut up. What was that entire ‘never doubt that I love you’,,” he makes an irritatingly sincere-sounding mockery of the words, “business, then?”

“I had to give you something, or you’d get mad when you found out I let the Frost Giants in.”

Thor stiffens. “Wait,” he says, voice lower. “You let them in? At my coronation?”

Loki pauses. Oops. He’d rather forgotten, to be honest, that Thor didn’t know about that. Didn’t he? Had no one really figured that out, after he ‘perished’ (and very damn near succeeded) underneath the Bifrost? Or did they just not talk about it, to not smudge his memory?
“I .. well,” he begins. “Right ..”

“You little shit!” Thor exclaims, pushing Loki on the shoulder so he falls away again, hitting the pole hard on his other side. He turns hurriedly to press his back to it as Thor stares incredulously.

Thor huffs. “You - you did that?”

“I - well I thought you knew already!” Loki protests.

“You thought I knew! What kind of an excuse is that!”

“To be fair, I do think mother figured it out towards the end -”

“And she didn’t tell me!”

“Well, no, I was dead, remember? She probably wouldn’t want to smite my memory like that.”

“You’d done plenty of smiting your own memory before that, Loki, I hardly think -”

“Of course, she did tell you about my parentage. That, I think, would also rather count as ‘smiting’ -”

“You’re a damned idiot, Loki,” Thor says in something near a growl. “And you really are asking for it.” He leans forward, a hand twitching and a dangerous glint in his eye.

“Oh no - no, don’t you dare,” Loki objects, drawing back, but he’s stopped by the pole and then it’s too late: Thor pulls him in again, this time with substantially more force and his one arm locking Loki’s arms to his sides. Thor holds his head to his chest, driving the knuckles of his other hand into Loki’s scalp with violence like he’s trying to get sparks to fly.

“Thor - Thor! Stop it -- I’m serious, you’re ruining my hair -”

“Be calm and accept your punishment, traitor,” Thor snickers, continuing his destructive affair. “You should be thankful, really, that this is all you’re getting.”

“All I’m - I died because of that, Thor, well almost -- and any way I would sooner be flogged than - ah, Thor, stop it!”

Thor laughs and Loki cries his protests. It goes on forever.

Eventually, still, Loki’s curse of an older brother relents, and Loki himself draws back, attempting to smooth down the mess of curls.

“You of all people know this hair hasn’t ever been easy to keep in check,” he grumbles. “It is really very difficult to style, Thor, not like yours, the damned perfect ‘golden mane’.”

“Oh, it’s been better in recent years, hasn’t it? After you’ve stopped trying to style the curls away.”

“That’s not the point. You should know to respect my struggle.”

“Then you should know better than to ruin my coronation day!”

“Oh, get over it. It’s been several years.”

Thor huffs, but he’s smiling. They’re silent for a moment while Loki finishes with his hair. He gives up, eventually. There’s not really a point to it out here.
“I am sorry, you know,” he then says. Thor glances at him.

“About my coronation?”

“Yes.” He makes a vague and quick hand gesture in the empty air. “All of that.”

Thor is quiet for a second. “I am, too,” he says. Loki frowns at him.

“You’re sorry? I’m the one who -”

“I do realize you were, indeed, being a little shit,” Thor interrupts. Loki sighs.

“You have grown terribly fond of that expression,” he attempts to point out, but Thor continues over him.

“- but I went along with a lot of it. I mean .. I could’ve noticed something was off, too,” he says. Loki grimaces.

“Thor, you don’t have to -”

“No, I’m serious. I .. wasn’t a very good brother. For many centuries.”

Loki looks away. Something in him is cackling with joy, yearning for the words leaving Thor, while another part just wants his brother to be quiet and leave the past where it’s ought to be.

“I was .. arrogant,” Thor continues despite it. “I’ve learnt that. I wasn’t very perceptive about the people around me. I was hurtful. I let you get hurt by other people, and I hurt you myself.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Loki says, studying the grass sprouting by the stairs.

“I don’t know if it was,” Thor says. “I think it’s very .. common, for siblings to hurt each other throughout time, you know? I don’t think I was worse than most, as such, considering our upbringing and .. culture, I guess. But I left you in the dust. I was .. firstborn, the throne was supposed to be mine, and I .. I was advantaged in a lot of ways. Yet I stopped standing up for you.” He sighs. Loki glances at him. Thor is looking out over the dark valley.

