Monster Culture

by gyabou

Summary

Written for the 2014 Norse Big Bang.

When Loki is injured by Kurse in Thor: The Dark World, Thor pleads his case to the All-Father and Loki is given the chance to repay his wrongs on Midgard in the care of Bruce Banner. Over the course of a year, the two navigate the city of Boston and try to figure out what it means to be human and what it means to be a monster.
The Monster's Body Is a Cultural Body

Monster Culture
by thicket / gyabou / alvit
art by lena7142 / portraitoftheodddity

Art by portraitoftheodddity. View full size here!
“Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself; it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again.”
Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture: Seven Theses”

He had been waiting here, in his cell, for an interminable amount of time. In his absence, the cell had been tidied; the destroyed furnishings were gone, and it was bare, empty, blindingly white. For awhile he stood, waiting; but eventually he sat down on the floor, legs stretched out wide, like a child. As time passed he imagined himself slowly turning to stone, a still, silent, cold figure cut of marble. He had spent much of his time while incarcerated in this state. He had first learned to seek refuge in it when he had spent what felt like eternities falling through starlight, the dust of the void clinging to his flesh like a second skin, stiffening him, freezing him to the core. It was easy to slip back into it when he needed.

Loki waited to hear what his fate would be.

He did not have Thor’s confidence that Odin would alter his sentence. He imagined his one-time brother, now, pleading to the All-Father for leniency, and were he capable of movement or emotion at this moment, he would have laughed bitterly. Though he had helped Thor recapture the Aether and stop Malekith, he was not so naive to think that could somehow balance out his past actions. This was what Thor could not understand -- one grand gesture would never be accepted as payment for wrongdoings: his wounds for the wounds he caused; his efforts for the efforts others expended; his loss for the losses he caused; one priceless, dangerous artifact neutralized to pay for the one he’d attempted to misuse.

No.

Never.

Of all people, Loki knew only too well the uselessness of conciliatory gestures.

And anyway, that wasn’t why he had done it.

In the fever state he’d fallen into, when he had succumbed to the wound from Kurse’s blade, there had been peace. Pain as well, certainly, but a pain that he could stomach. Perhaps he had even welcomed it. Faced with the possibility of death, he had surrendered to its inevitability, secure in the knowledge that he would never have to look at his own terrible face in a mirror again.

Then, some time later, he had awoken in the palace’s healing chambers to Thor weeping and smiling over him like a fool. And to his surprise, standing some paces away stood Odin, his gaze unreadable. Before Loki could formulate some kind of response, the All-Father had turned and left.

And then Thor had told him of all that had occurred since Loki had received his injury -- the Convergence, the great battle with Malekith and his defeat, Thor’s plans of abdication … and his plan to help Loki.

Help him. How like Thor to engage in such a pointless exercise, with no encouragement from Loki, no cognizance of the consequences, never realizing that perhaps the object of his supreme forgiveness and generosity might want it in the first place.

But there was no arguing with Thor once he had settled on a course of action. And so Loki waited.

By the time the entrance to the cell dematerialized and Thor stepped inside, Loki was so deep inside
of himself that he found it hard to swim to the surface. His muscles did not want to budge. He felt unready to be in the presence of others. He blinked rapidly, his facial muscles trying to remember how to form expressions. It took several minutes for him to take in Thor’s expectant expression; another minute for something in his stomach to dip and twist at the hopeful smile branding his features.

Loki was certain this could only mean trouble.

* 

Some time later, when he was bare chested, sweating, and the stave for bind prisoner was being traced onto his flesh just above his sternum by a sorceress, one of his mother’s former handmaidens, he thought that he had been right.

There is great power in symbols. Raw magic is pulled, stretched, spun like thread or forged like metal (every sorcerer has their own technique), bent and forced into a shape. In a binding, however, the difference is that a sorcerer’s magic is pulled from them unwillingly, siphoned out, and then contained, usually in the form of a tattoo or a brand. It is one of the most powerful workings, and the most demanding, and the hardest to break.

Thor stood a few paces away, motionless, watching him. The smile was gone from his face -- as a consequence both of Loki’s pain and the furious words his brother had been spitting at him for the last few hours -- but that pathetic, infuriating glimmer of hope still lingered in his eyes. Finally, the sorceress stepped back, her work finished; Loki continued to lay there, on the bed they’d brought into the bare cell for the binding, incapable of movement. Thor shuffled forward, crouched down next to the bed, and took Loki’s limp hand in his fist.

“It will be all right, brother,” he said. “A new life awaits you. A new chance. May it be as rewarding for you as it was for me.”

Weak as he was, Loki managed to summon enough strength to sit up slightly, rear back, and spit directly into Thor’s face.

* 

The Bifrost deposited them at the spot in the wooded glen where he and Thor had been whisked away by the Tesseract the last time he’d been on this Hel-forsaken rock. Loki felt unsteady, weak-boned, as though a thousand spiders were crawling under his skin. His restrained power hummed and throbbed, responding to the journey through the portal like a flower bud attempting to unfurl, but the stave on his chest burned, crushing it. For a moment the world blurred and spun. He felt Thor’s hand on his arm, steadying him; then his vision cleared and his legs straightened, and he pulled away.

And became aware that they were surrounded by a ring of black-clad warriors, weapons drawn: S. H. I. E. L. D.’s finest. And there, walking towards them, was their leader, Director Fury, and next to him, a person who made him instinctively bare his teeth.

His new warden.

“You will return to Midgard. You will learn humility. You will make recompense for the damage you have done. You will find your place in the Realms.”

“I will find a way to escape. I promise you this. You will never rest for searching for me. Why do you laugh? I assure you that you will not find it amusing for long.”
"You may try to escape, brother. But the one who watches you is ... quick to anger."

The Beast.

"Thor." Fury nodded, and then frowned and narrowed his one good eye. "Loki." He crossed his arms. "Let's not waste any time." He stepped to the side, and the Beast took his place. He squinted in the sunlight, his head tilted slightly to the side, face deceptively calm, but Loki knew only too well the unbridled violence that lay deep within him. "Dr. Banner will take you from here."

"If you'll follow me, we've got a car waiting." Banner smiled. "I wanted to take the train, but we all agreed it would be best to limit contact with the general population at first."

Loki frowned and gritted his teeth. He wanted to scream and tear them all to pieces. He did not move.

"Loki, come," Thor said, but quietly. It is as though he thought Loki had any dignity left to him at all.

With great effort, Loki raised his head high. He walked forward, as though he were walking through the great throne room, a prince of Asgard once more.

Banner turned and walked through the encircling crowd of S. H. I. E. L. D. agents. Thor and Loki followed. They passed beneath verdant canopies of trees, emerging into a brightly lit meadow. In the distance, Loki could see mortals frolicking in the sunshine. He looked down at the ground, his teeth on edge. He would have to live among these fools for an untold amount of time.

They stopped at last at a large black vehicle.

"This is where I take my farewell, Loki," Thor said.

Loki was taken aback by the jolt he felt at those words. He had supposed Thor would stay with them longer. Ah, but of course, this was not worth the prince’s time. He had many important matters to which he must attend. Smiling drily, Loki raised his chin, looked through his lowered lashes at Thor, and said nothing.

The lines around Thor’s eyes crinkled slightly. "Good luck, brother," he said, and turned and left.

Banner let out a long sigh. "Well," he said, and opened a door on the vehicle, gesturing inside, "let's get going."

For a moment, Loki imagined resisting. He could so easily turn and run - he had always been so fast - and though he didn't have magic, he was good at hiding himself without its aid. Then he imagined Banner’s skin stretching, the hue coloring; great fists reaching out and grabbing him before he even made it to the safety of the wooded grove.

Loki swallowed hard, and climbed inside the car.

*

"Seat belt," Banner said as he slid into the seat behind the wheel. "That strap next to you. Buckle up." He demonstrated with his own.

Loki inspected the flimsy cloth belt dubiously. "What is the purpose of this?" he asked. His voice was rough. He hadn’t spoken a word since they’d applied the stave to his chest. His throat had been tired from screaming.
“To keep you from flying through the windshield if the car crashes.” Banner raised an eyebrow.
“Though I doubt that would harm you much. But it’s also the law.” He took a key out of his pocket
and inserted it into the console in front of him and turned the vehicle on. As it shuddered to life, Loki
was reminded of just how primitive and dangerous Midgardian technology was. He pulled the strap
around his chest as Banner had and snapped it closed.

“Do you mind if I turn on the radio?” Banner asked, his tone calm and oddly polite. “It’s a long drive
to Boston.” Loki stared at him with a look of aggressive incomprehension. Banner simply stared
back at him, blinking. Loki frowned, looked away, and crossed his arms and closed his eyes. After a
moment, the mellow drove of mortal voices filled the vehicle and the car began to move.

*

He kept his eyes closed throughout the long journey. He was exhausted but unable to sleep with
Banner so close to him. Instead he let himself drift off back into that state of nothingness, only torn
out of it the few times Banner directly addressed him, though he barely responded.

“We’re nearly there,” Banner said, and Loki, with some difficulty, opened his eyes to see that it was
dusk. Before them was a city, just beginning to light up for the night. The tall, pale buildings
reminded him, from a distance, of Asgard. Loki was struck by a surprising wave of homesickness.
But as they got closer he saw these structures were dirty, clumsily designed, primitive -- nothing like
Asgard at all.

They followed a road into a tunnel, then emerged into a busy, claustrophobic street. It was loud. The
car moved slowly, forced to wait for people who were weaving in and out of traffic. He could not
find that quiet place inside himself in all the chaos.

Eventually they turned down a small narrow street, crowded in by older, red-bricked buildings and
trees. The noise faded somewhat as they progressed through a spiderweb of similar thoroughfares,
finally coming to a stop in front of a brick building with a red door, almost indistinguishable from a
line of similar buildings. Banner maneuvered the car to rest in front of the house.

“Here it is,” Banner said. He opened the door, unbuckled his seat belt, and stepped out. “Our home
base for the moment. A Stark investment property, I think.”

Loki did not care. He didn’t understand why Banner was speaking to him this way, had been
speaking to him this way the entire journey. As though Loki were not a prisoner (“leniency” and
“reformation” be damned); as though Loki had not killed and destroyed; as though Banner had not,
while in the guise of the creature who lurked within him even this moment, beaten the god into a
feeble mess little more than a year before.

He didn’t like it.

Banner stretched. “Let’s go,” he said, when Loki did not say anything, and began taking bags and
cases from within the car.

Slowly Loki unlocked his own safety belt, taking a moment to find the button that released it. He
climbed out of the car, and then, for a moment, he simply stood in the street, inspecting the house that
was to be his prison for an undetermined amount of time. There were bars on the windows of the
lower floors, and for a moment he was insulted; then he noticed they were old, and that every house
had them, and they must be meant as a deterrent to keep monsters out; not to keep one particular
monster in.

Loaded down with luggage (he did not ask Loki to help and naturally Loki did not offer), Banner
walked to the door and began fumbling for a key. He kicked open the door into a small entry area, dominated by a staircase leading to the second floor. Loki hesitantly followed him inside. He stared back at the open door behind him for a moment before finally closing it. He felt almost as though if he touched anything in this place, he’d never leave.

“I think the bedrooms are upstairs,” Banner called out from whatever room he had disappeared into. “Take whichever you want.”

Loki said nothing, but he climbed up the stairs. The hallway was crisscrossed by peach colored light from the setting sun. He entered the first room on his right; there was a bed in it, and several windows; a half-filled bookshelf; a desk; and a closed-up fireplace, painted over in blue. He closed the door behind him. He was still exhausted, and he was finally alone. Without even being aware of controlling his own limbs, he climbed into the bed and fell asleep.

* *

He woke once in the night, confused about his surroundings, but that was not unusual for him, at least not lately. He lay still in the darkness, breathing shallowly, trying to remember where he was and unable to, until distantly he heard the murmur of a voice. It took a moment for it to register in his mind as belonging to Banner. Then it all came back to him: Thor in his cell, the placing of the stave, the long trip to this house, falling asleep in this bed.

Banner’s voice was the only one he heard. He must be speaking on one of their communication devices. Loki focused his hearing and made out a few sentences: “He’s sleeping now”; “It’s fine, Tony”; “No, we have everything we need”. Eventually he gave his farewells and the conversation ended. Banner gave a long sigh. The floor creaked; a door opened and closed. He heard Banner climb into bed. Then, silence.

In the meantime Loki’s eyes had adjusted to the darkness somewhat. It was not truly dark; there was a dim light coming through the windows, from a lantern outside. He became aware that he was uncomfortably warm. He’d fallen asleep in his clothes, even his boots. He shucked those off, letting them fall to the floor by the bed, not caring if the noise woke Banner. The side of his face that had been pressed against the pillow was hot and imprinted with the creases of the covering. He rubbed it and flipped the pillow over, sighing when he felt its coolness against his cheek. He fell asleep again almost instantly.

* *

The next time he woke there was sun on his face and birds singing outside his window. He sat up in the bed, and his hand went to his chest, slipped inside the loosened laces of his tunic, and outlined the ridges of the stave. His magic surged and then sputtered and fizzled into nothingness. A full body shudder coursed through him, and he felt nauseous. He breathed his way through it.

When his heart beat had slowed and his nerves no longer felt like they were on fire, he got out of bed. At the door he hesitated. Was Banner awake? He listened and thought he could hear, from whatever room the beast occupied, a faint, even breathing. Steeling himself, he turned the doorknob and stepped into the hallway.

He stood on the bare floorboards for a moment. It was early. The sun had maybe only just risen. There was a closed door across from him, and on the other side of it, Banner lay sleeping. Two more rooms, doors ajar, were down the hallway. One appeared to be another sleeping chamber. The other, a washing room. He tiptoed inside, and, after wrinkling his nose at the very basic facilities, attended to his needs and washed his face with cold water. When he was done he stopped and listened again; Banner still seemed to be asleep. Cautiously, he crossed the hall again, and proceeded down the
On the main floor he wandered briefly through a sitting room, which was piled with the traveling bags Banner had carried in the night before, a small library, a dining hall, and the kitchens. On a table there he found a bowl of fruit, a loaf of bread, and a dish with butter.

He touched the rim of the bowl and wondered if Banner had left this all here for him. He remembered suddenly the sound of the mortal’s voice the night before, through the closed door: He’s sleeping now. Loki imagined Banner standing outside the door, hesitating, then pushing it slightly open, peering inside; pictured his own prone, fully clothed body, asleep on the bed, and here, in the kitchen, his body alternating between numb fury and fiery shame at the idea of Banner seeing him in such a vulnerable state. But he should grow used to this. His life would be a succession of indignities from here onwards.

Ultimately, he eschewed the bread, but took several pieces of fruit. He brought them upstairs. He felt unprotected down there, though Banner was technically in closer proximity on the second floor; but at least he had this door here to separate himself from the beast. A door demanded a knock. Most of the time.

On his bed, he contemplated the fruit he had taken: the apple and the peach he found familiar. He puzzled over a long yellow fruit with a thick skin, until he discovered how to peel it.

Afterwards, licking the juices from his fingers, he went over to the window and looked outside. There was a tree just outside, and the branches brushed the window. They were studded with small green buds; it must be spring. With some difficulty, he pushed open the window, but there was a wire mesh beyond the glass. He fiddled with the overly complicated locks and finally pushed that open, too, and pushed his head out, the cool morning air brushing against his face. A dark bird, with a keen, sharp beak and white flecks peppered through its iridescent feathers, landed on the brick windowsill. He placed his hand on the sill, and whistled lowly. The bird hopped, curiously, towards it, and with lightning fast reflexes, he grabbed it, holding it gently but firmly in his cupped hands. He smiled. This silly, weak thing. It squirmed in his hands, and then, suddenly, pecked him sharply on the fleshy part of his thumb. Cursing, he let it go, and it flew away quickly.

He watched it go, thumb in his mouth, tasting his own blood, hating everything.

There was a knock on the door.
The Monster Always Escapes

Chapter Summary

Loki starts his rehabilitation, and doesn't like it. Bruce has the patience of a saint.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“No monster tastes of death but once. The anxiety that condenses like green vapor into the form of the vampire can be dispersed temporarily, but the revenant by definition returns. And so the monster’s body is both corporal and incorporeal; its threat is its propensity to shift.”

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture: Seven Theses”

He sat on a stool in the kitchens, dressed in the thin and slightly scratchy clothing Banner had provided for him, watching as Banner prepared a meal for himself. Loki had refused any food, but accepted a cup of a hot leafy infusion which the mortal called tea.

“So today is Sunday,” Banner said, as he diced an apple. He looked at Loki thoughtfully, his brow slightly furrowed. “That probably means nothing to you. Saturday and Sunday are the weekend, and are usually days off from work for most people. Though not everyone.” He added the apple to his bowl of porridge. “Anyway, what I’m getting at is that we’re taking this day to settle in. Tomorrow, Monday, we’ll go in for our first day.”

Loki felt he was missing something. “First day of what, precisely?” he asked quietly.

Banner frowned. “I thought Thor explained.” He cocked his head. “What exactly did he tell you about what you’re doing here?”

“Oh, just vague nonsense about righting wrongs and learning the error of my ways. Thor is not prone to specifics.”

The beast looked unhappy. “We compiled a very detailed proposal in response to his request to commute your sentence to Earth,” he said. “You should have been informed of the details of the agreement.”

Loki shrugged. “It matters not,” he said bitterly. “My opinion was not necessary, was it?”

Banner sighed and rubbed his eyes in a gesture of defeat. “Well, anyway, yes. As you stated, part of the agreement to transfer you here included, well -- here we’d call it community service. That’s part of why I was given custody of you.” There was a moment of silence, and Loki knew both of he and the creature were thinking, but not speaking, of the other reason why he had been placed in Banner’s keeping. “You see, before S. H. I. E. L. D. called me in to help track the tesseract, I was living a very different life. I traveled from place to place and helped people. It grounded me.” He smiled vaguely. “For the past year, I’ve been back to working as a research scientist, with Tony Stark. But … well, it was nice for awhile, but it’s not a sustainable lifestyle for me. I needed … something more.” He trailed off. “Well, that’s besides the point.”

“What precisely am I to do, Dr. Banner?” Loki asked. He was tiring of this conversation quickly.
“I’m going to be doing medical work at a daytime homeless shelter nearby. We’ll see what work they have for you. I spoke with them the other day, and they need assistance in a lot of areas.”

Loki pressed his fingers firmly against the hot side of the cup in his hand. He did not need to ask for an explanation of what sort of place this shelter was; he could piece it together himself. He felt sick at the idea of being surrounded by fragile, filthy mortals. In a powerful, nauseating moment, he found himself longing for the pure solitude of his Asgardian cell. When he came back to himself, he found that Banner was gazing at him with curiosity as he silently ate his meal. Loki frowned, drained the rest of his tea, and, leaving the cup on the table, stood to leave.

“Loki.”

He stopped in the doorway and looked back.

“Let me know if you need anything.”

Suppressing a sharp retort, he wordlessly exited the room and went upstairs.

*

He spent much of the day asleep. When he was awake, he did very little. He watched the birds hop around outside his window. He listened to the sounds of the city faintly in the distance. He followed the shadow of Banner’s feet in the crack beneath the closed door as he walked down the hallway, then back, then back again, stopping in front of the door.

“Loki?”

With some effort, he rose from the bed, smoothing down his hair with one hand. He went to the door and opened it slightly, saying nothing.

“Are you hungry? I’ll make dinner.”

Loki shrugged. “I could eat.”

Banner surveyed him with some interest. “I’ll bring it up if you’d rather eat in here.”

He disliked the tone of Banner’s voice. It smacked of condescension to him. But he also did not wish to eat in Banner’s presence and be forced to listen to inane mortal chatter.

“Thank you,” he said, and closed the door.

Some time later Banner knocked on the door again. Loki took his time going to answer it, and when he opened it, Banner was gone. On the floor in front of the door was a tray containing a bowl with a stew of vegetables, some bread, and a clear closed flask of water.

He ate sitting on the floor, back to the wall, the window above his head. In his head, he imagined his mother, perhaps sitting on the bed and looking down at him. She would be shaking her head, he thought. He could see her smile. It seemed to be saying, What shall we do with you? His own lips turned up in response and imitation of it, and he raised his hand, let his fingers slide over his mouth to trace its curve and pretended it was hers.

*

The next morning it rained. The scent of fresh grass and the shush-shush-shush of the downpour wafted in through the open window. He huddled under the blankets against the cold. He did not
wish to rise. He could hear Banner stumbling about in the hallway. He held his breath as the footsteps neared his door, and braced himself for the knock. To his surprise, Banner instead opened the door.

“It’s time to get up, Loki,” he said simply, as Loki gaped in suppressed fury. Then he shut the door.

Loki clenched the covers around himself, teeth chattering. His chest boiled and burned around the stave that imprisoned him. I hate, he mouthed silently. I hate. I hate.

Eventually he managed to command his limbs to uncurl and he lurched stiffly out of the bed. He dressed himself without care, opened the door, strode across the hallway to the bathroom, and splashed cold water over his face. He caught sight of his face, contorted with anger, in the mirror, and closed his eyes. He breathed deeply. The burn in his chest subsided. When he looked again, his face was expressionless.

* 

Banner handed him a contraption he called an umbrella on the way out the door. Loki stared at it with contempt.

“Like this,” Banner said patiently, and unfurled his own umbrella, lifting it above his head. Loki only stared. Banner sighed and, resting his own umbrella on the floor, he took Loki’s, snapped it open, pulled Loki’s arm up, and molded his hand around the handle.

“Let’s go,” he said, and raising his umbrella again, proceeded down the stairs and down the street.

Loki stood for a moment, grimacing, and then followed.

They passed more houses much like the one they inhabited, then followed a small path through a grassy, tree-filled grove. They emerged onto a larger thoroughfare, bustling with people, vehicles, and noise. Everyone seemed as annoyed to be there as Loki was; only Banner had a relaxed appearance, the corners of his mouth curved upwards in a slight smile. Dodging puddles, they turned onto a smaller, dirtier street, crammed with merchants’ places of business. Finally, Banner drew to a stop in front of a somewhat dingy gray stone building with a blue cloth awning. Written across it were the words St. Christopher House.

“We’re here,” Banner said. He touched Loki on the shoulder, but Loki shrugged away. “They told me we should go in through the side entrance. The lobby is for guest use only.” He led Loki down the narrow alley, and ushered in him through a doorway, up a crowded, steep staircase, and down a short hallway. They stopped at a door marked Volunteer Coordinator. Banner knocked on it, and in a moment a harried looking man opened it.

“Hello, Mr. Alexander. I’m Bruce Banner, we spoke a few days ago --”

The man brightened. “Oh yes, doctor, come in.”

“I mentioned this when we spoke,” Banner said, as they stepped inside, Loki being tugged reluctantly along and, much to his annoyance, stuffed into a chair -- the impertinence! -- “but let me reiterate -- I’m not a medical doctor, I’m a physicist, but I have had medical training, and quite a lot of experience -- I’ll do whatever I can --”

“Oh, there’s no worries,” the man said, shuffling through a disorganized pile of papers on his desk. “Ah! Here we are! Anyway, you’ve come highly recommended. And this is the gentleman you spoke about?”
“Yes,” Banner said, glancing at Loki, and for the first time Loki thought he seemed a tad uneasy. “He’s best set to doing something a little … entry-level.”

“Well,” the man said, “they always need help in food services.”

“That’ll do,” Banner said.

“Excuse me?” Loki piped up. Perhaps he had heard wrong.

“You know, helping to prepare the meals,” the man said, eagerly, “or serve it to the guests. Whichever you’d prefer.”

“Probably the former,” Banner cut in quickly. “I don’t know if interaction with the public is a great idea right off the bat --”

“I’m to be a scullion?” Loki interrupted. “Slaving away to serve lowly peasants? I? A prince of Asgard?”

“Excuse us,” Banner said, and opening the door, grabbed Loki by the arm -- “Unhand me!” Loki spat -- the nerve of the beast! -- and pulled him out into the hallway. “Loki,” he said, his voice level and calm, soothing. “It’s honest, important work. They need the help. You’re more than capable.”

“I refuse to set myself to such drudgery! I am no fool. Surely there is something else I could do, if I must be put to work in this repulsive institution at all. I - I could assist you --” There was a wheedling tone to his voice, weak, powerless, and a voice in his head roiled in rage.

