Life In Reverse

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Life In Reverse

by Lise

Summary

Home is where you make it. Or, the AU where Loki falls to Earth after Thor, wanders around trying to work out what to do with himself, and somehow ends up working for SHIELD. (Mostly because supervillains are so plebian.)

Notes
If I let this note go on for too long it will rapidly become a flood of excuses as to why this happened and how it's a bad idea but I'm going with it anyway. And nobody wants that! So instead thank you to Maura for reading this over, and to people who follow me on tumblr for putting up with my continual writing related flailing with only the occasional rolling of eyes. Let's get this show on the road.
When Loki got back from his daily walk, there was someone in his flat.

Again.

Loki opened the door slowly, gathering himself to defend or attack if necessary, and ended up simply staring at the human, quite unremarkable in appearance (that already made him different from the others), sitting at the desk and drinking a cup of his tea. “Luke’s the name you’re going by?” he said, setting down the cup and standing up. “Hello. I’m Agent Phil Coulson. I thought maybe it was time we had a real talk. You’re a hard man to get in touch with.”

It would be quite easy, Loki mused, to rip out this Agent’s throat with his bare hands. He did not think that his landlady would approve, though, and he had become a touch fond of the old woman. He stayed where he was.

“I do not take kindly to intruders,” he informed his guest. The Agent half smiled.

“You can talk to your landlady. She let me in. Good woman. Said you were a – ‘nice young man.’”

Loki revised his affection of Ms. Fairfax downwards very slightly. He was certain he had had words with her, after last time. “Are you here for a reason,” he said, with deliberate politeness, “Or may I escort you out?” Preferably, he let his tone imply, out a window.

“Well,” said Agent Phil Coulson. “We’ve been trying to talk to you for months.”

Ah, Loki thought, so it is another one. Though this one, at least, seemed slightly different from the others. Months, as well, that helped. “Is that what the clumsy attempts at kidnapping were for?”

Coulson looked unapologetic. “Well, actually, yes. We’re very curious, and you seemed like an interesting person.”

“I’m a student,” Loki said, blandly. “Studying abroad for the semester. If you’d let me fetch you my ID.”

“Yes,” said Coulson, “That’s the interesting bit, isn’t it? You’ve got a full set of records, but if one were to do a little digging, one would find that they didn’t exist seven months ago. And eight months ago, there’s a call on record of a man falling out of the sky, only to vanish from a hospital the next day. Isn’t that interesting?”


“Oh,” Coulson added, “Right, I should say. I start acting funny or anything happens to me and I’ve got a sniper with a gun full of elephant tranquilizers.” The little man sat down again, perfectly unruffled. “Tea?”

Loki took a breath through his nose, let it out, and smoothly settled on another chair. Causing a ruckus was just what he wanted to avoid, and flinging this man through one of the walls would undoubtedly cause a ruckus. “Yes,” he said with a smile only slightly barbed. “Please.”

He watched this Agent Coulson pour another cup of tea and took it gracefully, tested it briefly for any kind of poison, and found none. He sipped at it and waited as his intruder watched him with placidity that Loki suspected was of dubious truth.
“What should I call you?” Coulson said, finally, and Loki flashed a toothy grin at him.

“Luke will do. Mr. Silver, if you must.”

He expected an objection, but Coulson simply nodded. “All right, Mr. Silver, then. I’m here representing an organization called SHIELD that is…interested in extraordinary talents.”

Loki tilted his head slightly to the side. “Extraordinary talents?” He said, and it was little challenge to sound faintly puzzled.

“Like,” said Coulson, with an air of patience that was just begging to be tested, “The ability to get a trained doctor to let you walk out of a hospital room no questions asked. Or, say, to fabricate a pretty good identity out of thin air. Or getting two trained agents to spill their guts about their mission goals.”

Loki’s fingers twitched. “And what would your organization do with such…extraordinary talents?”

Coulson leaned back. “That information’s largely classified. As is, I can only tell you that it’s a… project. Of sorts.”

“You would tell me if I asked you,” Loki said, mildly, steepling his fingers under his chin, and watched the first slight tension appear in the man across from him.

“I might,” he agreed, after a moment. “But that would probably qualify as me acting strangely and cue the tranquilizer, and I don’t think either of us really wants to deal with that.” Loki sat back and had another sip of his tea, held it in his mouth a moment before swallowing.

“And what makes you think I’d be interested?” Loki said, half closing his eyes. “Perhaps I am here as a prospective conquerer.”

“A possibility,” Coulson said, “Except that after the last few fiascos, we’ve been watching for a little while. We’re not the only ones to track you down, are we? I counted three minor league hostiles looking to step things up approaching you in the past three months. Only to mysteriously cease all activity shortly afterwards. –oh, except one,” here the man paused to refer to a pad of paper he pulled from a pocket, ‘‘Javier Holzinger’ who just disappeared.”

Loki had been perfecting an expression of perfect innocence for many mortal lifespans. “Five,” he corrected mildly. “There have been five. And every one seems so certain that they must be the exception. You make a rather large assumption; perhaps I merely wish to be left to myself.” He remembered Javier. Particularly determined, particularly persistent, and particularly prone to referring to Mrs. Fairfax’s granddaughter Angela as a ‘brat’ in his hearing. Loki was even more fond of Angela than he was of her grandmother.

Loki did so hope he was enjoying Muspellheim.

“Five,” said Coulson, sounding surprised. “How did we miss…ah, never mind. To answer your question – I think,” he said, and fixed Loki with a look that was surprisingly shrewd, “Wherever you came from originally – and I don’t really think that was here – maybe you’ve gotten a little bit attached to this place. You wouldn’t make such a point of turning their heads around – so to speak – if you weren’t a little annoyed by their schemes.”

“And you assume I am not annoyed by yours?”

“You haven’t thrown me out of a window yet,” Coulson said calmly, “And I don’t think that’s for lack of ability. So I think maybe you’re at least a little interested.”
“Interested in?”

“Again, classified. But I can tell you that it’d be a chance to use your unique abilities in a way you won’t get to otherwise.”

“Hmm. How intriguing.” Loki set down his tea and crossed his legs, ankle on the opposite knee. “What are you offering, then? –whatever you can tell me, that is.”

“Simply enough,” Coulson said, and his eyes locked on Loki’s, “An alternative. Other employment than these people who keep seeking you out.”

“You thought the attempted kidnapping would be persuasive?”

“As you can see,” Coulson said, still unabashed, and Loki did have to respect someone who could manage quite that degree of placidity, “We determined other measures might be more effective.”

“You might have tried that first,” Loki pointed out mildly.

“A disadvantage of working in covert operations,” said his visitor. “The straightforward is not always the first thing to occur to us.”

That was…true enough. And thus far, at least, this one was managing to be somewhat more polite than the others. And somewhat more interesting. Less…irritatingly petty. Nonetheless… “And if I were interested? What would you tell me next?” Loki asked, watching closely, and noticed the man’s expression brighten, very, very slightly.

“I’d ask you to come with me someplace a little more private to talk a few things over.” Loki cupped his tea between two hands.

“Ah,” he said. And smiled, very slightly. “No, thank you. I do not believe I am interested.” He blew on the surface of his tea. “You may see yourself out.”

The silence, however brief, was just slightly satisfying. He let one corner of his mouth tilt just slightly upwards. He waited, already half able to hear in his mind the indignant outburst, why not? Or perhaps he would jump straight to the signal to attack.

“Well,” said the man, and stood up. “It was worth a try.” He reached into a pocket and pulled out a small card. “Here’s a number where you can reach me, if you change your mind about getting involved.”

And he left. Loki stood to watch him exit, tensing when he paused at the door, half expecting – he wasn’t certain. Something. “That’s all you have to say for yourself?”

“Somehow,” said the man, turning around, “I get the feeling that I don’t really want to push you, Mr. Silver. Persistence in my experience isn’t always the best policy, as I’m sure the – late? – Mr. Holzinger would agree. My superior won’t be happy. But he trusts my judgment.” He paused, a moment longer, and then opened the door and stepped out into the hallway. “Have a pleasant day,” he said, almost brightly, and closed it behind him.

Loki waited, perfectly still, but he did not reappear. After a few moments, he bent down and picked up the card left behind. Agent Phil Coulson, it read. No position. No logo. Name, and a number.

After a moment’s thought, he tuck it in his pocket.
In the moment before he let go, Loki thought, very briefly and wildly, what if I die?

It was the answer which occurred to him that loosened his fingers and let him fall. Yes, he thought, with a peculiar kind of calm he hadn’t had for the past three days. Since Thor had been banished, since cold fingers had wrapped around his forearm and stripped away all of the pretense that had hidden him from the truth like swaddling cloths. Yes, what if? And if there was anything there it was a kind of curiosity. What then?

There just weren’t enough reasons to say no.

So he let his fingers slide free and for a moment didn’t even feel himself falling, just watched the shattered Bifrost receding above him and Thor’s mouth open to shout something he didn’t hear past the roaring in his ears.

And then he was falling. Everything was sound and music, howling and wild as the void hooked its claws into him and tore his mind wide open until there was no boundary at all between the universe and himself. Everything pouring through him and he could feel it wearing the edges of him away like a wave against the shore, sapping a little more of him with every rising swell-

It might have been a very long time or no time at all when he slammed back to himself with enough force to crack bone and pulverize something almost certainly vital in his gut, and it took Loki a moment to realize that it was not just him, that he wasn’t falling, and that he had landed on something solid and that was what had broken him.

He still felt raw, like whatever had forced him back into the hard lines of his body had done so clumsily and all wrong, left him jumbled up and twisted around, his vision a blur and head buzzing. Buzzing? No, voices.

So he wasn’t dead. He had fallen through the void and landed in some other realm, spat out and rejected even by oblivion, and wasn’t that just-

The pain was nagging at his mind, seeking admittance. He ignored it, pushed it away, tried to focus. If he wasn’t dead, he needed to know. Where? Svartalfheim? That would be a fine thing indeed, with all the love between himself and those people. Vanheim?

“No, I’m not fucking kidding, some guy just fell out of the sky can you send a goddamn ambulance?”

The words filtered hazily into his consciousness, and it took him a moment to realize why they sent a chill through him. Human voices. Human language.

He had let go seeking death, and the void had found him unworthy and shat him out into this cesspool of the nine realms. Thor, unworthy, had been sent here to test his mettle. You always used to follow him as a child. Tagging at his heels. Apparently you have not changed.

“Oh my god.” The same voice, evidently not speaking to him. “Oh my god, there’s a lot of blood, should I, like-

Midgard, he thought. It is Midgard. Ah, this is a fine jest. A fine, fine jest.

He started laughing. Started laughing and couldn’t stop until the pain opened its jaws and swallowed him whole like a wolf swallowing the sun.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

So what the posting of this chapter means is that there are now three chapters of this thing completed, which is already almost more than I was expecting to pull off. Whoa! Because my posting schedule is going to rely on "post chapter once the chapter after is done" I cannot make any guarantees for sure about timing, but hope it will be something like this. (Once a week, roughly.)

Minor warning for this chapter of Loki going medieval on someone's ass.

The visit troubled him. Well. Troubled in the loosest sense of the word. Nagged at, perhaps, would be more accurate. The idea of being watched did not sit well with him, and the fact that he could see no signs of any such observation irked Loki still more.

Ms. Fairfax remarked on the downturn in his mood. “I think you’re bored,” she informed him, confronting him on the stairs on the way back from the grocery. “I know what it looks like. I had a nephew once, got into the most awful habits when he didn’t have enough to do. A mind like yours ought to be active, young man.”

As always, he had the brief, sharp urge to inform her that he was a great deal older than her, thank you very much, and suspected, as always, that it would come out childishly petulant.

He bent to kiss her cheek, instead, knowing how it would make her blush. “You’re just trying to get rid of me,” he said with a rakish grin that changed to a smirk as he dodged her swat at his shoulder and slid around her and up the stairs.

He didn’t like it, but the thought nagged at him just the same that she might be right. That he was stagnating, becoming dull. Living a life pleasant but unremarkable.

Wasn’t that the point? A small voice in the back of Loki’s mind murmured, but he had never been very good at quiet or unremarkable or keeping his intentions to do either. He had been quiet, keeping his head down, and there had been not a sound. No one sent to bring the traitor (the second prince) home. Which was fine.

It was. There was nothing he had left to prove, and certainly not to them.

He kept the card in his pocket and pulled it out at quiet moments until the number was burned into his memory. He considered calling out of curiosity if nothing else. His eternal weakness.

Calling would have felt curiously like ceding victory, however, and Loki did not savor that idea in the least. He had had so very few victories of late.

In the end, of course, it wasn’t boredom, or curiosity, that decided him.

It was the fact that some humans did not know how to leave well enough alone.

“They took Angela,” Ms. Fairfax said, her voice shaking slightly. It was an overcast Thursday. The card in his pocket was an overthumbed wreck. Taken quite by surprise as he returned from a walk,
Loki blinked at her.

She’d been waiting for him just inside the front door. He set his stack of new books carefully down and turned to her. “I’m sorry?”

“Some men came,” she said. Loki glanced at her hands and found them knotted in her skirt and trembling. “They asked to see you. I said you were out and they said they’d wait, but I didn’t like the looks of them and I said…they took Angela,” she repeated, helplessly, “You know how she is, she was just being a child, just saying…I don’t understand, Luke, who are they, what do they want?”

“Margaret,” Loki said, using her given name with perfectly deliberate emphasis. “Tell me. Did they leave a way to get in touch?” Always, he thought, a slow, bitter burn starting in his stomach, always before, they had ignored this little woman who let him live here and did not bat an eye at his oddities. Always they had found her beneath their notice.

Ms. Fairfax looked up at him, wide-eyed. “An address,” she said, just as Loki thought she had forgotten the question. “They left a phone number, but Luke, tell me what’s–”

“Tell me the number.”

She opened her mouth, and then closed it, and even in the midst of her panic managed to look worried. “Luke, these aren’t…are you in trouble?”

“No,” said Loki, and smiled, just a little. “Though they might be.” Ms. Fairfax fidgeted nervously.

“They told me not to call the police,” she said, in a smaller voice. “That they’d kill Angela if I did.”

Loki took a step forward to close the distance between them and reached out to take her face gently between his hands. “Listen,” he said, slowly, clearly, and letting just the slightest bit of power ease into his words, to urge them home, “Go upstairs. To my quarters. Make yourself a cup of tea. And wait. Angela and I will return before you have the chance to get bored. All will be well. Now.” He met her eyes. “The number.”

Loki waited until Ms. Fairfax had wandered half in a daze up the stairs to call. The moment he heard the connection made, he said sweetly, “I heard you were looking for me?”

“You heard right,” said the voice on the other end, after a moment. Rough-edged, common. “We’d make it worth your while.”

“Of course,” Loki said pleasantly. “Happily. Where may we meet and discuss the terms?”

The man hesitated, but only a moment. Clearly he had expected as much. As had all the others. They all seemed to find it unthinkable that he would be less than entirely intrigued by their offers. He rattled off an address. “…now?”

“That would suit me, yes. Ah, one more thing,” Loki added. “You wouldn’t happen to have – borrowed a young girl while you were looking for me, would you?”

There was a moment of silence, and then the man said, “Yes, we–”

“Good,” Loki cut off. “Have her with you. A troublesome child, but one I have intentions for.” He let his tone slyly imply any range of unpleasantness, right hand working open and closed with the urge to clamp around flesh. “Understood?”
“Yes,” the voice on the other end said, after a moment’s hesitation, “I’ll see to it,” and Loki was briefly, viciously pleased. He sounded surprised. And faintly worried. Good; let him be. They all should be. All of these-

“I am pleased to be served with such alacrity,” Loki said, voice clear and precise, and cut off the connection. He took a few slow, deep breaths and tucked the phone away, trying to stay calm through the cold, vicious fury that was threatening to boil up his throat.

It was not far, so he walked.

Took advantage of the time to cool his temper to a low simmer. Or perhaps a slow boil.

Under the anger, though, there was a slight nagging feeling of guilt. They would never have come, he thought, if you weren’t there to draw them. Harm followed you, as it always does, into these little peoples’ lives. Is that what you wanted?