“You didn’t have very many friends,” he continues, and even if it’s a well-known fact and an ancient sentiment, Loki can’t help the twist of mingled hurt and quiet shame the runs through his chest. “At times, not any. You and Sif got upset with each other .. I don’t know, Loki. You were isolating yourself more and more. I guess, I, I still cared for you as my brother, I loved you of course, but I wasn’t there for you. You - I don’t think you were feeling well. And I should’ve noticed.”

Loki stays quiet.

“I shouldn’t have been hurtful to you,” Thor says. “I should’ve been standing up for you when you were standing alone, and I didn’t. Father was harsh on you, Asgard was a difficult place for you to grow up in, our friends would make fun of you - admittedly because you made fun of them, as well, humiliated them, really, those pranks did get .. horrible, at times -”

“I had mother,” Loki interrupts the ramble. “And I was choosing to be on my own, besides. I didn’t like your friends, you know. Not to mention the rest of the damned nobles.”

“You used to like our friends,” Thor argues, looking at him. “We used to have fun.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Yes,” Thor agrees quietly. “It was.”
There’s silent for another moment. It’s tense and awkward, suddenly.

“Look,” he continues, the atmosphere suddenly all uncomfortably sober and serious, “all I’m trying to say is .. yes, you were far out back then. But I played my part, as did father, and mother, and the whole of Asgard. I realize that. I’m sorry I wasn’t there when you needed someone. I’m sorry I wasn’t there when Asgard was on the brink of war, because of me, and you were standing as Regent Prince with all the responsibility on your shoulders, mother occupied with tending to the Allfather -”

“Thor, you forget I was the one who got you banished in the first place,” Loki cuts him off. “I goaded you into going to Jotunheim, even if I never actually meant for us to make it there. I - wanted to have you out of Asgard, I wanted, I wanted you out, or disliked at least because I wanted to show -” he cuts off. Huffs. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I’m sorry, Loki,” Thor repeats as if that’s any kind of answer. “I am. You made your mistakes, as I did mine. You weren’t alone in making the mess. I’m sorry it all landed on you, even if you did make hurtful and terrible choices. I’m sorry our friends weren’t there, that they betrayed you when you needed loyalty the most -”

“They were right to, they had seen through my scheme -”

“Perhaps they were. But you weren’ the only one at fault, is all I’m saying. You needed a brother in the years prior, during that time especially, and I didn’t have my eyes open. You were alone, you were miserable and getting worse and worse -”

“Thor, stop, thank you, I -” Loki huffs, looking away. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do but it - it just wasn’t your responsibility. You know that well.”

“I know,” Thor says. Loki can feel his eyes on him. “It wasn’t. And I don’t mean to make a big fuss - we’re both tired, it’s late, but I .. I want you to know, Loki, I see you, now. And I never wanted to hurt you, but I did - which doesn’t make me responsible for your actions, all it is is I realize I played my part, too. I see it. I could’ve been there for you, as a brother, and I was the opposite.”

Loki is quiet for a few seconds. “It’s still not your fault,” he says. His eyes are getting heavy again, fixed on the grass. Everything is a little blurry. “It was never your responsibility to bear. None of it.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t be sorry about it,” Thor says. “And want to be different.”

“You are different,” Loki says. “Too much so, at times. Now you’re just .. putting yourself in danger instead of everyone around you.”

“I admit I like that much better,” Thor says with a little smile.

“I tried to kill you, Thor,” Loki says. It blurs out of him without any thought. He wraps the blanket a little tighter. "More than once," he adds in a mutter.

“I’m glad you feel differently about me, now,” Thor says after a quiet moment. “I was angry at you for a long time, too. I think it’s been long enough. I think we’ve both suffered enough.”

There’s silence again.

“Thank you,” Loki then says. A million emotions are coursing through him at once, gratefulness for a million different things. Those two words are the only ones he can think to try and fit with all of them inside. A hand touches his shoulder and squeezes it. Not his neck, as it would’ve been in the past. Thor has avoided that area carefully ever since Loki came back.
“I’ve forgiven you a long time ago, Loki,” Thor says. “Can you forgive me?”