“It’s only to start out with,” Banner said. “Perhaps in time --”

“I see.” Abruptly, the fight seemed to flee his body. He felt numb, unable to care; the anger, still raging within, became remote, unreachable, as though buried at the bottom of a deep sea. “I am not trusted enough, even for so meager a responsibility.”

“Well,” Banner said, very carefully, “to be honest, no.”

Loki was silent. Banner sighed, and took the umbrella where it was dangling, forgotten, from Loki’s limp hand. He removed Loki’s jacket, and opened the door. “We’re all settled here, sir.”

* 

Banner was given directions to the medical clinic, and as he disappeared down the hall, Loki felt something akin to panic rise in him. As much he loathed the creature, to be abandoned among strange mortals made him feel as though he were drowning. Numbly, he let himself be led down into the kitchens, where he was handed off to the woman who was in charge; she was introduced to him as Ellen, though Loki barely responded to the introduction. It was busy and loud -- he shrank from the noise instinctively, overwhelmed, and was only vaguely aware of the instructions given to him until he suddenly found himself standing at a table, an apron draped haphazardly over his body -- had he put it on himself? -- and a pile of vegetables and a knife in front of him.

He picked up the knife. It was a paltry thing, dull, badly balanced, but he was skillful enough that he could do great damage with it, without even trying. How amusing that Banner did not trust him to help tend to the sick but allowed him access to potential weapons, with all of these soft fools about him, unsupervised. His fingers tightened on the handle.

The stave sent a jolt of pain through his chest, a warning.
Of course it did not matter. He could not do anything. Except perhaps slit his own throat.

*  

After several hours of work, Loki’s hands ached; they were raw and red from handling slippery vegetables and being washed repeatedly. At midday he was offered food, which he refused. Mortals seemed to need to eat very frequently. On Asgard one broke their fast and then ate again only in the late evening.

Instead of eating, he wandered over to the serving area and peered into the dining hall, where a great throng of mortals were gathered for their meal. They ranged in age from the very elderly to small infants. These were the people Banner did not trust him to serve food to. Well, he supposed he had very likely done away with the lives of many like them in his disastrous attack. Thor would have him feel guilt for this, he supposed. And should he not? But does a savage beast feel guilt for the destruction it causes? Were Jotunn even capable of such emotions? Loki didn’t know. He only knew a hollow rage, that left him feeling empty and dead, like the cold, frozen wasteland of the homeland he had never known.

His eyes were drawn past the loud mob of humans to a mural which dominated the opposite wall of the dining hall. It depicted a colossally huge man crossing a wild river carrying a small child on his back. He stared at it for a long time, losing sense of location and purpose, until a hand on his arm from the supervisor startled him back into reality.

*  

They were finished by mid-afternoon, at which point Loki was sent down to another room to sort clothing donations for a few hours until Banner was finished with his duties. By this point Loki was was tremendously exhausted. His body, though superficially healed, was still recovering from the wound he had received when he and Thor had fought the Dark Elves, as well as the application of the stave, which had sapped much of his strength -- it was as though it fed, even now, on his body’s energy in order to keep its mechanism running. Loki was not sure just when he fell asleep, but when he came to, he was resting against a pile of coats on a table, with Banner standing over him, looking amused and tired.

“Time to head home,” he said simply. “I have your things.” He held up the jacket and umbrella. Loki took them, fighting through the momentary embarrassment and letting it transform into resentment, though he was already overflowing with it and did not need a drop more.

Outside, it had ceased raining, but the world was still damp and the air crisp. They walked back to the house quietly, Loki surreptitiously rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He supposed, if there was indeed anything to admire in the beast’s character, it was that he was not given to small talk. When they reached the house, he waited on the street as Banner fumbled for his keys, and looked down at his feet. On the ground, near a rapidly drying puddle, he spotted a stranded worm, wriggling piteously on the stone. He wondered how it had gotten there, and supposed it would most likely shrivel up and die before long.

Without really thinking about it, he leaned down, picked it up gingerly with two fingers, and tossed it onto the patch of dirt and grass in front of the house. When he looked up, wiping his dirty fingers on his jacket as he did so, Banner was watching him from the open door, that faint smile on his face.

*  

The proceeding days continued apace. Each morning Loki rose -- after that first day he always made sure to wake before Banner so as not to be taken by surprise again -- and after breaking his fast, went
with Banner to St. Christopher House and toiled for hours in a series of demeaning tasks: besides preparing food and sorting items of clothing, he was set to cleaning -- sweeping floors, clearing tables, washing dining and cooking utensils until the skin of his hands resembled withered fruit.

At night he ate whatever Banner provided him with, tasting little and enjoying nothing, and usually so sleepy he could barely keep his eyes open. A creeping numbness seemed to fill him more and more each day.

One night, after eating the evening meal -- a boiled doughy substance with a vegetable sauce which was called pasta -- Loki went straight to sleep. He woke early, before the sky had become properly light. At once he felt confined and smothered in the blankets and breathlessly kicked them off. For awhile he lay there panting, his mind racing, until his mind coalesced around a single thought: that he could not do this. He must get away.

He sat up, rubbing his fingers restlessly over the lines burned into his chest. He could perhaps do it. Banner was overly trusting. In a mere few days he seemed to view Loki as little more than a recalcitrant child -- he left him unsupervised all day, in the company of defenseless mortals, with potential weapons. Thought he could not harm them thanks to the magic confining him, there was surely a way to subvert his bindings. The stave might pain him as he escaped, but he had experienced pain in great quantities in the past. He could withstand it. Why had he not fled before? It was as though his mind had been asleep, thickened with exhaustion and anger, and now he was abruptly, violently awake.

Loki rose and walked to the window, opening it as he had the first night they had arrived. He leant out of it and surveyed the ground below. Beneath his room there was a brick-lined walled garden, with a gate that led to an alley behind the house.

A slight excitement throbbed through him. He ducked back inside, found his boots, and pulled them on over the clothing he had worn to bed. Among the clothes Banner had given him, he found a warm knitted tunic and tugged it on. There was nothing else here he needed, he thought, looking around at the paltry room, bereft of personal possessions. Yes. He could go.

In a fluid movement, he climbed out of the window, braced himself carefully against the wall of the house, and let himself drop. He landed firmly on both feet. A mortal would have perhaps broken a bone falling this far, but for him it was nothing. He went quickly to the gate and climbed over it into the alleyway. And just like that, he was out.

With no particular idea of where to go, he began to walk quickly down the alley. Though he wanted to run, he knew well that it would only make him more noticeable. Of course, there were few people about at this hour; but still, all the more reason to be unmemorable. He made his way through a series of intersecting narrow roads. The further he got, the more excited he became. How much longer until Banner woke? Surely a few hours. He could be well away by then.

Once again he found himself in the heart of the city, the streets becoming wider, though only marginally busier, as it was still so early. In the distance he saw trees, and made his way in that direction. Before long he had entered a great garden, surrounded by wrought iron fences, though the gates were open.

The morning air was crisp and invigorating, and seemed to slap him awake even further. His mind turned ceaselessly as he walked. Where should he go? How best to hide himself? He tried to recall everything he had gathered about mortal life in his limited experience on this realm, but he was distracted by a growing ache in his chest. As he had expected, the stave was beginning to react to his increasing distance from his jailor. He ignored it. He felt safer here, beneath the trees, protected. There were winding paths and flower beds, though it was cold enough that most had not blossomed
Yet. He thought of his mother’s gardens, much more verdant than these. She kept them open to the
city as well, but there was little else similar between the citizens of Asgard and these mortal denizens
who he passed sleeping on wooden and metal benches. They looked much like the individuals who
frequented St. Christopher House. He avoided them.

Soon he reached the borders of the gardens, crossed a busy street, and entered a meadow, less
refined and planned than the gardens. The pain in his chest had increased, making his breathing
somewhat labored, but he did not let it hinder him. If he wanted to escape, he thought, he would
have to surrender his dignity anymore. Disguise himself as a mortal peasant, until something more
appealing came into fruition. At least he would be free.

A sharp, stabbing sensation pierced his heart, and he stumbled, drawing to a stop and bending over,
his hands planted on his thighs, panting heavily. He had not realized he was perspiring so heavily.
The cold morning air made his skin feel clammy. With some effort, he straightened up and continued
walking.

As the pain increased, his vision narrowed down to a point directly in front of him. His awareness of
the world around him dimmed to a haze of green and brown and gray. He kept walking, slowly,
purposefully. It had become noisier. He was not sure how much time had passed, but there seemed to
be more people about. He thought perhaps they were staring at him. He did not want to attract
attention, but it was all he could do to keep walking. He had not thought the pain would be quite this
bad. Surely it must subside at some point?

“Buddy, what happened to you?” Someone, some filthy mortal man, face blurry and concerned, had
stopped him; his hands were gripping Loki’s arm, and he wanted to pull away, but found he did not
have the strength. In fact, he found that once he had broken his concentration on continuing to walk,
his legs began shaking violently, and soon the man was not just holding him still, but holding him up.
“Hey! Someone call an ambulance! This guy’s bleeding out!”

His mind felt fuzzy and uncontrolled, and he could barely understand what was being said. In a sort
of stupor, he glanced down at himself, and realized that his shirt was stained dark with oozing blood.
He reached unsteadily with one hand and pressed it against the stave, through the sodden cloth
covering it, and a surge of dizziness passed through him.

“It’s okay, it’s going to be okay.” voices were saying to him soothingly, and he realized he was on
the ground surrounded by people. Midgardians. They were fetching help, they would take him away
to their healers; Banner would find him eventually, collect him, take him back to the house. Or --
perhaps not. Perhaps he would be sent back to Asgard. Back to his cell.

“No,” he croaked. With a surge of sudden energy, he raised himself from the ground. All around
him, mortals gasped and fluttered, trying to stop him. “No!” Even at his weakest, he was stronger
than them; and the pain was so terrible that a little more from pushing a few weak humans away was
nothing. He broke away, and the crowd shrank back, frightened. With all his strength he forced his
legs to move, to walk, and then to run. Somehow he had wound up in the street again. He followed
the sides of tall brick and stone buildings, and then metal fences. He needed to hide. Here was a
place that would do; a small garden, but flowerless, and studded with standing stones. A quiet place.
He stumbled through the gate, his strength rapidly fading. Soon he was crawling on all fours, in the
dirt, and the ground was becoming stained with red. He sat before one of the stones, trying in vain to
catch his breath. He rested his head against the coolness of the stone. There was writing on it. He
tried to read it, focus on the letters, let the Allspeak decode them. But it read like nonsense. Names:
stupid Midgardian names that meant nothing to him. Numbers. Years. Ridiculously short spans of
years, blinks of an eye. Between them all, words that he could make sense of, that he knew
It came at him suddenly, sickeningly, that this was a place where mortals were put when they had
died. He had heard of such practices: mortals generated so many corpses, it was their primary
commodity. They disposed of them in many ways: burning, immersing in the sea, wrapping them in
linens, locking them in stone buildings, or burying them in the ground.

In Asgard, death came so infrequently; and when it did, the lifeless body was truly made no more,
becoming part of the void.

(How did the Jotunn dispose of their dead? He did not know. Perhaps their bodies melted into a
puddle if left long enough. His hand clenched at the bleeding stave on his chest, strangely comforted
by the warm stickiness of his own blood.)

But sad, stupid mortals were trapped here on this planet. They hoarded their dead like dolls. When he
truly thought about it, this world must be studded with their bones. Layer upon layer of them, billions
and billions. They were beneath his very hands and feet right now, only a few mere feet of dirt
separating him from them.

It was repulsive. Suffocating. And he could not get away; he was rooted to this spot, his limbs leaden
and outside of his control. He could not even support his body, and must lay in dirt like a corpse
himself.

He lost all sense of time and place, fading in and out of consciousness, until at last he came to and a
face was staring down at him, mouth drawn tight and eyes expressionless. Banner.

“How did you find me?” he asked, his voice no more than a whisper. Taking stock of himself, he
realized that the pain had receded in Banner’s presence; his body simply throbbed and ached, as
though he had climbed a mountain or fought a war.

“Magic,” Banner said shortly.

And Loki laughed.

Chapter End Notes

Some notes:

The neighborhood Bruce and Loki are living is called Bay Village.

St. Christopher House is based on St. Francis House in Boston.

The place where Loki collapses at the end is the Old Granary Burial Ground near
Boston Common, which is the burial place of Sam Adams, Paul Revere, Phyllis
Wheatley, and Mother Goose (!). The gravestone specifically mentioned is for the
victims of the Boston Massacre.
The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis

Chapter Summary

Loki recovers from his escape attempt and rediscovers his love of learning.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The refusal to participate in the classificatory ‘order of things’ is true of monsters generally … so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions.” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture: Seven Theses”

It took a long time for Banner to get him back to the house. Though the stave no longer pained him, he was incredibly weak. Banner walked slowly next to him, occasionally putting out a hand to steady him, but Loki could not bare to be coddled, and he seemed to know that.

They were silent the whole way, for which Loki was grateful at first, but gradually a sort of dread filled him. He was initially unsure as to why; finally he realized that it was because he was certain he would be sent back to Asgard.

But why such unease? A prison was a prison. And he despised every moment of his sentence here. It was degrading and pointless. Did he not long for the peace of his austere white cell?

When they reached the house, Banner led him to the washing chamber, turned on the bath, and left him to strip down and stand, shivering, under a nonetheless warm spray, trying to wash away the dried blood and dirt on his hands and torso. It was a testament to his weariness that when Banner opened the door and left him clean, dry clothes, Loki did not care a bit.

Banner was waiting for him when he emerged, clean and reclothed. In Loki’s room, the mess he had made while he was preparing to flee had been righted. The bed was remade, turned down. Loki lowered himself into it, with the care and speed of a fragile old man. When he was seated, Banner pressed a hot drink into his hands, and as he sipped it, he felt like something loose that had been shuddering around inside settled.

“When will they come?” he finally asked. His voice was still hoarse.

“Who?”

“My brother,” he clarified, “or whoever Asgard sends. To retrieve me.” A moment after he said it he realized he had fallen into the old habit of calling Thor his brother. He had no energy to correct himself.

“No one’s coming.” A pause. “Is that why you did this? So you’d get sent back?”

In retrospect, Loki did not know why he had done it. There had been no hope in escaping. He did not answer though. Let Banner think that he had actually had a plan. In his life, such silences had often served him well, and disguised his moments of weakness.

Let them think that he always knew what he was doing.
“Well, nothing of the sort is happening,” Banner finally said. “You’re not going anywhere. Are you?”

Loki looked at him, taking in the angle of this mouth, the set of his eyebrows. He sensed that Banner was angry, which should put him on his guard; but the beast’s eyes were oddly restrained, by some emotion Loki could not decipher. He put it down to his exhaustion.

“Any other questions?”

Loki took another sip of the hot drink. “What of our work? We shall be late.”

“We’re not going today. We’re going to rest.” Banner turned and walked to the door. “Why don’t you do that?” Without looking back, he closed the door.

* *

Loki slept for some time, and awoke feeling much refreshed. Below, he could hear a dim murmur of voices, and for a moment he froze, wondering if perhaps Banner had lied, and Asgard had come to take him. But after a time he detected a pattern to the voices, and realized it must be one of the human’s entertaining devices.

He picked up the cup on the table next to the bed, still half full, and drank some of the now cold liquid to wet his dry throat. When the cup was empty, he sat there, holding it in his hands, and wondering at Banner’s response to his escape attempt. He had been angry, but that anger was cloaked in a grim calm. For this whole week, he had seemed remarkably placid, too, and while Loki had thought that Banner had let his guard slip against him, in truth Loki had allowed himself to be lulled by Banner’s seeming meekness himself.

But now he had been reminded that Banner was not truthfully so calm, was he? His soft, mild gaze belied a great rage. Loki knew. He had experienced that rage, so, so intimately. It called to him, as though answering his own, which was so less well hidden.

Once he had been able to hide it well. But what point was there in it? One day, Banner would learn that too.

* *

Loki crept quietly down the stairs, intent on seeing what Banner was doing without having to reveal himself first. It was difficult: he felt heavy, unlike himself, and he had since he had come to this cursed place; was it the stave? Perhaps it was an effect of this planet. Maybe mortality and its inherent clumsiness was infectious and he was doomed to become more and more the thing he hated.

He found Banner in the study, tapping away at a primitive instrument -- a computer, humans called it, -- and it reminded Loki much of a squirrel striking a nut against a tree to open it. The computer was also the source of the sound; he had thought it might be a television, which he knew had a visual component, but this was merely audial in nature. He realized that this was like the radio that Banner had listened to on their journey to this place. Quaint.

Banner ceased his typing, leaned back in his chair, stretched. “Need anything?” he said casually, and Loki stiffened from where he was hidden behind the door frame, and stifled a curse. He stepped into the doorway.

“What work are you engaged in?” he asked, as if he were really interested.

“Oh,” Banner said, bashfully, and ran a hand through his hair. “I’m just … giving some feedback on
a peer-reviewed article. On deuteron-gold collisions.”

Loki turned his head away and tried to hide a smile.

“Are you hungry?” Banner said. He picked up a cup from his desk. “Thirsty? Do you want tea? Or coffee? Do you know what that is?”

Loki blinked, slowly, like a watchful cat, and shrugged his shoulders.

Banner picked up his computer, still bleeting noise, and carried it into the kitchens. He boiled water and arranged cups, and they each drank while a voice told them about current happenings on Midgard: wars, accidents, petty scuffles -- in general, the steady creation of more corpses.

“I’m going to cook something,” Banner said, and then stopped, staring at Loki in a calculating manner. He rustled around in cupboards and drawers, and placed a knife and a wooden board in front of him on the table. A small pile of root vegetables joined them in a moment. “Here,” he said, with a half smile. “Show me what you’ve learned this week.”

Loki bristled with annoyance. He wanted to take the knife and plunge it into Banner’s eye. With great difficulty, he restrained himself. He took the knife into his hand, held the handle tightly, felt the weight in his hand. He took a vegetable -- brown, rough-skinned, knobbly -- with his other hand, held it steady, and sliced it cleanly in half. Inside it was a vivid, almost creamy orange.

“Great,” Banner said. “Just dice those.” He turned his attention back to what he was doing: preparing meat. Loki blinked with surprise. He had not eaten meat in the entire time he had been here.

The voice emanating from the computer droned on, and Loki lost himself in the rhythmic, monotonous chopping. When he was done Banner took them from him, and gave him leafy vegetables that he had to strip from their stems.

“Want to mash this?” Banner asked, handing him a strange looking utensil and gesturing to the pot of boiled orange vegetables. Loki did it wordlessly, and midway through experienced a bizarre moment of near out-of-bodiness, as though the world spun around, and he observed himself slaving away over a hot pot with a reddened face like a peasant and was sufficiently ashamed.

Still, when he finally sat down to a plate that featured a rather bloody piece of red meat, he found he was too hungry -- having not eaten since the night before -- to care. Banner sat down too, but his plate included something that looked to him like pease.

“You do not eat meat,” Loki said, as he cut into his his own.

“No, I don’t.” Banner replied.

“Is that,” Loki said, spearing a dripping chunk onto his fork and staring at Banner with a vicious smile, “because you fear it will appeal to your baser instincts too greatly, and thus incite the beast within?” He popped the meat into his mouth and chewed with some satisfaction.

“Something like that,” Banner said mildly. “I’m glad you’re enjoying your steak. I thought you might be iron deficient, you lost a fair amount of blood today.”

Loki sneered to hide his disappointment, and ate the rest of the meal in silence.

* *

“Why don’t you clean up tonight,” Banner said casually, and departed back into his study, taking his
noisy computer with him.

Loki gaped after him, then stared at the dirty plates on the table, and then walked into the doorway of the kitchens and looked at the dirty pots and pans there. Then he stood for a minute with his arms crossed, contemplating what to do.

He could march up to his room and close himself in it, leaving the mess down here, like an angry child. He could break every dish and throw the pots out the window into the ugly brick courtyard outside. He could follow after Banner and shout at him until the monster came out to play.

Loki closed his eyes and breathed slowly, and unbidden against the backdrop of his closed eyelids he saw Banner’s face hovering over him as he lay prone on the ground in the field of the dead this morning. He wondered again how Banner had found him so quickly (magic…), and for the first time wondered why it had been Banner’s mortal mask which had greeted him, and not the furious beast.

Banner had been angry. But not so angry he had lost control.

*Is that why you did this? So you’d get sent back?*

*Show me what you’ve learned this week.*

Loki knew this was a test.

Slowly, reluctantly, he opened his eyes, unfolded his arms, unclenched his fists. He gathered the dirty dishes from the dining hall and brought them into the kitchens.

What seemed like an interminable time later, he placed the last dish out to dry and stopped the water. He stood there for a moment, rubbing his wrinkled fingers together, calming himself. From Banner’s office, the dim chatter of voices had changed to something like music. Horrible Midgardian music. He could decipher some of the words, but others were too slurred or unfamiliar to understand; they rose and fell in peaks and valleys of comprehension.

*… to be an echo … sound … floats … a feather … in the deep … loud … no one could hear …*

He dried his hands on his shirt and walked slowly, silently to the hallway.

*… slept … mountain … the stars … awake and count them … gray … spray … great … way … die alone …*

As he walked past the open doorway, he saw, from the corner of his eye, Banner look up, face illuminated in the dim light from the computer, and watch him pass. He was reminded, suddenly, of being led down that corridor in S. H. I. E. L. D.’s flying ship, and picking Banner out among the faces in the rooms on either side, the excitement throbbing through him at the sight of the beast, knowing all his plans would come to fruition.

Loki thundered up the stairs, closed himself in his room, and fell asleep some time later still trying to work out what Banner meant by it all.

*The next morning he woke early. He felt tingly and hyper-aware and he simply couldn’t stay in bed for a moment longer. He rose, stretched, and walked over to the window, opening it. Those birds were back. He watched them idly, then turned his attention to the mostly empty bookshelf for the first time since he had come here. The books there were mainly compendia; works of reference, lists, lexicons. A flush of familiarity passed through him. This reminded him, in a paltry sort of way, of the
sort of books which populated the great libraries of Asgard. In his youth he had spent a great deal of
time pouring over such texts. He had studied, with the utmost seriousness, all there was to know of
the nine realms: their histories and legends, races, creatures, languages (a purely scholarly pursuit, as
Allspeak made such things unnecessary), styles of dress, customs, ecologies, music, art. How cool
and ordered it all seemed now. Not at all as messy and chaotic as it truly was. And there had never
been much about Midgard in those books, he thought now; it was a lesser realm, and much of
Asgard’s interaction with it had been far in that world’s far past, though not so long ago to an Aesir.
Everything changed quickly here.

There had been nothing in his dutiful study to prepare him for this punishment.

Loki passed his fingers over the spines of the books, and stopped on a slim volume about
horticulture. He pulled it out and paged through it, appreciating, remotely, the beauty of the
illustrations, the graceful petals and stamens and leaves. He had once treasured this sort of thing. He
had loved beauty, valued symmetry and grace.

But what use were those things to a frost giant? To a creature of ice and barren wasteland and
murder?

He closed his eyes, briefly, and tried to steady his breathing. His hands clenched the book tightly.
When he felt a little more under control, he opened his eyes, and read the text on the page he had
stopped on.

Abutilon Megapotamicum (or Vexillarium): This curious Brazilian climber with the formidable
name is usually offered as a half-hardy or greenhouse plant, but experience shows that it will
withstand as many degrees of frost as it is likely to meet within the southern counties. It is well worth
trying against a south wall, for apart from the unusual character of its flowers it has several points to
recommend it. For one thing, it occupies but little space, seldom growing more than four feet high,
so that even if you should happen to lose it you will not be left with a big blank gap. For another, it is
apt to flower at times when you least expect it which always provides an amusing surprise.

You should thus grow it somewhere you are constantly likely to pass and can glance at it daily to see
what it is doing without having to go out of your way. Another reason for doing this is that it is not
one of those showy climbers which you can see from the other side of the garden, but requires to be
looked at as closely as though you were short-sighted. And you can only do so in the open, for if you
cut it to bring into the house it will be dead within the hour, which is unsatisfactory for both it and
for you. But sitting on the grass at the foot of the wall where it grows, you can stare up into the queer
hanging bells and forget what the people round you are saying.