He lengthened his stride. And if they have harmed her, that will be yours as well. Big, bright eyes glazed over with death, small hands spattered with blood-

Loki caught his snarl in his throat and stopped across the street from the building he’d been sent to. He stared at it for a moment before crossing the street and knocking lightly on the door. His more intelligent self informed him dryly that he probably ought to have a plan. The rest of him was not terribly interested.

He’d always been a good improviser.

The door opened, and someone peered out at him. Loki smiled pleasantly. “I believe I am expected?” He said, putting just a touch of regal impatience in his voice. The door opened immediately the rest of the way. The man standing there was quite a bit shorter than himself, Loki observed, and attired in a truly unfortunate combination of colors. Loki did not think he would ever understand the human tendency toward the garish.

“That was prompt,” the man said, sounding decidedly pleased. “I was expecting more trouble. You’ve got a reputation for avoiding partnerships.”

“Have I?” Loki asked, innocently. A reputation. All his effort, and word was still spreading, and yet apparently still failing utterly to deter the persistently irritating. That was…displeasing. “Ah, well. One begins to grow bored.”

“Of course, of course. Well, I must say that I am very pleased to have you assistance in this…”

I do not care, Loki felt the urge to say, about your petty plans. Your small desires. I have no interest in your sneak thieving and little power struggles. Time was-

Focus. He tried his best to look interested, and fell into step beside this masked man, who was nearly swaggering with too-obvious pleasure. Tuned out the man’s voice to nod and murmur agreement at appropriate moments – a skill he had perfected long ago – and surveyed his surroundings. He could see no sign of Angela. Any number of inconspicuously dressed minions were standing by, dully incurious.

“So you see,” he heard, from some distant corner of his mind still paying this insect heed as the man opened the door into a new chamber, “We could use-”

It took him a moment to place the sound he could hear just dimly from the other side of the room. Angela, he thought. She was…
She was crying. A hiccuping, sniffling noise that was trying very hard to be quiet.

His mind went very cold and very still and very quiet. And excruciatingly, wonderfully clear, as it always did when the pieces of some large puzzle fell perfectly into place. Loki stopped and turned toward it, took a slow breath through his nose.

“Is that,” he asked mildly, “The girl I spoke to you about?”

“What? Oh,” he said. “Yeah, guess so, could somebody shut her up?”

He pictured wide brown eyes looking up at him without fear. Her keen inquisitiveness. The bright, simple way she smiled to see him. Demanding stories, to be held, that he make her laugh.

“Angela,” he said, raising his voice, “Close your eyes and cover your ears.”

Silence fell, total and complete. A sniff, and then, though he still couldn’t see her, a familiar voice: “Mr. Luke?”

“He’s here,” said the masked man beside him. “What’s-”

“Yes,” said Loki, ignoring him. “It’s me. Mr. Luke. Angela, I want you to close your eyes and cover your ears. Please.”

The man whose lack of a name would not be a trouble for much longer grabbed Loki’s arm. “I need an explanation right now,” he said, and Loki did not look at him. Deliberately.

“Do not,” he said steadily. “Lay hands on me without my permission. Or you will no longer possess a hand.” The man let go, Loki was almost sure before he realized that he had done so, because a moment later he could almost hear him bristle and draw himself up. He hoped, dearly hoped, that Angela was neither listening nor watching.

“What,” said the masked man, or snarled, still so sure of himself, “Do you think you’re-”

Loki turned and tethered him with one hand, forefinger and thumb of the other hand pressing against his eyes until they popped like peeled grapes and the man, this pathetic little mortal, broke off into a scream. “I thought,” Loki said, and his voice sounded too calm to his own ears, “I had made my lack of interest in this sort of thing clear.” He pulled back his hand and smeared clear fluid down the man’s cheeks like tears, took a moment to watch him weep blood, and called on his magic. “I do not want to work with you. I will never want to work for you. And I do not take kindly to those who attack children.”

The gurgle he made as every internal organ imploded at once was somewhat satisfying.

The others took a step back.

Loki grinned at them in a fashion that owed more to sharks than to men. “I would so dearly love to devise a suitable chastisement for each and every one of you,” he said, deliberately cheerfully, “But I’m afraid I simply haven’t the time.”

One thing he could say for this wretched lot of humans. At least they died trying. To run, most of them.

He picked his way through the remnants and found Angela blood-splattered and cowering in a corner. She looked at him with terror and tried to back away further. Loki reached out and touched
her temple, lightly urging Angela into unconsciousness, and forgetfulness. Just enough to soften the edges. Then he picked her up.

“Hush,” he said, feeling a peculiar kind of pang. “You will be all right now.”

She whimpered, disbelievingly, before sliding the rest of the way into sleep.

The blood, he thought dully, would want explaining. Likely he could not remain here, even if Ms. Fairfax would accept it. He almost wished…

But no, not really. He didn’t regret killing them. Only regretted Angela’s fear. He had been peculiarly fond of her. And did not like the fact that that was in the past tense.

He deposited the sleeping Angela in her grandmother’s room and returned to his own flat, where Ms. Fairfax bounded to her feet the moment he opened the door. “She’s back,” he said, evenly. “Sleeping. In her bed.”

“Oh, thank god,” she said, and rushed forward. Loki did not get out of the way of her embrace in time, and patted her awkwardly on the back. “Oh, thank…is that blood?” she asked, detaching, and Loki stepped back quickly, covering the evidence with a swift working.

“Go see to her,” he said, quietly. “I am…fine. And very sorry for the trouble.” She struggled for a moment, but there was no real contest, and she seemed satisfied that her eyes had deceived her.

“As long as you’re not hurt,” she said, dubiously. “I’ll – I’ll call the police, I should have before, I just-”

“No,” said Loki, firmly. “There’s no need for that. It’s settled. There was…a misunderstanding.” He found an easy smile. “I am unhurt. Angela as well, though frightened. Think on it no more.”

He waited for the door to close quietly behind her to let out a slow breath between his teeth. His anger wasn’t gone. Burning low, but still there. Undoubtedly some had slipped free, and even if they had not, stories always managed to spread. And yet others would still come. Perhaps more determined. More intentional. Reading his defense as a weakness (correctly, a cynical voice noted from the back of his mind) and exploiting it.

Without thinking, his hand slipped into his pocket and felt over the well worn surface of the card there. He pulled it out and examined it. There was a small rust-colored stain over the A in Agent.

An alternative.

He rubbed his thumb across the numbers, long-since memorized.

And he called Coulson. “You offered an alternative,” he said, crisp and clipped. “If that offer still stands...though I have a few conditions.”

Interlude (II)

Loki woke dizzy and with the taste of bile in his mouth from confused, fragmented dreams. For a moment he thought dizzily, none of it was real. It was all - it was all a dream. A terrible-

But he knew even before the thought had finished that it was not. Could smell it in the air and feel it in the lingering ache in his body and remember everything with the too-sharp, edged clarity of
memory. *Midgard. Someone, somewhere, is laughing. Perhaps enough to make even Heimdall
crack a smile.*

He wondered if they would follow him here. Drag him back to Asgard and try him for treason, for
attempted fratricide, for patricide, and all the rest. If they would judge it worthwhile, or think him
sufficiently beaten down that exile would do. It was not as though he could return. No, no
miraculous restoration and healing and forgiveness for Odin’s second - false - son.

It was tempting to fade again, let the fog in his mind overcome him and drag him down to a quiet
place where he didn’t have to think or move or do anything, but Loki had never been very good at
surrender. It seemed the Norns did not think much of his attempt at it either.

Loki tested his limbs first, confirmed that they were all functional, and then opened his eyes and
pushed himself to a sitting position. He was sitting in a room that was very white and very barren,
and as he looked down at himself, he realized that they had taken away his clothes and left him in a
loose-fitting robe of unappetizing color. He groaned quietly as something in his gut tore and mended,
correctly this time.

He felt a sudden, irrational surge of fear and reached for his magic. Still there, and it flooded through
him like warmth. Tapped low, and weak, but still there. Whatever the void had done, it hadn’t torn
that away from him. Whatever else he did not have (a long list, the hollow space in his chest
murmured), that much, he still possessed.

First things first. He had been hiding himself from Heimdall for years when it suited him. It was no
trouble to do it now, like pulling a cloak around his shoulders. Perhaps it was too late to disappear,
but he could hope that he mattered little enough that they were not actively seeking him, and
Heimdall’s eyes would pass him by.

Could hope that just this once his invisibility would work in his favor.

“Hello,” said a cheerful mortal voice from the door. Loki opened his eyes and looked over.
Unremarkable, he assessed, human, and by his bearing not a guard or soldier. “I see you’ve-

“What is your name?” He asked, and wrapped the words with a touch of power, suggestion, *you
want to answer, it’s terribly important.*

“Doctor Frank Kolstein,” the man said with barely a blink to register the nudge, and Loki fought the
urge to smile. *Weak willed. Easy.*

“Am I imprisoned here?”

“No, but you’re,” the man started to say, his brow furrowing.

“Then I think,” Loki said, putting a bit more force into the suggestion, *accommodate me, you want
to, is it really such a trouble?* “You should like to let me leave without question, yes?” Likely, he
thought, there was no harm here. Likely there was no risk to remaining. But he did not wish to.
There was an itch in him to move stronger than the lassitude that made him want to stay. And
perhaps there was some small, bitter part of him, *see, brother, see how easily they bend before us?*
*What did you see in them? What did you see in them that you did not see in me?*

“Oh,” said the man –doctor, Midgardian healers, Loki remembered. “Of course.” Loki pushed
himself to his feet, and focused on keeping them. A sudden dizzy rush to his head left him feeling
momentarily like he would fall, but he did not. He started toward the door the man was holding
open, and paused when he realized that the breeze down his back was because the robe he was
wearing was loosely tied in two places and left him largely unclothed.

“Hm,” he said, and looked at the doctor, who was looking at him and waiting attentively for suggestions. Perhaps he had been a little too forceful. “May I borrow your coat?” He asked, after a moment, and the man hastened to shed it. Loki pulled it on, and if the fit was abysmal at the very least it was a covering. He considered the healer and wondered if there were questions he ought to ask.

His mind felt too dull to try. He wanted to be out of this place, with its white glow and its sterile smell. “It might be best,” he said, “If you were to rest for a bit. That bed over there looks comfortable, does it not?”

“Sure does,” said the healer eagerly. Loki turned to slip out of the room, pulling a shroud of magic around himself that would keep him unnoticed from human eyes as well, at least for a while. Hopefully the rest would remove any lingering effects of his influence from the man.

Why does it matter? A murmur, in the back of his mind, as he walked carefully down the hallway. He doesn’t matter. Like you. You don’t matter. Isn’t that clear yet? What are you going to do with yourself, miserable, pathetic-

What was he going to do?

It was a good question. Loki made his way through the hallways of what seemed to be a vast building full of healers (humans, Loki reminded himself, breakable and prone to injury, they needed more) and tried to clear his muddled thoughts.

There is nothing left for you. That’s why you let go, wasn’t it?

That life was only ever a lie anyway, Loki thought viciously. Perhaps it’s for the best. From here forward, you can build everything for yourself. If you are all you have, then let that be enough. It always has been before, has it not?

Or, more bleakly, death will not have you. What is there left, but life?

He stepped out into the sunlight and blinked against its brightness and the sudden wash of unfamiliar sound. The constant, continual chatter of Midgard, its people, its animals, its vehicles. He was swaying on his feet again, still worn, still unbearably tired.

He crossed the street to sit unnoticed on a bench nestled in a small patch of grass. If Thor or Odin marked him here, they would drag him back by the scruff of his neck. That meant blending in. That meant playing at humanity, speaking and living and- Loki glanced down at himself – dressing like one of them. It meant learning them inside and out until his mimicry was perfect.

He had always had a talent for acting.

You learned young, cuckoo, said that soft, brutally snide voice. You were lying with every breath, even then. But now you know. Loki thought of sitting huddled in the snow pulling stitches from his own lips. One day, he thought viciously. Then another. Then another. You may be a monster, but you are not dead yet.

Survive. That’s all you need to do. Survive.

The rest would come. It had to.
Chapter 3

He met Agent Phil Coulson for the second time in a coffee shop several streets away from his flat. Ms. Fairfax had been trying to speak to him for the last few days. He could guess easily enough what about, and did not intend to indulge her. He would settle this matter and go to the elsewhere where, presumably, he was to be sent.

“I thought I said we would talk someplace more private,” Coulson said, as he sat down across from Loki and looked around the bustling shop.

“Oh,” said Loki, with a broad smile, “This is. No one in this room will glance at us twice. Anyone attempting to listen will hear a rather dull conversation about farming prospects in the northeast. I find that it is most difficult to get real privacy in quiet places. Besides, I enjoy the coffee here.”

Coulson was giving him a hard look. Loki let him stare. A day out and his anger had cooled, leaving him with a few second thoughts and new wariness. Although if he was honest with himself, at this point it was not as though he had much to lose.

Finally, the agent sat back and said mildly, “I wasn’t expecting a call from you so soon.”

Loki narrowed his eyes. “But you were expecting a call from me?”

“I have good instincts.” The man had a bland voice. Level and calm and utterly unremarkable. Loki wondered if this had all been an elaborate orchestration for his benefit, but – no. That bordered on the paranoid. And while that was occasionally justified, in this case he thought probably not. Though he did not doubt that Agent Coulson could be ruthless if it was required, the ill use of a child seemed…unlikely.

“Well,” said Loki, matching the blandness of Coulson’s tone with his own, “I am just full of surprises.”

“So it would seem.” Coulson leaned forward very slightly. “On the phone you mentioned conditions. You understand I’ll have to clear those before telling you any more than I already have about this… project.”

“Of course,” Loki said. “I think you will find them simple enough. Recently my landlady found herself…rather unfortunately in the midst of an altercation with another person interested in my… services.”
“I heard something about a bloodbath the other day. I think the report attributed it to gang violence.”

Loki sipped his coffee. “A pity. I am told violence is on the rise.” He glanced up. “Or was that a question?”

Coulson stared at him in silence for a while. Loki had endured much worse, and ignored it. Finally, the agent asked, “Where were you going with this?”

“You have been watching me. I would ask that you continue to keep an eye on her and ensure that no one gets any ideas. Or that if they do, they are…thoroughly deterred.”

“You want protection for them.”

Loki wouldn’t have put it that way. But he supposed it was accurate enough. “Yes.” Coulson nodded.

“That’s simple enough. What else?”

Loki took a breath through his nose and let it out. “Only one other. That I be allowed reasonable independence. Your surveillance will cease. I will have some discretion with regards to how I carry out any…instructions I am given. I am not merely a tool and will not be used as such. By anyone.”

He realized too late that his tone had taken on more vehemence than he’d intended. The echo, perhaps, still in his ears, another stolen relic.

Coulson was considering him like he was trying to solve a puzzle. “Within reason,” he said, finally. “There are certain…parameters. As for the surveillance, of course that will be removed.”

Loki folded his hands under his chin. “I reserve the right to deal in my fashion with any lingering watchers,” he said, and if possible the agent’s expression grew even more bland. Loki waited.

“Make yourself available and easy to contact,” Coulson said, finally, “And it won’t be an issue.”

Loki cupped his coffee between his hands, letting himself enjoy the warmth between his palms. “Then it won’t be an issue. Those are my conditions.”

“That’s all?”

“I told you they were simple.” He raised his eyebrows at Coulson. “Can you tell me more about this project of yours, now?”

Coulson was silent for several moments. He glanced at the people milling around them in apparent unconcern. Loki was briefly impressed when Coulson looked back at him without further objection. “We are a covert organization working from within the United States on countering…extraordinary threats.”

“That’s suitably vague.”

“We work on a number of fronts,” Coulson said, after a bare moment’s pause. “Espionage, assassination, defense. Primarily concerned with those threats…beyond the pale of other organizations. You’ve heard the term mutants?”

Loki hadn’t. It was easy enough to guess, however, what it meant. “I believe so, yes.”

“The more mutants surface, the more…situations we get into having to deal with them. And the more important it gets to have protocols to deal with them effectively.”
“And you wish me to have a place in these…protocols.”

“Yes. We believe your particular talents would be of use.”

“And,” Loki added, with a thin smile, “You want me somewhere where you can keep an eye on my – as you put it – ‘talents.’”