Loki wants to protest. He wants to snap, and snarl at Thor that there’s nothing to forgive, and maybe that’s true but it doesn’t change the feelings that had pestered him for so many years. That Thor was to blame for everything. That Loki had been betrayed, wronged, and Thor was at the root of it all. The Golden Prince. The root of the problem. Thor should’ve persisted. He left Loki with Thanos, or in the cell under Golden Asgard. They held the funeral without him and Thor never would listen or see or talk about any of it. Loki is not really sure what he feels anymore. Who holds blame for what, in the twisted equation held by these most suppressed parts of his mind.

“It’s ridiculous,” he finds himself saying. “You shouldn’t be the one apologizing.”

“Few things are decidedly right or wrong,” Thor says with a shrug. “I may have been in the right at times, as well, but I did many things that I regret. I regret dismissing you, I regret treating you as my lesser. I regret insulting and hurting you. I regret forgetting about you when you needed me to remember. I regret stomping on you in my own quest for greatness, I regret letting you fall for my own gain. I regret leaving you alone, entirely to your own devices in a time where you perhaps needed someone most, after being in the hands of Thanos, or when mother died. Perhaps you would've trusted me to know you survived Svartalfheim, then. I regret that I couldn't see past my own hurt to give you a helping hand, I regret that I didn't try talking to you after New York. I didn't take the opportunities you gave me to talk. I think that would've made a lot of things perhaps a little easier, had I been able to. And I need to know if you can forgive me for it.”

Loki is speechless for a second, mouth open and no words but a few strangled sounds coming out. Then he sighs. He closes his eyes and leans forward to hide his head in his hands. He sits like that for a long moment.

“Could you just .. could you give me a little time?” he asks, not sure what he wants the time for, exactly. His head is throbbing, he can’t keep his thoughts glued together. Nothing is making sense. “I’m .. I don’t understand what it is you want me to forgive,” yes you do “and I ... I’m not sure what I think about any of this. You want me to forgive you, although I was clearly the greater issue in all of this, and I - I don’t know. I don’t know, Thor.”

Thor is quiet for a moment. “Alright,” he says, but he sounds disappointed. “Of course you can have time.”

There’s quiet again. “Maybe we should go back to New Asgard,” Loki says. “It’s late.”

“Could we just sit here for a little while?” Thor asks. His voice is getting cut, betraying his emotions. “Could you ..” he continues a moment later. “Please, Loki, could you come here for a moment?”

Loki lifts his head. Thor has his one arm hovering out from his body, almost anxious in the half-way movement, making space where Loki was leaning against him earlier. Before this stupid conversation.

Loki doesn’t say anything, just sits back to let Thor wrap his arm around him again, leaning against his older brother’s sturdy frame. Everything smells familiar. Loki lets himself slump, turning to rest his forehead against Thor’s shoulder, his knees against Thor’s thigh. His arms hug each other underneath the blanket.

He tries to focus on the warmth, the scents, the scruff of Thor’s beard against his ear. The gentle sounds of the night and mountains. The coarse wood underneath them. Rather than his own stupid thoughts, tangling together in a big, indecisive mess of mass. This is all stupid. He almost wants to cry with the frustration of it but that would be even more stupid, and he’d rather continue hiding his face in his brother’s shoulder than burst into tears and then have to explain that. To his brother who,
despite all the ridiculousness, is here. Close.
Loki doesn’t understand one single bit of it.

He’s being moved, he belatedly registers. Put down somewhere, his back meeting something .. soft. Fabric rustles. He’s wearing his jacket, zipped shut in front, and he’s wrapped in .. something .. the blanket? Right, there was a blanket.

“What -” he tries, blinking his eyes open. His sight is unfocused, eyelids heavy, voice croaked.
Oh. He must’ve fallen asleep.
Thor’s face over him comes slowly into focus, dimly lit by the soft glow of their lantern. “It’s alright, Loki,” he mumbles. “Go back to sleep.”
The blanket is tugged tighter around him. Are there .. several blankets? It’s very soft.

“What are you -” Loki begins, turning his head with a sigh and closing his eyes again. “What are you doing?”
“I’ve just moved you inside,” Thor says. Loki blinks to see him crouching by his side, putting something on the ground. “It’s a good thing you have so many blankets here,” he continues. Loki is not sure why that is such a good thing. “Figured we could just stay overnight.”

“Oh,” he replies, closing his eyes again. “Hm. Suppose so ..”
The world fades.