“How strange,” Loki murmured to himself, and then heard the sound of Banner’s feet outside his
door. He snapped the book closed and strode over to it, pulling it open, and was pleased at the slight
start that Banner gave at his sudden appearance.

The human recovered quickly, however. “Will you be ready in thirty minutes?”

Loki nodded, and stepped back to shut the door, but noticed Banner staring at the book in his hand.

“After work,” Banner said suddenly, as Loki’s hand closed on the doorknob, “we’re going some
place.”

“Where?”

“Surprise field trip.” Banner smiled, and headed back to his room.
When they arrived at St. Christopher House, Loki went directly to the cafeteria, eager to get away from Banner for a bit. He was early, and so he stood for a few minutes among the tables, staring again at the painting on the wall.

“What does this depict?” he asked the manager when she arrived.

She looked at him strangely. “It’s Saint Christopher, of course.”

Loki blinked. “Oh.” It meant nothing to him.

“The director just called me,” she said. “You’re doing something new today.” She gave him directions to a room he had never visited before. Loki hesitated, unsure, but went.

The directions led to a large, airy room, filled with wooden easels, tables littered with tools, a potter’s wheel, kiln, a loom.

“Luka?” A slip of a girl with pale brown skin, freckles, and a shock of dark curly hair approached him. “That’s your name, right?” Loki scowled. He had been ignoring the ridiculous appellation Banner had chosen for him all week. The girl seemed not to notice, or perhaps only politely overlooked his rudeness. “I was told you’d be down here to help me today. I’m Edith.”

“What would you have me do?” he asked. He didn’t understand the purpose of this place.

“This is the art studio. We have an expressive therapy program here. Ever heard of that?” Loki said nothing, but she went on regardless. “A lot of the visitors here have suffered trauma, or they’ve lost their way. This is a way to help them work through their problems creatively and build skills … we also sometimes sell their art at a gallery we have an agreement with, so it generates some funds for them too.” She led Loki over to the corner of the room where there were stacks of metal containers. “Why don’t you set up some paint for now? And then when the guests arrive I’ll show you how you can help them.”

So he poured paint out into cups and arranged brushes and fetched paper and drawing utensils, boxes of beads, or whatever else the “guests” requested when they arrived. They were a curious lot. Some looked like utter rascals; some repulsed him; others looked surprisingly respectable. Edith treated them all with a polite respect and solicitousness. He could certainly not bring himself to mimic her, but under her watchful eye he found himself restraining his temper more than he might have thought possible.

Later in the day, when there was something of a lull, he stood and watched as a woman worked at the loom he had noticed when he arrived. It reminded him of his mother, working at a much larger instrument, weaving a complex and glittering pattern, with the same elegance and mastery as she wove magic. The product of this weaving was much simpler, and the pattern strangely unfocused.

When the studio closed for the day, and they were done cleaning up, he went back over to the loom, and looked at it curiously.

“I saw you watching, earlier,” Edith said, from where she was drying paint buckets that she had just cleaned out. “Do you want to know more about that?”

Loki shrugged, but once again this did not daunt her.

“It’s Saori weaving,” she said briskly, stacking the buckets up tidily. “From Japan. It’s supposed to be very good therapy. The nice thing about it is that it’s not really possible to make mistakes with it.
You just let the pattern of the weaving proceed organically.”

“It must look rather ugly,” he said.

She laughed. “You’d be surprised. I’ve never seen one that didn’t look at least interesting and unique.” She came up to him, smiling, a little too gently, and something inside of him suddenly felt drawn tight, like it might snap at any moment. “Do you want to try using it? You could have a go tomorrow morning, maybe, before the guests arrive.”

“No,” he said, a little more harshly than he’d meant to, and back away. Again she didn’t seem to notice.

“Well, good night, then, Luka. I think your friend is waiting for you.”

Friend? Loki wondered, and frowned at Banner, standing quietly in the doorway.

* * *

“Where are we going, Banner?” Loki was distinctly uncomfortable. They were on “the subway”, or “the T”; Banner had tried to explain it, but Loki was too busy being vastly irritated by the mortals surrounding him in this cramped vehicle to care. For some reason they were almost all wearing ugly red and blue tunics, and they were very loud.

“Sorry,” Banner said, raising his voice to be heard over the din. The vehicle began to turn, and everyone leaned with it, holding onto poles and straps to keep upright. “I didn’t realize there was a game today. Baseball season, you know.”

Loki stared at him.

“Boston takes its sports very seriously.”

“Ah,” Loki said. He had some inkling of this. “Sports. What you mortals do to distract yourselves from killing each other in battle too frequently.”

“Something like that,” Banner said.

“You didn’t answer my question, Banner ---”

“Wait, is this Copley? It is. Come on, we’re getting off here.” Banner took him by the arm and pulled him through the crowd of people. When they emerged from the train, Loki took a moment to enjoy the free air, before immediately realizing that far from being free, they were still in a disgusting, dank, underground tunnel.

“This way,” Banner said, hurrying towards a set of stairs.

A few moments later, they were at last above ground. Everything seemed bright and white, compared to the dark dinginess of the subway, but it was no less devoid of people. As irritated as Loki was by Banner’s grasp on his arm, he found himself somewhat grateful to be tugged along through the milling, disorienting crowds. They climbed a low set of stone stairs onto a plaza, past elegant brass sculptures of silent, wise-eyed women, towards the entry of an imposing grey building. Loki blinked up at it, and, craning his neck to look, his eyes caught on on a engraving high up along the border below the roof:

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY OF THE CITY OF BOSTON BUILT BY THE PEOPLE AND DEDICATED TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF LEARNING A . D . MDCCCLXXXVIII
“You’ve brought me to a library?” he asked dumbly, as Banner let go of his arm and opened one great black door, above which there was another inscription, reading simply, FREE TO ALL.

“A library?” Banner laughed. “This is one of the greatest libraries in the country. Watch your tongue.”

How had Banner known, he thought, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the dimmer light within, that he had been thinking of the libraries of Asgard this morning?

“I have to sign up for a library card,” Banner said, gesturing towards a desk. “Why don’t you take a look around and find some books?”

Loki’s mouth felt dry, and his eyes hot and burning. He watched wordlessly as Banner walked over to the line at the desk without further comment. He looked around. Before them there was a great marble staircase. He walked towards it, almost robotically. He wondered if perhaps this was a trap. But as he ascended each step, nothing happened. The stave was quiet in his chest, and when he looked back, Banner was at the desk, head bowed over a piece of paper.

At the landing, the sides of the staircase were flanked by large marble lions. He reached out and touched one cold, solid paw. They were beautiful. But when he rounded the corner, he saw the sides of their mounts bore an inscription honoring war dead, and a sour taste filled his mouth.

The staircase split into two, and he took the left side. As he climbed the stairs further, he noticed that the walls were muralled. Much as with the painting at St. Christopher House, he found it difficult to interpret the images before him; it seemed he was lacking some essential knowledge to decode their symbolism. Beings floated in air clothed in diaphanous white robes, while others draped themselves across the ground, engaged deep in thought. Naked women bathed in pools. Others gesticulated at each other wildly.

He reached the apex of the stairs and wandered through a doorway into a colossal room with high, vaulted ceilings. It was lined with desks and nearly all were full of people seated, working. It was repressively silent bar the clicking and clacking of buttons, the scrape of pages turning, the scratch of pens on paper.

Something deep inside him stirred. The scene was at once so hauntingly familiar that it was painful to him. He was almost blind with longing for that peace, the purpose with which these people set themselves at work.

He turned and left the room, and walked back down the stairs, past the artwork and the lions. Banner was no longer at the desk. Loki looked wildly back and forth.

“Do you need help finding something?” A man in a black uniform had approached him.

Loki was not sure exactly what he was even looking for.

“You want the circulating collection?”

“Yes,” he said, unsure but grasping onto the first thing that he said.

“Follow this hallway and turn the corner. Go through the door into the courtyard, and then cross the courtyard and go back inside, and straight on into the stacks. Got it?”

Loki nodded, and hurried off in the direction indicated.

The courtyard was beautiful and busy. A fountain splashed in the center, and people were sitting
about at metal tables or even on the ground, reading and talking and working. Loki reentered the building on the other side, and found his way into a large room filled with bookshelves.

Again he found himself overwhelmed. Had he been in a library on Asgard, he would have known precisely where to go, what shelves to consult, which writers to trust. Here he knew nothing. Not only had he no idea what system of organization was used, but he had no idea what topic he should even begin with.

He began to wander aimlessly through the stacks. He trailed his fingers over books about geography, stopping to take out an atlas and page through it to find, first, Boston, then New York, and New Mexico, where he had arrived. Then, flipping through pages past oceans, he discovered Stuttgart, which was in a country called Germany. His knowledge of the spatial arrangement of Midgard was intensely blurry; he had been lead from place to place the entire time he had been here, and his memories of that time were shaky at best, for he had barely been himself at the time.

He paused at that thought, and swallowed deeply, pushing those thoughts aside. It was pointless, really. He pushed the book back onto the shelf.

He continued onwards, pulling books at random off of the shelf, keeping some, putting others back. At one point he found himself in a section that concerned the religions of Midgard. He found himself dizzied at the sheer number of them. Stopping at a series of slim volumes about Norse mythology, he shook his head and continued. He did not care to know what mortals thought of him, or Asgard. He had even less desire to see if the books contained clumsy images of blue, cold giants.

A few shelves later, he discovered a book poking out titled Lives of the Saints.

He put the books he had gathered on the floor and tugged it out. He scanned the opening pages quickly, finding the concept of saints to be somewhat bizarre and morbid, but he supposed it was not unlike the veneration of great heroes which was prevalent in Asgard, and had been on Midgard in the days of Odin’s prominence there. But the way these saints’ gory deaths were fetishized felt alien to him. The stories in the book revelled in them: martyrs, they were called. Devoured by beasts, crushed by stones, burned at the stake, tortured. He found his mind drifting back to the burial marker he’d collapsed in front of, with its words about massacres and victims. It was the same impulse. It seemed inescapable here.


*Christopher, also known as “Reprobus” (“the rejected”), the Canaanite. Feast: July 25. Martyred in 251 AD. Patron saint of bachelors, travelling, storms, epilepsy, gardeners, holy death, and toothache. Often depicted as a great tree, a giant or ogre, or a dog-headed man.*

He read that Christopher had sought to serve the most powerful of kings, but every one he found was soon superseded by another. He discovered that all men feared the devil, and so served him. But the devil feared God. When Christopher asked how he might serve God, he was told of a raging river, in which many perished as they attempted to cross it. As he was great and powerful in stature, Christopher could carry travelers across the river safely. One day he encountered a small child who required his assistance, but despite his small size, he was tremendously heavy. When Christopher reached the opposite side of the river, the child dismounted and revealed himself as Christ, the son of God, and that Christopher had been carrying the world on his shoulders.

A fanciful tale, Loki thought. While he found the mortal stories about the Christian God to be perplexing and amusing, he supposed it was not, at its core, all that different from all the myths that had preceded it.
“There you are,” a voice said softly above him, and he looked up to see Banner, smiling faintly down at him.

Loki became acutely aware that he was sitting on the dirty floor, with piles of books about his legs. He stood hastily, and as he bent to pick up the volumes from the floor, Banner also stooped, and swiftly took the Lives of the Saints from the top.

“This brings me back,” Banner said, amused. Loki saw his eyes glance over the page he had been reading, and then regard Loki with frank interest. Loki looked away, feeling strangely bare.

“Do mortals enjoy these stories?” he asked, eager to turn the subject of Banner’s thoughts from himself, even if it meant engaging in conversation with him.

“Enjoy? I don’t know, probably some people do. And I guess they are kind of interesting in their way, even if they are primarily codswallop.” He closed the book and handed it towards Loki, who shook his head; he had no interest in it now that he had slaked his curiosity about Christopher. Banner slid it back onto the shelf at random -- something Loki would have been irritated by, if he had understood the classification method used at all. “No, I never enjoyed them. Mostly I was forced to learn it all through years and years of CCD. But at least I didn’t have to go to Catholic school, I guess.” He did not bother to explain these enigmatic terms for Loki.

“I see you found some reading material.” Banner held up a book that Loki hadn’t noticed and placed it on top of the stack in Loki’s arms. “Here. It’s a favorite of mine, I thought you might like it.”

Loki peered at it, slightly annoyed. The title on the cover read Siddhartha.

They were silent as they walked to the exit, and stopped at a desk where Banner took Loki’s books and waved them under a device that beeped and spat out bits of paper. As they exited the building into the semi-darkness, Banner spoke again.

“What are the libraries like on Asgard?”

Loki blinked. He looked down at the books in his arms -- worn covers, crumpled pages, in every way completely different from the glorious, sturdy codices which filled the repositories in Asgard. He did not even know where to begin. Finally he settled on, “You cannot take books away from the libraries. You must spend time there to learn.”

Banner nodded. “That’s the way things used to be here.”

Used to be. He wondered what that meant. Judging by the way time passed on Midgard, it could be anywhere from a decade to centuries. Such a paltry amount of time, but for the residents of this cursed spinning sphere, something that used to be might be beyond the scope of living memory. He thought of the day that the All-Father had first spoken of planning Thor’s coronation. He supposed Banner had not even been born yet. Coronations took some time to plan, after all.

They had reached the house. Banner was fumbling with his keys. Loki wondered how much time he had left to live; had the metabolic alterations which he’d undergone altered his lifespan? Lengthened it? Shortened it? How long might this punishment last? What would happen to him if (when) Banner died?

He shook his head, angered by himself. No. He would surely find a way to escape this prison by then.
The song Bruce is listening to in his office is "Hummingbird" by Wilco.

The book about flowers Loki reads is *Some Flowers* by Vita Sackville-West - a fascinating woman who was Virginia Woolf's lover and the inspiration for her novel *Orlando*.

Saori weaving is fascinating and really is used for art therapy purposes!
The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference

Chapter Summary

Loki and Bruce see a play. Loki reveals a secret to Bruce.

“Because it is a body across which difference has been repeatedly written, the monster … seeks out its author to demand its raison d'être -- and to bear witness for the fact that it could have been created Otherwise.”
Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture: Seven Theses"

He read books late into the night, filling his head up with all manner of Midgardian things, some of them very mysterious and confusing to him. Again it seemed as though there were a thick veil cloaking his understanding. It was supremely frustrating. He was used to learning things with ease. For example, who were Churchill, Columbus, and Napoleon? What were samurai, typewriters, vacuums, profiteroles? Where was Red Sea, and what sorcerer had parted it? These books were littered with allusions to things he had no knowledge of, and he was overwhelmed by the vast quantity of people, events, and inventions which had filled the centuries of human history.

In the morning, he marched downstairs. Banner was pouring milk over the disgusting horse meal with which he usually broke his fast.

“I require a concordance,” Loki said.

Banner’s eyebrows drew together in confusion. “Pardon me?”

The mortal did not understand him. Loki frowned, already embarrassed by the request, and tried to push his way through the limitations of the Allspeak. “A … compendium of knowledge. It explains … words.”

Banner tilted his head. “A dictionary? Or maybe an encyclopedia. Or both. Hold on.” He picked up the bowl and walked with it through the kitchens into the study, and approached one of the bookshelves. “Here’s a dictionary,” he said, pulling it from the shelf. “A little out of date though.” He crouched down to survey the bottom shelves. “And there’s a set of encyclopedia down here. Not many people have these anymore.” He turned his head and look back up at Loki. “They’re a little cumbersome. The internet is easier. But it’ll do.” He handed the dictionary to Loki, who took it from him, and stared down at the cover, frowning.

“You can come down here and look through the encyclopedia when you want to,” Banner said, standing. “Dictionary’s got word definitions -- the encyclopedia is more detailed.” He ate a spoonful of his breakfast, and smiled.

Loki nodded, feeling uncomfortable, and swiftly left the room.

* 

The days passed in a blur. Everyday he worked in the art therapy room, which was better than his previous tasks in that it was less dull, and there not so much drudgery involved. It had its own
challenges, though. He was assaulted at all times by people. He could not retreat into the silent world of his mind for a single moment. They made demands on him. They spoke to him.

These people -- referred to by the staff of St. Christopher House as “guests” -- did not know who he was, or what he had done. They spoke cheerfully to him, or snapped at him, or told him their troubles, or lectured him on conspiracies in the government (some of which he suspected might be true). In their presence, it was easy to forget, for a moment’s time, who he was, as well. But not for very long. Eventually, he snapped back into himself, like a night-blooming flower which closes back up at the first light of morning.

Every evening after work Loki set up camp in his bedroom, books and volumes of the encyclopedia spread out around him. He read until his eyes ached and the tips of his index finger and thumb were dry and itchy from turning endless pages. The more he learned the more there seemed to be to learn. He read about the history of Midgard, about their science, medicine, political systems, cultures. It seemed he had only scratched the surface.

Late one night he picked Siddhartha up and began to read it. He had glanced at it earlier but had found it utterly mystifying, full of concepts and concerns he was completely unfamiliar with. Now he tackled it a bit more seriously, and with a little more context. The book was about a young man named Siddhartha, well-loved by his family, intelligent, successful. But nonetheless he was deeply unhappy. Despite his father’s protests, he left home, in the company of a friend, to become an ascetic -- one who has given up all luxuries and pleasures in life to live in the barest simplicity. In doing so he hoped to achieve enlightenment.

(Enlightenment of what? Loki wondered. Mortals always seemed to think they could learn the secrets of the world by thinking hard about it, or mortifying their bodies, or sacrificing goats.)

After living some time in this state, Siddhartha met a man named Gotama, called the Buddha, who many revered as having attained perfect peace. Loki found himself contemplating the book’s description of Buddha, whose name he recognized now from his reading.

*His calm face was neither happy nor sad. He seemed to smile quietly and inwardly. With a hidden smile, quiet, calm, somewhat resembling a healthy child, the Buddha walked, wore the robe and placed his feet just as all his monks did, according to a precise rule. But his face and his walk, his quietly lowered glance, his quietly dangling hand and even every finger of his quietly dangling hand expressed peace, expressed perfection, did not search, did not imitate, breathed softly in a continuous calm, in an undying light, an untouchable peace.*

He thought of Banner’s seeming constant serenity, which in the past few weeks had so infuriated him. Yet he knew that Banner was not perfectly calm, not deep inside. Far from it. He possessed a deep and soul-shaking rage, but try as he might, Loki had not been able to tear the beast from him.

Loki stilled, and wondered at that thought. He had not fully realized it, but yes, at some point he had stopped fearing the emergence of the beast and had begun baiting it. Why did he want this reaction? Did Banner’s seeming internal balance annoy him?

Or did he simply long for a punishment that would more effectively assuage his guilt?

*I never asked for this, he thought. I told Thor I did not long for his forgiveness.*

He pressed his lips together firmly and exhaled. He would not think on this more. It was too late.

*
As the weeks passed, the weather in this part of Midgard became extremely hot and the air seemed to stick to their skin. Flowers burst all around the city in the manner of brilliant dying stars and the city swarmed with people like buzzing gnats. One night, there were explosions in the sky -- fireworks -- but made of gunpowder, not magic. They could hear them, but could not see them from the house because there too many buildings in the way; but Banner dusted off the television set he never used and turned it on, and there they were. Loki supposed they weren’t terrible, for a mortal effort.

They went to the library many times, and Loki learned many things. It was as if something had woken up inside him. Curiosity was itching at him inside -- his old weakness.

He felt more and more like himself everyday.

But he couldn’t be that Loki anymore, could he? That person was a lie. A much-loved lie, but a long discarded one. Like a snake’s shed skin -- nothing but refuse.

* 

At St. Christopher House, Edith finally convinced him to try the Saori loom.

He did not wish to. He did not need “to work things out”. But every day he found his eyes drawn to the loom whenever it was being used. The strange, unpredictable patterns hypnotized him. It was so ugly and crude. He liked it.

“Mabel left without finishing this,” Edith said one day as they were cleaning up. Mabel was a white-haired old woman who constantly seemed to be humming an aimless tune, except for when she suddenly started screaming at nothing - Loki had been told she had a condition called Tourette’s. Edith stood by the loom, running her fingers over a half-finished stretch of bumpy, colorful cloth. “Do you want to try? This weaving thread will go to waste otherwise.”

She held out the boat shuttle to him and put it in his hands. He only stared at it for a moment, wanting to hand it back, but he felt stupid, and so he sat down to get it over with. He did not need instruction; he had watched people use it many times already. It seemed to come naturally to him. The threads whooshed through the heddles. There was no design, no intention behind anything, no hidden meaning. It just was, a thing created for no purpose.

When he finished, Edith pulled it from the loom and held it up.

“What are you going to do with it?” Loki asked.

“I think I’ll hang it on the wall,” she said, folding it over her arm. “Tomorrow I’ll bring some nails.”

* 

On their next day off, Banner asked him if would like to do something different.

Loki blinked. They had established something of a routine; it was almost comfortable, despite its lack of luxuries. He did not even bat an eye at cooking or cleaning these days, though he had been rather angry the day Banner had revealed to him the purpose of the metal door beneath the counter in the kitchen (not "kitchens" -- most Midgardians did not often have anything so grand as that, he had realized): a dishwasher. He had not had to wash those dishes by hand, that day when Banner had tested him so sorely.

But he had gotten over that, even.

“What do you mean?” he asked carefully.
“It’s a play,” Banner said. “Outside, on the Common. I thought you might enjoy it.”

Loki bit his lip. Long ago, he had loved theater. They had attended performances frequently. Thor might fall asleep whenever there wasn’t a fight scene, but he and mother --

His hands tightened into fists. “Is this not meant to be my punishment?” His voice came out harsh and loud.

Banner raised an eyebrow.

“I was not aware that murderers merited so much care in your society. You are a very kind warden, Banner, to offer to treat me to such extravagance.”

“It’s hardly an extravagance,” Banner said. “It’s free. The audience sits on the ground.”

Loki snorted. “I am sure your superiors would be happy to know you are taking such good care of me.”

Banner frowned. “No one at S. H. I. E. L. D. is my superior.”

Loki laughed. “They may tell a different tale.” He crossed his arms and began to pace. Something dark and poisonous was stirring within him. It had been silent for weeks, waiting for an opportunity to sink its teeth into him. “Do you know what I think, Banner?”

“Very rarely,” Banner said. He was watching him warily.

“I think I am not the only prisoner here. This place is your cage as much as it is mine. And just as you give me the illusion of freedom, they have given the same to you.”

Something had gone flat in Banner’s eyes. It sent little shivers and sparks through Loki, starting at the back of his neck, spreading out through his shoulders and down to his fingertips and toes. There was a long, terrible stretch of silence between them. Finally, Banner said, “You’re probably right. But I’m only a prisoner because I choose to be.” Another pause. “And I think the same could be said for you.”

Then he turned away and left the room.

*

Loki had stayed in his room for hours. He tried to read his books, but the words blurred and ran together in his mind. He paced the room. He looked out the window. He listened for the sounds of Banner’s existence, but he was silent. He found himself thinking of his first few days in this house; he had not felt this restless and penned in since then.

Did he wish to be here?

Of course not. The stave kept him here. He had tried to escape, had he not?

He unbutton the top of his shirt and slid his hand inside, let his fingers trace the contours of the symbol on his chest, and felt a reverberation go through him. Downstairs, he heard a quiet thud, which startled him. His breath stuttered his chest, and he pressed against the stave again, both thrilled and sickened by the surge of strange power he felt when he did. It was quickly reined in.

Loki again tasted bile and blood in his mouth, heard himself saying, How did you find me?

Magic.
Fifteen minutes later, he had dressed and readied himself and slowly descended the steps. He checked Banner’s study first, then, finding it empty, the kitchen. He found him standing in front of the doors that led to the courtyard, staring blankly outside. He cleared his throat. Banner looked back at him over his shoulder.

“When should we leave?” Loki said, with no preamble.

Banner raised an eyebrow. Then he said, “Now.”

They walked the streets, making little to no conversation, and certainly not discussing what had passed between them earlier. The sky was turning a slightly leaden color; Loki thought it might rain.