“Yes,” said Coulson blandly, and without a trace of embarrassment. “That too.” Loki had to admire, just a bit, a mortal who was at least somewhat aware of what Loki was capable of and still managed quite that level of casual…well, plain-faced audacity.

“Ah,” said Loki. “I see. I suppose this would be a more effective way to manage that than…previous efforts.” He tipped his head back. “May I ask what, precisely, I would be doing for you?”

“That’ll depend, somewhat, on what our training determines to be…”

“Let me save you the time,” Loki said, smoothly. “Given a face, and some mannerisms, there is no one I cannot impersonate. I am able to go without being noticed in most places. I have passable skill with most weapons but am best with throwing knives. I have no small amount of experience in negotiation. As you have witnessed, I am also capable at persuasion.”

“…that’s quite the laundry list.”

“Versatility is a virtue.” Loki offered Coulson a placid, innocent smile. Coulson looked unconvinced.

“You’ll still need to go through an evaluation and assessment before we make any calls.”

“I would expect nothing less.” The little man eyed him.

“You seem to be taking all of this pretty casually,” Coulson observed. Loki considered him for a moment, then leaned back.

“As you have so astutely observed, I am not from here. I did not even, in truth, choose to come here. I am easily bored and have little enough to tether me to this place over any other. Your offer intrigued me, and seemed in my best interests.”

“And the best interests of your landlady and her family,” the agent added, his gaze curiously shrewd, and Loki fought the urge to wince. Follow him, as the Destroyer had followed. Not, perhaps, one of his more thought out plans.

It was fortunate they hadn’t seen his face, at least.

“Nothing will follow me here,” Loki said, with easy and complete sincerity. “As I have not the
means to go back, they have not the means to journey here.” Not strictly true, either way, but near enough. They wouldn’t waste the effort. Not without reason. As long as he stayed hidden there would be no reason.

He intended to stay hidden.

Coulson looked at him for a little longer, but seemed to accept the answer. “There are a few more formalities that need to be taken care of. Not here.”

“My affairs are in order. I need only collect a few things from my flat.”

Coulson stood. “I can arrange a flight out within a few hours.” Loki took his last swallow of coffee and set the cup down, standing as well.

“I expect that to be enough time.”

He caught, just for a moment, the first smile he’d seen from this bland-faced man so far. It only lasted a moment, however, and then he was sticking out a hand that Loki accepted in a formal handshake. “Welcome aboard, Mr. Silver.”

“Please,” said Loki, with a thin smile. “Call me Luke.”

**

Ms. Fairfax was waiting for him on his couch when he got back.

“That’s enough of this nonsense, young man,” she said crisply. “I will not have you avoiding me, and I will certainly not have you traipsing off without a goodbye.”

Loki blinked at her. Perhaps Angela had said nothing. Or perhaps she had dismissed it as a child's fancy. Either way, he felt a pang of something a little too close akin to guilt. “Ms. Fairfax,” he said, after a moment, slowly. “I…hello.”

“You are going, aren’t you?” she demanded. “Off with that nice man from a couple weeks ago, Phil. I saw him waiting in that car outside.”

Loki sighed. “I am,” he said, after a moment. “Yes. I will see to it that the money from this month’s rent reaches you as soon as possible.”

“Oh, pish,” said Ms. Fairfax, sounding almost indignant. “I’m not here about the rent. I’m here because you, young man, have been avoiding me!”

Loki felt the urge to wince that he had only had before around, perhaps, one other person in his life. The woman he had called mother for a time. “Ms…Margaret. I meant you no offense. I thought it best…”

“Well,” she said, “It wasn’t.” And frowned at him. Loki resisted the urge to rub at the bridge of his nose in an old nervous gesture.

“I’m afraid,” he said, finally, “I have done you a disservice. I have not been entirely honest with you and in so doing, feel I may have brought trouble to your door.”

“Is this about you having superpowers? You being one of those…what do they call them – mutants?” she asked, and Loki blinked in genuine startlement.

“What?”
Ms. Fairfax narrowed her eyes at him. “I may not be so sharp as you, boy, but I notice a thing or two. I’ve known for a while you weren’t exactly usual, but I figured if you didn’t want to make a thing of it it was none of my business.” She fixed him with a gaze that suddenly seemed more shrewd than it ever had before. “I don’t know just who you are, maybe, but I know you brought my Angela back, and I know you used to make her smile brighter than just about anyone else ever did.”

Loki felt the unaccountable urge to squirm. “I frightened her,” he said, lowly, gaze skating away from hers.

“Yes,” Ms. Fairfax said, “You did. And I probably ought to be frightened too. But I don’t have much other than her, and I’m just grateful. You’re not a bad boy.” She stood up. “I think you’ll turn out right.” Loki could only stare at her, and to his horror felt his eyes begin to sting. “There’s a basket of cookies on the counter for you to take with you.”

When he needed them most, it seemed, his words chose to desert him. “Thank you,” he said, finally, and she nodded.

“Take care, Luke. And don’t think you need to be a stranger.” She paused, pressed her lips together, and then reached out and embraced him before hurrying out.

Feeling confused and curiously bereft, Loki wandered over to the counter. Foolish sentiment, he told himself. She knows nothing and less of you. And yet there was a warm feeling tight in his chest. He looked down at the basket and inhaled the smell of cookies wafting from it. There was a piece of paper resting on top.

He unfolded it, after a moment, and found himself looking at a picture clearly drawn by a child. Three scribbled person-like figures, one considerably taller than the other two. A yellow sun shone overhead, and across the bottom was written me and grandma and Luke.

Loki tucked the drawing back in the basket, picked it up, and looked around the room that had become a strange kind of home. A strange kind of comfort.

He walked out and closed the door quietly behind him.

Interlude (III)

Clothes, Loki decided, needed to be the first order of business. He could walk unseen like this for a long time, but not forever. And stealing scraps would get tiresome very quickly. He stole what he needed so as not to be conspicuous in his barely serviceable clothing from the place of the healers, and changed in a fitting room. Loki examined himself in the mirror provided once he had donned the set of clothes he’d decided on.

The clothes themselves were…adequate. They did not suit him perfectly, felt strange and uncomfortable, but he would adjust quickly enough, and he had found some with a sleek enough cut to be almost flattering. But there was…

He looked, he thought, sick. There were dark hollows around his eyes and under his cheekbones. There was something haggard in his eyes and too tight around the corners of his mouth. Loki steeled himself to keep from flinching.

What did you expect? You thought you would die. Of course it took a toll.

You don’t even look like yourself, Loki thought with sudden savagery. You look like a shadow. A shadow of a thing who was a shadow to begin with. Look at you. Pathetic, wretched thing, thieving
from crawling mortals who ought to bow before you or at least run screaming from your monstrosity, but they ought to see you and yet walk by-

Then again. Was that really so unfamiliar?

He could almost taste the bitterness sour on the back of his tongue.

Turning sharply from the mirror, he exited the shop, leaving behind his former garments with no regret. (Wishing he could leave behind other things so easily.) And now to find sanctuary. A place to wait for his power to return and his strength to build while he found his footing in this realm.

He wandered down the street for a while, dropping the magic that kept him unnoticed, and watched the flow of humans moving in their quick, scurrying rush, hastening everywhere and nowhere. Going home, he thought. Back to their little families to embrace their children and rut with their mates.

He didn’t even have that much, Loki reminded himself. What he’d thought he had –

Loki wondered if Thor knew yet. If Odin had told him the truth yet. If Thor would nod in sage understanding when he heard, yes, now I understand, I see why, we could not expect more, he was only ever a monster.

He could feel himself trembling and stopped walking. Took two, long, deep breaths. Not now, not here.

He reached out to catch the next person to walk by. “Pardon,” he said, “But is there a place of lodging somewhere nearby?” The sideways look they cast him was somewhat baffled. A young woman, Loki registered vaguely, hair pulled back from her face in a style that made him think Sif but those spectacles would hardly be practical in battle.

“Uh…you mean a hotel? Yeah, there’s a few, there’s a Mariott just around the corner if…hey, you okay?” Loki blinked at her, for a moment not comprehending the question. She shifted a little bit – nervously, Loki thought – and half lifted her right hand before dropping it down. “You look a little…uh. Not great.”

‘Okay,’ Loki thought. Ah. She wishes to know if I am well. That is. Almost amusing. He stepped away from her, feeling suddenly naked under her worried gaze. “—I am fine. I – thank you. For your assistance, and your trouble,” rather than asking why she would inquire after a stranger’s well-being. He could feel her watching him walk away.

The place of lodging – hotel, Loki learned – was his next ordeal, but he floated through it easily enough on charm he’d been perfecting since boyhood and some sleight of hand that procured him a card and persuaded their machine to accept it as valid method of payment. The key, the stairs, and he curled up on the bed without changing his clothes.

The last time I slept, Loki thought, nose full of the foreign smell of whatever humans used to clean their sheets, I was a prince of Asgard. Thor was my foolish, arrogant brother. How did everything change so fast?

He could feel himself starting to shake again, as he had out on the street. This time he didn’t try to hold it back, and it seemed like seconds before he was howling, great, ugly wracking sobs tearing out of his throat and heaving through his whole body, until he couldn’t breathe. Until there was nothing left in him at all, as empty and hollowed out as he could get save for a cold dark knot at the center of his chest.
It wasn’t enough.

He hurt. His body hurt. His soul hurt, all the way through. And he was so tired.

One of those things, at least, he might be able to fix.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Hahahahaha ONCE A WEEK? that was a joke. I just started school again, which has been...hectic, so updates will probably be more like once every two weeks, barring unforeseen improvement in my ability to write plot heavy chapters. Because plot's going to start kicking in fairly soon. What's that about.

On the plane, he was given a folder of information to read that was thick, dense, and nearly as dull as the tome of genealogies he’d once been set to memorize.

Between that and the space that was not quite big enough to stretch his legs, Loki almost regretted not mentioning that he could travel his own way to Washington D.C., their apparent destination, without benefit of artificial wings. But he supposed the information was important, and set to absorbing it.

He looked up while reading through a lengthy explanation of the rather curious position of the organization he was to join in the complex beaureaucratic hierarchy of its country of origin. Agent Coulson had, at some point, sat down across the aisle and was watching him. Doing a passable imitation of not doing so, but Loki knew that trick well enough.

“Something interesting?”

“Everybody gets that packet,” Coulson said after a moment. “Most people skim it. A few people don’t bother to read it at all. I’ve never seen anyone go through it page by page.”

Loki eyed him for a moment, trying to decide if he was being mocked. The agent’s face told him nothing. Finally he said, “Give me twelve hours and I will have the entirety memorized, and repeat it back to you verbatim.”

Coulson’s expression twitched not at all. “Useful skill.”

Loki gave him a thin smile. “Knowledge is power.” He looked down at the folder and tapped it with one finger. “Something I think you know well.”

“I try to keep a healthy appreciation for it.”

The thought flashed across Loki’s mind, wondering if Agent Phil Coulson was ever ruffled. That led to the question of what it would take to cause it, and that to memories of wild schemes attempting to distract the watchman of Asgard-

He yanked his thoughts away. Sometimes it still crept up on him, like the unexpected knife between his ribs. Everything he had to remember, and all the rest he needed to forget. And sometimes the two seemed to get muddled.

He could still feel Coulson watching him, and wondered what he saw. Kept his face deliberately and carefully closed. That was, at least, something he had a great deal of practice with, and returned to his reading.
At the back of the packet, tucked in like an afterthought, was a brief two page report on the “New Mexico Incident.” Loki got two paragraphs in and stopped. He could see Thor’s face hover briefly in his mind, remember the way something seemed to have gone from it. Some brightness. Golden Thor, tarnished by the dull sheen of mortality.

He closed the folder, quietly. Focused his eyes straight ahead and cleared and centered his thoughts. This was his life. One not ruled by Thor. Not ruled by any but himself.

And yet, as always, wherever he stepped there Thor had been first, leaving impressions too deep for Loki to match.

Loki shoved the bitterness threatening to well up down. Thor was not here. Thor was no longer a part of his life. All of that was gone, and now was only the forward.

*If you keep moving, he thought dryly, perhaps someday you will outrun all your shadows.*

Loki got the feeling that Director Nick Fury didn’t like him very much.

At least, he thought dryly, there were a fair number who would sympathize with that sentiment.

Director Fury had a face that seemed best suited for glowering, and as though it had not spent much time doing anything else. One of his eyes was covered by an eyepatch, and Loki thought of a rumor that had circulated once, wondered what this man had sold his eye for.

“So you’re Mr. Silver,” he said, and folded his hands on his desk. “You’ve caused us a bit of trouble.”

Loki cocked his head a fraction to the side. “Have I? I might have put that the other way around.”

Fury flipped open a folder on the table that looked remarkably like the one Loki had been given. “Six agents,” he said, not looking down at it. “Two just got through spending two months as a pair of lovebirds.”

Loki did not crack a smile. “Not very charming creatures, are they?”

“Another abruptly decided to tender his resignation in favor of a career as a florist. The fourth has become prone to speaking in tongues without seeming aware of doing so. The last two are still under probation for revealing classified information.”

Looking unapologetic was not a struggle. “As your estimable Agent Coulson realized,” Loki said, “I dislike being – well, stalked. Admittedly yours were better than some, but I think you will find that most people object to certain methods, most notably attempted kidnapping.” Loki let the corners of his lips tilt up. “I merely have the means to defend myself somewhat more spectacularly than most, and what I think a few have called an unfortunate sense of humor.”

Fury’s one visible eye narrowed. Loki waited. He could read a certain amount of authority from this man, but that was only all the more reason to make things clear from the beginning.

“You gave Agent Coulson quite a list of skills.”

There was a question under that, but Loki chose to ignore it. “The universe is more dangerous than you know. It behooves one to be prepared.” That single eye narrowed a little further, and then his expression smoothed. Loki did not mistake it for relaxation.
“I suppose it does.” A momentary pause, and another slow consideration. “The way Coulson managed to keep you off our blacklist,” Fury said, darkly, “Was by convincing me that you’d be a better asset than an enemy. Try not to prove him wrong.”

“Oh,” said Loki, and sobered, very slightly. “I don’t think I’ll disappoint.”

After that, the rest was almost easy. He breezed through the assessments – far less difficult than the trials he’d clawed his way through at adolescence – and held back only what he needed to that he could be sure they would not react out of the fear he suspected they would if he wasn’t careful.

If nothing else, his conversation with Fury had said enough of that. Underneath all the phrasing, Loki could hear it well enough. You’re on thin ice. We don’t trust you. Stay useful. They would find killing him difficult or impossible. That did not mean they didn’t have the ability to make his life severely inconvenient.

And besides, he had made his choice. Or his bargain. He would keep it.

It was Coulson waiting for him when he emerged, with an ID card and another packet of papers, and that same unaltered expression. Loki gave him a bit of an arch grin. “Did I exaggerate?”

Coulson did not seem to find that worth answering. “From here on in it’s mostly paperwork,” he said. “Other logistical details…there’s some housing nearby, though for the first few months we ask that you remain on-site. Probationary period. After that you’re welcome to seek new arrangements.” He paused, for a moment, seeming to be considering something.

“We haven’t seen something quite like you before,” he said after a moment, bluntly. “You’re going to get a lot of curious techs knocking at your door. We could use any information you have to offer. Play nice.”

Loki pulled out his toothiest grin. “Why. What gave you the idea I would ever do otherwise?” He murmured, and received the first trace of something like humor he’d seen yet from the peculiar little agent.

It gave him a small, unexpected gratification.

His room was simple enough. Unadorned, impersonal, largely uninteresting. The few things he’d brought with him were stacked in a corner and, so organized, looked like even less than they had before.

A visual representation, he thought dryly, of the sum total of what his new life was. Eight months, he reminded himself, was barely the blink of an eye.

After a moment, he sat down at the desk in one corner and removed his laptop from one of his bags, flipped it open and started it up. He read through the Wikipedia articles on poison dart frogs, bromeliads, and Spanish conquistadors before drifting back to Google and searching the New Mexico Incident.