He wakes back up to quiet. Eerie quiet. Unfamiliar smells.
His eyes fly open, and for a moment there, he’s absolutely sure he’s been kidnapped. He doesn’t know where he is. Teleported somewhere. Someone is messing with him, someone is out to hurt him -

Within seconds, he’s on his feet. He sways, head fogging with the suddenness of standing up as he stumbles in something wrapped around him and has to reach out a hand to support himself against the wall. Oh. The wall. Right.
He looks down, and recognizes the floorboards. Beside him on the ground is a puddle of blankets, familiar blankets, half of which his legs are tangled in. He tries to step out of it, and stumbles again, opting instead to just sit back down on the floor. He does so with a thump.

It’s cold, he registers. He’s still wearing his jacket. He reaches for the second blanket and slings it over his shoulders, wrapping it like a cape, when he realizes the thing lying beneath the blankets, the thing he’s been sleeping on, is Thor’s jacket; large and blue and perfect as a makeshift sleeping spot. Or maybe not perfect but, well .. softer than the ground. Right, Thor.

Thor.

Loki’s eyes flick to a blanket lying abandoned next to his own. Someone has been sleeping there.
He looks at the window. It’s light, out. Morning, supposedly.
There’s no sign of Thor anywhere in the house, except for the jacket he’s left. His bag is gone, Stormbreaker is not visible anywhere, waiting for its master propped against a wall.

Loki gets to his feet again, this time slower to avoid lightheadedness, carefully de-tangling himself from the blanket wrapped in his legs. He stands still for an indecisive, hollow moment, looking at the empty room. Then he starts in a beeline for the door.

Outside is icy. He wraps the blanket closer around his neck, even if he isn’t actually feeling cold, himself; that doesn’t change the shiver running through him at the sight of the untouched landscape. He looks around on the porch. There’s no one here. Nothing.

He walks to stand on the top of the stairs, looking over the decline of meadow in front of the house. “Thor?” he calls, and his voice sounds irritatingly small. There’s only quiet in response. No warm voice calling to answer.

“Thor?” Loki tries again, louder.

Stormbreaker is gone. Thor isn’t here. He’s taken Stormbreaker and left. He’s left Loki to be on his own up here, he doesn’t want him anymore because Loki was a goddamn idiot yesterday -

He reminds himself to think logically. Thor could be out … taking a walk. Maybe Stormbreaker is just somewhere else, maybe Thor took it with him somewhere, he --simply went to take a piss. That was all. He could still be here, could very well be somewhere near, he’s just not in the house but he could be here.

But Loki’s knees are shaking, just slightly, as he makes his way down the stairs. His legs feel weak, his head spinning. He staggers back and around the house to look behind it. No Stormbreaker leaned against the wooden planks. No sign of Thor. Nothing.

Thor has left.

He’s left Loki here, alone.

Because he doesn’t want him.

Because Loki broke the last straw of their already horribly fractured bond, yesterday.

He makes his way to the front of the house again. Calm down, he tells himself. He can walk to the village by the mountains. If nothing else, the authorities will come to get him when the day is up and he needs to go back to New Asgard. It’s fine.

It’s fine.

It’s not. It’s not fine.

Thor has tired of him, he’s left him because he has finally had enough. He’s going to reject him when Loki returns to New Asgard. Loki is going to get thrown into a cell instead, no contact with anyone for the rest of his life, dark and quiet and isolated, except for perhaps the occasional experimentation done to him because he is an outcast, he is abnormal, he is in a body that in no way is his own because neither state of it feels true to him, neither state is true. They’ll take him and use his freakishness for whatever purposes they deem fit. It wouldn’t be the first time. He knows they want to. No one will care. Everyone will agree it’s for the better.

He’s alone. He might as well stay here in this lousy shed of a house, forever. He has no right to go back to his brother, Thor deserves better.
There’s a flash like lightning, though the sky is clear, and it disorients Loki for a moment, breaking his smouldering, explosive quiet. He blinks. It came from the forest beginning a little away from the house.

He staggers toward it, not thinking at all. His breath is not working. Everything is slanting. Hazy.

Thor emerges from the treeline, bag slung over his shoulder and carrying Stormbreaker in his hand. His forehead creases in the distance.

“Loki?” he calls, and Loki comes to a halt. He still can’t breathe, why can’t he breathe?