At last they reached the Common. It was a great green oasis amid the tall buildings and sullen gray stone of the city, and Loki realized he recognized it. He had passed through it when he tried to escape. His eyes darted to Banner, but he was busy scanning the crowd of people seated on the ground. Loki said nothing.

The place was more beautiful than he remembered it, but perhaps he had not quite been himself at the time, wracked with pain and confusion as he was. This world had also been half dead at the time, still coming to life in the early throes of springtime, and now it was midsummer.

“Here?” Banner said, leading him over to the steps of a stone monument. “It’s a bit far away.”

Loki shrugged; peering at the empty stage, he found he could see it quite easily. And this spot was removed from the mortals somewhat, which pleased him.

They sat on the steps, Loki’s long legs splayed out over the grass, and Banner handed him a bottle of water and a sandwich. He was not very hungry, and after picking at it for a bit, he ripped a piece of the bread and threw it to some birds.

Banner looked amused. It was the first true expression Loki had seen on his face since they had exchanged words that morning. “Let me guess. You made your mom cut the crusts off your bread when you were a kid, huh?”

Loki blinked in confusion. There were still many references Midgardians used that he found unintelligible. “I am simply not hungry.”

Banner shook his head, smiling wryly, and drank his water. After a moment he reached into his satchel and pulled out a slim book, which he handed to Loki. “I thought you might like to follow along.”

Loki looked at it, puzzled. *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare. “This is the performance we will be seeing?”

Banner nodded. “They do a different one every summer.” He paused. “Most people consider Shakespeare to be the greatest writer in the English language.”

Loki had avoided Midgardian literature for the most part, preferring to stick to facts; but the name Shakespeare had come up from time to time in his reading. For some reason, he felt wary at the idea of exposing himself to the imaginary worlds of mortals. It was one thing to know their history, their petty wars, even their strange religious beliefs, for so much of it seemed so primitive. But he had
always found, in his studies, that the true character of people could best be understood in their art, and he did not want to know mortals in this intimate way. Every time he had come close, he had shied away. It felt suffocating.

Yet here he was. He did not know why he had come, why he had conceded to Banner’s strange attempts at kindness again and again, except that perhaps there was some traitorous part of him that was weak, and it was taking him over, piece by piece.

Loki closed the book. Turning his attention to the birds, he pointed. “What do you call that type of bird?” he asked abruptly, startling Banner.

“The one with the white cheeks? That’s a chickadee.”

“No, the other. With the dark plumage.” It was the same type of bird he had held in his hands that first day of his imprisonment here -- the one that had pecked at him and drawn blood.

Banner’s brow wrinkled. “I think that’s a starling.”

“Starling,” he murmured.

“Actually, there’s a funny story I heard about starlings. It’s kind of relevant.”

“Oh?” He could not keep the inquisitive tone from his voice.

“They aren’t native to North America. But about … maybe a hundred fifty years ago? Some time in the nineteenth century, there was a society of people who loved Shakespeare, and they decided that every bird mentioned in a Shakespeare play should be introduced into America. The starling was one of them. Now they’re an invasive species, and push other native bird species out of their habitat.”

Loki mulled this over, and threw another piece of bread to the birds. The starling grabbed it with ruthless efficiency and flew away. “Which play? Not this one?”

“Oh, I’m not sure.” Banner reached into his pocket and took out his phone; after a few moments of tapping his thumb against the screen, he continued, “They’re in Henry IV. That’s one of Shakespeare’s history plays. *The king forbade my tongue to speak of Mortimer. But I will find him when he is asleep, and in his ear I’ll holler ’Mortimer!’ Nay I’ll have a starling shall be taught to speak nothing but Mortimer, and give it to him to keep his anger still in motion.* Starlings are mimics. They can repeat phrases and sentences you teach them. I think they’re related to myna birds.”

At that moment, a man entered the stage to introduce the play; the audience hushed, and Banner put his phone away. Loki looked listlessly at the book on his lap, as though he were eyeing a terrible temptation.

And so he sat and watched a mortal tale unfold: an island in a great storm, an exiled sorcerer, a shipwreck, strange spirits bent to human will. And Caliban, the repulsive monster, son of a witch, raised by Prospero as his son, until, rejecting the lessons he has been taught, the monster tried to rape the sorcerer’s daughter, and was imprisoned as a slave. Loki, without realizing it, found himself opening the book, and turning the pages until he caught up with the scene on stage.

*Full fathom five thy father lies;*
*Of his bones are coral made;*
*Those are pearls that were his eyes:*
*Nothing of him that doth fade*
*But doth suffer a sea-change*
*Into something rich and strange.*
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell

*Hark! now I hear them,--Ding-dong, bell.*

He followed along, no longer heeding the part of him which hesitated, wholly absorbed by the world of the play. At the close of the second act, Banner touched his arm. “Can you still read that? It’s gotten very dark.”

Loki blinked. He looked around. He supposed it had.

“Do you need light?” Banner asked.

Loki shook his head. “I can read it.”

“Hm,” Banner said contemplatively. The intermission had begun. He stood up. “Aesir must have good low light vision. I’ll have to ask Thor about it.”

Loki stilled. He looked down at his own hands, feeling as though they belonged to someone else. A deep sense of disease went through them. The words on the page were so clear to him. How had he never noticed this before? He cast his memory back, bringing to mind every time that Thor had pulled him from his work late at night when they were young, urging him to bed -- *You've not even lit your room, brother. How can you read in this dim light?*

He let out a low shuddery breath, and a wave of nausea passed through him.

“Loki?” Banner said. “You okay?”

Loki nodded.

“Right … well, I’m going to go stretch my legs.” He turned and walked away. Loki kept his eyes pressed tightly closed for a minute, and when he opened them, he was alone. He cast his eyes about in the crowd, but he could not see Banner.

His mind was flooded suddenly with plans, possibilities. A million methods of escape. But the stave - no, fuck the stave. He might have no powers, but he was still immortal. He was strong. A powerful beast with the capacity for incredible endurance.

He may not be a god, but he was a monster.

If the stave held him, back, could he not rid himself of it? Tear the thing out, even if its mark bore down straight to his heart? He could see it so clearly. He needed only something wickedly sharp.

He held the vision in his mind for a moment, savoring it, and then, with a choked noise, let it go.

Because … he did not want it. It was not simply that he had not taste for hiding, scheming, fleeing capture (the mere thought exhausted him) -- no, there was more. He was in the midst of something. And he found, for the first time in ages, he wished to see it play out until the end.

When Banner returned, Loki was still sitting, eyes closed, book open in his lap to the beginning of Act III. The man smiled.

“Ready for the last half?”

Loki cleared his throat. “Yes,” he said. “I am eager to learn this story’s resolution.”

*
“Banner,” Loki said, his voice loud in the quiet, muggy night air as they walked down their street several hours later, “There is something you are mistaken about.”

“Hm?” Banner stopped and turned his head to look him, or try to, in the darkness. Loki had been walking a few steps behind him; though Banner had a short stature compared to Loki, he had a brisk stride.

“I am no Aesir.” Once said, Loki marveled at how easily the words came. “Did Thor not tell you of my origins?”

“Uh … he said you were adopted, I think.”

Loki laughed shortly. “Of course, Thor would find the most facile manner to describe our relationship.”

“If you aren’t Aesir, then …?”

“I am Jotunn. A frost giant. This skin I wear is … not my native flesh. It is a mere disguise.”

Banner was looking at him strangely; Loki could not decode the expression on his face. They began to walk again. “I don’t understand.”

“I am a shapeshanger. The All-Father said that I took this form when he … ‘adopted’ me.”

“You don’t remember?”

“I was but an infant.”

Banner said nothing, only continued looking at him in that strange way. It made Loki feel uncomfortable.

“So you see,” he went on, filling the silence with words as best he was able, “there is no point in asking Thor. About my vision, you see. I have no doubt Aesir have superior vision to humans, but … perhaps my own abilities are not the same.”

“What makes you think that?”

Loki shrugged. A sort of detached feeling descended upon him, as though the topic they were discussing was in no way related to him. It was merely a matter of scientific interest. “Well, Jotunheim is a world of perpetual cold and darkness. Jotnar would likely have senses which are adapted to their environment.”

“But you don’t know.”

“Ah … not really. Asgard was at war with Jotunheim for centuries, and after the conclusion of hostilities there existed a great gulf between the realms. Consequently there was not much information about their race in our libraries.”

Banner nodded, looking thoughtful. “But you look like an Aesir … what makes you think your senses and abilities wouldn’t be the same as theirs?”

This made him think for awhile. “This is merely an illusion,” he said after awhile. “And I have
always been … different from others. When I discovered my true heritage, suddenly many things I had experienced in my life became clear …” He trailed off. It came back to him, again, what exactly they were discussing. How could he forget?

But Banner merely made another contemplative noise. “Interesting.” They had reached the house. Banner let them in, and Loki was engulfed with the now familiar smell of the place. So different from Asgard, yet somehow, it had become so comfortable in these months.

“It’s late,” Banner said. He rested his hand on Loki’s shoulder. It sat there, warm and solid, and Loki was caught in a violent conundrum, torn between wanting to tear away, too stunned to move, and somehow, strangely, enjoying it. “Let’s continue this conversation later.” He smiled, and went upstairs.
The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible

Chapter Summary

Some visitors arrive in Boston, and Loki receives a gift.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The monster is transgressive, too sexual, perversely erotic, a lawbreaker; and so the monster and all that it embodies must be exiled and destroyed. The repressed however … always seems to return.” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture: Seven Theses"

But they did not discuss the matter further. Loki was not eager to do so, and Banner seemed to have forgotten about it. Weeks passed, and life continued apace, but things were not quite the same. Loki continued to read, but The Tempest had altered his interests somewhat. He read Shakespeare, Dickens, Hemingway, Orwell, Kafka. Banner recommended the Russians. That occupied quite some time. He also finished Siddhartha, following along as the protagonist left his life of solitude and entered the world, pursued love and wealth, contemplated suicide, and restarted his life on the path to enlightenment.

“Why did you give me this?” Loki asked. They were sitting downstairs in the parlor, while Banner was reading white papers and listening to the radio. It had become a common scene. Loki found Banner’s quiet presence while he worked increasingly desirable. The radio, too, had ceased to irritate him. Sometimes it brought news, which made more and more sense to him as he understood the world better. Other times it told stories. Today a woman was talking about a long journey over the sea from a war torn country. He had been quietly listening, his eyes closed with Siddhartha, completed, on his chest, a cool breeze coming in through the half-open windows (the seasons were shifting here again, and so quickly). He was only half listening. The rest of his mind had been restlessly sorting and categorizing and comparing, as it was so often wont to do.

Now he had broken this peaceful quiet. Banner looked up from the pamphlet in his hand. “Give you what?” Loki held up the book. “Oh.” He took off his spectacles. “Someone who cared about me gave it to me once when I was confused about my place in life. It helped me.”

Loki was silent for a moment, digesting this. “You wanted to help me?”

To his surprise, Banner looked a little abashed. “Yeah, of course.”

Loki sat up. He wanted to ask why, but something made him shy away from it. “Who was it who gave you the book?” he asked instead.

Banner gave a funny little smile. “Her name is Betty.”

He was surprised by the sudden rush of jealousy that surged him. What did it matter? He was saved from further pursuing that line of thought, or the conversation, by a sudden burst of noise from Banner’s phone, which was resting on the table near his chair.
This song is about a superhero named Tony! It's called, “Tony's Theme”!

Banner rolled his eyes. “He’s really got to stop changing my ringtones. Don’t you think that’s a pretty clear violation of privacy?” He grabbed the phone and answered the call. “Tony, cut it out.” Stark was so loud, Loki could hear the burst of laughter from the other end of the line, and Banner stood and left the room, taking Stark’s raucous conversation with him.

Loki sat for a moment, and then, standing, walked as quietly as possible to the hallway, where he could just barely hear Banner’s conversation through the closed door of his office.

“That’s great, Tony. When can you come by? Uh huh. Well, I don’t know. Do you think it’s a good idea? Yes, I know. You can’t really reason with him, can you? Hm. Should I talk to him about it first? I honestly don’t know. I doubt he’ll like it, but he’ll like a surprise less. No, things have been good. Pretty calm. Great. Well, thanks for everything. I’ll see you then.” Silence, and Loki turned to leave, but before he could, Bruce pulled open the door. “Thor and Tony are coming to visit this weekend,” he said, seemingly unsurprised by Loki’s eavesdropping. “And don’t worry, I didn’t hear you. I just figured you couldn’t resist.” He left the office, closing the door behind him. “Mind helping me make dinner?”

Loki said nothing, one part of him vibrating with nerves at the idea of Stark and Thor coming here; another part, strangely pleased by Banner’s nonchalant assessment of his habits. He found his lips twisting into a smile, and he could not seem to unravel it. He followed Banner into the kitchen. “I suppose I must, if I do not wish to eat grass, or whatever it was you planned to cook.”

* 

Nevertheless the closer the weekend approached the more his nerves about Thor’s impending arrival overtook him. He found it difficult to focus in the art therapy room, which was problematic, as Edith had assigned him more and more responsibilities, and often left him alone in charge now, on days when she was busy with paperwork or meeting with gallery representatives. He had come to know many of the regulars by name. His old skills of diplomacy and organization came into play here, and he learned to alter his language and temper his sarcasm when dealing with the guests.

But now he found himself short on patience, unforgivably absent-minded, and when he was snapped at it was incredibly difficult not to snarl right back. Before he could give into these whims though, Edith saw his tension and took him aside.

“Having a bad day?” she whispered. “You’ve been on edge since Tuesday. Why don’t you go find Bruce? I’ll take over here.”

He had still never visited Banner in the clinic, but he knew where it was; he had overheard others giving directions there. He walked through the narrow hallways, and remembered the first time Banner had brought him here, how claustrophobic and dingy and dull everything seemed. It was strange how quickly one adapted to such things.

The entry chamber (waiting room, they were called waiting rooms) of the clinic, he stood for a moment, glancing around the room. He recognized a number of the people here from the studio. Alice, a woman who frequently attended sessions in the studio, was sitting near the entrance, and he went over to her.

“What’re you doing here?” she said gruffly. She was quite rude, but Loki enjoyed conversing her. Perhaps because he was equally rude. “Don’t you have any messes to be cleaning up?”

He ignored her. “What is your infirmity?” he asked.
“You talk so damn weird.” She pulled up the sleeve of her shirt, revealing a long dark bruise. “I fell on the T.”

Loki frowned. “That was clumsy of you.”

“Ha! You’re so sweet.” She made a kissing noise at him and laughed hoarsely. Loki shook his head and turned away.

“Where is Banner?” he asked the young man at the desk.

The boy blinked, looking a bit terrified. Loki had acquired something of a formidable reputation at St. Christopher House. “In Room 2 -- you can’t go in there -- he’s seeing a patient --” But it was too late; Loki brushed past him and pushed through the curtains.

Banner looked up, glasses sliding down his nose. He had both his hands at a man’s throat, feeling with his thumbs for his lymph nodes. “Loki, you aren’t allowed in here. Go wait outside.”

Loki blinked. He couldn’t explain it, but he felt like Banner had slapped him in the face. “I -- Edith sent me --”

“I’ll be done in a minute. But you can’t stay in here. Go.”

Several invectives rose in Loki’s throat. You dare speak to me this way, was one; I shall burn them all in this building and you, Beast, last of all. They all died at his lips, and left a rotten taste on his tongue. He swallowed acidic bile, turned, and left the little room, closing the curtain behind him with as much dignity as he could. The boy at the desk was looking back at him, wide-eyed and curious, and Loki hissed at him. “Look elsewhere, pest.” The boy flushed and nearly fell off his chair.

“I am a prince of Asgard no longer,” he thought mournfully, and wondered how, after all that had occurred, he could have forgotten like that. He wondered too why Banner’s rebuke had shocked him so; if it had been Thor or Odin, he would have sneered and made a rejoinder.

He relaxed too much these past weeks. He had let himself care.

Painfully, slowly, he reassembled his defenses. Stone after careful stone was laid. Until at last he breathed evenly, and his face stiffened, paled, cooled. He was strong once again.

Behind him, the curtain rustled. The man shuffled out, casting him wary glances. Banner came up behind him, and clapped him on the shoulder. “Sorry about that,” he said. He smiled; that calm, beatific smile that drove Loki insane. “I’m very strict about patient privacy. Are you nervous about tomorrow? Let me call my replacement, so we can leave early.” He peered at Loki. “Are you okay? You look drawn. Let’s go out to eat for dinner.”

And just like that, the wall fell again. Loki realized he was shaking.

And it had taken so little. When had he become so weak?

* 

Banner had never before taken him to a restaurant. He had brought food home from them before, going inside to get the food while Loki stayed outside, glaring at passersby, or, lately, with his nose stuck in a book. He had never cared for taverns, and had resented the times Thor had dragged him into such establishments in their youth, so he had not had much interest in the places anyway.

But he let Banner lead him to Boylston station, where they boarded a Green Line train and traveled
several stops to Hynes Convention Center. He tried to think the whole way there, but his mind kept spinning around, distracted by the noise of the passengers, and the conductor repeating over the scratchy intercom *The destination of this train is Cleveland Circle. Please take all of your belongings when you exit the train. The next stop is …* Instead, he stared doggedly at the confusing, complicated map of train stops over the door, filled with strangely evocative and pastoral names of locations that he doubted looked anything like their appellations: Fenwood, Riverway, Back of the Hill, Brookline Village, Beaconsfield, Woodland.

He followed Banner off of the train, up the stairs, and down Newbury Street until they reached a place that made him stand stock still. Banner stood there, smiling. “I thought you might like this place,” he said knowingly, and nodded up to the sign which projected from the brick wall: *Trident Booksellers & Cafe.*

Damn him.

*

Thirty minutes later, they sat at a table, Banner eating vegetable dumplings and Loki paging through the glossy pages of a book, staring at an old map of Boston, while the frittata Banner had ordered for him sitting largely untouched, rapidly cooling. He traced the line of the old city, and compared it to a modern map on the next page, imagining for himself what this primitive book could not itself demonstrate: the skinny isthmus filling out with the effort of human industry, creating the land beneath him, the land the house they lived in rested on too, and leaving behind the names of the now erased geographical features that had once existed there: the Fens, Bay Village.

Asgard had undergone similar but more advanced work, post-cataclysm -- long before Loki had been born, of course, but he had read about it with curiosity and admiration as a youth. The broken, incomplete chunk of rock, year by year increased by Aesir engineers and sorcerers, until it could support the population.

He closed the book and ate some of his cold dinner, and looked around himself, gaze slipping past the tables of diners to the colorful stacks of books, arranged neatly on the shelves.

On Asgard, when one wanted to acquire a book for their personal library, there was a rather complicated process involved. First you acquired the manuscript itself from the publisher. Then you took it to the bookbinder, who bound it in the fashion you wished. Loki’s books all had the same binding, one which he had himself designed, with green-stained deerskin leather, and runes of ownership and protection against theft and damage.

Oh, and Asgardian books also had tiny nanoparticles woven into the pages which animated images, summoned up information and related resources, and replaced the text with new editions.

“What are you thinking about?” Banner asked. “You look pretty far away.”

Loki frowned. He was -- worlds away. His mouth spasmed, caught between the choices before him - - say nothing, say something rude, say the truth. Always the same options with which he had struggled. Seemingly with no input from his mind, his mouth grew impatient and chose for him, and chose, strangely, the truth: “Asgard.”

“Oh,” Banner said, and in that simple statement managed to convey surprise, interest, curiosity, and a careful wariness all at the same time. Then: “Tell me about Asgard.”

Loki played with the fork on his plate, chasing bit of bacon and egg around with it. “What do you wish to know?”
“Do you miss it?”

Loki shrugged, and attempted to sneer.

Apparently unconvincingly, as Banner’s next question was: “What do you miss the most about it?”

He did not know what to say, and so he told Banner about the books. Banner listened, eyes gleaming, and asked question after question, forcing Loki to trace his knowledge back as far as it could go back, to explain concepts and technology and traditions he had taken for granted since childhood. It was like trying to explain the discovery of fire, or the invention of the wheel. It was frustrating, and yet strangely exhilarating. He forgot to be bored.

He forgot to think about Thor.

*

He remembered though, in the middle of the night, when he woke suddenly, sweating and startled from a dream he could not remember. Thor is coming here tomorrow -- no, today, he thought, and his skin crept with discomfort.

He could not sleep. He rose from bed, opened the door and stood in the hallway, barefoot and shivering, staring at Banner’s closed door. Slowly, quietly, he crept down the staircase, wandered into the kitchen, and made himself tea. But it was too quiet: all he could hear were the whirring of nighttime insects, the soft sounds of passing cars, the occasional roar of an airplane overhead, and the ever-present hum of electricity that ran through the entire city.

Banner’s office door was open. He looked inside: it was messy, the desk and floor covered in stacks of papers and books. He cleared a space on the desk and put his tea down, and sat down in the chair, stilling for a moment when it squeaked loudly. He looked up at the ceiling, and pictured the second floor, counting the rooms; Banner’s room was overhead, wasn’t it? Still, he was silent. Humans did not have very good senses. Likely he slept heavily.

He stared at Banner’s computer, and then, decisively, turned it on.

Banner had inquired about getting Loki a Starkpad, but S. H. I. E. L. D. had rejected the proposal. Loki did not care. Now, as the laptop in front of him hummed to life, he wondered what they were afraid of.

The log-in page appeared. The username -- Banner’s name and a string of numbers, unimaginative -- and beneath it, an empty box for a password. Loki wove his fingers together and rested his chin on his hands, and wondered what it might be. Likely he could figure it out. It was like picking a lock, or luring a curse out with gentle whispers. He reached out, slid his fingers along the shiny keys, and thought, Always start with the simplest solution first. He hit enter.

The computer logged in and desktop loaded. Banner did not have a password.

He spent a little time acquainting himself with the machine, figuring out its limitations, working backwards from his knowledge of Aesir technology. It was charming in its antiquity, really; like being entertained by an elderly lady who kept trying to offer him cakes.

He found the program that Banner used to listen to the radio, and activated it, turning the sound down low. A warm hum of voices filled the room. He listened to the news: children shot at a school, a storm in the Caribbean, war in the Middle East. He opened folders and glanced over file names, like a thief surveying drawers of jewels and gold. He did not open any. The ease of access to Banner’s personal data deflated his interest in the actual contents.
He grew bored of the news, and figured out how to listen to the programs Banner had played before and he had enjoyed, and then pushed away from the desk, pulling his legs up onto the chair, and drank his cold tea while he listened to two people talk about vulnerability and shame.

*This is the world we live in. And one of the ways we deal with it is we numb vulnerability. You cannot selectively numb. So when we numb those, we numb joy. We numb gratitude. We numb happiness.*

That was how Banner found him, hours later, head cradled in his arms, asleep in the chair. He woke him with a touch to his shoulder. “Thor and Tony will be here in an hour or so.”

Loki yawned and rubbed his eyes, and glared balefully at the computer, still murmuring away, in front of him. He turned the program off. “Your security is pitiful.”

Banner smiled. “I live in a world with super spies, secret organizations, and mind readers. If someone wants to read my emails, a password isn’t going to protect me.” He took Loki’s empty mug. “I’ll make you some coffee.”

Loki watched him go, annoyed by the slight heat in his cheeks. *Vulnerability,* he thought, wondering, and shame.

* Stark and Thor arrived with a great deal of loud banging and raised voices, Stark complaining about traffic, the earliness of the hour, and Thor’s appetite for donuts. Banner laughed and embraced him, and shook Thor’s hand, a gesture Thor was clearly confused by. Loki hung back, in the doorway of the kitchen. He was still dressed in rumpled clothes from the night before, and he felt naked and indignant.

Thor’s eyes locked onto him. “Brother,” he said, and then seemed to forcefully correct himself. “Loki.” He smiled, broadly. “You look well!” He strode down the hallway, arms outspread, and Loki felt like a creature being closed on in a hunt.

“Thor --” he protested, and was cut off as Thor’s inevitable embrace enveloped him. *Fool,* he thought desperately, smacking at Thor like a bothersome pup, *I am a wretched frost giant. And I killed our mother --*

“It is good to see you so restored, Loki,” Thor said, pulling away at last. His eyes dropped suddenly to Loki’s torso. “Does it pain you?”