There was almost no news coverage, Loki noted. A few small items, vague and uninformative. Some forums thick with conspiracy theorists and people claiming to have seen the mysterious item before it was removed. A few accounts from someone-who-knew-someone from the town itself, half-coherent descriptions that were half truth and mostly confusion.

He clicked on the image search.
Loki stopped scrolling and clicked to bring up the full size image. He glanced at the website it was from, caught traces of *most of my pictures, but they didn’t get this one*. The sun was bright and the quality was poor, but it was clear enough. Three people, one woman, two men, clustered together, apparently in the midst of a conversation and unaware of their photographer. He couldn’t make out their faces, except for the woman’s screwed up in concentration, but he didn’t need to.

Loki would know that mane of golden hair anywhere. As well as he knew anything. Or had known.

So these were Thor’s mortals. He had only the vaguest memories of them, and even now as he tried to focus on them, his eyes kept coming back to that golden head bowed down, tilted toward the woman as though listening, truly listening. He felt sick.

No, not sick. *Homesick*. For a place that had never really been and something he’d never really had, but all the same- like an ache. Remembering Thor throwing him into a pool of water and then diving in after him, remembering Frigga’s soft voice, remembering-

Loki slammed the computer shut and just managed not to throw it across the room. A waste of money, and while he could probably reassemble it, that was a waste of time. His hands quivered and he clenched them and stood up, jerkily.

*Over and done with. All of that is gone. They will never connect you to it save by coincidence, and can prove nothing. And the moment the Bifrost is repaired and he returns – if it ever is repaired – then it is only a moment’s thought to be gone, and there are other places to hide. To run.*

*To crawl to, like a creeping coward dog from its master.*

Loki swore under his breath and summoned his knives to him, letting the weight of one in his palm be something of a comfort, as if it could defend him.

*You lied to yourself,* he thought, looking down at it, eye following the blade as it vanished to a razor-fine edge. *To think you could ever leave it behind. Gone but not forgotten, and they, these humans will reopen all of your old wounds yet. Will you be bled dry or still stand on the other side?*

*I will stand,* Loki thought stubbornly. *I chose this road. And I will take it, and they cannot take it from me.*

*No one can take it from me.*

Thor’s shadow was not here, except in his mind, and he could burn it away from there. This small thing that he was making, he would not lose to memories.

**Interlude (IV)**

Loki slept poorly. His dreams were all fragments, messy and disjointed, of falling and of Odin holding him over the edge and then slowly, slowly, letting go even as he tried, desperately, to explain that he’d just meant to - *it doesn't matter what you meant*, Odin said in Heimdall’s voice. *You are what you are. You will never be anything else. I cannot have a jotunn for a son.* In his dreams, Thor stood back and looked impassively at him, stony-faced as Loki tried to explain, but his tongue was all in knots and Mjolnir was rising to strike him down into nothing, less than nothing, but then had he ever been anything else-

He woke feeling only marginally more rested than he had and in no sunnier a mood. The room had a stale, unwashed smell to it, and Loki simply lay back for a time, looking up at the ceiling and
somehow managing to simultaneously feel empty and too full.

But his head was clearer, he was no longer dizzy, and taking a deep breath through his nose, Loki rose in one smooth movement and went to inspect the facilities.

The bath seemed unwontedly small, but after some experimentation Loki worked out the shower and while it was not quite so luxurious, the water was warm and the pound of it against his back was peculiarly soothing. He lingered for a while, working a lather of soap through his hair, and realized as he was rinsing the last of it away that this was the first time he’d had a chance to really wash since Thor’s banishment.

He looked down at his hands, at the water rolling off his skin, as if half expecting them to change before his eyes.

They didn’t, and a moment later he turned off the water with a sharp jerk of his wrist and climbed out of the shower to dress, thinking of his next intentions. With the amount that he would have to learn and absorb, though, there seemed an obvious choice.

Thor, Loki thought without meaning to, would have laughed at him. Of course, always the first place you look, isn’t it, you’d live in a library if you could, and he winced. Would that ever, he wondered, not hurt to think? Would he ever be rid of Thor’s shadow casting a pall over him?

(You didn’t need anyone else’s shadow; you cast your own on yourself effectively enough.)

Loki shook himself and donned his new clothes. He stopped at the counter on his way out and asked about a library. The servingman behind the desk was more than helpful, producing a map and circling locations. On a whim, Loki magicked a gold coin into his pocket as he exited the lodging – hotel, he remembered.

Orienting the map and placing himself in the warren of streets, Loki set off for the nearest library.

Libraries on Midgard, at least, were a comforting familiarity. The smell of books, row upon row of shelves and the quiet. That sense of still peace that had been such a sanctuary for him when he was young – and later, too. When his mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and he was full of uncertainties and doubts that wouldn’t leave him, so often had he retreated to the royal library to curl up amongst the shelves as if he might slip between the pages of a book and hide there.

That thought brought back the ache in him, the childish wish that he might open his eyes and this would all be gone. That he might turn and see Thor standing there, telling him it’d all been a terrible mistake, Loki, we’re so sorry, we need you home with us.

But he knew lies, and he knew truth, and he knew what he was. Blood would always out, it seemed. Blood might be thicker than water, but ice, it seemed, was thicker than blood.

Childish foolishness.

The Midgardian library was, at the least, well organized, and it was easy enough to coopt a desk in an unoccupied corner and begin accumulating books. Unsure what would be most useful, he picked up everything that looked interesting, though after some inspection the sciences and social sciences sections seemed to be most fruitful, so he began there.

And buried himself and his thoughts in memorizing everything he could read.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Hahahahahaha oh god weekly updates that was a joke. Or a lie. Or both.

Thanks to zaataronpita for reading this over for me and telling me that it needed work, thus spurring a full rewrite and a much improved version. The plot begins to thicken! Or possibly to congeal.

Enjoy!

Most of the others seemed inclined to avoid him. That suited Loki well enough. He could feel them watching, stares ranging from wary to curious, and didn’t bother to acknowledge any of them. No doubt he was a thing of curiosity to them.

Another time, he might have basked in the attention. In his current mood, he didn’t want it. Not this particular type of interest.

He spent his time instead going over protocol (ensuring there was nothing that he would stumble over), exploring the complex (including a few areas Loki suspected he wasn’t supposed to know about) and taking apart and reconstructing the majority of the electronic devices in his rooms.

They gave him his first mission only a few days later, and it seemed almost embarrassingly simple. Infiltration and recovery of an object whose importance Loki did not entirely grasp. Nor did Loki particularly care. He was simply grateful for the chance to stretch his legs – and himself.

What he was less grateful for were the conditions.

“You’re not going alone,” Coulson informed him. The look Loki gave him must have communicated some of his incredulity, because he went on to add, “Very, very few of our agents take entirely solo missions. And not on their first time out. Whatever their prior experience.”

“You’re not sending someone with me for my safety,” Loki said coolly. “You’re sending him for yours. To ensure that I do not step out of line.”

“Would that be such a surprise?”

Loki smiled his sharp, thin smile. “No. But that does not make it any less of an annoyance.” Coulson met his eyes, still utterly untroubled.

“This isn’t one of those things that’s negotiable. The agent we’re sending is more than competent and has been with us for a while. I don’t doubt you’ll find his assistance useful.”

Well, Loki thought dryly. At least there’s that. “Assuredly,” he said a little too silkily. “Am I to be introduced to this ‘more than competent’ operative of yours?”

“I can introduce myself,” said the man who’d just appeared in the open doorway. Loki glanced over at him, took in a compact frame, a blunt stare, and sharp eyes currently examining him with something that was not quite wary distrust. “Agent Barton.”
Loki turned, pressed a hand over his heart, and sketched a formal bow. “A pleasure, I’m sure,” he said, slipping without entirely meaning to into the exactingly polite tone that had never failed to irritate its target. “I am-”


Loki did not contain his smirk. “It would seem I’ve attained a certain level of notoriety among this agency. I suppose I shouldn’t be flattered.” He caught out of the corner of his eye the slight press of Coulson’s lips into a line, perhaps irritation, and ignored it.

“No,” Barton agreed, voice a little bit crisp and most certainly not amused. “Probably not.”

“Pardon me,” Loki murmured, letting his head fall slightly to the side in a quizzical tilt. “I have the strangest impression that I’ve done something to offend you.”

“Friend of mine was part of one of the teams they sent after you,” Barton said, flatly. Loki could not quite keep his mouth from twitching up at one corner.

“Oh? Lovebirds or florist?” The man’s eyes narrowed, but more notable was the slight frown that Coulson directed at him, this time directly. Not in itself, but more the reminder that apparently he was going to have to cooperate with this mortal for the next hopefully short while and it would not be in his best interests to make the interaction more odious than it already would be. “Ah, no matter. My apologies, I suppose, for having caused your friend…trouble. Perhaps it might be forgotten for a time?”


“Excellent. I am pleased that you are able to be so reasonable.”

The slight tightening around Barton’s mouth suggested to Loki that perhaps his tone had not been quite as intended. Or perhaps had been precisely as he’d intended; his temper had not been at its best. “Let’s just get this op over with.”

“I certainly,” Loki said, and perhaps the mildness of his voice was a touch too deliberate, “Have no objections to that proposal.”

**

The security of the lair where the object they were to retrieve was being held was frankly abysmal. Several entertaining possibilities suggested themselves to Loki at once as he took it in, but the bore of eyes on the back of his neck served as a reminder that perhaps he might conserve his consideration of the importance of style for later.

The electronic systems were easy enough to tease into cooperatively directing their gaze elsewhen, bent back twenty minutes or so. The human guards were even easier. They were bored and distracted, minds bent to other matters, and keeping them directed away from one more small thing was…

“So what,” Agent Barton (Clint, Loki had heard Coulson call him, strikingly familiar, and wasn’t that interesting), “are you planning? Just going to walk right up and-”

“Hush,” said Loki, but not quickly enough, the strands of his careful working evaporating. “That was my intention, yes,” he said, flicking the remains of the spell away and taking the backlash of
what was left without reaction. “But if that seems too simple to you—”

It was probably unnecessary to choose as his illusion one of the ríkrbjørn, full grown and raging. It burst from the trees with a roar that shook the earth and charged for the guards suddenly scrambling to decide how to manage the unexpected attack. Barton was on his feet as well, already reaching for an arrow, but Loki caught his wrist.

“An illusion,” he said casually, “Nothing more.” Barton was staring at him as though he was not entirely certain that Loki was sane, an expression which Loki ignored.

“That’s an,” Barton began to say, and Loki observed the motion of the guards, adjusted the direction of his illusion, and made his move.

He grabbed a handful of clothes at the nape of Barton’s neck and dragged him through one of the small gaps in the world he’d spent most of his childhood learning to find. They landed just in front of the door he needed to reach, tucked safely behind a sheltering snowdrift, where Loki promptly released his charge and evaded the knife that the man attempted to embed in his side. Loki was going to assume that was an instinctual rather than personal reaction.

Though if it were the latter it would not be the first time.

Barton jerked away from him and backed several steps away, eyes slightly wild. “What the fuck did you just do,” he demanded, sounding breathless, and still holding his knife, braced as though for combat.

“A simple short distance transportation,” Loki said absently, turning his attention to the door, and touching his fingers to the lock, investigating it with a few tendrils of magic.

“What kind of fucking mutant are you?” Barton still sounded alarmed. There was an edge on his voice. Nervous, perhaps? Loki was not going to bother to take the time to consider it.

“A very peculiar one,” he said glibly.

“Don’t ever do that to me again,” Barton said, voice dropping almost to a snarl. Loki raised a hand and flicked his fingers dismissively, almost amused, and began shaping the image of the lock in his mind, picturing how to undo it. It was more complex than what he was familiar with, but surely—

He felt the slightest stir of air and turned, and found an arrow nocked and at his throat. Barton staring up at him along it, sharp eyes impressively cold. “I don’t think I was quite clear enough,” he said. “Don’t. Do that again. At the very least not without asking first.”

Loki tipped his head to the side. A prickle of annoyance crawled along his nerves followed by hotter anger and he could think of a thousand ways he could end this before the man could so much as twitch, leave him dead and bleeding for daring to—

He pushed it all down and forced a smile. Thin and edged, but a smile nonetheless. “Point taken.”

Barton stared at him for a long moment, then finally released the tension and replaced his arrow. “Out of the way,” he said, muttered, almost shouldering past Loki to the door. “I’ll get the lock.”

Loki let him, and watched Barton work the lock open while wondering if an arrow through his throat would be enough to kill him. He doubted it. To Barton’s credit, at least, it didn’t take long, and they slipped inside one after the other.

“How long’s that illusion thing going to last,” Barton said, after the door closed behind them and he
investigated the hallway. His back to Loki was almost pointed.

“As long as I ask it to,” Loki said. He wondered if Barton would have gotten a scolding for killing their potentially valuable new operative. He doubted it.

“And how long is that?”

“That,” Loki murmured, “rather depends on the duration of this little jaunt, does it not?”

Barton muttered something under his breath that Loki did not ask him to repeat. So they moved in silence, and Loki at least had to give the mortal that. He was swift and quiet and admirably cautious.

But…there was something prickling at him, a kind of wariness, and it only grew as they moved through quiet, empty halls. One after another, unguarded, his magic sensing no life, nothing other than stone and metal. There ought to be something here.

He was missing something. He, Loki, was missing something, and he was quite sure it should have been obvious.

“I’ve got the floor plan,” Barton was saying, voice low and pitched not to carry. “Intel says that there’s a hallway that should get us where we want to go a little further in. Which, hey, actually, if that teleportation thing is-”

“It only works if I have at least passing familiarity with the place I am trying to reach.” His senses were humming, but he couldn’t have said why. Which was…more than slightly irritating. He did catch the look Barton threw him, though, not quite suspicious. But close.

“That’s convenient.”

“Mmm,” Loki said, noncommittally. Barton stopped and turned, eyes narrowed.

“What is it?” His voice was sharp edged. “You’re twitchy.”

Wary, Loki thought, with a faint stab of irritation. Cautious. “A rank amateur could sense something wrong about this. Can you not?” He said, mildly, though in truth he was not certain just what it was. There was something. Something.

He could see Barton bristling. It was there, just beyond his reach, if he could only… “You’re a cocky son of a bitch. One of us is a rank amateur and guess what, it’s not-”

Loki interrupted him. “Agent Barton. Does it seem quiet to you?”

“Yeah,” he said, after a momentary silence. Almost grudgingly. “It does.”

Loki reached out with his mind, trying to sense any kind of life, and stilled completely. Nothing. Utter silence to his senses, other than the hum of whatever was keeping the lights running, somewhere far from them. “There’s no one here,” he said, flatly. Barton stopped as well.

“No one –” he cut off. “Shit. Why bother guarding an empty facility-”

“Unless they were warned.” Loki summoned his throwing knives and turned in a slow circle, the prickling of instinct on the back of his neck intensifying. “It isn’t here. There is nothing here. If there ever was-”

“Forget it,” Barton snapped. “If there’s still a guard here then they were hoping to catch something, which I’m just guessing means there’s something unpleasant around here somewhere meant for us.”
The thought that crawled into his mind was ugly and all too plausible. He turned the rest of the way through his circle and fixed his eyes on Barton. “I wonder,” he said softly. “Who warned them.”

Barton’s gaze jerked back to him. He looked convincingly frustrated, convincingly confused. But of course, he needn’t… “What?”

Loki felt his mouth curl in a slow, ironic smile. “Curious, isn’t it? I am, at least to some of your organization, a threat. What an interesting coincidence, that the first time I am sent to do their bidding, a snare is waiting.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Barton snapped, and Loki felt his smile stretch.

“Is it? There would be a curious kind of efficiency to it, would there not? Your Director seems the sort of man to admire efficiency. If you perish, that would be easily laid to my malice. If I should fail to return – well then. Problem solved. Or – what is the word? – neutralized.”

Loki saw it. Just for a moment. Barton wavered. Slightly, fleetingly uncertain. And then he laughed sharply. “Jesus Christ, you really think-”

He heard the creak of metal in motion a moment too late and thought, for one brief, mad moment, the Destroyer. It was not.

It came through the wall in an explosion of rubble and dust and the scream of mechanical joints, like a cat or a bear. Mouth opened in a soundless roar, metal claws gouging into stone, crouched blocking the hallway behind them.