“I’m sorry,” he says, but it’s not loud enough. Thor walks faster, frown increasing, something like worry (or disgust) growing on his face. “I’m sorry!” Loki calls to him, standing rigid and frozen in place. “Thor, I’m - I’m so sorry - I -” He cuts off, breath coming in a single, strangled gasp. “I forgive you,” he cries. “I do, please, I forgive you, whatever you want, please don’t leave, please -”

Thor reaches him, drops Stormbreaker to the ground with a heavy thump before reaching out both arms and pulling Loki close to himself. Loki realises, only in contrast to the other, steadier body, that he’s trembling. His heartbeat races against Thor’s chest. He’s holding him. He’s close, he’s here. He’s right here.

“Shh, Loki,” Thor says, voice muffled in Loki’s hair, the head he’s cradling against his own shoulder. Cradling. Not crushing. “Take a breath. Come on. It’s okay, listen to me. I’m here. I’m here. I’m not leaving, I’m here.”

“I’m - sorry,” Loki gasps out between insufficient breaths. “I don’t know why I - I’m sorry. I couldn’t - I didn’t know -”

“It’s okay, brother. You’re okay. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“I forgive you, Thor. I do - you don’t have to -- I was angry, I used to be angry but I’m not anymore, and it - none of it was your fault, it never was, it was never your responsibility and I swear I’ve forgiven you so long ago, I shouldn’t ever have had to -”


They stand like that for some time. Loki’s breathing eases gradually, the panic replacing itself with increasing, overwhelming shame the more it fades. Thor just holds him, stroking his hair back and breathing slowly in a steady rhythm for Loki to follow.

“I’m an idiot,” Loki says eventually, mumbled into Thor’s shoulder.

“It’s alright,” Thor tells him. “So am I, at times. If only very occasionally.”

Loki huffs.

“But no,” Thor continues warmly, “you weren’t correct in assuming that I’d left you here for good.”

Loki lifts a hand from where he’d been clutching at Thor’s back, to grasp at his own forehead. It hurts, right temple throbbing with a deep pulsating sensation. Thor squeezes his shoulder, then pulls back. He keeps a hand on Loki’s upper arm, scrutinizing his face. Loki swallows the shame and looks up to meet his brother’s eyes.

“Would you like some coffee?” Thor asks.
Loki blinks. “Coffee?”

“I went home to get a fresh one,” Thor says with a hint of a smile. Loki doesn’t know what to say for a long moment.

Then he manages to get out, “yes. Please.”

They walk back towards the house together but instead of going into it, Thor leads them towards the hill in front. The sun peeks out and lights up the scenery.

“Let’s sit here,” he says, “to look over the valley. It's beautiful.”

Loki doesn’t respond. Just sits down in the grass, resisting the urge to draw his legs tight into his chest. He peels off the blanket still over his shoulders; not really sure why he brought that. He’s not really sure he was even actually, truly awake when he went outside and freaked out, in the first place.

“You were sleeping so peacefully, this morning,” Thor says, rummaging in his bag, “the whole night through, it seemed. For once. I didn’t want to wake you up.” He fishes up a thermo flask, then two plastic mugs. He unscrews the lid.

“Did you sleep well?” Loki asks in response. He clears his throat when his voice sounds a little too anemic for his tastes.

“I did. A heavy sleeper, all that.”

“You gave me your jacket.”

“I always get overheated when I sleep. The blanket was enough for me.”

Thor hands him a pink mug with steaming black liquid inside. Loki takes it. “Thank you,” he says, curling his fingers around the pleasant warmth.

“You’re welcome,” Thor replies, taking a sip of his own. “So, did you mean that? You forgive me?” He glances at Loki with a sly smile. “Or was it just because you thought I was abandoning you.”

Loki wants to crawl into a hole and hide forever. “Of course I meant it,” he says instead.

“So I’m forgiven. The past is in the past.”

“Don’t let it go to your head,” Loki mumbles, taking a sip of coffee and squinting at the scenery. It settles in his stomach, the drink, and it feels strengthening.

Thor watches him for a second. “I know that doesn’t mean you think everything was my fault. If that’s what you were conflicted about, yesterday,” he then says.

“Good. Because it wasn’t. I think I mentioned that.”

“You did.”