Loki straightened up, and his hand went up to his chest, covering where the stave lay hidden beneath clothing. “Do not speak of it,” he hissed, the memory of Thor staring down at him as the ritual was performed flashing through his mind, and anger following it.

Thor looked distressed. “I meant your wound.”

Loki blinked, and his hand fell. He had forgotten -- “I am no weakling. It healed well enough.”

“It was a cursed blade,” Thor said softly. He frowned. “Let us speak of it no longer.”

“Yeah, let’s not, Brothers Karamazov,” Stark broke in. “Jesus. It’s like the fucking Hague in here. Let’s chill out a little bit, shall we?”

“There were three Karamazov brothers,” Loki said shortly and with an air of condescension, and brushed past Thor, heading to the stairs. “I will be back shortly, I must change my clothes.”
As he climbed the stairs, he heard Stark muttering, “When did Jolly Green get a Ph.D. in literature?”

* 

Loki was not certain what the purpose of Stark and Thor’s visit was, other than to annoy him. Perhaps it was part of the conditions of his parole, as laid out in the contract which he had never been invited to read. Thor certainly seemed to be interested in his progress -- recovery -- rehabilitation -- whatever this was supposed to be.

He had thought it would just be a brief visit, but he was wrong. Banner proposed that they attend a lecture at a physics colloquium across the river at MIT -- Stark’s alma mater. Stark looked sidelong at Thor. “Er, won’t the big guy get kind of bored? Not much hacking and slashing in the study of neutron stars.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “He is no ill-bred peasant. Be assured that he can follow Midgard’s meager attempts at understanding the cosmos.”

Thor looked happy. “Brother,” he said, “was that a compliment?”

Loki looked away, muttering something about litotes. Stark rolled his eyes. “Wow, I sure got told.”

Banner coughed delicately. “I’ll go find my jacket. It’s starting to get cold out these days.”

* 

Thor was dressed in typical Midgardian clothing; the only thing he had with him which bore the stamp of Asgard was an old traveling pack, covered in golden swirling designs and shiny buckles. He left it at the house when they departed.

They walked to the common and took the Red Line to Cambridge, Thor grinning and asking questions about everything: stalls selling Italian ices, buskers, the chirping noise the crosswalk made. The train was full of young people with suitcases and boxes -- “The semester’s starting, kids are moving into their dorms,” Stark observed.

Loki had never crossed the river. As they emerged from the tunnel onto the Longfellow Bridge, he peered back at the city behind them with interest, noting the tall, shining skyscrapers rising above the clutter of older brown- and red-bricked buildings. He turned and looked out the other window at the northern side of the city.

“What is that structure?” he asked, pointing.

Banner squinted out the window. “The place with the dome? That’s the Museum of Science.”

“No. Beyond it.” He couldn’t describe it. To him it looked like the prow of a great, white ship. It looked like it belonged on Asgard.

“Oh. It’s the Zakim Bridge.”

And it was a bridge, he realized, as they sped along and the angle changed; now he could see the other struts and supports. Another great bridge, straddling the river further along its banks.

He watched it, glimmering in the sunlight, until they reached Cambridge and plunged back into the darkness.

*
“Ah,” Stark said, spreading his arms broadly as they stepped out into Kendall Square. “The motherland! Witness to my formative years! The place where I lost my virginity!” He wiped at an imaginary tear. “So many memories.”

“This is Tony’s alma mater,” Banner explained wryly. “In case you didn’t know.”

“And you, sir, are in enemy territory.” Stark slung an arm around Banner’s shoulder. “Caltech!” He made exaggerated vomiting noises.

“I only went there for my doctorate, Tony,” Banner said, looking tired. “I wasn’t really involved in the rivalry.”

“Whatever, dude. You’ve been tainted.”

They walked through the campus, past a bizarre mixture of old brick buildings and constructions of metal and glass. They saw students busy constructing a great wooden creation, which Stark thought might be a rollercoaster. “It’s rush week,” he explained. “Dorms do projects like that to attract freshmen to live there.”

“Did you live in the dorms, Tony?” Banner asked.

“Ah, no,” Stark said, giving an abashed smile. “I was fourteen. My guardians didn’t think it was advisable. I got a condo.”

* 

The lecture, though technically extremely rudimentary by Aesir standards, was nonetheless terribly interesting. The speaker discussed how pulsars of neutron stars’ predictable beam emissions could be used to learn more about the nature of the universe.

“They are so close, are they not, brother?” Thor whispered to him while the lecturer took questions. “And they have such wonder and curiosity. It is so different here.”

Loki said nothing, only hummed noncommittally and picked at the hem of his shirt, annoyed that Thor had put into words precisely what he had been thinking.

Afterwards, Stark led them through a long stretch of hallways he called “the Infinite Corridor”, past the great Dome, and finally out onto a new street. “Let’s go have a drink!” Stark said, clapping his hands briskly. “Astrophysics always makes me want to get wasted. Also, I know a place.”

He led them down the street. Loki was beginning to feel a bit like a pet dog, tugged this way and that, but Thor of course looked happy to take it all in. And when he saw where Stark had led them, he let out a great bark of a laugh and pointed, pulling on Loki’s arm. “Look, brother! We shall go to Asgard!”

“If this place is called the Asgard,” Banner asked, “why is it an Irish pub?”

“Shhh,” Stark said. “Don’t let them hear you. They probably don’t know.”

They got a booth, and Stark insisted on selecting beer for each of them. “I have a great feel for this kind of thing.” He disappeared to the bar, and returned in a bit with a tray of glasses and a look of concentration on his face.

“They all look the same,” Loki observed.

“Thanks,” Banner said.

“And for the Lord of Lightning, Newport Storm.”

Thor looked puzzled, but took his glass anyway.

“For me,” and he held up a glass as though in toast and then took a gulp without waiting, “Pretty Things.” Banner rolled his eyes.

“And for you, Greensleeves,” he said, and took a long, dramatic pause for effect, “... Bud Light.”

“Oh, Tony.”

Loki took a sip and frowned. “This is disgusting.”

“I shall drink it, brother,” Thor said generously, taking the glass from from him and handing Loki his own. He took a long pull and sighed. “Ahh. It is reminiscent of the swill one gets in the gambling dens.” He winked at Loki. “Good times, eh, Loki?”

“Oh,” Stark said, and waggled his eyebrows. “Do tell.”

Loki sighed and dragged a hand over his face.

*

It was dark when they left. They walked to Central, and it was full of strange people, who shouted at each other and muttered to themselves. “Thor, buddy,” Stark said quietly, “do you mind not staring at everyone and smiling? The weirdos are out.”

The train was quieter and emptier than it had been. When they reached the house, Stark looked sidelong at Thor, then loudly asked Banner to go show him a paper that he’d mentioned reading. They retreated to Banner’s study, door closing with a bang.

He was alone with Thor.


Loki tensed. “What is it?”

Thor wandered over to the bag he had left on the sofa. “I had some trouble acquiring this,” he said amiably. “For you know I am no scholar, brother. I had to call in many favors, and eventually, I had to travel into Jotunheim.” He smiled, and pulled from the pack a large book. “As you can imagine, I was not very popular there.”


Thor presented the book to him, and the words died on his tongue. It was large and decaying, bound in a bluish-gray lizard-like skin, terribly frayed at the corners and head and tail of the spine, the boards nearly detached in places so that the entire thing had to be held together by being tied up with a length of leather cord.

“Jotnar do not have a written language, as I understand it,” Thor said quietly. “So everything I found about them had been written by other races, and based on hearsay and rumor. But it seems that long
ago, a Jotunn trained on Asgard. This was before hostilities broke out between their realm and Asgard.” Thor gestured to the book. “That Jotunn wrote this. As far as I know, this is the only copy in existence.”

Finally, hesitantly, Loki reached out and touched the book. Even here, now, in this warm Midgardian dwelling, the book felt cold, as though it was imbued with frost. He took the book from Thor. “How did you get this?”

Thor looked tentative. “The one I acquired it from said that it did not belong on Jotunheim. It was not written for Jotunn; they had no need for it. It was written for other realms.”

They were silent for a moment, Loki staring at the book. It smelled strange, like rock and ice floes and pine needles.

“Why?” he asked at last.

Thor took a step forward; reached out toward Loki, then stopped and let his arm fall. “Dr. Banner said he thought you should learn about your … people.” He said the last with great difficulty, and when Loki looked at his eyes, he saw they were red-rimmed. “But Loki, remember. You are my brother, and always will be. Whatever I have said in the past, I know that now. What lies between us is stronger than blood.”

Loki tensed, and he gripped the book tighter to him and looked down. A coldness spread through him, starting in his chest, reaching out tendrils like spiraling vines. When he looked up, he knew, without even looking at his skin, that his gaze was red. “You are a fool. You know not of what you speak.”

Thor held his gaze steady. “I know,” he insisted.

“I’m a monster.” Loki bared his teeth. They felt strange in his mouth, not real. “I killed your mother.”

“Our mother. Loki, you didn’t kill her.”

“I did!” He was surprised the loudness and timbre of his own raised voice -- it possessed a range in this form that he did not have ordinarily.

“Did you wield the blade?”

“I sent her killer to her,” he hissed. “I told him how to reach the imperial chambers. And why? For no reason -- simply for fun.” He smiled. “That is what monsters do, you see. They have no reason. They just are.”

“Loki,” Thor said, looking at him searchingly. He reached and rested his hand on Loki’s shoulder, through his rapidly stiffening and icing clothing. It must have been cold, though not enough to cause him harm. Yet. Thor squeezed his shoulder. “If that is true then … I forgive you.”

Loki blinked. “What?”

“I forgive you. And mother does too.”

“What is wrong with you?”

Thor smiled. “What’s wrong with me is that I have a troublesome little brother who doesn’t know what’s good for him.” He cocked his head and then pressed his hand against Loki’s cheek, startling him. “Loki, you’ve turned back.”
He had. He wasn’t sure when. He ran his tongue along his now flat, familiar teeth. “You’re a fool, Thor,” he repeated, with less force.

Thor raised his hands in defence. “Fool I am then, brother. And happily so.”

Something niggled at his mind, and he smiled, half-heartedly. “The fool doth think he is wise, but a wise man knows himself to be a fool,” he quoted.

A piece of Midgardian wisdom that Thor wouldn’t recognize, but he grinned and shot back with a more familiar adage from their childhood: “Foolish is he who frets at night/And lies awake to worry/ A weary man when morning comes/He finds all as bad as before.” He slipped an arm around Loki’s back and pulled him into an embrace before he could protest. “Be well, brother.”

“Wow,” came Stark’s voice from the doorway. “Two hugs in one day? Watch out, or Ebenezer’s going to have a heart attack.”

Thor sighed and let Loki go. “I should depart. Jane is waiting for me. I have been away a long time, searching for this book.”

“Yeah, me too.” Stark slapped Banner on the back. “See you later, Brucie.” He looked at Loki, as though he were about to say something; then drew his eyebrows together, glanced back at Banner, and frowned. “Take care.”

When the door shut behind them, Loki sat down, the book on his lap, overwhelmed with relief. He had not realized just how tense he was until the objects of his distress had departed.


Loki scowled. “You should cease meddling in affairs you understand nothing about.”

“Sure,” Banner said calmly, but there was a trace of something more passionate in the undercurrent of his voice. “I know nothing about having another half of you that you don’t understand at all, that you can’t control and that terrifies you.” He turned and left the room, stopping in the doorway. “At least you have a manual. I’ve had to figure it all out for myself.” And then he left.

Loki’s breath came in whistling heaves. He stared at his pale hands on top of the cold, dull cover of the book on his lap; then he balled them up into fists and pressed them into his eyes until the overwhelming panic fled his body.

And then, finally, he untied the book and opened it for the first time.

Chapter End Notes

The radio show Bruce and Loki listen to is the TED Radio Hour. The first story mentioned is "What Does Identity Mean to an Immigrant?" by Tan Le from the episode Identities. The second is "Can We Gain Strength from Shame?" by Brene Brown from the episode Making Mistakes.

Bruce's ringtone for Tony is Tony's Theme by The Pixies.

The Caltech-MIT Rivalry is legendary. According the Official Marvel Handbook, Bruce Banner got his doctorate from Caltech.
"The fool doth think he is wise ..." is from Shakespeare's "As You Like It".

"Foolish is he who frets at night ..." is from Hávamál ("Sayings of the High One"), a series of gnomic verses attributed to Odin and collected in the Poetic Edda.
Fear of the Monster Is Really a Form of Desire

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone,

I'm still working on the final chapter (7). Hopefully I will have it done by the end of this weekend! Please bear with me.

Also, please check out portraitoftheoddity's beautiful artwork for this story. I'll be adding it to the first chapter of this story later, as well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“We distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair.”
Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture: Seven Theses”

A treatise on the origin and nature of Jotnar, written by a Jotunn in the Allspeak

This book puts into words all the known history of the Jotnar and our homeland Jotunheim, from the time of our creation to now, the eve of our ascendance. For soon Jotunheim will join with Asgard and reach its full potential. Therefore I have made it my mission to write this history down, so that all the Nine Realms might understand our race in the years to come. It is also a gift for my one-day husband, who has worked so hard to forge this alliance between our two races.

All Jotnar know this history well. It is the first thing we learn during the ritual of joining, and therefore needs not be spoken or recorded. But to others we are a mystery. For you, reader of a distant land, I have written this.

He had expected the writing to be crude, but the author’s command of Allspeak was almost fluent. Something about the writer’s hand -- the angle and formation of the runes -- seemed unusual, but it was not clumsy. The words, too, were surprisingly elegant. Who was this Jotunn who had trained on Asgard? And what was this alliance that she spoke of? He had never read of such a thing in all his studies on Asgard. But in order for Asgard and Jotunheim to have gone to war, he supposed that at some point, there must have been peace.

He turned the page and found a list of the contents of the book.

On the origins of the Jotnar people

On the line of Jotnar kings

On Jotnar biology and society

On the ritual of joining

On the future of Jotunheim

Something about the hope expressed in that last article filled him with a sense of deep melancholy.
Loki took a steadying breath and flipped to the first section, and began to read.

On the origins of the Jotnar people

In the earliest of our remembrances, our ancestors, the Venerables, first encountered the worlds connected by Yggdrasill after a long voyage from their home world, of which we have no knowledge. All memory of it has been wiped away, and we, the Jotnar, are the only ones amongst their descendants who remember even this, it seems. It may be that you might doubt our memory, for what I will tell here about our origins will seem strange to you; but as you will discover as you read further in this book, we know well of what we speak.

The Venerables arrived on a great ship called Auðumbla, and their leader was named Aurgelmir. Traces of their existence can be found in the legends of the Aesir, though there they call Aurgelmir “Ymir” -- a slur, as I understand it. The first world they encountered was Muspelheim, but many found it almost uninhabitable due to its high temperatures. However, from there they discovered Yggdrasil, and the curious method by which our realms are connected. They traveled on to Niflheim, but found it a cold, barren dead place. Next they found Midgard, and were surprised to find it was inhabited -- indeed, a race of creatures not unlike themselves, but far weaker, had developed on their own. The Venerables, after exploring this place, moved on, looking for other places to live -- though there are rumors that some may have stayed behind.

The other worlds were discovered apace: Nidavellir, Svartalfheim, Alfheim, Vanheim, Asgard, and Jotunheim, the last. As each planet was colonized, the settlers adapted themselves to its particular demands. What does this mean? The Venerables had access to much knowledge which is now lost to us -- even we, the Jotnar, who remember all. They could alter their bodies after a limited fashion in order to best survive in different environments. And so the races of the Nine Realms were born from necessity.

Aurgelmir oversaw this entire process, visiting the different realms to ensure all colonies were surviving, and giving them what tools he could to help them, until the great ship Auðumbla was stripped almost bare. This is what it means when the Aesir says that the worlds were made from the pieces of Ymir’s body, who was fed by the poisonous milk of a great cow. How can the Aesir believe such a strange tale? Are they not curious as to what really transpired? I have asked my betrothed this many times, but he can shed no light on it.

Eventually, Aurgelmir himself settled down, and he chose Jotunheim on which to live. It was one of the harder worlds to colonize, and needed his guidance. With him he brought the last functioning pieces of Auðumbla, including its energy core, which we call the Casket. He became the ruler of the Jotnar, and from him springs the line of Jotunn kings, which I will outline next.

Loki leaned back, rubbing his eyes, He had learned many things, but was filled nonetheless with even more confusion. For the history recounted here was like a distant cousin to the one he knew so well. Some things which in Aesir history was unclear and mixed with legend -- in particular, the earliest days of the settlement of the Nine Realms -- were recounted in an authoritative tone here.

He flipped to the next page and found an extensive family tree.
So this placed the writing of this book before the beginning of Laufey’s reign; but Loki did not know the name of Laufey’s predecessor, had never come across much of anything about Jotunheim predating the frost giant’s invasion of Midgard in all his reading.

Loki was tired. His head was spinning. He rose, leaving the book open on the coffee table, and slowly made his way into the kitchen. To his surprise, Banner was there, making tea.

“What is the time?” he croaked.

“Hmmm, about midnight.” He took down another cup. “Do you want one?”

Loki nodded, sat down at the table, and rested his head in his arms. He listened to the sound of Banner moving cups around, rustling in packages, pouring water, opening the refrigerator. Finally, his voice muffled by his arms, he spoke. “Do you not have questions?”

Banner put a cup down by Loki’s head. He was silent for a moment, standing there. “It’s not really my business, is it?” Loki looked up at him and scowled. “But no, I admit it. I am curious.”

Loki took the hot cup from the table and held it in his hands, letting the warmth permeate his hands, first pleasantly, then uncomfortably. Why should he speak of these things? It was, indeed, as Banner himself had stated, none of his business. Yet his tongue did not wish to be still.

Slowly at first, and then with increasing speed, he found himself telling Banner of what he had read so far. The man listened, his brow creased, without speaking, until Loki had finished his recounting.

“Well?” Loki said. “What do you make of this, mortal?”

Banner frowned. “But … how long ago was this? And what is Yggdrasil anyway? It’s not part of our galaxy.”

“Your technology only allows you glimpses of it. Thor told me his Dr. Foster has seen the Bifrost with her devices -- that is the channel which connects the realms which are linked by Yggdrasil. The Nine Realms are connected, not spatially, but dimensionally.”

“Like planes of existence, or alternate universes.”

“In a sense. As to when these events occurred … that is harder to say. Aesir history becomes vague once one reaches the rule of Buri … they would have us think all stories began with him, but that seems unlikely.”

“What makes you think this?”

“Well, Aesir and Jotnar have similar lifespans -- around 5000 of your Midgardian years. This books lists five generations of Jotunn rulers -- that’s approximately 20-25,000 years, well beyond Buri’s lifetime, and that’s not even counting how many rulers followed the ones listed in the book.”
“25,000 years,” Banner said, looking distant. “That’s … what … Upper Paleolithic? Probably after the extinction of the Neanderthals, but way before Proto-Indo-European culture.”

“What are you doing?” Loki said, trying in vain to keep from smiling. Banner did have a tendency to get carried away in vague ruminations.

“Trying to figure out when Asgard starting mingling with humans. The origins of the gods are usually traced to the late Neolithic -- that would be around … 5000, 6000 years ago.”

“That seems correct,” Loki said. “Buri, Odin's grandfather, began visiting Midgard in his elder years, along with his son, Bor. None visited so much as Odin, though.” He narrowed his eyes. “How is it that you are so knowledgeable about Midgard’s history? You are a physicist, not a …”

“An anthropologist? Yes, but I thought it would be wise to learn more about these things once we realized … that … well, we aren’t alone in the universe. We never were.”

“Of course not. There are far more worlds out there than Yggdrasil, too -- some which Asgard has contact with, and others … that are more …” He frowned, a chill spreading through him. “… In the shadows.”

Banner looked at him quietly for a moment, and then broke the silence. “It’s late. You should get some sleep.”

Loki shook his head. “I cannot.” He looked back at the living room, where the book sat waiting for him.

“Hmm.” Banner took a sip of his tea. “It’s a good thing I told everyone at the shelter that we wouldn’t be in tomorrow.” At Loki’s look of surprise, he continued, “I figured you’d need some time to work through this all.”

Thank you drifted up to his tongue, and he bit it back.

“Um … do you mind if I join you? I promise I won’t intrude. I’m just not very sleepy either.”

Loki stood and, after a decisive moment, nodded, and wandered into the living room, Banner following his his wake.

*

True to his word, Banner did not intrude. He found some of his work and sat at the opposite end of the room, leaving Loki alone to confront the book. He opened it up to where he had left off, the beginning of the chapter on Jotunn biology and culture, and he felt a sickening flutter of nerves and disgust. He had no wish to learn more about his real body, nor the barbaric habits he would have been raised in had he lived out the life nature had meant for him, had he survived.

The Venerables possessed several traits which are still intact among the advanced races of the Nine Realms today: longevity, strength, agility, and rapid healing. But faced with the unique properties of the lands they sought to colonize, they evolved traits to better survive there. The full extent of this technique is beyond our power now, but survives, in a limited form, in the ability to shapeshift -- though such methods are far less durable and long-lasting.

Thus Jotnar can endure extremely low temperatures -- in fact, we thrive in them. We understand snow and ice and rime and can manipulate it to our will. Ice is not simply a weapon or tool of defence to us -- it is, in fact, everything to us. We gain nutrients best from what our homeworld produces naturally, so that we are self-reliant.
In appearance, we can reach up to sixteen hands in height, though some of us are for more diminutive. It is said by some that we can change our size at will, and for those of us skilled in shapeshifting that is true, but it is not an intrinsic trait we possess. However, our skin naturally ranges in color from the lightest cerulean to dark indigo, depending on our temperature, so that we can better hide in our environment. We grow hair from our heads, which serves no real purpose except beauty, I suppose, and those who spend great periods of time outside generally lose it, as it freezes and breaks off. I have heard tell that some think our blood is thick and black, or that we bleed ice water, but none of these things are true. Our blood is precisely the same color and viscosity as any Aesir’s, Vanir’s, Elf’s, or Dwarf’s. We did, after all, spring from the same race.

The lines of our family are written, literally, on our skin. It seems some other races think these lines are self-inflicted, but we are born with them, and to us, they tell a story which even Allspeak cannot decode.

It is thought our eyes are red in hue, but in truth they are more of a copper color, and glow red in darkness, particularly in the often dark skies of Jotunheim.

Also I have heard tales that our teeth are sharp so that we might eat Aesir and Vanir babies. This is nonsense. If we wished to eat babies, we would not need sharp teeth to do it. Our teeth are sharp because much of our food is frozen when we eat it.

Many of us are adept at the magical arts, more so than many of the other Races, excepting the Vanir, who have always made a special study out of it. Though their interest is purely intellectual, ours has a very practical purpose. In such harsh conditions, magic has often helped us to survive, to create life where none might otherwise catch hold, to provide shelter.

Our oldest and greatest halls were built deep into the ground of Jotunheim, a process which King Aurgelmir planned and oversaw. During certain times of the year we do not even emerge from our underground fortresses, for the blizzards make it almost impossible to see or move, even for us. It seems that Jotunheim has grown colder and harsher over the centuries; but with the help of Asgard, perhaps we can discover why and change that.

Despite the barrenness of our land we love bright colors, and have created many works of art. We have our festivals, music, toys, rituals, just as the other Nine Realms do. And some of our traditions are such that is utterly unknown outside of Jotunheim.

Many wonder why anyone might ever live on Jotunheim. I do not think they can see the world as we do -- our eyes view the snow and ice as no others can. Jotunheim contains great beauty, for those who are privileged enough to witness it.

* 

Loki stood. His legs were cramped; he needed to stretch. Banner had fallen asleep in his chair. Pacing back and forth from the couch to the window, which displayed the darkened courtyard lit only by a street light, he tried to calm his mind. He felt itchy, as though his skin did not fit him, and that thought sent him into a spiral of disgust-anxiety-terror-loathing. He ran his fingers over his face, searching for rigid lines, that in this form, he knew, were not there - the lines of his -- family. Were a frost giant to look upon him, would he see one line that read Aurgelmir, another that indicated Laufey?