Enjoyable, Loki thought, ha.

Judging by Barton’s, “Oh, fantastic,” to his left, he felt the same way. Well. At least they had that in common.

Whatever this was, Loki thought, already in motion, whoever was at fault, he did not intend to perish yet.

He sent his first throwing knife for the creature’s eye. The spelled steel sank in deep but the creature showed no reaction, did not even slow, and Loki braced himself to meet its pounce as it barreled toward him. Barton was out of the way, Loki noted, in the last few scant moments before impact. Good.

Loki ducked claws and teeth and went for the throat of the creature with his right hand, bringing his knee up into its exposed belly. A reflexive move that, unfortunately hurt his knee more than the creature, but the real force was in his hand, shoving raw power into metal joints and elaborate energy pathways he couldn’t take the time to navigate.

He realized a moment too late that he’d made a mistake, created a circuit between himself and the energy that kept this beast moving, added to it with his own, and he should have pulled away at once to avoid the inevitable-

The backlash hit him like a hand squeezing behind his eyes and a popping feeling somewhere in his head. He jerked away to avoid the rest of it and felt the clean, tearing pain of very sharp metal ripping through his shoulder.

This, he thought angrily, was not going well. Fool. You’re rusty.

“Get down!” Barton’s voice, and Loki dropped obediently, reflexively, and before he could think too
much about obeying a mortal’s orders. His shoulder was screaming at him and he shoved that down. Ignored it.

Loki didn’t see the arrow, but he heard the grind of metal on metal and the hiss of acid, and as he rolled to his feet and turned saw that something highly corrosive was eating through the joint where one of the legs attached. Another followed, but the beast was back in motion, awkward, lurching, but still quick, and in the narrow hallway, the ranged weapon was a weakness. Loki saw the moment Barton realized it as well and reached for his own blade. The beast was lurching rapidly towards him.

Loki could see, in the clearheaded distant way that he understood things when fighting, that it wasn’t going to be enough. Those metal claws had ripped his shoulder open to the bone. A mortal would not survive the same.

It was a snap, impulse decision. His favorite. He opened his stride and vaulted up on the thing’s back, slammed his hunting knife down through where the spine would be in an ordinary creature, driving its head toward the ground. He reached for the knot of energy that made up the core of this thing to his magic-sense, and made of his power a crude knife, sliced through it.

The front end of the beast disintegrated. Violently. The rest of it crashed to the ground, inanimate.

Loki rose out of the wreckage and retrieved his knife. The blade was nicked. That was truly irritating. Barton was looking at him with something like a frown.

“No need to jump in,” he said, after a long moment. “I can handle myself.” Perhaps, Loki thought, faintly peeved. Though he caught the mortal’s gaze lingering on the disintegrated remains of their aggressor and wondered if he had overplayed his hand.

“I do not doubt it,” Loki said mildly. “Right up until it spilled your entrails on the floor while you were still trying to get a knife through steel.” He flicked his tongue out and tasted copper on his upper lip, grimaced. Nosebleed. Unpleasant.

“Every armor has weak spots,” said Barton stubbornly. “I’m pretty good at finding them.” He paused, a moment, and added, almost grudgingly, “You’re bleeding.”

“So I am,” Loki allowed. It was already slowing, at least, though the mending muscle would ache for a day or so yet. “I am not about to fret over it.”

Barton narrowed his eyes. “Yeah,” he said. “Okay, fine.” Then he stepped around Loki and started back down the hallway, stiff like an offended cat. “I don’t know about you, but I think it’s time to get out of here.”

“I would not object on principle.” But. His shoulder hurt. Suspicions stung at him like horseflies. And there was still something…he groped for it. “Stop.”

Barton stopped. “What,” he said, flatly, “Got another conspiracy theory to throw aroun…” He trailed off. Sniffed. “Something smells like a gas leak,” he said, and then his eyes widened. “Shit shit shit. Move!” There was a dull boom somewhere back the way they’d come. More than familiar enough, and followed by another, and another, drawing closer.

A distraction, Loki thought. Clever. Give them something to fight and in the meantime-

“There’s another exit,” Barton was saying rapidly, “I think, a few turns down from here-”

He could feel the structure shaking, shuddering as it began to crumble like the metal cat under his
spell. There were certain odds that Loki was not willing to play. Perhaps this had been a trap set for him, but there was more than one way to prove one’s worth.

“He forgive me,” Loki said to Clint, and grabbed his arm.

The approaching flames were near enough that he felt the heat of the next explosion on his face as they teleported away.

**Interlude (V)**

When he finally surfaced, Loki was startled to realize that hunger was beginning to gnaw at him and text swam before his eyes when he looked away. He blinked and rubbed at his eyes impatiently. He was beginning to feel as though it might be a task of months to grasp what he needed to know about this place, when so much of the way they thought about things was strange and unfamiliar.

But he thought he at least had a grasp of a few things. It was something to start with. Between that and the knowledge he’d accumulated out of curiosity during the period of time when he’d been considering wandering all nine realms...

Of course, then Thor had found out about the idea and mentioned it to Frigga and that was the end of that; he’d been furiously angry at the time, but of course Thor had said-

*I only want to keep you safe, brother. I never want to see you come to harm.*

It was like someone had reached between his ribs and wrapped fingers around his heart and squeezed. Hard.

He rubbed savagely at his eyes and stood up. He paced away from his stack of books and stretched cramping muscles. It had been some time since he’d been still and researching for quite so long. His mouth was dry, he was beginning to feel hungry, and there was a dull headache beginning to pound in his temples.

“Wow,” said a voice, suddenly, from over his shoulder, startlingly close, “I was starting to wonder if you’d died or something.”

Loki wheeled, half groping for a weapon that wasn’t there, and stared blankly at the girl with an armful of books watching him. She smiled, a little crookedly.

“I mean, I’ve walked past here at least four times in the last five hours and I’m pretty sure I haven’t seen you move once. So it was kind of a legit concern.”

What was it, Loki wondered, about humans, that compelled them to make conversation with anyone at all? “As you can see,” he said, “I am not. Your concern is touching.”

“Ooh,” she said, “Accent! Where’s that from?” Loki stared at her, and the girl’s cheeks flushed just a little. “Um…never mind. I was actually just about to say, though. Library’s closing in ten. So you might wanna…you know. Get ready to leave?”

Closing? Loki cast a look toward the windows. “It must be – barely early evening.”

“Almost six,” said the girl, and shrugged. “Time flies when you’re buried in research, I guess.

“Six?” Loki echoed, and took a moment to convert the Midgardian hour into his own understanding, and then frowned. “And it is closing *already?*"
The girl stared at him. “…same time it always does, yeah. I mean, I guess if you really wanted to you could probably hide in the stacks and pull an all-nighter in here.” Loki wasn’t sure what the expression on his face was, but it appeared to alarm her. “Don’t actually do that,” she hurried to add. “They’d probably arrest you or something.”

Loki scoffed, without really thinking about it. “They might try.”

The girl blinked at him and then laughed, suddenly. “Wow,” she said. “I thought you were, like, professorial type. Guess I got that wrong. Seriously, though…don’t stay here overnight. Can I, uh, help you put your books away? I’m Laurie, by the way.” She stuck out a hand, which Loki examined for a moment before shaking, because refusing seemed pointless.

“Luke,” he said, after a bare moment’s hesitation. “It’s a pleasure, I’m sure.” He mouthed the pleasantries without really thinking about it, and only belatedly noticed the flush around the girl – Laurie’s ears.

“Uh huh,” she said, and Loki hoped he hadn’t erred. But she did grab one of his stacks of books. Loki picked up another, balancing them precariously. He could, he assured himself, always come back tomorrow. Laurie was examining the titles with interest.

“Wow,” she said. “What are you researching, anyway?”

It was a question he should have been prepared to answer, and with some dull, technical string of words that would quickly lose all interest of the listener. He didn’t have one prepared, though, and so settled on honesty. “A bit of everything,” he said casually, and hoped that did not seem strange here. Laurie whistled.

“Yeah,” she said. “No kidding.” But she smiled at him, just a little, and if that was confusing it wasn’t unpleasant. “So,” she went on, after a moment. “Coolest thing you read today?”

Loki shot her a sharp look, but the expression on her face was not one of mocking. Was, rather, of genuine curiosity. He had a flash of his mother asking him the same question, but even briefly it hurt. So he pushed that away the best way he knew how.

By talking.

It helped.
With enormous thanks to zaataropita who has undertaken the dubious task of being my full time beta for this monster mess story. I don't think I actually have a whole lot of disclaimers to make! Except that I am wowed by the response this has received and hope to get to everyone's comments eventually, but my life is composed of a great deal of flailing about lately.

A note about OCs: this story is most likely going to stay hilariously gen with very, very few exceptions. If you were worried. But it will make pretty significant use of a few OCs that I hope will remain as inoffensive as possible.

Also a note that I am keeping my science vague because I am bad at science. Fair warning.

Well, Loki thought, if he were to find positives to the situation, metal claws left remarkably clean wounds. Barton was (miraculously enough) still alive. He had only briefly made a serious attempt to eviscerate Loki and then proceeded to ignore him with almost admirable thoroughness. Their target had not been where it was supposed to be to begin with, so strictly speaking, they had not failed.

It still had the bitter taste of it on Loki’s tongue. Enough to reawaken the low murmur of never could do anything right, what made you think this would be any different in the back of his mind. He had felt Barton watching him from across the helicopter that had come to fetch them and wondered what he was thinking. What he would report.

The mission had gone poorly. Their objective had not been accomplished. He had performed sloppily (to put it kindly). They had been compromised from the beginning. Barton had nearly been killed. The fact that it might have been a setup from the beginning – a notion that Loki had still not entirely discarded – might mean that he had stymied an attempt to bring him down, but left the possibility that he needed to remain scrupulously on his guard. Though of course, if they wanted rid of him, his very lack of satisfactory performance might well prove enough.

For the moment, however, he was sequestered in his still fairly barren room and allowing himself to be slightly pleased with the fact that he had managed to keep any and all blood off of his clean sheets while his shoulder healed.

The little spell he’d keyed to alert him when someone was at the door went off a moment before the knock came. Loki pushed his hand back through his hair and stood up, composing his face before pacing over to open the door. It was not, as expected, Coulson.

It was Barton. He didn’t look happy.

Loki raised his eyebrows and waited.

“You didn’t deliver your report in person,” he said, after a few moments of silence.

“You look a fair bit less bloody than you did last time I saw you.”

“I heal quickly,” Loki said shortly. The man seemed very slightly uncomfortable, though Loki could not have pinned down why. It made him tense. He supposed it might be the fact that he had ignored the injunction about teleportation, but all things considered he did not truly think Barton could be too picky.

“Hm.” Barton paused. He pulled a lopsided smile, then. “So, that. Could’ve gone better, probably.”

Loki stared at him, dully, and waited. Barton looked back at him, and if his attempt at a smile faded quickly, it was into almost stubborn indifference. Loki ran out of patience first. “Why are you here?”

The slight twist of Clint’s mouth did not look entirely pleased. “I’m not stupid. I noticed what you pulled with that thing and I know how good my chances were if you hadn’t.”

“I assumed it would put me in poor standing to allow you to die,” Loki said shortly, though he almost regretted it a moment later, even if it was true. Simple arithmetic. He was stronger, faster, and less vulnerable. He had had the chance and the power to kill the thing while it was distracted and had taken it.

Clint’s eyes narrowed another notch. “Yeah, well. Doesn’t mean I don’t appreciate it.”

Loki blinked once. Very faintly startled. “Are you thanking me?” he said, before he could think better of it, and Barton gave him a slightly sidelong look.

“Generally the thing to do, isn’t it?”

Loki stared at him blankly. Barton seemed uncomfortable again, and took a step back. “Anyway… yeah. That’s all.” He turned, and then paused, and turned back to face Loki again. “Though. I’ll let this one time slide because of the whole imminent building collapse thing, but I am serious about that teleportation thing.”

“It is useful,” Loki said, unable to help a slight curl of his lips, and Barton twitched like he wanted to shudder and thought better of it.

“It’s fucking weird is what it is,” he muttered, and raised a hand almost awkwardly. “Anyway. I guess I’ll…see you around.”

Loki closed the door quietly behind him and stood with his hand on the doorknob for a moment. Thinking of hunts that had gone awry and Thor or the Warriors Three venting their frustration with what he had or had not done. Anger when he pulled them out of a battle he knew they would lose, or killed one of their attackers by magic, thus depriving them of the chance. So very, very seldom was there gratitude.

Barton did not seem to like him very much. And yet…he’d come nonetheless.

Strange.

It was, Loki decided, something to consider.

Over the next few days, Loki found himself wondering what Barton had said. The majority of his coworkers…still seemed largely content to ignore his movements, but he caught some watching with new curiosity or interest, and a few went so far as to approach him and introduce themselves with a faint air of wariness and a more definite air of curiosity. Most of them agents of some stripe or
another, a blur of mortal faces and names that Loki stored away for reference but did not particularly bother to ponder.

And then there were the others.

“Agent Silver?”

He turned to see a short woman stalking toward him like a wolf closing on its prey. Loki let his eyebrows rise a fraction of an inch. “I’m afraid I haven’t had the pleasure.”

“Chandra Sheffer,” she said. Everything about her was brusque, and the way she looked him over almost brazen. “I work in one of the labs. May I have a few moments of your time?” The way she said it, the question was very nearly a demand.

But curiosity had always been a fairly reliable motivator for him. “I don’t see why not.” He offered her a shallow bow. “I am unoccupied and at your mercy.”

The smile she flashed at him was almost unnervingly familiar, which just further piqued his interest. “Right this way, then,” she said, and started striding toward one of the elevators. “If you don’t mind coming downstairs with me, we’ve just got a few questions…”

“About?” Loki asked, slowing his stride to match her quick, short steps.

“Well,” said Chandra, “To be frank, I’m a scientist. I don’t believe in magic. So when I get handed a file with records of something that looks an awful lot like ‘magic’, I’m curious.”

Loki felt a little twinge of amusement. “To return the favor of your frankness, magic does not require your belief. It is, whether you believe it or not.”

Chandra’s lips pressed together and she narrowed her eyes at him. “I do not accept that answer as sufficient.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not enough to know that something works,” she said, stoutly, and something about her voice was familiar but Loki did not let himself linger on that. “I want to know how, and why. You’re not curious?” Loki wondered if Chandra was any good at true questions. This one sounded almost like an accusation, and he suddenly thought of his own peevish voice, don’t you ever just wonder things? Give that back, I was reading.

He did not let his stride falter. “And how do you mean to answer these…questions…of yours?”

“The usual way,” Chandra said crisply. “Gathering and analyzing data. In here.” She directed him into an elevator. Loki let himself be steered, though privately he began to wonder if perhaps he had made a hasty decision.

“What sort of data?”

“Energy readings, mostly.” Chandra sounded slightly distracted. She had pulled her phone from her pocket and was punching buttons on it rapidly, eyes fixed on the screen. Texting someone, he supposed. “A DNA sample’d be great if you didn’t mind, we had some blood but that got confiscated—”

That got his attention. “You what?”
She glanced up, blinked, and for the first time looked very, very slightly nervous. “You were in a hospital,” she said, slowly. “It’s standard procedure, and after you just kind of disappeared SHIELD took everything related to you off record.”

Loki’s right hand twitched. He could almost feel fingers crawling up his spine. “There are a number of unpleasant things that can be done with very small amounts of blood,” he said, and stored that information away to seek out this errant sample later. And destroy it.

“Like what?” Chandra asked, and the fear was gone again. She had a look on her face that Loki associated with the one he himself got when he had an idea about a spell and was itching to try it, and the notion that he had perhaps made a hasty decision intensified.

“I don’t think that is relevant,” Loki said, with just a trace of acidity in his voice.

“Yeah,” Chandra allowed, though she looked slightly disappointed. “Probably not. This is all just a little…well. Blood magic and everything, I was into Harry Potter for a while—” she snuck a glance at him, and Loki didn’t know what his expression looked like, but apparently it wasn’t what she was expecting. “—but whatever.” The elevator dinged as it stopped on what Loki noted was Basement Sublevel 2. “Right through here. There’s a few labs down here, mine’s the second on the left that way—” She started down the hallway, scurrying almost like a rodent. Loki followed and watched her flash her ID in front of some kind of reader. She held the door open for him.