Loki fiddles with the pink cup, turning it in his grip and watching the liquid splash against the sides. “You know I’m not your responsibility.”

“I do,” Thor says.

“No, Thor, I’m not sure you actually do,” Loki says, a hint of irritation entering his voice. He
spends a second stifling it. “You act as if .. as if my problems are yours to take care of. They’re not.”

Thor stays quiet. Looking at him. Finally, Loki looks back, raising his eyebrows in a deliberate provocation.

“Do you get that? You’re not supposed to take my wrongs onto your own shoulders, Thor.”

“I get that.”

“And still, every time I’m in deep shit, you come to pick me up, sort it out. As if I’m your responsibility.”

“I know. I didn’t use to do that, either, did I? I used to dismiss you.”

“Yes, and that’s exactly my point. You don’t have to apologize for living your own life. You’re not supposed to take care of me, I’m supposed to take care of me. You were in your full right to dismiss me at any point that you did .”

“I was. I was in my full right. But I don’t want you to be hurt and unwell.” Thor takes a sip of coffee. “That’s all this is. I used to dismiss you, and I was in my right to do that. Now I don’t want to. I feel differently, I’ve learned. I want us to be brothers, and I’m asking forgiveness for the times I have hurt you, the times I was not kind, so we can be brothers on equal terms.”

“And I am saying I forgive you,” Loki says. He’s confused.

“Good. That’s all I need.”

Loki takes a breath. “I -” he cuts off. “You could leave me, if you wanted,” he eventually says. “Let me go. You don’t have to stay, Thor.”

“I know I don’t have to,” Thor replies. “That’s not why I’m staying.”

Loki stares at the declining slope. The familiar lines of twining pines and bushes. The places he used to go hunting. The snow-covered mountaintops all around. He listens to the wind howl in valleys and between cliffs. In the crumbling wood of the house behind them.

“Please don’t make promises, Thor,” he says. “They are almost never kept.”

“I’m not,” Thor replies with a shrug. “I’m not promising anything. I am your brother, is all. That’s not the same thing. It doesn’t mean I’ll take your bullshit unconditionally, you know that.”

“I know that.”

Thor reaches out a hand, squeezing Loki’s knee. “You are my brother, Loki, and my friend. You do annoy the living Hel out of me at times, yes .. but never doubt that I do love you.”

Loki looks at Thor. “Was that ..?”

“That’s what you told me, right? More or less.”

“Oh, you are so sappy.”

“You’re the one who said it first!”

“Well, yes, it was cute one time. It was cute when I said it.”
“It was sappy. You know it.”

“I told you already, I had to outweigh ruining your coronation. Let my dignity suffer a little for the greater good.”

“So we’re back at the coronation, are we? What, do you want me to tickle you, is that it?”

“I do rather think you should’ve forgiven me by now. Besides, you don’t even want to be king.”

“No, but it’s the principle of it that matters. You did those things specifically to hurt my feelings, and I will resent you for it forever.”

“Oh please, brother, I didn’t give a hoot about your feelings when I did that …”

They sit on the hillside for a while as such, the sun warming through their clothes and lighting up the budding green all around them. Spring really is on its way. Two brothers, in the sun. For a while, there, the rest of the world doesn’t seem to matter very much. Loki forgets the device fastened around his ankle, the fact that they’re on a lease and that the mountains are not endless, free territory for him to roam. He forgets the past, right then, in order to have room for the present. Not that the past doesn’t linger in him; just that some things are growing in importance, and perhaps outweighing some of the older wounds for a bit. He forgets the fact that he’s not, really, supposed to belong anywhere or be allowed to have a family at all. He’s been forgetting that particular thing a lot, as of late. It has been rather pleasant. Really, for a little while, they’re just there, together.

They're home.

Chapter End Notes

So if anyone who might've enjoyed this story has some prompts in this same-ish genre they would like to see realized, feel free to send! I'm not too sure how messaging works on here, but I'm on tumblr under the same name. Do come chat if you want somebody to chat with, prompts or not, by the way :) :) :)

Also, I'm getting to the LOVELY comments on the last chapter and will be answering soon, can't wait to get into that!

Later addition: THANK YOU for all your comments on this chapter! I will respond, I promise! I read and love every one and I'm going to take out time to reply, too. It means so much to me that you've all let me know such sweet things. I'll be getting to it soon <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!