He rubbed his hands together briskly, turned, and stopped, a foot away from the chair where Banner sat, slumped, asleep. He pictured the green-skinned beast that was his alterego, traced how these fragile human features thickened and warped into that other creature; he could see him in Banner’s face, even now, while it was at peace. When Banner looked in a mirror, did he see himself? Or did
he see the Hulk? Did he catch him out of the corner of his eye as he looked away from his reflection, spy him when his own hand made a fist? How did he draw the line? Did he?

He looked back towards the book, half opened on the coffee table. *I must continue*, he thought.

*

The next chapter was titled, enigmatically, *On the ritual of joining*. He remembered such a thing being referenced earlier in the book, but with little explanation. His brow furrowed, he began to read.

Several pages later, he sat up, his eyes wide.

“Banner,” he said, and stood up, and walked over to the man. “Banner, wake up.”

“Hmm?” He startled awake, blinking and sitting up. “What is it?” He looked up at Loki, and frowned. “Are you okay? You’re very pale.”

“I…” Truthfully, Loki wasn’t sure why he had roused Banner, except that perhaps he needed to tell someone. “This book -- I do not understand -- it is impossible.” He walked over to the couch, picked up the book, and brought it over. “It says here that Jotnar can join minds. Share thoughts, memories, emotions.”

Banner’s eyes widened. “That’s incredible,” he said. “Have you ever been able to do this?”

“No,” Loki said, taken aback. He had not even thought about that. It turned the conversation to a direction he hadn’t anticipated, towards himself, and he did not like it. “No -- no, I’ve never … that’s not the point. The point is that frost giants -- they simply aren’t that advanced -- they live in caves!”

“But what about the scepter?” Banner said, not really listening. “When you controlled Clint and Dr. Selvig. Was that just the scepter? Or maybe it tapped into this innate ability --”

“No! Be silent!” Loki said, standing up and slapping a hand against the book. A loud rushing noise filled his ears. The mention of the scepter brought back memories he did not want to acknowledge. Barton’s eyes, ice cold. The pain permeating his body. That voice in his ear, invading him. Desperation. Fury. Hatred. A burning in his chest -- no, that was not then. It was now. He sat down heavily on the couch, his breathing labored, and slipped his hand into his shirt and rubbed against his sternum.

“Loki,” Banner said. His voice sounded far away. He was kneeling in front of him on the floor. “Loki, calm down.”

He closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing slowly and deeply. The burn bled into a faint warmth. As he calmed, he became aware of the quietness filling the room, like the coolness of afternoon shade. He could almost drift off in this peace … but there was something anchoring him. Banner’s hand, heavy on his arm. He hadn’t noticed it -- how long had it been there?

“You were saying,” Banner spoke up, his voice scratchy and low in the silence, “that the Jotnar aren’t advanced enough to have such abilities. What did you mean?”

Eyes still closed -- he feared that if he were to open them, it might break the spell of calm he was under -- he said quietly, “Jotnar are monsters. Cold, stupid beasts, who create nothing, think little, do only what must be done to survive. They are instinctive killers.”

A drumbeat pause. “Is that what you are?” Banner asked.
Loki’s head sagged. His body felt heavy, leaden. He closed his eyes tightly, and whispered, with great difficulty, “Yes.”

Another pause. Banner’s hand was still on his arm; it felt dreadfully warm. “So you’re stupid?”

Loki pressed his lips together; he wanted to laugh. Of course Banner could not challenge him on the other points; for he was a killer, wasn’t he? “No.”

“And what about the Jotunn who wrote this book? Did she seem stupid?”

Loki said nothing.

“Look at me.”

He wanted to shake his head, pull away -- like a recalcitrant child. Instead, he forced himself to open his eyes.

“People are largely what they make of themselves. Sometimes it comes down to innate ability, but a lot of it is down to choice. Some are stupid, some are violent, some are peaceful, some are brilliant.”

“Jotnar are not people.”

“If what you read in that book is true, then they’re descended from the same race as the Aesir and all the others. So if Aesir are people, then so are Jotnar.”

“Then it’s all lies.” Something inside of him was aching. It wasn’t the stave.

Banner rose from his crouch and sat down on the couch, the book between them. “May I see the book?”

Loki shrugged, and Banner picked it up.

“Are those … runes?”

“They are similar,” Loki said. “I’ve read that we borrowed them from Midgardians several millenia ago. If you could read runes, you might be able to understand it.”

“Because it’s Allspeak? How does that work?”

“It is a language of true meaning.” Something clicked in the back of his mind, and when he looked at Banner, there was a smile on his face, and he knew that he was thinking the same thing.

“Doesn’t that sound similar to what this says the Jotnar do? Just a verbal expression of it? So maybe Jotnar kept the old way of communicating, but Aesir turned it into a language, and forgot the origins of it. What do Jotnar speak, anyway?”

“Some primitive dialect. If anyone has tried to study it, I have not come across their work.” He had studied the languages of the Elves and Dwarves out of keen interest as a youth, but why learn the grunts and shouts of cave dwellers?

“Probably a supplementary communication method to use with children, before they learn to use their abilities, or with those who aren’t very strong at it.”

“Banner -- this is all fantasy --”

“Why don’t you try it, then?” There was a challenging tone to Banner’s voice.
“Try it? How?”

Banner shrugged. “You read the book, not me. Didn’t it give you a clue as to how to do it?”

Loki fell silent for a moment, gazing at the book where it rested in Banner’s hands. “It spoke a little of how they teach their young.”

“Then there you go.”

“I -- I can’t --” Loki’s mouth twisted around the words, and they came out in a jumble, harsh and messy and embarrassing. “It’s not -- not something one can do alone, I would need --”

“Someone to try it with, of course,” Banner said, and looked away for a moment, then looked back at Loki. “Then you can practice with me.”

Loki almost choked. “Are you mad?”

Banner smiled. “I’ve been accused of it in the past, sure.”

“You would allow me into your mind? Don’t you fear that I might find things in there that would be a danger to your world?”

“This might surprise you, but there aren’t many important things that I’m actually trusted with. Strangely enough, I’m not considered the most stable individual by S. H. I. E. L. D.”

He felt, strangely, a rush of indignation on Banner’s behalf -- where had that come from? -- but pressed on. “I’ve controlled the minds of others in the past. Surely your superiors would not look kindly upon you opening your mind to the same monster you are meant to be guarding.”

“I’ve told you before,” Banner said, in a slow and patient tone that Loki recognized by now as a sign that he was annoyed, “they are not my superiors. And in case you’ve forgotten, I’ve already got a monster in my mind. And I think we’ve seen before that he’s a match for you.”

Loki looked down at his lap and smiled. He suppose, months ago, such an exhortation would have infuriated him. Now … now it made him feel … strangely pleased.

“It’s very late,” Banner said suddenly. He stood, and, finding a piece of unopened mail on the end table, placed it in the book to mark Loki’s place and closed it. “Let’s talk about this some more in the morning. If you think you can sleep now, that is.”

“Yes,” he agreed. He was very tired -- almost trembling with exhaustion and spent adrenaline, to be honest -- and though he was close to finishing the book, he found he couldn’t face reading the rest of it now. Not yet.

They climbed the stairs in silence, and then, when they reached the landing, Banner paused, as though about to say something. But after a moment, during which it seemed to Loki as though he were internally proposing and dismissing various statements, he simply gave a soft, “Good night, Loki,” before entering his bedroom and closing the door.

Loki stared at the closed door, overcome with a sudden urge for -- something. He wasn’t certain. An emotion, which he could not put a name too, but almost like nostalgia, or excitement, or sadness -- it made no sense, flooded him. He thought of Banner’s hand on his arm, his dark brown eyes staring up at him -- Look at me -- and a tingling warmth spread through him.

“Good night,” he whispered, and retired to his room.
The ritual of joining is our greatest power, and our greatest mystery. It is impossible to describe adequately in words -- now, writing this, I am reminded of the paltry tools available to me, constrained to this ink and paper.

From our earliest days we are taught to make our minds receptive to joining. Children establish a connection with their parents by sleeping in the same berth at first, and later sleeping with their siblings. Over time, dreams naturally mingle. This causes the mind to become limber and accustomed to opening towards others.

Later, children are taught to quiet their mind and focus on a key of great meaning - an object, a sound, a gesture -- until consideration of this key causes them to slip into that state with ease. When such mastery is achieved, two Jotnar might focus together and learn each others' minds. Though an adult first demonstrates this to a child, they are encouraged to practice with other children, so that they might learn together over time. Eventually, it becomes so second nature that one might communicate even with a Jotunn who is a complete stranger.

“So,” Banner said, when Loki finished reading aloud from the book, “maybe we should have slept together last night.”

Loki felt a traitorous flush stain his cheeks. They were sitting in the courtyard. It was a mild morning, and the air smelled like burning leaves. “I’m sure that isn’t necessary.” He cleared his throat. “In any case, perhaps this is pointless. I did not receive any of this training as a child; likely my mind did not develop in the necessary ways to master these abilities.”

“I don’t know,” Banner mused. “You’re unusually adept at magic, aren’t you? In comparison to other Aesir?”

Something about the way Banner phrased that -- other Aesir -- as though Loki could, despite his true origins, be counted among them -- kindled a strange warmth in him. He looked down at the book, rubbing his finger along the rough binding. “Very few on Asgard practice magic, and those who do are usually unable to achieve great competency. I do not know if that is because of ability, or because it simply not as valued, and there is less opportunity to learn. My -- the Queen -- is unusual in that regard. But she is part Vanir.” And, I always thought, I was as well.

“Doesn’t Odin know magic as well?”

Loki smiled. “Have you been studying up on your mythology?”

“Well, I’m a curious person.”

Loki laughed. “Well, yes. The All-father studied magic and is capable of great feats, but he does not flaunt it very much. Most Aesir seem to conveniently forget that when they deride sorcery as paltry tricks.”

“How do you learn magic?”

Frowning, Loki asked, “Why do you wish to know this?”

“Like I said, I’m curious.”

This was an unsatisfying answer, but Loki described to Banner, briefly, the structure and manner of his education -- his early tutelage under his mother, the simple spells he had first practiced, how he had trained with the Vanir for a time when he thirsted for more knowledge.
Banner propped his feet up on one of the other chairs and stretched out, his eyes closed as he listened to Loki speak, his hands clasped on his stomach. He was wearing, Loki noticed, a truly ugly sweater -- all brown and green and blue and red flecks, as though it couldn’t decide what color it wanted to be. Mortals had terrible taste.

“Hmmm,” he said meditatively when Loki had finished. “Doesn’t sound too different to me from what you just read out, really.”

“What?”

“Well, you began simply, learning from your mother at a young age. Then you practiced with peers, and eventually strangers. And some of those early exercises certainly seemed to require mental control. Maybe that’s why you were so successful at it -- magic uses similar muscles as this joining does. And didn’t you say you read earlier that Jotnar are pretty good at magic?”

“I suppose,” he said reluctantly.

“Let’s just say, then, that maybe you have done the sort of training that you would need to in order for your mind to be ready to do this. That means the next is establishing a key -- training your mind to open to others.”

“Such as what?”

“What do you think would be the easiest for you?”

Loki thought for a bit. In truth, this seemed familiar to him -- magic operated in a similar way, words or gestures or objects not so much creating a spell as directing and amplifying one’s abilities to a particular bent. “A word perhaps … “ He had always found them easiest to focus on. “But …”

“But?”

“If I have other associations with it, they might interfere with my focus.”

“Maybe a word from here? One you haven’t encountered before?”

He considered it. “That could work. But none of your ridiculous scientific phrases -- they only make me laugh.” He still found Midgardian science, despite its great leaps and bounds, to be pathetically quaint.

Banner rolled his eyes, and stood up. “Just a minute,” he said, and disappeared into the house, leaving the door open. He emerged a few minutes later with a little paperback book in hand; it was titled *Historical Dictionary of Ancient Greek Philosophy*. “I saw this on the shelf before,” he said in explanation, “and you haven’t read much of the Greeks, have you?”

He paged through the book, brow furrowed, silently mouthing out words, and rather testing Loki’s patience, until he settled on something that made him smile. “Here,” he said, brandishing the book, “this one.”

“Ataraxia,” Loki dutifully read aloud from where he was pointing. “freedom from disturbance, tranquility of the soul. It didn’t need to be so specific,” he said, rolling his eyes at Banner’s enthusiasm.

“But it’ll do?”

“It will do.”
He sat on his bed for most of the rest of the day, focusing his mind on the strange word *ataraxia* while Banner ate his midday meal and busied himself downstairs, trying to be quiet. He let his mind ramble for some time, empty its thoughts out, mostly choruses of *why am I doing this* and *it will not work*. The voices trickled down to a mutter, then ceased. Something in him eased and relaxed. And he let the word fill it.

*Ataraxia.*

*Ataraxia.*

*Ataraxia.*

Some time later, he opened his mind, and it was nearly dark out. He was hungry, but the hunger felt distant; his entire mind and body felt relaxed. Downstairs, there was silence. He unfolded himself, slowly and creakily, and crept quietly downstairs, where he found Banner, sprawled out on the couch illuminated only by the dim light of the outside. He awoke when the floorboards creaked beneath Loki’s feet.

“Hey,” he said quietly. “Any luck? I tried doing it, too -- I mean I know I don’t have any ability, but I thought it would help. Guess I fell asleep.”

Banner looked young like this, sleep mussed and a little confused, and something tightened and unfurled in Loki’s stomach. “Yes,” he said. “I would like to try now, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure,” Banner said. He sat up, looking a little uncertain. “What should I do?”

Loki sat down and thought for a minute. “Banner, why are you willing to do this? Really?”

He was silent for a moment. “It seems to me,” he said at last, “that you’re missing something. It’s like … fission.”

“What?” he said, amused.

“In fission, lots of kinetic energy is released … as gamma rays. You all probably know that, nuclear engineering is like making a potato battery for you, but anyway. If you introduce water to it, that radiation is turned into heat. But without that addition, it’s destructive. It explodes.”

“That almost makes sense.”

“So maybe this is the addition you need. Well, not just this, all of it.” He gestured at the book, which was sitting on the table.

“That doesn’t tell me why you are doing it.”

Banner sighed and leaned back against the couch. “Maybe … I need it too.”

Loki found he had nothing to say to that.

“So what do we do?”

He had considered this. “I think … a physical connection would be helpful. Like this.” He took Banner’s hand and placed it on his arm, the way he remembered Banner had done the night before, when he had become so lost for awhile. He mirrored the gesture with his own hand on Banner’s other arm. “And then …” He looked into Banner’s eyes and tried to clear his mind. For nearly a full
moment, they sat like that, his mind frothing with embarrassment and excitement and awareness of Banner’s closeness, the sound of him breathing, his smell, and suddenly a great bubble of laughter erupted from his throat and he bent over, wheezing hysterically. Over his own laughter he could hear Banner, chuckling -- when he looked up, the man was leaning back against the couch, breathless.

Finally they calmed, and Banner sat back up. “I think it’s out of my system now. Shall we try again?”

He nodded, and wiped at his eyes, where tears had formed. They assumed their positions again, and Loki bit his lip as a snicker almost formed, before he levelled his gaze once more into Banner’s eyes. Gradually they both relaxed. He stopped being aware of all the sensations around him; he was focused solely on the darkness of Banner’s eyes, the brown of the iris so deep it almost blended with the pupil.

Then, and only then, did he let the word rise to the surface of his calm:

**Ataraxia.**

At first there was nothing. Just the darkness of Banner’s eyes, and then suddenly, Banner blinked.

It was like he was falling.

Darkness swallowed him whole, and he was lost -- but no, he was not, because Banner’s hand was gripping his arm, and his own hand was still firmly linked to the man’s bicep. He squeezed it, holding on for dear life, and reminded himself -- *I am not in the void; I am not falling through the world. I am in Banner’s mind.*

He was not falling. He was floating.

“Banner?” he said, but did not say, because he had no mouth. He was not anything, here, just a thought.

Banner did not respond. He wondered where he was, until it occurred to him that most likely he was in Loki’s mind.

*We should not have done this,* he thought, and then two thoughts seemed to appear at the same instant, battling for significance: *Banner is not prepared for what he will see there and Banner cannot see those things, he’s not allowed.*

But it was too late. It had already happened -- and something was pulling him along, he was like a thread tugged by a shuttle, and before he knew it, he was plunging down deeper.

* *

Thoughts and memories came fast. At first, so quickly that he could barely make sense of them. They appeared merely as flickers, compendiums of pure sensation and color that sped through him until his mind quaked with the power of it. Gradually he regained some kind of control, and, with great determination, he was able to pull at moments and examine them, like one might pluck a string from cloth. At first, they were so slight as to be almost insignificant. The sun setting through blinds, casting strips of light across a room; a dropped pot of boiling water and a scalded hand; a paper playing card inserted in the spokes of a bicycle; running alongside a missed bus until it pulled away; a cold trickle of snow sliding down the back of his neck in the midst of a blizzard.

He pulled, and pulled, and pulled.
Looking over the beautiful, still, reflective surface of Chandertal Lake in the Himalayas. His mother smiling as she closed the door of the closet, leaving him in there in the dark. Betty saying, “But then it’s still you inside of it,” and no no no no no. Climbing down the stairs into the basement to find the box with his winter coat in it; there’s a monster down there, he thinks. Signing his name on the cover page of his doctoral dissertation, right above the name of his adviser. Carefully forming the letters of his name on purple-ink penmanship paper that smelled like hot chemicals -- “Bruce, darling, your es are backwards.” Emptying out the old house with Aunt Susan, and he found his father’s pocketwatch in a drawer and threw it out before she saw it. “And here’s your copy of the death certificate,” the woman behind the counter said, passing it under the plastic window towards him. “Here’s to you, Brucie!” Tony said, and spilled his beer everywhere. “Oops, don’t tell Pepper.” He looked up from his work and saw, through the glass, guards passing through the hallway, leading a gaunt-faced man with a crazed expression on his face -- Loki. He opened the door and looked inside the room, and there he was -- asleep on the bed, still in his clothes, and he didn’t look like a murderer now, nor a god, neither. “I’m always angry,” and it feels so good, but afterwards, so bad. He gazed at the back of Loki’s head, bent over a book, and one strand of hair kept falling from behind his ear no matter how often he pulled it back -- and his hand twitched, and wanted to touch. I wish I knew what you were thinking. But it’s probably better I don’t. “What exactly will this do?” he asked, and looked down at his chest, where the mark had been drawn, according to the specifications sent to them by Asgard. I have to find him -- the first thought as he woke up, chest aching and pulling him, stumbling out of bed, to track Loki down.

Loki gasped, and came back to himself.

“No,” he said, his voice loud in the silence. He blinked rapidly, trying to get his bearings, and saw Banner blinking similarly, still seated across from him. They were both still clasping each others’ arms.

“Loki?” Banner said. “I can’t see, it’s too dark.” It was pitch black in the room; night must have fallen. Loki let go of Banner’s arm, reluctantly, and turned on the lamp. He crouched down in front of Banner and began unbuttoning his shirt.

“What are you doing?” Banner said, confused. “Loki, stop.”

“The stave,” he said, his voice shaking. And there it was, on his chest, the mirror of his own. Not burned in, at least, but almost as powerful in this form. “Why did you let them -- Bruce, do you know what you’ve done?”

“It was to help me guard you.”

“This isn’t the stave for guarding. It’s the same as mine. It means you are a prisoner -- we are linked, as though by a chain.”

Banner looked at him, levelly, no emotion showing on his face. Finally he said, “Well, that’s nothing new.”

Loki frowned. Banner was not taking this seriously enough. “You thought the instructions for this came from Asgard. I cannot believe that is true. Thor would not wish to thus imprison you, he is not devious enough -- Odin is, but he has no motivation to do so. The decision to do this must have come from within S. H. I. E. L. D., though how they acquired such knowle--”

He was cut off as Banner pressed his hand to his mouth, silencing him. “Loki,” he said, simply.

…and Loki came back to himself. Remembered what they had just done. Inexplicably, fear filled him. “What -- what did you see?” And then, quickly, tripping over the words, “Are you all right?”
Banner smiled. “You’re mind’s a pretty scary place, I have to admit. But terror -- that’s something I
know pretty well myself.”

The fear didn’t abate; it was making him nauseous. “I should not have let you see that,” he choked
out. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Shouldn’t have let me see what?” Banner asked. “All of the things you’ve done?”

Loki pressed his lips together tightly and clenched his thighs until they hurt. And for a moment, he
allowed himself to remember. It came easily, perhaps because Banner had just been paging through
those same memories. He felt his sweaty palms as he heard the warning cry: "Frost Giants in the
vault!" His father falling, heavily, to the stairs, the echo of their argument still ringing against the
walls. No wonder I was never worthy of being your son. Thor’s mortal body, landing like a crumpled
doll in the sand. Heimdall encased in ice; the mix of triumph and disgust heavy on his tongue. The
cries of a thousand Jotnar, dying in droves. "Perhaps when we’re finished here I’ll pay her a little
visit myself!" What a repulsive and stupid threat! The scepter, hot and heavy in his hands. He swung
it effortlessly, and mortal corpses fell in his wake. He threw the man onto the table, and smiled as he
lowered the device over his eye, listening to his screams. "Kneel before me." He slammed his hand
against the glass, enjoying her fear. "You’re a monster!" He pushed the blade up between Thor’s
ribs. Betrayer.

Banner took his hand. Loki looked at it, disbelieving, and closed his eyes again.

“Or,” Banner said, “all the things that happened to you?”

No, I don’t want to remember that, either. Peering down at his hand, slowly turning blue. "No,
Loki." Disappearing into the void, until he was nothing, not Loki, not a Jotunn, not a god. He forgot
who he was, until they made him remember. They took all the pieces, and put them back together,
but they put him back wrong, all wrong. He’d do anything to get out of that place, and anyway, he
was bad, irredeemable, so it mattered not.

“That’s not all I saw, though, Loki,” Banner said, softly. His voice sounded very close. “I saw who
you were before, too. For all those hundreds of years.”

“And who was I?”

“You were Loki,” Banner said, “a son, a brother, a friend. And also yourself. A sorcerer, a warrior, a
politician, a scholar, and frankly, kind of a smart ass. You were loved, and you loved others. And
you were a frost giant then, too, even if you didn’t know it.”

Loki winced. “But that’s not who I am anymore. So what does it matter?”

“Aren’t you?”

Silence.

“You can’t erase what you have done. But you can stop letting it define you and all your future
actions.”

“How?”

“That’s not something I can tell you,” Banner said. “You have to figure it out on your own.” He
paused. “You are figuring it out. Even if you don’t want to admit it -- you’re trying, aren’t you?”

He wanted to snarl and retort, but what was the use? He had seen everything, hadn’t he?
They were quiet, sitting together, until finally Banner broke the silence. “You know, you called me Bruce, earlier.”

*Oh.*

“You can. If you want.”

Loki nodded.

“All …” Banner -- no -- Bruce put a hand on his shoulder and turned him towards him, “this.” And … he pressed his lips, very gently, against Loki’s. When he pulled away, Loki knew his face was crimson. “Well? Did I interpret that incorrectly?”

Loki thought of the warm, tingling sensation he sometimes felt when Bruce touched him, the kind tilt of his head when he asked Loki an unexpectedly considerate question, the memory of Bruce standing, that very first night, in the doorway to his bedroom while he slept -- how angry it had made him, to imagine that, back then. And now … “No, you didn’t,” he finally replied, and grabbed Bruce by the shirt and pulled him in close to kiss him again.

A little later, they sat, forehead pressed against forehead, and Loki asked, “You saw that, in my mind?”

“No, really. Felt. I don’t think you had really realized it.”

Loki laughed, a little, and then began to quote, “So perceptive … “

And Bruce finished with him, “… about everyone but yourself.” He pressed his fingers against Loki’s cheek; when he pulled them away, the tips were damp. “You’re crying.”

He sighed, and wiped at his eyes. “Bruce … why are you doing this?”

Bruce furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?” He tapped his head. “Did you see?”

Loki closed his eyes, and tried to remember. “You watched me sometimes … you wanted to touch me.” He shook his head. “But I can’t bring myself to understand why.”