“After you,” she said, and Loki stepped inside.

His first impression was of low level chaos. There seemed to be an alarming number of people all rushing about and miraculously managing not to collide. There was a continuous low level murmur of conversation, of which he caught periodic snatches – “If we try it with an amplitude of…” “…did somebody move my nitrates?” “…season finale was stunning.” Standing a moment longer, he could begin to perceive a rhythm to it, a pattern to the motion and activity, and then someone turned around and appeared to notice his arrival, judging by the fact that they stopped dead and stared.

Loki raised his eyebrows delicately in their direction. Then Chandra behind his shoulder bellowed (at an impressive volume for so small a woman), “Hey folks! We’ve got a guest, everybody play nice. There, introductions over, follow along after me,” she said, and marched into the fray.

Loki was torn between amusement and a mild sense of affront, but pushed both down and simply followed, ignoring the blatantly curious stares that followed him. He found Chandra in a back corner of the lab, almost ludicrously cluttered, clearing some papers off of two chairs. She sat down in one and indicated the other.

Loki sat, plucked up one of the moved papers and scanned it quickly before setting it back down. He could hear murmurs behind him, his assumed name, _fell from the sky, new designation, what do you think…_

He could not decide if he found it enjoyable or uncomfortable, and steepled his fingers under his chin, focusing on the woman who was clearly in charge. “Okay,” Chandra was saying, “Let’s start with a few questions.” She clicked her pen on the table twice. “Now. Were you born with these abilities of yours, or did they come from some childhood incident?”

‘A few’ turned out to be ‘very many.’ She wanted to know when his magic had begun to manifest (though he noted, with some amusement, that she avoided saying ‘magic’ as though it were a sort of curse), what form it had taken, what the limitations were (a question he assured her he could not answer without several hours and that she would not understand without an advanced background in
the theory of these things), and so on and so forth.

It was more fun than he’d had in years. Chandra was an attentive audience. She asked perceptive questions – if often somewhat odd ones. She had a quick mind and was swift to grasp concepts that he explained to her. She did not interrupt, though it seemed a struggle for her not to do so.

Loki had not had anyone to discuss seiðr with in many years, much less known anyone curious about the intricate workings that had drawn him to it to begin with. Even discussing the most basic theories with a mortal was…

Pleasant. Was pleasant, he could admit that.

If frustrating.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Chandra said, for the umpteenth time, and Loki exhaled in frustration.

“It does not make sense to you. How would you describe sight to a blind man?” He asked. “Or light, to someone who has spent their entire life in darkness? If I do not speak your language, you do not speak mine.”

“Maybe not,” said Chandra, a stubborn set to her mouth. “But what I want to know is if we can learn. Everything follows certain rules. If I work out the rules of this-”

“Unless your rules are wrong,” Loki pointed out mildly. Chandra looked almost personally offended.

“They’re not mine, and they’re not wrong.”

Loki exhaled in frustration. “Not wrong, then. Limited, if you prefer.”

“Limited how?”

“In vocabulary, at the very least. Half of the things that occur in the world are invisible to you, and thus you lack the words to describe them.”

“Then teach me the vocabulary.”

“It is not-” Loki tilted his head back and considered. His mind was racing ahead of him, already wondering if it could be taught, if these mortals did have the capacity for understanding seiðr and wouldn’t that be…ironic was not quite the right word. He was curious, now, and he knew that itch too well. But there was still...

He reached inward and cast one of his oldest, most familiar workings. Chandra looked gratifyingly startled.

“How would you explain,” he said, and it was her voice, volume, intonation, and pitch mimicked perfectly to match the face he’d borrowed, “what I have just done?”

“Oh, wow,” Chandra said. “That’s just. Weird.” She blinked. “…I guess I’d…” She leaned forward, a little, her expression going even more intent. “Is it a brain thing? I’m not good with neuro but – something to do with facial recognition structures…” She trailed off. Shook her head. “That’s not it, is it.”

Loki tipped his head to the side and half smiled, then dropped the working and shifted back to his own form. “That is not the way it works. I do not reach out and nudge the mind of everyone in this...
room to suggest that they see one thing when there is another. It is like…putting on clothes. Weaving a new skin out of the energy in everything and slipping it in as if it is your own.”

“So it is a manipulation of energy, then,” Chandra said, and Loki was startled by the fervent tone of her voice. “It’s just a matter of what kind of energy. And that’s what I want to see if I can-”

“You cannot.”

Chandra blinked at him. And frowned. “Magic is three things, in essence: will, energy, and talent,” Loki said, leaning back in his chair and dropping his hands from his chin. “The first two can be taught. There are ways of acquiring the third, but all of them dangerous and shadows of the thing itself, even for peoples far more gifted in the material they are given to work with than you. No offense meant,” he added, somewhat as an afterthought.

Chandra looked like she wanted to object. Or argue. But she was interrupted. “Excuse me,” piped up an unfamiliar voice. “Agent Silver, can you do that again?”

Loki blinked, and glanced to where the voice had come from, to discover that at some point the chaos he had first observed had stilled and he had gained an audience, one of whom was standing and holding some kind of device that he did not recognize. He blinked at them, quite surprised, and Chandra seemed equally startled.

“Don’t you all have things to do?” she said, after a moment, but sounded only half-heartedly peevish.

There was a momentary guilty silence. “Probably,” someone said, eventually, sounding only the slightest bit abashed. “But this is way more interesting?” Loki felt a quiver of amusement followed shortly by something else, a small, warm, pleased sort of feeling. Perhaps he was a curiosity, an interesting specimen. But they were listening attentively, interested, invested in what he had to say.

He could not recall the last time someone had paid so much mind to any serious explanation of his.

Chandra’s lips pressed together, but Loki turned his attention to his new questioner, a young man with a mess of red hair. “It doesn’t have to be that particular…uh, spell.”


“—yeah. Just…something. I’m curious if…”

“Ooh,” said a woman perched on a stool next to him. Her hair pulled back from her face was unflattering to sharp features, but there were laugh lines around her eyes. “You think there might be some kind of frequency shift or…”


“I don’t know,” said another thoughtfully, fiddling with his glasses. “Just from what I heard I’m seeing quantum mechanics of some kind, maybe, but I want to know how…”

They were all looking at him, intently curious, eyes wide and eager and waiting, and Loki was suddenly entirely caught off balance. “I’m afraid,” he said, slowly, “I have lost track of what it is you are asking of me.”

“Do something magic-y,” said someone, and Loki heard it suddenly, there. Of course. The mockery. The expectation that he would perform like some sort of buffoon for their entertainment – the small warm feeling withered and died.
He stood. “No,” Loki said coolly. “I think I must be going.” He looked for a path to the door, did not find one, and heard what was unmistakably a disappointed sigh ripple through the assembled group. Let them sigh. He would not be their entertainment.

“Hold on,” said Chandra, which he ignored. “Jesus, Ian, you dumbass,” someone else muttered. “Now you’ve pissed him off.”

“If you would please,” Loki said delicately and coldly, and a few mortals shuffled a little, and did not seem in any real hurry to make his exit easy. Loki’s eyes narrowed.

“Um,” said one of them, sandy-haired and wide-eyed. “Please don’t just. Take off? Ian’s a dumbass but we’d really like to know…” A clamor began to rise, hopeful and cajoling.

*I am not your jester,* Loki felt the urge to snap. *I will not perform my ‘tricks’ to entertain you. I will not dance on your strings.*

*Aren’t you?* The thought occurred to him, and Loki turned sharply, lifted his hand, and snapped his fingers. Every light in the room exploded into a spray of sparks and then went out. The silence that fell was profound.

“I hope,” Loki said acidly, “That will do.” He could dimly see a number of astonished faces looking up at him.

“Oh, Jesus,” said someone, into the silence. “That was awesome.”

“A power surge,” said someone else. “Was that a power surge? Was anyone looking at any readings?” The excited babbling began to rise again, and Loki blinked. Even in the dark, he could see their eyes, and the ones looking at him were – impressed. Almost, he thought, awed. He flicked a hand and the lights flickered back on, though he suspected they were not exactly as they had been, and looked to Chandra.

She was watching him with narrowed eyes, but it was an expression thoughtful rather than suspicious. The other voices died down, and they were looking at him expectantly again. Feeling suddenly self-conscious, Loki held very still, wondering if he had perhaps overstepped himself, and feeling suddenly and peculiarly like a petulant child.

“Agent Silver,” said Chandra, after a few moments of silence. “I asked if you would be willing to undergo a few tests. Are you still? …preferably without blowing our circuits, I guess I should add,” she said, with a wry smile. Loki stared at her. He was not sure what reaction he had expected, but it was not…

…but well. Appreciation seemed the nearest word.

He remembered Coulson suggesting that he cooperate with these sorts of questions, but he had not made it sound like a condition, and Loki was fairly familiar with the sound of conditions. He need not tolerate this…prying, this gawking at him like some sort of spectacle. He need not—

But their open curiosity, their interest, their keen desire to know how and why, and he could remember the feeling when he’d first made a successful working like a small living thing taking shape between his hands; the wonder, the awe. The way they were watching him now, eagerly hopeful. Perhaps they could not work magic, mundane things that they were, but to understand something was its own reward, sometimes.

*Is it such an ill thing,* he thought, *to want to be seen?* Because that was at the heart of it, wasn’t it, that he wanted their attention, wanted their eyes and their praise and that was absurd, what need did
he have of the approval of little mortals who hardly understood their own world-

But then again, by the other side of the coin, might it not be his due? Might it not be the least he should be owed, and yet here he shied from them as though-

(You don’t deserve it.)

Perhaps it was that thought, flitting across his mind for just a moment, that decided him. “I am willing,” he said, and summoned a sharp smile. “Who else will see to correcting your woefully backwards ideas about the universe?”

Perhaps he ought to have taken Chandra’s smile as a warning. He did not. He took it as a victory.

Interlude (VI)

Loki was not entirely certain how he wound up eating dinner with Laurie and her grandmother.

He suspected it had something to do with being caught up in discussion of Midgardian literature, oddly enough (on which Loki was mostly bluffing, but could manage that relatively effectively) and somehow ending up walking Laurie to her apartment, whereupon her grandmother took him in before Loki could depart gracefully and seemed to determine that he was in sore need of feeding.

In fairness, Loki could not object so much. The food was delicious, the conversation was friendly and he managed, for the most part, to keep it safely away from himself. They were kind, they were curious, they spoke rapidly and in what seemed to Loki to be largely nonsense.

This is, he told himself, a much more efficient way to gain an understanding of this realm. There is only so much that a book can tell you.

There was only so long, however, that he could dodge all of their questions, and it was Laurie’s grandmother (named, he had learned, Bethany), a small, withered looking woman, who caught him by surprise. They were discussing something or other, some story that Loki was just half listening to.

“So, Luke,” she said, and the curious sharpness of her eyes really ought to have warned him. “Do you have family here?”

“—what?” Loki said, distracted by mopping up the last of the gravy on his plate with a slice of bread, surprised by his own hunger.

“Family,” Bethany said, pointing her fork at him. “Do you have family here?” And, horrors, Loki stumbled. Paused just a moment too long before managing his rather too vehement “No,” realizing too late how conspicuous it sounded.

They were both looking at him now. Loki tensed. He ought to have been paying closer attention. “No,” he said, after a moment, again, smoothing out his voice. “I have…no family here.” Or anywhere. Either dead or dead to me and-

Stop, he thought, clenching one hand on his leg. You will only humiliate yourself.

Bethany nodded sagely. “A job, then,” she said, and Loki was still off guard, still trying to collect himself.

“Ah,” he said. “I – just arrived here, in truth. I have not as of yet found… employment.” Hadn’t even begun to think of it. Money was not a worry, or had not been. Though he had not actually paid for anything as yet, and that he might have to consider. There was no savor in stealing from such easy
“And with the market what it is these days! Well, best of luck. Might think about spending a bit more money on food than on clothes, though, eh?” She smiled at him, bright and guileless, and chuckled. Loki glanced at his clothes. He had not thought them particularly fine, but his tastes had always run a little toward the luxurious. He let his mouth quirk a little, though privately he wondered if he was really so gaunt as that.

“Nana,” said Laurie, sounding a little pained. “Not polite.”

“Nonsense. I’m old enough to have the privilege of saying what I like.” Bethany leaned forward, a curiously intent expression on her face. “So what brings you here, then? You’ve got a bit of a look. Like them who come to a city looking for some kind of fix for their lives they didn’t find somewhere else.”

Loki found himself staring at her, quite unable to look away. Her words jarred something in him, and he twitched. “…I don’t know,” he said, without strictly meaning to. He ought to have had a lie prepared. Again. Ought to have been ready. And he could have blamed it on any number of things, but the truth was that he had done the unforgivable and relaxed. “If I’m looking for something, I don’t know what it is,” and a moment later wanted to call the words back. Neither of them laughed, though, or looked at him with pity. Laurie, if anything, looked curious (and yet didn’t ask). Bethany nodded as though satisfied.

And stood up. “Well,” she said. “Luke, are you going to help me with the dishes? House rules.”

“Nana!” said Laurie, now definitely sounding appalled, but Loki laughed, surprised, uncertainty still a knot somewhere under his sternum but the easy assumption that he would help reminding him of—

_Imperious as a queen in this her realm_, Loki thought, and perhaps it was better to keep away from that thought, to keep away from the whys and the details and simply keep moving. “Of course,” he said, standing with his best and most courtly bow. “I would not dream of abandoning two such fine ladies with all the work.”

“Oh, now you’re just a flatterer,” said Bethany, but she sounded unmistakably pleased. It crossed Loki’s mind for a moment that he had been far out of childhood when she had been young. _So brief_, he thought, and wasn’t sure if the thought was pity or scorn. Or something else, not quite either.

He somewhat regretted his decision when he was elbow deep in suds, but there was a nagging thought at the back of his mind that did not connect until he was drying the last of the dishes. These people knew nothing about him. They had a face, a false name, and they invited him into their home and made him welcome.

There was something suddenly warm about that. As if he were…just anyone.

Loki dropped the towel and took a step back. “Hey,” said Laurie, too _close_, and he wheeled, almost smacking into the counter. “—you okay?”

“I’ve just – remembered something,” Loki said. _I’m dangerous_. “I should…I need to go.”

“Whoa, whoa,” said Laurie, looking confused. “Are you sure you’re-”

“Thank you,” Loki interrupted. “For your hospitality, for both of your…I am sorry.”

“Jesus,” Laurie said, dropping her own towel. “Did you remember that the mob has a hit out on you or something? Cool your-”
“It would be best,” Loki said, feeling a sudden surge of sick dizziness, “If you forgot I was ever here.” They both stared at him, blankly, Bethany already nodding as he could see Laurie trying to fight against it, confused, not understanding why. Strong-willed, he thought. Compassionate, to reach out so blindly and easily.

He fled.
...wow, this took embarrassingly long time. WE'RE NOT GOING TO TALK ABOUT THAT. Continue to be awed at the response to this mess, and continue to hope that it works out, though periodically getting this story to work the way I want it to is roughly equivalent to wrestling a bear. Sometimes I would rather the bear.

Enjoy! And thank you for your continued patience with my extremely loose posting schedule. Continued undying and eternal love to zaataronpita for her betaing prowess.

Loki returned to his room embarrassingly near to exhausted and torn between a feeling of satisfaction at productive work well done and a feeling that he was a horse that had just been put through its paces. He rubbed at his forehead and half smiled.

A curious lot of mortals. Persistent, nearly irritating, woefully ignorant, but not complacent. Not content with the limits they were given. In that way, he thought dryly, almost unnervingly like himself, who had never been satisfied, never content, eternally seeking more. Not like Asgard, steady, stable, eternal perfection.

(Ha.)

Loki tried not to let his mood darken, reining in his thoughts with ruthless force, and opened the door to his room. He stopped in the doorway and pressed his lips together, staring at the occupant already present and standing with his hands behind his back, looking at Loki’s one piece of decoration, a print of Escher’s *Day and Night*. He turned, likely at Loki’s quiet, ‘hm.’

“Interesting choice,” he remarked, with a little gesture over his shoulder. Loki kept his expression perfectly neutral.

“If this is going to become a habit of yours,” Loki said levelly, “I am going to begin to set up an unpleasant surprise for you.”

The smile he received in return was pleasantly placid. “I’ll keep that in mind.” A quick examination of his room revealed nothing out of place. Loki stepped inside and leaned against the wall by the door. An interesting man, Loki thought. He wondered what he would learn, if he went looking.

Something to keep in mind, perhaps.

“It’s been a bit,” Loki observed. “And here I thought you would be keeping an eye on me.”

“I have been,” Coulson said. “From a distance. Been busy?” Coulson asked politely, and Loki shrugged one shoulder.

“Certainly not intolerably so.”

Somebody said they saw you wandering off with one of the lab technicians.” Loki offered a fractional smile.
“You yourself recommended I…cooperate with them, did you not?” There was an unfortunate itch quivering under his skin. This polite stepping around whatever the true purpose of Coulson’s visit might be could be fun, perhaps, but under the circumstances…

It occurred to Loki that he was, perhaps, just the slightest bit tired of intrigue and uncertainty. That part of him missed the solidity and reliability of the life he had begun to craft for himself, unwanted intrusions or no.

But he had committed to this course.

“I guess I did say something like that.”

Loki watched Agent Coulson, eyes slightly narrowed. “Though I confess it seems…quiet, after the recent excitement. I must wonder if you have – ah. Decided to remove me from active duty.”

“I assure you that’s not the case. According to the report you submitted you performed satisfactorily regardless of success. And your account was corroborated by Barton’s.”

Loki could not keep his eyebrows from jumping up. “Performed satisfactorily?”

You survived, murmured one thought, only to be followed by another, but survival might not be a measure of success.

“So says the official evaluation.” He was examining Loki with that strangely inscrutable gaze again, and Loki felt himself fidget, and was promptly annoyed by it.

“Is that what you came to tell me?” Loki made his tone just faintly touched by impatience, and Coulson shook his head, and Loki was trying not to let his growing sense of irritation (unease) show.

“Not so much.”

“Then what,” he said, a bit more sharply than he meant to. “Whatever your business, I would sooner you-”

“I’m…concerned,” Coulson said, cutting him off, sounding anything but concerned, and Loki’s temper flared at that but was snuffed out by the next, somewhat baffling words: “That you might think we sent you in on bad intel on purpose.”

That drew him up short. Barton, he thought, must have mentioned it. The suspicion had lingered, after all, though he had been careful not to voice it. If it had been, after all, that made it part of the game, and if not then it would not do to appear paranoid. He tried to evaluate the agent’s expression and found it irritatingly difficult.

After a moment, Loki straightened and crossed the room and sat down at the chair by his desk, as though untroubled by the second occupant. “Is that so.”

“Yes,” Coulson said. “That’s so.”

Loki regarded him out of the corner of his eye, trying to determine what answer was expected, or perhaps what answer would be best. He could not be sure of either. “I concluded,” he said finally, keeping his voice neutral, “That you would not risk your Agent Barton in such a fashion. You seem to find him valuable.”

Coulson’s posture was ramrod straight as he turned to face Loki, managing somehow to look at ease despite the rigidity of his body. “Whatever doubts SHIELD might have about your intentions,” he said levelly, “You signed the contract. Which makes you entitled to our protection the same way as
the rest of our agents.”

Loki did not let his flicker of surprise show on his face. Probably, he should have been insulted at the idea that he would require protection at all. Probably. But he was… “Is it that simple?”

“Barring further complications, yes. Besides,” and there was that flicker of very faint amusement again, nearly undetectable, “I get the feeling that trying to stab you in the back wouldn’t end well. For us.”

Loki could not keep down a sharp-edged smile. “Wise.”

“I have that reputation in some circles.” Coulson’s eyes fixed on Loki. “Is that clear?”

Loki crossed his legs, ankle-to-knee. “You are not going to attempt to eliminate me intentionally.”

“No,” Coulson confirmed. “We are not.” It was, of course, a matter of pragmatics, and of his usefulness. Further, a blatant play for his loyalty. At this stage, knowing even what little they did, of course they would want to tie him to them, and the most effective method of doing so was to appeal to loyalty and self-preservation. We will protect you even from ourselves. Obvious. Transparent.

Nonetheless, Loki felt a little pleased in spite of himself. Pathetic weakness, perhaps, to be placated so easily, but the voice that murmured so was quiet and easily ignored.

“Understood,” he said, and offered a half smile. “I will keep that in mind.”

Coulson nodded, and his gaze moved away, but he did not seem in any hurry to leave. Loki waited. If he had something else to say, no doubt he would get around to it. After a few moments, he retrieved an empty glass and filled it with water from a pitcher on the corner of his desk. He sipped delicately. “And yourself, Agent Coulson? What occupies your days?”

“Same things that usually do,” Coulson said. “Keeping things running, organized. Making sure Mr. Stark behaves. Investigating unsubstantiated reports of some kind of massive magnetic disturbance. Sifting through reports.”

“A busy schedule. And yet you found time in it for me. Are you so friendly to all your new recruits?”

“Only the ones our tech estimates have enough raw power to take out a city block.”

Loki felt his mouth twitch. “Only one?” he said, and then nearly thought better of it, but it won that little flicker of amusement away. He would not regret it too much, and it might easily be taken as a jest. “Fair enough. I will accept your… concern… as touching.” He paused. “Was there something else?”

Coulson looked back at him. “You said you didn’t choose to come here,” said the little man, and sounded for the first time genuinely curious, though faintly. “Where were you trying to get to?”

Loki felt his stomach clench and chuffed a laugh with a bit too much bitterness. “To? Nowhere. Away from, say rather,” he said, and almost immediately was irritated with himself. Coulson showed no great reaction, however.

“Away from what?”

Loki looked down at his glass of water and swirled it in a circle. He felt suddenly tired. All the quiet of the past few months and suddenly, in a few days’ time… he glanced up and smiled thinly.
“Family drama.”

“Hm,” said Coulson, looking at him with that bland, skeptical stare. Loki held it for a few moments, and then glanced away, toward a blank wall.

“Secrets and lies,” he said, finally, fingers toying with the glass. It felt cool against his skin. “And a legacy I could never live up to.”

“Ah,” said Coulson, and curiously enough, nodded. As though satisfied. “Crash landing on Earth wasn’t planned, then?”

“No,” Loki said, remembering how he’d felt first opening his eyes and realizing where he was. “No, it was not.”

“Mmm,” Coulson said, and Loki watched him, attempting to glean something about his thoughts. Ultimately he dismissed the effort, just as the agent turned back to him. “Well, Agent Silver, good to get the chance to talk to you again. Clear up misconceptions.”

Loki kept his eyebrows from pulling together. “Indeed.”

“I’ll leave you to it. And in case you were wondering, I don’t think I’ll be making a habit of unannounced visitors, though you’re welcome to booby trap your room anyways.” The man turned and headed for the door, only to stop within the frame of it and glance back.

“You’ll do all right here,” Agent Coulson said, and Loki glanced at him in surprise, but the small, unflappable man was already gone. Loki looked after him, face relaxing into the slightest of frowns.

The next day, for lack of anything more entertaining to do with his time, Loki wandered back down to the labs. At the very least, he thought dryly, they were using what minds they had, and that at least made them more interesting than the alternative company. Which was...more than likely another afternoon by himself.

He bypassed the keycode Chandra had used to access the lock with little more than a touch and a slight pulse of power, and slipped into the lab. It looked much the same as it had before – chaos just on this side of organized. He could hear Chandra’s strident voice barking something that sounded like a scolding.

Sliding himself out of notice, Loki wandered in. He peered over shoulders and examined various equipment which use was opaque to him. He observed largely incomprehensible experiments over various shoulders, discovered one technician playing some sort of game on her computer, and observed an argument on the relative merits of beatles versus rolling stones, which remained curiously compelling until Loki gathered that they were discussing music and not, in fact, natural phenomena.

He found his attention most drawn, however, by a curious looking apparatus in one corner, sitting on a table it had to itself. Amid the clutter, that seemed remarkable enough. A metallic ovoid of remarkable smoothness that seemed to hum to his senses, and after his eyes strayed to it for the umpteenth time, he wandered over.

After examining it for a few moments, he reached out and touched it with one finger. All his hair seemed to stand on end at once, and Loki jerked away, startled. Something was nagging at him, but he could not quite find it. Like a memory just out of reach.

And regardless, he was curious. It was certainly not like the others in the room.
Frowning at the device, a moment later he dropped the working keeping him unnoticed and snagged the sleeve of the nearest passing minion, a man unremarkable to Loki’s eyes. Lab technicians, was that was Coulson had called them? Regardless.

“What is this,” he asked, indicating it.

“Oh,” he said. “That’s,” and then appeared to register Loki’s face and jumped. “—when’d you come in?”

“A few minutes ago,” Loki said, easily. “You really ought to mind your surroundings more closely, much of this looks terribly fragile.” He released the sleeve he had claimed. “Your name?”

“Ryan,” said the boy, after a moment of staring blankly. “Ryan Welch.”

“Good day, Ryan Welch.” Lok offered him a smile that he thought was admirably patient. “Well, what does this artifact of yours do?”

“Uh.” The young man seemed nervous, lifting one hand to scratch at the back of his head and then dropping it as though he’d been scolded. “We don’t actually know.” Loki raised his eyebrows and waited. “—well. It’s not really ours. It’s an. Um. Artifact.”

“Artifact,” Loki repeated. He looked back at it again. Between that hum to which he suspected the mortals in the room were utterly insensate and the isolation of the thing, he could make a guess. “By which you mean…not of Earthly origin?”

The boy seemed curiously uncomfortable. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I guess, that.”

“Hmm,” Loki said, thoughtfully. “Have you touched it?”

“Yeah,” the young man said, with a fidget. “When we were examining it. Feels kind of weird, like static electricity.”

Static electricity, Loki thought, was the sharp, quick shock created by fleece slippers on carpet. Not in the least the same. “Mm. I see.”

“Do you…know something about it?” Welch sounded almost hopeful. Loki raised an eyebrow at him, and then looked back at the device. He did know something, he was sure of it, but could not quite recall…

“If I may—” he started to say, and was interrupted, to a flash of annoyance that Loki quickly pushed down.

“—hold on, is that - Agent Silver? How did you get in here? Ryan, did you—” The boy quailed, and Loki bit down an urge to laugh that was, perhaps, unkind.

“No,” he said, with an easy smile. “I let myself in, quite without help. A pleasant day to you, Miss Sheffer.”

“Doctor Sheffer.” She frowned at him, and Loki kept his face placid with only a bit of effort. “That door is locked to anyone not possessing the proper clearance code, which I’m pretty sure you don’t have.”

Loki lifted a hand and wagged his fingers at her. “I have certain advantages others do not.” He nodded at the item that had drawn his attention. “It’s an interesting object you’ve acquired there.”
Chandra’s arms crossed. “Recognize it?”

Loki considered her, for a moment. “I might,” he said, finally. “I suspect I do.” Chandra’s eyes narrowed, and Loki offered her a bit of a smile. She pursed her lips.

“What is it, then?”

“I can hardly be sure unless I examine it properly. I am not certain what it is, only that I have seen it before.”

Chandra’s eyes narrowed another hair. “What does that entail?”

Loki shrugged. “Guessing, mostly. Or – if you will – testing a hypothesis. If I am correct, there should be no harm done. If I am not…well, likely nothing will happen at all.” He could see her struggling with that. Curiosity and her reluctance to share. Loki waited. They were drawing attention from other eyes, too, curious sideways glances poorly hidden.

“Um,” said the boy he’d been speaking to. “It’s been four months and we still don’t have any clue about what it is. If he…if Agent Silver can tell us, it’d be nice to know?”

Loki caught only a fraction of the glare Chandra shot at the unfortunate Ryan, and saw him flinch. But then she looked back at him, and nodded, very slightly. “Okay,” she said. “Fine. Do your…whatever.”

“Work my magic?” Loki could not resist saying, to receive his own withering glare. Loki bowed formally to her and gave her his best charming smile. “Gracious lady, I shall see to it at once.”

He could feel her and the boy Ryan both watching as he turned back to the machine. He knew he had seen one like it before, something similar, but a long time ago, nearly lost to memory.

“How did you bypass the card reader?” Chandra’s question registered only vaguely.

“A gift for mimicry,” Loki said, absently, and reached out to lay his fingertips against it again, to that same sense of current coursing through him, though to his senses there was no true flow of energy, not of the kind he was familiar with. Something else. So tantalizingly familiar, and if he could remember...

“There’s something we thought might be a lock mechanism on right side,” Ryan volunteered, a bit less hesitantly. Or maybe writing…”

“That’s not really an answer,” Chandra objected. Loki exhaled through his nose.

“I begin to appreciate the frustration of unending questions,” he said mildly, moving his fingers over the smooth metal of the thing’s surface around to the right side, feeling for what the boy had mentioned. His fingers caught on the irregularity soon enough, and almost at the same moment, the strange sensation stopped, as did the humming. He paused, frowning, and at the feeling under his fingers, the patterns of the metal seeming to twist on itself in a strange way, it came back to him.

Sit with me. Listen.

“What,” said Chandra, almost immediately.

“I have seen this before,” he said, pulling his hand away. “It’s not a lock. Not really. Nor does it require any of my magic to open.”
“Where is it from?” That was Chandra.

“Not here.” Loki stepped back. “Quite a long way from here, in fact. Or from anywhere.”

“Is it a weapon?” Someone else, and Loki wondered how many of them were watching now. He was tempted to turn and leave them all to puzzle at it on their own. “What’s inside it?”

“As I said,” Loki said, stepping back with a gesture. “You need only ask politely.” He looked to Chandra. “If you would like to do the honors, perhaps?”

Chandra was eyeing him with something like wariness. “…just ask?” she said, sounding dubious.

“Politely,” Loki repeated. “It only opens once.” I don’t understand. Hush, child, you don’t need to.

Chandra stared at him, and it was Ryan who stepped forward. “Um,” he said. “I guess. If you wouldn’t mind opening?” He blushed, brightly, and someone at the back tittered. For a moment, silence, and then the metallic shell clicked once, twice, and the metal surface shimmered into transparency. Ryan jerked back.

“Wait,” Loki said, flatly. Another click, and then it began to sing.

He remembered that voice. Clear, sweet and bright, in no language known, and exquisitely sad. A recording, Loki was perfectly aware, but it didn’t sound it. “What is it,” a redheaded technician asked, and her voice sounded harsh and discordant.

“Hush,” said Loki, not quite sharply, and there was silence. The last one of these to come to Asgard had been many years ago, when he was still small, and he remembered Frigga pulling him onto her knee and telling him the story. They had sat in her garden and listened to that ancient voice sing, and Loki remembered weeping.

His heart hurt. Remember this, Loki, she’d said, quiet and sad and for the first time he could remember, old. All things must end. Whether good or evil, all things must end.

It was not so long, in the end, and as the last notes faded, so too did the translucency, and it was once again a plain, metal container, but no longer humming. Its message given.

They were all looking to him, now. Loki felt his shoulders twitch.

“A history,” he said. “A record. Or so I was told, once. That they belonged to a very old people, long dead, even their name lost to memory. That they knew their own end before it came, and sang their story so that they would not be forgotten. I remember being told that these capsules drifted through space until finding a planet where their story could be heard.”

“What’s the story?” someone asked, and Loki did not bother to look at them. His eyes were on the dull metal. He felt the corner of his mouth tug.

“That is the irony,” he murmured. “No one knows. The language is forgotten. A song sung to nobody at all. I have heard some deem it arrogance, that they would assume their language would endure even if they did not.” He shrugged one shoulder. “Or else hope.”

“And that’s all anyone knows?” Incredulous. Loki swallowed the urge to laugh. Remembered – but doesn’t anyone know any more?

It may be nothing but a legend, in the end.
“That is, yes. That is all the light I am afraid I can shed on this mystery of yours. Not terribly useful, I am afraid.” He threw his audience a crooked smile. “I hope you will not hold it against me. Now if you will excuse me, I daresay…” He slipped out, with fluid, easy grace. They did not attempt to summon him back.