“Then look again,” Bruce said. “Open your eyes.” When Loki opened them, he was looking directly into Bruce’s -- and before he could barely think ataraxia he was slipping through to that other, internal world again. So smoothly, so easily.

But this time was different. Last time it had been as though he was diving into a deep and dark sea, alone but surrounded everywhere by Bruce. But this time, Bruce was right there with him. He could feel him, just as if they were holding each other tightly. And with barely any hesitation, they were off -- not diving this time at all, but soaring.

_Look_, Bruce seemed to say, though he had no voice to say it with. And Loki saw, or felt, or experienced -- it was everything at once. A hundred instances of their growing closeness. It had been so gradual and subtle that he had barely noticed it. He had not realized how open he had left himself, how exposed. When he had first come here, he had felt it keenly, and shuddered at it, and thought that he had cloaked himself sufficiently in indifference and numbness. But Bruce had drawn him out. Slowly but surely.

But why, why, why? Loki pressed on. He could feel Bruce: his brilliant mind, his kindness, his essential goodness -- so different from himself it made him hurt just to behold it. But there was more, wasn’t there? He could feel it. That anger. Sadness. Pain.
The Beast.

The Other Guy.

It was there too.

And Bruce could sense that in him as well. That other Loki, shifting and rippling beneath his Aesir skin like the tide. It had always been there, and he had never known it. He’d been tricked into thinking he knew who he was. But Loki had made his outside match his insides, only to discover, now, that he’d been wrong again. But this time it was he who had tricked himself.

For Bruce it was different. He had grown up with that beast inside him all his life, even though it hadn’t been made flesh for a long time. When the Beast appeared, he had been horrified, not just because it was monstrous, but because he knew it so well, and recognized it as bearing his own face.

But now, Bruce had tamed it. Taken it back. Let it become a part of him, given it a purpose, and allowed it to become him.

I realized I wanted you to do the same. And that’s how I began to care.

Loki floated back to himself gently, like a leaf gently coming to rest on a bed of grass. When he had settled back into place he realized that Bruce was kissing him. He slowly relaxed against his lips, at first, and then a certain desperation overtook him. It had been so long … and he had wanted to do this for awhile, though it had seemed so completely unlikely that he had not even been able to acknowledge it.

But now he would. He would acknowledge all of it.

Chapter End Notes

Get a comfortable seat because this chapter has a lot of notes, I'm afraid, and all about my world building.

I find the MCU to be a little tricky to make sense of logically. I don't feel like it's enough like the comics to rely on that backstory, but I also don't think that Norse mythology fits it very well either. (Quick note: ages ago, before I got into Marvel, I studied Old Norse language and literature in graduate school - it was my big passion, mostly inspired by Tolkien.) It's somewhere in between -- take the mythology and give it a science fiction spin. So that's what I tried to do here, with a little bit of influence I think from BSG and Mass Effect.

If you read any Norse myths you've probably read their creation story involving Ymir. I've tried to think of an explanation for how this could fit into the world we're given in the MCU, and this was the product. Yes, I turned an intergalactic cow into a spaceship. I'm sorry.

Probably the most involved thing I created was the Jotunn royal genealogy. Here's how I pieced this thing together: in mythology, Þrúðgelmir is indeed Aurgelmir's son, and Bergelmir is his grandson. I chose the names of their spouses myself. Gullveig might be familiar; she's the witch who is burned in Voluspa. She is not stated to be a Jotunn (in fact scholars think she might be Freya), but I felt like she would be a powerful figure to
paired with Aurgelmir. Harðgreipr, who I made into Þríðgelmir's wife, is a giantess who appears in the *Gesta Danorum*. Aurvandil, who I list as Bergelmir's younger brother, is actually the name of the evening star, but Snorri Sturluson also calls the husband of Groa, a seeress and possibly a giantess, by that name.

The rest of the genealogy I will save for the next chapter, because it is a little spoilery, though people who are familiar with the comics or with mythology have probably already figured out what it means.

Finally I want to talk about my chronology here. I'm a little obsessive about these things and it drives me crazy that Loki and Thor are supposed to have been born sometime during the 10th century CE on Midgard. It's true that all the written sources on Norse mythology are created after that time, but they are based on oral traditions going back way, way before that. Stories about Thor, or a sort of proto-Thor, and other figures go back thousands and thousands of years. There's no way to make it make sense, except perhaps to imagine that MCU Norse characters are named after figures in Asgardian stories -- or maybe the other way around, and Asgard took names from Midgardian stories because they amused them. (I know none of this is important! But I enjoy trying to make it make sense.) Still I get frustrated thinking, *Branagh, if you'd just bumped it back to like, 675 AD instead, it might be a little easier to explain ...*)

I'm a major nerd about pre-history and early man, so I enjoyed trying to make Earth timelines match up with whatever might be going on Asgard, which is why I had Bruce have that conversation with Loki. If you've never read about Proto-Indo-European theory, please check it out -- it will blow you mind. *Proto-Indo-European religion* is especially relevant here.

Thank you for reading. :)
The Monster Stands at the Threshold ... of Becoming

Chapter Summary

Loki seems to have found a place for himself in Midgard, but unexpected events change everything for him and Bruce.

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the long delay for this chapter! It's been 90% finished since October, but the 1-2-3 punch of new job, finger fracture, and the holidays has made completing it a little tricky. It's also VERY long. I hope you all enjoy it and find it a satisfying conclusion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return … These monsters ask us how we perceive the world and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place … They ask us why we have created them.”

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture: Seven Theses"

Loki awoke to sun on his face. His body was half sliding off the couch, and his face was pressed against Bruce’s bare chest. He lay there, blinking and confused for a few minutes, and then sat up suddenly. He gazed down at Bruce’s prone body -- he had never witnessed him asleep before. He looked vulnerable -- but Loki knew now just how strong he really was.

Rubbing his eyes, he stood and stretched. The room was filled with a rosy color from the rising sun. It was beautiful, and it summoned up in Loki’s mind a hundred memories of Bruce’s that were similar -- some tinged with happiness, some with sadness. Was this what it was like to be a Jotunn? To always have one foot tethered in the real world and another in the minds of others?

If so, Loki thought, then it was a wonderful thing. Jotnar must never feel truly alone.

The book was sitting open on the table where he’d left it; he still had the final chapter left to read, but before he could reach out for it, he glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece, and started.
“Bruce,” he whispered, sitting back down, “Bruce, wake up. It’s nearly seven o’clock.”

Bruce yawned and rolled over on the couch. “Really?”

“Yes. The sun is rising.”

Bruce sat up, ran a hand over his hair. “Do you see my phone anywhere? It was in, uh, my pants.”

Loki bit his lip to keep from laughing at the slight blush on Bruce’s face, but did as requested. Bruce yawned as he took the phone from him and Loki slid up against him, waiting a moment, and then relaxed when Bruce did not shy away from the intimacy.

“It’s only 5:45.”

“But --”

“Daylight Savings Time ended, I forgot. I always do. Don’t ask, it’s complicated. Suffice it to say, the whole country went back an hour last night. So we gained time.” Bruce laughed. “That’s a good thing -- how much sleep did we even g--”

He was silenced by Loki’s lips. They kissed for a long time. Loki let his hand drift back and wove his fingers into Bruce’s messy curls.

Bruce whispered, “We need to go to the shelter today.”

Loki nodded, and let his forehead rest against Bruce’s.

“We have to go.”

Loki made a noncommittal noise, and Bruce squeezed him tightly. Silence descended again.
Bruce said, abruptly, “You haven’t finished your book.”

“I know.”

“Aren’t you going to?”

“I don’t know if I want to. It seems sad now.”

“How so?”

Reluctantly, Loki unwound himself from Bruce’s embrace, sat forward, and pulled the book towards them. He flipped the page to the start of the final chapter. “It’s about the future of the Jotnar.”

“And?”

“Don’t you see? Whatever they thought was going to happen did not … they couldn’t have foretold all the disaster ahead. All the pointless wars, animosity, and --” his voice thickened, “-- and the destruction of the many of their people by one of their own.”

Bruce reached out and touched Loki’s hand, which was gripping the edge of the book as though for dear life. “Then don’t read it. Not now. It can wait.”

Loki looked back at him, then nodded and closed the book.

*

Time passed. The air grew colder, leaves curled up and died on their branches before falling to the ground. It was dark now when they woke in morning and when they walked home from the shelter at night.

Loki came to know Bruce. It was strange, for he had lived with him for many months now, and now knew him intimately in a way he’d never known anyone (he knew how Bruce liked his coffee -- whole milk, no sugar; that he wore socks to bed and kicked them off in the middle of the night; that
he was allergic to dust mites; that he hated lima beans), yet he felt as though he had heard about those things in a story, perhaps; and when he witnessed them in real life, he felt a surge of fondness as though he were noticing them for the first time.

Bruce must know everything about him as well. How strange. He had never been closer to anyone in all his life.

Midgardians had a host of feast days in the colder months, and Loki had all of Bruce’s memories of them, though not all of them were very happy. On Halloween Bruce handed out miniature Snickers and Kit Kats while Loki sat on the stairs and watched the parade of children came to their open door, dressed as fairies and princesses and pirates and monsters. It made him think of the games he and Thor once played -- one of them as a frost giant and the other as an Aesir warrior -- they had switched the roles, he remembered, and Thor had taken a surprising liking to being the frost giant, snarling and scratching and shouting “You’re frozen! I touched you! Stop moving, Loki, you’re dead!”

On Thanksgiving, both he and Bruce returned to the cafeteria to help serve dinner. They walked home, exhausted and intending to fall into bed and sleep, to find all the lights on in the house. When Bruce opened the door, Stark was there with a bottle of wine in his hand, and behind him was a pretty blonde woman -- her name was Pepper, he remembered (or rather, Bruce remembered.)

“Surprise!” Stark pulled Bruce into the dining room -- the table had been set with a meal. “Yeah, pretty crafty, I know. We’ve been slaving away all day on this.”

“He set the table,” Pepper said.

“Untrue! I also made the salad.”

“He emptied the bag into a bowl.”

Loki stood back in the doorway, unsure of how welcome he was, but Bruce turned back to him and took his hand, pulling him into the room. “There’s a place set for you, you know.”

Stark and Pepper were strangely cordial -- well, as much as Stark was cordial to anyone -- and after a few minutes Loki realized suddenly that Bruce must have told Stark. Perhaps not everything, but something. He must know. Loki’s stomach churned, but he was distracted by the sound of Bruce’s quiet, soft voice, so different in tone to Stark’s abrasiveness and Pepper’s sharp wit -- and so familiar,
so comfortable to his ear.

“This was quite a surprise, Tony. Thank you.”

“Well, I can’t say I imagined eating a Tofurkey in Boston for Thanksgiving this year. Especially not in this house.”

“Why this house?” Pepper asked, buttering a piece of bread.

“Oh,” Stark said, sitting back and staring down at his glass of wine. “I guess I never really said … my great-great-grandfather built this house. He was an architect -- designed a lot of the mansions on Beacon Hill -- then he built this house for him and his family to live here, and then his son lived here too. My mom’s grandparents, the Collins. She used to come here for holidays as a kid. Sat around this table probably. I’ve only been here a few times before. Anyway.” He shrugged, and tossed back his wine.

“Wow,” Pepper said. She looked around the room appreciatively. “I think my great-great-grandfather was a sheep farmer or something.”

Bruce laughed. “I have no clue who my great-great-grandfather was.”

Loki stared out the French doors into the patio, and did the math. When this house was built, when this far off ancestor of Stark had lived and breathed and designed great buildings and eventually died, he had been completing his studies on Vanaheim, and Thor’s coronation had begun to be planned -- such a grand event would of course take several centuries of council meetings to come to fruition. It was a gasp of a breath to him. And Bruce had not even existed then, and all the faceless mortals who by chance had met and melded their genes together to eventually create this magnificent man were lost to all memory.

And yet his own past was also such a blank to him now. He thought of his father -- his real father -- whom he had met only a few times, the final time being as he stole away his life. All those generations of Jotnar listed in that book, which he had put away upstairs, and somehow he was sure they were connected to him.

After dinner, Bruce helped Pepper clean up, leaving Loki in the room with Stark -- a truly uncomfortable combination. And yet something suddenly took a hold of him. He stood up and walked over to Stark chair, and said, quietly, “There is something I must speak to you about.”
Stark looked up at him slowly, his fifth or sixth glass of wine hovering at his lips.

“Bruce -- I mean, Banner would not want you to know.”

“This is intriguing.” Stark put his glass down and turned his seat around to face him. “All right, lay it on me.”

Loki began to unbutton his shirt.

“Woah!” Stark hissed, and grabbed his hands, trying to stop him. “What’s up with the striptease?”

Rolling his eyes, he jerked his shirt apart, exposing his chest. “Do you know what this is?” he whispered, pointing at the stave.

Stark looked at him dubiously. “Yeah,” he said. “That’s the thing that’s supposed to keep you sweet and harmless.”

“It imprisons me here, as well.” He began to button his shirt back up. “It binds me to Banner. But … I recently discovered … that Banner bears the same mark.” At Stark’s uncomprehending look, he explained, “Banner is a prisoner too. He has only the illusion of freedom.”

Stark’s face had grown uncharacteristically serious. “What does this mean?”

“I do not think this is Asgard’s doing. I fear this is a plan concocted by S. H. I. E. L. D.”

“And what does Bruce think? He knows what it means, right?”

“Yes, but he refuses to speak of it. I don’t understand why.”

Stark leaned back in his seat and looked up at him. “Why are you telling me all this?”
“You are Banner’s friend, are you not? And you have accessed S. H. I. E. L. D.’s files in the past -- I know you have.”

Stark nodded.

“You must find out what is behind all this. What their intentions are. Whether -- whether Banner is in some kind of danger.”

An awkwardness passed through him as he uttered the last sentence. He felt exposed. And the way Stark was looking at him now, evaluating him, as though he were a peculiar engineering problem, made it even worse. But finally, Stark nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “I’ll look into it.”

Loki lipped his lips. “Thank you, Stark.”

Stark tilted his head. “You’re welcome. Loki.”

“It’s time for pie!” Pepper poked her head into the dining room. “Tony, no more wine for you. I made coffee.”

*

That night, when Stark and Pepper had departed to spend the night at the Park Plaza, Loki waited until Bruce had fallen asleep (he drifted off quickly, tired from the long day and soothed by Loki’s hand gently stroking his brow), and then slipped out of bed, crossed the hallway to the room he had slept in for six months, and found the book where he had stored it on the shelf.

He paged through it, glancing at details he had overlooked on his first reading, and thought: If I had been raised on Jotunheim, would I have learned all this from my first joining? Who would have showed it to me? Would it have been Laufey? Or my mother? At this he started, for he realized he knew nothing of his birth mother, not even her name. He assumed her to be dead. So far as he knew, Laufey had no living queen.

*Perhaps she died at my birth. Perhaps I killed her, just as I killed my father. Just as I killed Frigga.*
He looked again at the genealogy of the Jotnar kings. Where did he fit into it? Perhaps the final chapter held some answers.

**On the future of Jotunheim**

*Through the many years since Aurgelmir first founded the colony on Jotunheim, our people have thrived despite all hardships. But the limitations of our resources have stifled us nonetheless. Our progress can only go so far when so much of our effort must be expended merely to survive.*

*And so it was that my father, long-seeing Bölþorn, treated with Buri, King of Asgard. Their negotiations lasted long and were not without strife; for both Aesir and Jotnar are a very proud people. But since the cataclysm Asgard has been in dire need of space, and with Jotnar workers the city could be expanded. Jotunheim needs trading partners; we need Aesir engineers to better design our cities. And both our kingdoms will stand stronger against the Dark Elves and all other threats if we are united rather than divided.*

*Above all, the Aesir wish to learn the ritual of joining, and the Jotnar wish to learn the Allspeak.*

*Thus, when an agreement was finally made, chief among the provisions was that I, Bestla, daughter of Bölþorn, would wed Bor, son of Buri, King of Asgard. I would learn the Allspeak and in turn, teach my husband how to join. Our children will rule Asgard and through us our realms will both thrive …*

Loki stared at the words, uncomprehending. He reread the last paragraph, then, his hands stiff and fingers sluggish, flipped back through the book until he found the family tree again, and stared hard at that name -- Bestla, which had tickled his mind the first time he had stumbled across it, but in such a strange context he had not realized … He completed the tree in his mind:

```
   Bestla = Bor
     /
    Odin
```

But Odin had not yet been born when this book was written … by his mother.
I don’t understand. I don’t understand.

Odin rarely spoke of his mother. She had died very young, Loki thought, and the books mentioned her only in passing. None of them said she was a frost giant.

How -- this could not -- this would mean that Odin was half Jotunn … impossible! It was impossible!

He flipped back to the final chapter and, numbly, read the rest of Bestla’s words, barely comprehending them. They were filled with bright positivity and all the possibility of her vision of the future. And they were so doomed. Every word was belied by the destruction yet to come. She would oversee projects to educate and uplift the Jotnar -- lead diplomatic missions to Alfheim -- build a library as magnificent as the one of Asgard --

When he reached the final page, he stared at it, thinking about Bestla’s hand hovering over the final word, a feeling of satisfaction no doubt coursing through her as she surveyed her work. It was all too pathetic. Loki’s own hovered over the page, fingertips finally gently pressing down onto it.

At his touch, the page shimmered.

In shock, he watched as runes -- in a very different, far more sophisticated hand -- appeared on the page before him, crowding in beneath Bestla’s last words. He knew the handwriting well. As he read the first word, a gasp rose and then died in his throat.

Loki,

I have not much time to write this. Thor is waiting in the antechamber to bring this book, which I commanded him to find, to you on Midgard. But I must try here to explain some matters to you, better I hope than I have before, when my words were clouded with sorrow and anger.

As you have no doubt discovered yourself, this book was written by my mother. I have few memories of her; she died not long after I was born. I was never told why, but it was said that she found the climate of Asgard very difficult, and was often ill. When she died, the agreement between Asgard and Jotunheim still stood, but it had lost much of its passion and driving force. By the time I had reached adulthood, there was little communication between the two realms, and I knew nearly nothing about my Jotnar heritage. This book had passed from Asgard to the possession of my great-grandmother, Groa, and then seemingly lost forever, until I sent Thor to find it.
Thus, my father decided that I should be sent to study for a time at my Uncle Mimir’s court. There I learned the history of Jotunheim from the court historian, Vafþrúðnir; was taught magic by King Mimir himself; and most of all, I learned the ritual of joining from Queen Gunnlöð. But I was a foolish young man in those days -- yes, even more foolish than I am now as an old man, Loki. I became obsessed with my uncle’s wife and behaved in a very rash manner. This terrible conduct, and the ensuing suspicion and rumor that filled the court afterwards, I am ashamed to say, led eventually to the tragic deaths of Mimir and Gunnlöð; and though I had no direct involvement in their deaths, I may as well have held the blades to their throats. I was sent home in disgrace and punished accordingly. My banishment of Thor was not without precedent, you see; and unlike your brother, I did not discover the error of my ways in mere days of wandering Midgard.

It was many years before I returned to Asgard. When I did, many things had changed in my absence. Upon their deaths, Mimir and Gunnlöð left but one child, a sickly daughter, small and weak, named Farbauti -- my cousin. In the power vacuum which followed her parents’ demise, the most accomplished of the Jotnar generals, Laufey, won the right of marrying her, and he quickly took control of the kingdom. Laufey was eager for conquest and dominion, and began causing trouble immediately. Before long the agreement between Asgard and Jotunheim was in tatters, and we became engaged in a struggle to drive the Jotnar from Midgard that lasted centuries.

At last, the wars finally ended. After Laufey submitted to us, I wandered the court where I had spent much of my youth and there, in the temple of Aurgelmir, found you, Loki. I knew at once that you were my kin.

When I saw you I knew that I could not leave you there. To me you symbolized a bit of hope amidst all the strife -- that there might be a future for Asgard’s and Jotunheim’s coexistence in peace, if I could only raise you and fix the mistakes of my past. And also I saw how I was directly responsible for your dismal fate, left there to die alone and afraid, that I had doomed your mother with my careless actions. Yet out of such tragedy, you were created.

I must tell you this, though I know you will not believe me, and I have attempted to tell you before, poorly, and failed: I loved you from the moment I took you into my arms, Loki. All political machinations were truly second to this your whole life -- you were, in my heart, always my son.

Though such sentiments may be difficult to accept in the face of my actions, they are nonetheless true. It is also true that I deeply regret not telling you of your true origins early on. But even more, I regret allowing you and Thor to live in a society in which your (and my) kind was reviled and demonized. My early efforts to change the perception of Jotnar on Asgard were constantly undermined by infractions by Laufey -- it was as though he remade the entire Jotnar race in his own image. The Aesir seemed to forget my own background -- despite their long lives, or perhaps because of it, they have extremely short memories. And it seemed to me to be less and less wise to expose you to ridicule or even harm by allowing the truth to be known. It is a sad state of affairs for a king to be ruled by his people, especially the worst part of them, but I cannot claim to have been a brave king in this manner. In truth, Thor will likely surpass me in his due time.
That is all, my son. No doubt you have more questions, and I know that this simple letter will do little to change your heart, or heal what wrongs I have caused you -- and that you have caused yourself. But I do hope that one day you will heal, Loki, and perhaps forgive me. Not for myself, but for you; for such hatred will twist and ruin you, and despite everything, I do believe you are not without hope now.

*Father.*

Loki did not know how to react. Part of him wanted to scream and tear the room apart, throw the book from the window, and perhaps set the entire house on fire. Another part of him wanted to collapse and weep. He wanted to shout to Heimdall and demand to speak to the All-father. He wanted to put the book away and curl up next to Bruce in bed and never think of it again.

He did none of these things: he simply sat on the bed, the book before him, feeling hollowed out and numb, unable to comprehend anything.

Everything was a lie. He had thought that he had gotten to the bottom of the lies, but in truth he had only peeled back the onion skin of it. Beneath there were layers and layers, going back generations.

Why would Odin tell him these things now? Now, when it was all too late? He had already severed them all from his heart, clean and swift, and now --

“Loki?”

Bruce was standing in the doorway, looking sleepy and confused. Loki stared at him, tried to speak, and found that he couldn’t.

“What is it?” Bruce walked over and sat next to him. “Are you okay?” And then, somehow, he understood. “Show me.”

So Loki did. When they came back to themselves, Bruce let out a long sigh and slipped his arms around him and held him tightly until Loki relaxed.
“He loves you,” Bruce said.

Loki closed his eyes. “It’s too late now.”

“No, it isn’t.”

Loki didn’t argue. He just pressed his face against Bruce’s shoulder and inhaled his scent deeply.

“You told Tony about my stave,” Bruce whispered.

Loki started, then flushed. He’d known Bruce would see that eventually, but had, in the moment, forgotten about it.

“Are you angered?”

“No.” He pressed a kiss against Loki’s forehead.

I’ve never felt so understood by anyone, Loki thought, and felt his heart tighten with a sudden dread.

*

Winter came, first in dribs and drabs, then with great billowing storms that left surprisingly little accumulation. “It’s the city,” Bruce explained. “The ground is too warm from human habitation for the snow to stay long. It’s called the heat island effect.”

They spent the holiday of Christmas on their own. They worked at St. Christopher’s, distributing presents and serving food. A choir, which included Edith from the art studio, performed the songs of the season for the assembled throngs, singing of kings and wise men and stars and bells. They sang of a king named Wenceslas, who journeyed through the snow with his faithful servant to give aid to a starving beggar.
Sire, the night is darker now, and the wind blows stronger; 
Fails my heart, I know not how; I can go no longer."
"Mark my footsteps, good my page. Tread thou in them boldly
Thou shalt find the winter’s rage freeze thy blood less coldly."

Loki found these melodies strangely eerie and unsettling. There was something to them that reminded him of Asgard, he thought; and perhaps Bruce had also felt that way, as a child maybe. Loki found that sometimes Bruce’s less significant impressions and memories were at times almost indistinguishable from his own.

After, they went home and ate a vegetarian lasagna that Bruce had prepared the day before for dinner. They exchanged no gifts, as was the custom; Bruce shared everything with Loki, and Loki had nothing to give. But that night he read aloud to Bruce from Dylan Thomas's "A Child's Christmas in Wales," which he knew Bruce loved, and because Bruce said Loki's voice calmed him. Loki softly recited the words on the page, not understanding all of it, but enjoying the way the strange, loping syllables of Thomas's prose rolled off his tongue and disappeared into the near-darkness of the parlor --

The silent one-clouded heavens drifted on to the sea. Now we were snow-blind travelers lost on the north hills, and vast dewlapped dogs, with flasks round their necks, ambled and shambled up to us, baying "Excelsior." We returned home through the poor streets where only a few children fumbled with bare red fingers in the wheel-rutted snow and cat-called after us, their voices fading away, as we trudged uphill, into the cries of the dock birds and the hooting of ships out in the whirling bay. --

and so on.

In January, the snow grew worse, and the cold temperatures made Loki think of blue skin, red eyes, the sparkle of dim starlight on the surface of neverending snow and ice; and to his surprise, such thoughts no longer made his skin crawl, unless he forced himself towards morbidity. And when he did, if Bruce was present, he would glide his thumb along the lines forming in Loki’s brow and smooth them away, and give him something better to do.

One such time, they had just entered the library, having trudged through freezing sleet to get there. They dropped of their returns, and then Bruce, seeing Loki’s preoccupation, took his hand and said, “Let’s take a walk around upstairs and warm up.”

They climbed the broad central staircase, and Loki was reminded of the first time he had visited there. They passed the majestic marble lions, and when Loki spotted the murals, he broke free and walked up to them, wondering if he could decode them better now than he had been able to then.
Bruce stepped up behind him. “I’ve never really looked at these.”

“What do they mean?” Loki said.

“No clue,” Bruce said, and pulled out his phone. After a minute of searching, he said, “They’re called *The Muses of Inspiration* and they were painted by Chavannes.”

Loki stepped back and turned around to look at the walls. “Which muses?”

“Uh … poetry, philosophy, history, and science.” He pointed to the right wall. “These are poetry …” And then to the left. “These are philosophy and history.” Then he turned and looked towards the window. “And these are science. Somehow.”

Loki took the phone from him and read: “Physics,” as he turned toward a painting of floating ethereal figures, hovering over a line of telephone poles. “By the wondrous agency of Electricity, Speech flashes through Space and swift as lightning bears tidings of good and evil.” They laughed. On the other side of the window, several figures stood around a brazier, the lead figure holding some sort of rod. “Chemistry,” Loki read, “A process of mysterious change evolves itself under the magic wand of a fairy surrounded by watching spirits.”

They looked at each other, grinning.

“Midgardians are exceedingly strange,” Loki said.

“Right. And Asgard isn’t strange at all.”

*  

When the snow finally melted and the ground thawed, and buds began to sprout into leaves on the trees, Loki and Bruce left the city for the first time since they had arrived nearly a year ago.

“Let’s go on a trip on our next day off,” Bruce announced one morning, while they were laying in bed, trying to wake up. “A day trip. I’ll drive us somewhere.”
Loki had frowned in surprise. “That’s very sudden,” he said. “What prompted this?”

Bruce stretched. “I just thought you should see something outside of Boston someday. Maybe go some place with a little less concrete.”

And so four days later Bruce loaded up the car with bottled water, some packed lunches and trail mix, a GPS Bruce attached to the windshield, and a couple of travel guides for Massachusetts. Loki scrambled into the passenger seat and fastened his seatbelt, and paged through one of them. “Where are we going?”

“Cape Ann,” Bruce said, starting the car. “It’s about an hour away on the North Shore.”

As they pulled away, Loki looked up Cape Ann in the guide and read: A rocky promontory on the northern coast of Massachusetts, it is dominated by the towns of Gloucester, Essex, Rockport, and Manchester-by-the-sea. It was first mapped by John Smith, of Pocahontas-fame, who named it Cape Tragabigzanda; this he claimed was the name of his mistress in Constantinople, during an incident in which he was claimed he was sold into slavery by the Tartars; Tragabigzanda fell in love with him and set him free. King Charles II later renamed it after his mother, Ann of Denmark.

Bruce took an on ramp onto the highway and the car was plunged into darkness as they entered a tunnel. Loki thought about the buildings and people they were speeding past, beneath the ground, like they were flowing through the hidden arteries of the city. They emerged to blinding sunlight, comparatively, and, to Loki’s surprise, directly onto the Zakim Bridge -- the white, majestic structure he had only seen in the distance before, that had reminded him so much of Asgard -- at once new and old. The white cables rose above them as they sped across it, like the bleached rib cage of a long dead beast.

And then -- they were passing out of the city, speeding past a sort of dead zone of construction areas and gravel pits. Gradually, brick buildings and billboards became less frequent, replaced by trees and lakes. They talked a little but largely remained silent, listening to the radio for awhile, while Loki looked at the pictures in the guidebook. Soon the green exit signs began to bear names like Peabody and Marblehead and Danvers and Beverly, and Bruce said they were nearly there.

They passed over the Annisquam River into east Gloucester around eleven in the morning, and followed a bumpy narrow road lined with pretty little houses on either side and a vast expanse of woods in the distance. Eventually Bruce pulled off the road into a barren industrial park at the edge of the woods and parked the car.
“Where are we?” Loki asked, and Bruce reached into his pocket and pulled out some folded pieces of paper and handed them to him. When Loki opened them, he found they were maps and written directions for something called Dogtown.

“It’s the original abandoned settlement of Gloucester,” Bruce explained as he pulled items out of the car. “Before the shipping industry took over and everyone lived inland, trying to farm. Now it’s a protected reservation. Do you think it’s going to rain? We should take these plastic ponchos.” He threw two packages into his backpack.

They struck out on a dirt path into the woods. They had been walking for maybe twenty minutes when they came across it: a large boulder on the edge of the trail, emblazoned with the words “GET A JOB”.

Loki reached up and touched the letters. “Who did this?” he wondered.

“An eccentric billionaire in the ‘30s hired some out of work stonecutters to carve messages in the rocks. He used to own this land, but he sold it to the town. Come on, there’s more of them. This area is a Terminal Moraine. These rocks were all deposited here when the Laurentide Glaciation retreated about 15,000 years ago.”

“When did you learn that?”

“Last night when I was reading about it.”

“You’re insufferable.”

The next stone they encountered read simply, “HELP MOTHER.” Loki said nothing.

Soon afterwards they found “SAVE”, and then they had to cross a railroad bridge over a reservoir before following the path once again. They passed “TRUTH”, “WORK”, “COURAGE”, and “LOYALTY”. They stopped a few times along the way to drink water and for Bruce to take a break.

The woods had seemed quiet when they first entered, but now they seemed incredibly loud. They were filled with birdsong, the chittering of insects, creaks and rustles, an occasional thud.
“They say these woods are haunted, you know,” Bruce said, a good-natured sparkle in his eyes. “Witches used to live here.”

Loki snorted.

Further along the path, they found a cluster of boulders, some of them set off from the way a few feet. There was INTELLIGENCE and across from it, IDEALS. There was also INTEGRITY, INDUSTRY, and most amusingly, SPIRITUAL POWER. Not long after that they encountered USE YOUR HEAD (“For what?” Loki asked. “Writing vapid slogans?”) and then the path crossed a wider road. There they began to find smaller rocks with numbers carved into them, which Bruce said indicated the cellar holes of the houses of Dogtown’s former inhabitants. Sure enough, they also stumbled across a marker inscribed “D. T. SQ”. There were more of the boulders too: STUDY. IF WORK STOPS, VALUES DECAY. PROSPERITY FOLLOWS SERVICE.

At last they came to a massively tall boulder with straight, smooth sides, which had nothing carved into it but which Bruce said was called Peter’s Pulpit. They sat down at the base of it to eat the sandwiches Bruce had packed.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Bruce asked.

Loki, who was taking a drink of water, pulled the bottle away from his mouth and licked his lips, thinking.

“Should I be?” he finally replied, quite seriously.

Bruce raised his eyebrows in an expression that Loki read as Go on.

“I do not know what is appropriate anymore,” Loki said, disease thickening his voice. “Do I have the right to enjoy myself? Even -- even -- you and I -- do I really deserve such a thing?” Bruce took his hand and remained silent. Loki forced himself to continue, though the words were difficult to get out. “I … killed many Midgardians. Many Jotnar. Many people.” He let out a shaky breath. “I murdered them. I’m a murderer.” He pressed his palms against his eyelids until he saw colors and shapes, gritting his teeth. “They weren’t cattle, or mindless creatures, or insects. They were individuals with lives and personalities and purposes. And I snuffed that all out.”

There was silence again, but for Loki’s distressed breathing and the sounds of the forest. Then Bruce
said, “I’ve killed people, too, Loki. Innocent people.”

“You were the Hulk then. You weren’t yourself. It’s not the same.”

“Loki, I am the Hulk.”

Loki took his hands from his eyes and looked at him. To his shock, there were tears in the corners of Bruce’s red-rimmed eyes.

“There is no Other Guy. There’s just me --Bruce Banner. When I transform, I’m still in there. What the Hulk does comes from me -- from all my anger and frustration. I’m culpable.”

Loki shook his head. “Bruce, no --”

“I couldn’t handle that,” Bruce continued, “so I had to separate myself from it as much as possible. But the funny thing is, the further I pushed that part of myself away, the worse I became. And then when I couldn’t stand it anymore --” He stopped suddenly, because he knew that Loki knew exactly what he was referring it. He had seen it in Bruce’s memories: the night he had tried to kill himself. He pictured it now, the way the shaft of the gun had tasted and felt in Bruce’s mouth, metallic and smooth. The ease with which he pulled the trigger, the kickback, the taste of gunpowder -- and then he had come. And Bruce had been grateful. Because in that moment that the bullet had erupted from the gun, that tiny instant before he shifted, he had thought: No! I do want to live!

And Loki thought of how it had felt to let go Gungnir, his sweaty palm sliding over its surface, and he could have held on, but those words (No, Loki) had made his whole body go numb. Not because he knew that he had disappointed his father, done the unforgivable, not because he knew his father wasn’t his father and never would be -- no, it was because he saw, in Odin’s eyes, that despite his words, his father still loved him. Still loved a monster. And if he let Thor pull him up, save him, what would happen? He’d doom his family to living with a monster, a murderous, traitorous creature, who would destroy their lives and bring down the Realm. And whatever was left in him that was still Loki couldn’t let that happen. So he let go.

But the void had saved him, just as the Hulk had saved Bruce. And despite all the agony and terror that was sure to follow, they had both been pathetically grateful, because in the end they still wanted to live.
And now they were here. And Loki had never been so grateful or so terrified to be here, at this moment, with Bruce.

“There’s no point in wallowing,” Bruce said finally, when he had gained some control over himself. “No point in overwhelming yourself with regret, letting it paralyze you and ruin you. No point in punishing yourself, because the point of punishment is to make you really come to terms with what you’ve done and to pay back the debt. But can you really pay back the debt of taking somebody’s life? That’s the question. No matter what you do, those people will never come back. You can’t change that. All you can do is try to save other people, or at least help them. It’ll never be right, but at least it’ll be better. You can be happy, Loki, but you also can’t forget.”

Loki squeezed his hand. “Bruce Banner,” he said quietly, “how did you become so wise?”

Bruce smiled. “Well, when life is short, you have to learn fast.”

A dull pain echoed in Loki’s head. He put one hand to Bruce’s face, and slid his fingers over his brow, nose, lips. “Too short,” he murmured. “Too fast.”

Taking Loki’s hand in his own, Bruce pressed his fingers to his mouth and kissed them. “It is what it is,” he murmured.

Like this place, Loki thought. A moment in time, transfixed; all that was left was the bones.

*

It began to rain, as Bruce had supposed it might, as they walked back to the car. They unfolded the plastic rain ponchos; when they put them on Loki thought they looked like strange, awkward winged beasts. Trudging along the dirt path, there was only the popping noises of raindrops hitting the plastic covering them. The newly wettened leaves and moss gave off a musty smell.

When they reached the car, it was downpouring. They ran towards the vehicle, took off the ponchos and stuffed them into the backseat before jumping inside. Bruce turned on the car and got the defrost and windshield wipers going, and while they caught their breath and waited for the windows to clear, he pulled out his phone to check the time. His forehead crinkled in concern.

“What is it?” Loki asked.
“Tony called me, a few times. Then he sent me a text.” He turned the phone towards Loki to show him the message.

* * *

*I ordered a new bellcrank. I’m going to collect the fixture - can you find that clevis I asked you about? I’m worried about the elasticity.*

“*What does that mean?*”

“It’s a code Tony came up with,” Bruce explained, and rolled his eyes for a second, before frowning again. “First, “bellcrank” -- that means that something has changed. “Fixture” means he’s heading to our place, and “clevis” means we should meet him there. “Elasticity” means there is danger, so I shouldn’t try to contact him.” They looked at each other for a moment. Loki felt that constriction in his chest again.

Bruce pulled out of the parking lot, silent, but his knuckles white as he clenched the steering wheel. It was quiet -- too quiet, except for the whirring of the wipers and the pelting of the rain against the car. Loki couldn’t stand it. He turned on the radio.

At once they were assaulted by a cacophony of noises: sirens, shouts, and over it, the sound of a reporter breathlessly conveying the news.

That was how they learned about it: the fall of S. H. I. E. L. D., Captain America’s rebellion, Project Insight, the destruction of the Triskelion, the release of all of S. H. I. E. L. D.’s data by Black Widow. After the initial shock wore off, Loki reached over and laid a hand on Bruce’s arm. He was shaking. They said nothing, but both knew this was what Stark had contacted them about.

The ride back to Boston felt long, longer than it had going up. The rain dissipated but Bruce forgot to turn off the windshield wipers for almost a mile afterwards; they made a dry creaking noise as they scratched against the glass, but Loki could not bring himself to say anything about it, feeling as though Bruce was only just holding himself together. Eventually, he silently reached over and pushed the lever up, turning them off himself.

It was nearly dark by the time began to near the city. Against the blackening sky, the bright lights of the Zakim Bridge made it look even more ethereal than it normally did, but Loki could not enjoy the beauty of it now. When they dove into the O’Neill tunnel, the radio fizzled into static, cutting off a discussion of Hydra’s potential involvement in the Iraq War, and Bruce turned it off. He said, in a rough, croaking voice, “It’s going to be all right.”
Loki stared at him, blinking, taking in his still, marble-like expression, his skin stained by the yellow lights of the tunnel, and responded, “I believe you.”

Bruce smiled, jaggedly, and nodded.

*

Stark was waiting for them in a car parked outside their house when they pulled up.

“You got here fast,” Bruce said as he closed the car door.

“Flew here in my suit,” Stark explained. “Then I went and picked up this baby. It’s all sorted out. There’s a couple of registrations in the glove compartment. You can use them as you see fit.”

A shuddery breath rattled up through Loki’s chest and he stifled it. “We are leaving, then?”

Bruce nodded, his mouth a tight line, the expression in his eyes a mixture of sadness and anger. They silently entered the house, and then stood in the entryway in the semi-dark.

“You were on the list, Bruce,” Stark said.

“I suspected as much.”

“If Steve hadn’t stopped it …”

Loki thought of it -- the two of them stumbling about Dogtown, oblivious and free, the whine of an incoming missile overhead, following the telltale pinging of Bruce’s Starkphone …

He suddenly felt cold, and the darkness was too close, even with his good vision. He found the hallway light and flicked it on, then began turning on all the lights in the parlor.
“It probably wouldn’t have killed me, anyway,” Bruce said softly, standing in the doorway and watching Loki go from lamp to lamp. “He’s stronger than that.” Loki wasn’t sure if was speaking to him, or to Stark, or to himself.

“What about you?” Stark said. It took Loki a moment to realize he was addressing him. “Bet it wouldn’t have even dented your hood at all.”

Loki shrugged. “Likely not.” Bruce stared at him, his expression dark and unreadable. Loki wanted to embrace him, but felt rooted to the spot.

“There’s one more thing,” Stark said. “That thing you asked me about.” He gestured towards his chest with one finger, tracing a design idly, over the spot where the device his chest no longer resided. “I tried to look into it, but had a really hard time getting anywhere. Everything was locked up tighter than a medieval princess’ chastity belt.”

“And now we know why,” Bruce muttered.

“It was this organization, this HYDRA?” Loki’s mind began to spin. “But why? If they truly intended to do away with Bruce with this scheme of theirs, then what was the point of imprisoning him?”

“They must have known that Project Insight wouldn’t have killed the Hulk,” Bruce said. He began to pace back and forth. “In that case though, why even target me?”

And then it clicked into place.

“It’s all part of the same plan,” Loki said. They stopped and stared at him. Loki looked at Bruce, trying to estimate how much restraint he still had left. “They knew the Hulk would protect you, Bruce. That their weaponry couldn’t hope to kill you -- or me. But the Hulk could hurt me.”

Bruce stared at him, very still.

“With the stave in place, I would not be able to escape you. And once you had done away with me, your own stave would ensure your death.” Loki placed a hand against his chest. “That’s the way it
works. Our lives are bound together by this. And our deaths.”

They stood in silence for a moment. Then Bruce turned and abruptly left the room. They heard him walk across the hall and into his office. The door slammed shut.

Stark stared after him. “Is he going to Hulk out in there?”

Loki ignored him. He walked over to the office door and laid his hand against the wood. “Bruce,” he called out. “Bruce, listen to me. They were wrong. Their plan was flawed. It would not have worked.”

He paused for a moment, listening. He could hear Bruce breathing, heavily, with a sort of whining sob.

“They thought you wouldn’t know me,” he went on. “They thought the Hulk would have no control, no ties, no emotion. But they couldn’t have understood. They didn’t know what we know. They couldn’t even possibly imagine.”

He thought of Bruce today, sitting next to him in the woods. Loki, I am the Hulk.

“You would have known me, Bruce. The Hulk would have known me. How could he not? I’ve seen everything. I know him. I know you.” He laid his hand on the doorknob. “They thought they had crippled us by binding us together. Instead, they made us stronger.”

Loki opened the door. Bruce was sitting at his desk, head in his hands. He looked up, and his eyes were wet and red-streaked. “Loki,” he whispered, and Loki leaned down and held him, tightly. He could feel Bruce’s terror so keenly, without even their minds joining. It came off of him in waves. He wanted to absorb it all and take it away from him. He could stand it for both of them.

* * *

When Bruce was calm enough again, they wandered back out into the parlor, where Stark had set up several devices and was paging through reams of data. “I just got off the phone with Natasha,” he said. “Steve’s been found. He’s injured, but he’s going to be all right.”
“Is Fury really dead?” Bruce asked. His voice sounded slightly thick and croaky, but that was the only evidence of his loss of composure.

“That’s harder to say. They’re being pretty tight-lipped about it, but my inclination? No way. I’m pretty sure we’ll see One-Eyed Jack again.” He smirked. “Remember Coulson.”

“Please don’t make me.” Bruce sat down on the couch and let out a long sigh. “Okay. I need to start making some calls. Figure out where we are going to leave. And then we need to pack.” He looked around. “Are you sure this place is clean, Tony?”

“Did a full sweep before you got here. I got rid of all the tech I found. In any case, there’s nobody left to listen.” He paused, then formed his hand into a fist and rapped his knuckles against the counter. “Knock on wood.”

“If there is no one left to listen,” Loki said, “why must we leave?”

“Tony’s being hyperbolic,” Bruce said. He had taken out his phone and was scrolling through his contacts, frowning. “HYDRA’s been purged from S. H. I. E. L. D., but they aren’t stamped out completely.” He shook his head. “We aren’t safe here. You and I, Loki, we’re not like Tony or Steve. We can’t entrench ourselves and pull up our defenses, get the public behind us. We aren’t like Natasha and Clint, either, we can’t ride with the tide and disguise ourselves and work the system. We have to be unpredictable, keep moving, be adaptable.”

“You could always hide out with me, you know,” Tony said. But Bruce shook his head.

“You know the answer to that, Tony.” He turned to Loki. “You don’t want to leave, do you?”

Loki looked away. “No,” he admitted. No, he didn’t want to leave this place, this house -- once his prison, now his home. These past months, such a short period of time out of all the many years he had lived, seemed more intense, more solid, more vivid, than anything he had ever experienced. At first it had seemed as though he bore a gaping wound, endlessly bleeding and sapping him of energy and every gentle breeze made it smart. And then, gradually, it came to feel as though he had spent years buried in sand, and now it was being washed away. At times he had thought he might drown, but he had made it through, choking and gasping, and felt fresh air against his face.

Bruce sat down next to him, and took his hand. “We’ll make new memories elsewhere,” he said. “This world is large. There’s so many things to see. And I’m looking forward to seeing them with
They were interrupted by the sound of retching from Stark’s direction. “Excuse me,” he said. “I’m lactose intolerant. I can’t handle all this cheese.”

*

Some hours later, Loki had finished gathering his things together. He wrapped the book from Jotunheim in his clothes and buried it at the bottom of his bag. He also packed as best as he could for Bruce, as he was tied up with making arrangements for them. By midnight they were ready to leave.

Downstairs, he found Stark was on the phone with the media, while Bruce typed away at his laptop, balanced on one knee, while looking at his phone with his other hand. Loki put his bags down and sat next to him, putting a hand against his cheek to gain his attention. When Bruce looked at him, he let their consciousnesses merge — it was easy now, so easy. He saw in Bruce’s mind where they were going — a small town in rural New York, where they might work for a few weeks at an employment center, until things calmed down a bit, and then on to Detroit. From there, who knew? The world was open to them.

When he broke the connection, Stark was just hanging up the phone. “I’m heading out to D. C., to meet with Nat and see Steve. There might be a Senate investigation.” He rubbed his eyes tiredly and yawned. “Are you guys going to be okay? Do you need anything?”

Bruce shook his head, closing his laptop and sliding it into one of the bags Loki had packed. “We’ll be fine, Tony. I’ll keep in touch, okay?”

Stark pulled Bruce into a loose, one-armed embrace, then turned to Loki. He stared at him for a moment and then stuck out one hand. Loki raised an eyebrow. “I hope you don’t expect me to kiss it.”

Bruce rolled his eyes. “Loki.”

He laughed, for he knew the mortal custom of hand-shaking well enough by now, strange as it was. He took Stark’s hand in his own and shook it.

They bundled their things into the car, and waved farewell to Stark, who stood at the doorstep of his
great-great-grandfather's house, Iron Man suit in its case at his side. The house seemed so small to Loki -- yet so much had happened there. He felt a hollow ache as he and Bruce climbed into the car and began to drive away. He watched the familiar streets recede; they passed the street to St. Christopher’s, and he thought, I may never see Edith again. They passed the Common, the trees and flowers just beginning to bloom. They plunged once more into the tunnels, and emerged, at last, not on the Zakim, nor to the south, the way that Loki had entered the city. Instead, they were heading west. The whole country was before them, and beyond that, the rest of Midgard, far larger than Loki had ever known. He had much to learn.

Chapter End Notes

So many things.

Here's the rest of the genealogy, most of which was revealed in the previous chapter. Bestla, is, of course, Odin's mother, and her father is Bölporn in mythology. There is speculation that Bestla's brother is Mímir, a wise Jotunn who teaches Odin magic and whom Odin beheads. As Bölporn's wife I chose Nótt (Night). She is sometimes described as Jotunn in mythology, and she is Thor's grandmother -- however, she's supposed to be his maternal grandmother, because Thor's mother isn't Frigga, but the earth goddess Jörð. So I switched that around. Gunnlöð, who I made Mímir's wife and the object of Odin's adolescent affection, is a giantess whom Odin seduced or raped in the myths.

In this story, Loki and Odin are first cousins once removed. Loki and Thor are second cousins.

You can read about King Wenceslas here.

The full text of "A Child's Christmas in Wales" is here.

Read more about Chavannes' "The Muses of Inspiration" at the BPL here.

See photos of Dogtown and the Babson Boulders here and in Elyssa East's "Dogtown: Death and Enchantment in a New England Ghost Town". Fun fact: I am descended from early Gloucester settlers, but they didn't live in Dogtown, to my knowledge -- they lived in Little Good Harbor on the coast. But one of them was accused of being a witch. She and the other Gloucester witches were set free after spectral evidence was rejected by the courts.

I certainly hope that the way I worked Winter Soldier into this is satisfying to everyone!

Thank you to everyone who has read and commented!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!