He went up to the surface levels of the complex and navigated his way to an exit. Stepping outdoors, he broke into a sweat almost immediately, and nearly turned back inside. He held his ground.

Strangeness and familiarity and strangeness again. He wondered if Frigga had that memory as clearly as he did. If she thought of it even now.

Ultimately the heat was too much. Loki retreated back to his room. To his relief, there was no surprise occupant, though for one absurd moment, he was almost disappointed. Coulson, he had begun to think, made surprisingly good company.

On a whim, he padded over to his computer and blinked to see one more email than he’d expected in his Inbox. From: M. Fairfax, it said, and Loki blinked, and opened the message.

Dear Luke, it read. I am not very good at this emailing, but you did not leave a forwarding address for me. I don’t know what the rules are – this new job of yours seems very mysterious, and I might only be your landlady. But I know that sometimes a friendly voice can be good to hear. I wanted you to know that we are thinking of you, and hoping you are settling in well. Angela and I feel very lucky to have met you. It went on from there, little details, trivial things, and Loki caught himself smiling, just a fraction. He could almost hear her voice.

A moment later, another message appeared above Ms. Fairfax’s. He did not recognize the address, and opened it, only to blink at it in surprise.

Thanks for the concert. Mind coming around for a bit next Tuesday? Got a few more questions. –C.

Brusque, he thought. Blunt, direct. (All those eyes, curious, attentive. Perhaps it was only knowing no better, but to them…)

Loki wrote a swift response before closing his computer and plucking up his book of the moment. Somehow I’m not surprised, he wrote. I’ll see you on Tuesday. Don’t bother to leave the door unlocked.

Interlude (VII)

You should not have done that.

The thought nagged at the back of his mind, troubled him. He still did not feel calm, even once back in his rooms. Paced back and forth at the foot of his bed – remade, he noticed, and not by him, which just made uneasiness prickle further along his spine though he knew it was only housekeeping – and flicked his thumbnail against the other fingers of his right hand.

It was a thoughtless, foolish reaction. Childish. Are you truly so pathetic as that-

(Yes, he thought, yes, that probably was the answer, that he was so pathetic.)

They were kind to you. A fine way to repay such kindness.
Loki squeezed his eyes closed. He could still see the look on Laurie’s face. Her surprise and confusion and-

*You weak, fractured thing. How did you ever think that you would survive here? See how easily you break and burn even the best of things offered to you?*

The room seemed too tight, too close. Stifling. On instinct, he twisted himself out of there and into elsewhere, and almost fell onto the grass, stomach lurching with nausea. He took a few sharp, deep breaths of cooling night air, and sank to sit cross-legged, palms pressed flat against the earth.

*Is this how you are going to live? Sneaking, crawling from shadow to shadow…*

No, he thought, viciously, defiantly. No. I am not broken, I am not done.

*This is another realm, now sundered from Asgard. Another beginning. You need not…*

Why, he wondered, then, why had he? It ought to have been welcome, their openness, ought to have been his due. He knew things they could never hope to understand and had grasped power they could not even think to touch. *Dangerous,* he’d thought, but that was foolish. Of course he was *dangerous,* as any predator among lesser beasts might be. But that was hardly…

*You chafe at indifference yet reject kindness. What is it you think you want, Laufeyson? Do you know yourself?*

His thoughts felt like a tangled snarl he couldn’t find the end of. He pressed the heel of one hand to his eyes, the meal he’d just eaten too heavy in his stomach.

“Oh, man, got a light?”

Loki bit back his automatic snappish reply enough to simply say, “No.”


He did not bother to try to silence his sharp and jagged laugh. “Many seem terribly eager to ask me that question of late. I have no idea what they expect to hear.” A few more moments of silence, and whoever his interrupter was, they wandered away, leaving him alone once more. It was a quiet night. Pleasant. Warm.

He took a deep breath and tried to center his thoughts. So he had erred. Acted unbecomingly. *It will not happen again.* Was that not enough? What more…

But it was not simply error, it was panic, it was *fear.* What had he thought would happen, what had he expected, and how did he think to make his way in this world if he fled so from all companionship?

Perhaps, he thought with a brittle kind of anger, that was it, that the fault had never been in others but in him, and the loneliness that had plagued him was only his own isolation.

He shoved himself to his feet and pushed all thoughts from his mind. Inhaled deeply. *Keep moving,* he thought. As he had thought, when first opening his eyes on this his new life. *Keep moving. Do what you must.*

*Try again. And again. And again. This is an entire realm. You have only just begun.*
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Let's not talk about how long it's been since the last update? All I have to say is broken wrist!! and schoolwork!!! and being grabbed by the throat by self indulgent oneshot/continuation ideas!! and honestly I am very sorry. Hopefully the next update (and future updates) will not be so long in coming. Hopefully.

Once again, my undying love and gratitude to zaataropita, without whom I would either be a crying mess or this story would be an incoherent blob, or possibly both.

Loki suspected that Agent Jason Ford had been chosen as his companion for his sheer, unassuming nonoffensiveness. Perhaps a deliberate contrast to Barton. Loki appreciated the difference. The man did not, at least, seem overly inclined to look askance at Loki. Among SHIELD’s field agents that seemed to be rare.

He was occasionally tempted to do something based solely on the fact that a lot of them seemed to be waiting for him to bite. Comparatively, Ford was almost talkative. As they were traveling for some incomprehensible reason in the mundane way to their destination, they had time for it.

Though Loki did not find the experience of flying any more pleasant the second time around.

Ford made a fair distraction, fortunately, or Loki thought he would perhaps have done something reflexive, unfortunate, and probably damaging to the helicopter.

“You haven’t been off the SHIELD base yet?” He exclaimed, sounding incredulous, after mentioning a pub that Loki had to admit to not having attended.

“I was given to understand that I was on probation,” Loki said, a bit stiffly. Ford shook his head.

“I knew that, but that doesn’t mean you have to stay within base limits all the time. There’s a town a few miles out, and so long as someone knows where you are I don’t see why you couldn’t do a bit of exploring. Better food, for one.”

Loki could not quite keep his nose from wrinkling. “That notion appeals more than slightly.”

“Yeah,” said Ford. “I bet. Hey, here’s a deal. After this is done, before heading back, we go out for drinks.”

Loki gave him a sharp, startled look. “You do not have…other plans?”

“Nope,” said Ford, almost cheerfully. “The wife doesn’t expect me back until late, and I haven’t been in weeks. So why not?”

I am not the best of company? Loki thought, but did not say. “Very well,” he said, slowly. “I suppose a change of scenery that is not…mission related…might well be pleasant.”

“It’s a deal, then,” Ford said, and then settled back in his chair. “You know, for all the talk,” he added, after a moment, “You’re not such a bad guy.”
Loki could not quite keep himself from a flickering half smile.  

“We’re here,” their pilot called. Loki stood, swaying just a little with the motion of the craft as it began to descend. Ford stood with him.  

“Let’s make this smooth,” Ford said. “Maybe we can get back for happy hour, huh?”

Loki had no notion what that meant, but allowed himself an indulgent smile. “Maybe.”

You are just, Coulson had said, acquiring information.

We have most of what we need to know, Coulson had said, sliding the file across the desk. Should be straightforward enough. Some matter, Loki had gathered, of weapons, and people who should not have them having them, and what seemed to him overall somewhat mundane.

He was going to learn, Loki decided, not to make these judgment calls.

“You are,” the man in front of him drawled, “an interesting one.”

Gabriel Fossett, Loki thought he remembered. Ringleader of yet another thuggish cult. Loki was beginning to wonder how many there were on Midgard.

His suit, Loki caught himself observing, was embarrassingly shabby.

Loki was, of course, well familiar with the tendency of the best-laid plans to go awry very quickly. Perhaps, he thought with a short burst of bitterness, overly familiar. It was beginning to become a slightly disturbing trend.

“Yes,” Gabriel said. “Very interesting indeed.”

He could break the bonds they had placed on him, metal or not. He might even be able to do so and reach Ford before the gun on him might fire. And if he did not, what was one mortal life anyway? (He asked you to go out with him. Invited you. Not such a bad guy. Loki felt the smallest possible twinge of guilt. And then, of course, there was the prospect of fighting his way free of whatever resistance they put up, and that seemed…tedious, somewhat less than expedient, and also probably unlikely to get him the information that Coulson wished him to retrieve.

Instead he donned his best smile and remarked, “I’m so pleased you find me so.”

“What is it? Super strength? You one of those X-Men?”

Loki did not know what that was supposed to mean, and so ignored it in favor of tilting his head back and affecting a bored expression that had always infuriated various courtiers attempting to curry favor. Do go on, it said, I needed to sleep today.

“No,” he said, tapping fingers against his thigh. “SHIELD doesn’t usually hire mutants.” He narrowed his eyes at Loki, who looked back at him placidly. “How did you get in?”

“Relatively easily,” Loki said, with a smile. He was not concerned yet. Merely frustrated, and displeased, and he ought to have expected the presence of some kind of subtler alarm system than the ones he had found and disabled prior to acquiring entrance.

A lesson, he decided, to remember.
“My men on the doors swore they didn’t see anyone.” They hadn’t. They’d both followed someone in, unseen. Apparently the sensors were smarter than men.

“Perhaps they ought to watch more closely.”

The man narrowed his eyes. “Are you some kind of telepath?”

“Do you want me to tell you what you are thinking?” Loki said, tipping his head slightly to the side, still keeping his tone airily flippant. Within his own thoughts, he was flipping through and considering potential escape plans, one after another, attempting to find a way to complete the mission they had been given as well. “For I doubt it is much of substance.”

They did not know his magic, or at least had not seen it. He hadn’t used it to fight, not with the suddenness of their apprehension. If he could use it here, without being noticed or identified as such…there was a spell to loosen the speaker’s tongue, and while it as often as not only revealed perverted fancies, every so often something useful spilled from loose lips.

He had half formed the spell when Gabriel stepped forward and took his chin, tilted his head to the side like he might read something in Loki’s eyes. Loki stiffened. “You talk a lot for a spy. I don’t think that’s what you are, though. Not the usual SHIELD material, anyway. Not like him.” He jerked his head in Ford’s direction.

“Oh,” Loki said, “You are?”

“Ought I to be flattered?” Loki said, and let a caustic note slide into his tone that said no. Gabriel seemed amused, but he stepped back and drew his hand away. His amusement, Loki found, was irritating. Though certainly less so than that proprietary, over-familiar touch. Loki wondered briefly if – but no. That was too distasteful to even consider.

“You could,” Fosset said. He slid his hands into his pockets and smiled a little more in a way that left Loki with an unaccountably uneasy feeling. “I wouldn’t count on it, though. Whatever you are, we’re going to find out.”

“I always knew I was not one of you. I simply did not know how much. He was speaking before the thought had fully crystallized in his mind. “You’re a businessman, yes?” Loki said, and almost did not recognize his own voice. Too silky for the cold, choppy sea of his thoughts. “I can appreciate that.” He smiled, and it felt wide and raw. “I’ll make you an offer, then.”

An offer?” The man looked like he wanted to laugh, but straightened, the knife still out. “What do you have to bargain with?”

“Your life,” Loki said, easily. “I will offer you your life, for our freedom.” He could feel it vibrating in him, some unidentifiable thing, crawling under his skin. He saw Ford’s head lift slightly out of the corner of his eye, the man staring at him as though he’d gone mad. Loki did not so much as glance in his direction.
It was not even an effort to not think of him, in the hate-filled buzz of his thoughts.

Gabriel’s grin faded for a moment before it picked up again. “Pretty big words for someone without much room to maneuver. You make a move, we shoot him.” He jerked his head at Ford, and Loki smiled. He kept his eyes cold, and the man didn’t quite recoil, but he saw it.

“I am capable of recognizing an acceptable loss.”

Ford was staring like he’d never seen Loki before now, and like he sorely wanted to panic. Loki couldn’t really blame him, not really, but his heart was thudding in his ears and his focus had narrowed to one target only. Gabriel’s tongue flicked out and he licked his lips. Nervousness. Loki savored that. He took a step forward, closing the distance between them.

Yes, Loki thought viciously. **Prove how you don’t fear me. Show fear and lose your power. So come in close, close enough for me to-**

“You expect me to believe,” he said, slowly, “That you can actually break steel-”

*Close enough,* Loki thought, coldly, and moved. A single spell to shatter the metal binding his hands and he reached out with the same stroke to the man holding a gun to Ford’s head. *Your skin is on fire,* he shoved at him, *melting from your bones,* and if it was too clumsy to stick it was enough to get the man’s hand to jerk away, enough for Loki to grab Gabriel’s head between his hands.

“No. That is not how this game is played. Not with brute force. With finesse.”

THOUGHT INTRUDED, though quietly. *No. The thought intruded, though quietly. No. That is not how this game is played. This is not how your game is played. Not with brute force. With finesse.* The man was almost whimpering. Pathetic. Weak. (Like you.) Ford, he knew, was watching. Good. Let them all see what they had on a leash, let them fear-

*Is that what you want?*

“I have money,” Gabriel said. “I can double whatever you’re getting from the government, triple it-” Fear almost rolling like a scent off his skin, and suddenly Loki felt a sick surge of disgust.

*Such strength, to frighten ants. What proof of your power.*

No. The thought intruded, though quietly. *No. That is not how this game is played. This is not how your game is played. Not with brute force. With finesse.* The man was almost whimpering. Loki took a deep breath through his nose and let it out, and gathered his power to him.

“We are done here,” he said, and put force behind the words, letting it roll out in a wave. Gabriel’s eyes rolled up in his head almost immediately and he slumped, but Loki did not relinquish his hold until the other guards had dropped as well. Then he paced over to Ford and snapped his bonds with a sharp wave of his hand. The agent’s eyes were not quite wide, but Loki could almost hear him
thinking.

He wondered how much he’d been told, and flashed a thin smile. “Come,” he said, “We still have information to retrieve, do we not?”

He was still humming, almost, on a razor fine edge. But Loki would just have to face that later.

Loki glanced back, and then summoned Gabriel’s appearance for himself and slipped into it. He did not look to see the way in which Ford was watching him. “Let us see what we can find,” he said in a voice not his own.

Ford said no more than two or three words to him the full rest of the duration of their mission. Loki did not let it trouble him, did not let it worry him, determinedly did not. In his borrowed skin, and absent inconvenient interruptions, they moved through the facility unhindered, gained the information they were looking for and then some. To their captors, they would appear to have merely escaped, the memory of magic fuzzy and perhaps confusing enough to be dismissed by some mundane explanation. It was not, ultimately, such a poor result. Perhaps even for the best. Fond as Loki was of eavesdropping from shadows, more often than not the things people had to say were less than useful.

(And yet like barbs, like thorns catching in his skin and sticking – what kind of freak are you? Nothing but interest, of course, curiosity, curiosity like his technicians with their endless questions and preposterous notions about the order of things, not horror or disgust or-)

Loki retreated to his rooms the moment he got the chance and closed the door firmly behind him. He would be heard if he screamed as he wanted to, loud enough to leave his throat raw. A new life, he thought, he had told himself he was starting a new life, and his old kept coming back. Here, his old kept coming back. When his life had been quiet and contained and confined to the simplest of things- Because you could ignore it. Because you did not have to face it, or yourself, or anything. Because you fell, and then you ran, and then you kept running. You covered the wounds but they are still there. He had reacted emotionally, irrationally, and without self-control.

He paced around the narrow confines of his room and finally sat down, forcing himself to stillness. I chose this, he reminded himself. Chose to remain on Midgard. Chose to work with these mortals. Chose to take a risk. Would you pretend that you did not think there would be – difficulties?

“What happened,” a voice asked from the doorway, and Loki started, and immediately felt a twinge of sharp irritation with himself for not hearing anyone approach, or the door open. He ought to have locked it.

It was Coulson, though. His – his minder. Loki quirked an eyebrow at him.

“Is my report required already?” They will cast you out, the thought whispered across the back of his mind, or try to cage you. He shoved the thought down.

“Not formally, no.”

“Informally?”

“Not that either.” Coulson paused, seeming to consider him. “Ford requested he not accompany you again. Barton didn’t make the same request but heavily implied it. You’re not making friends in the field, Agent Silver.”
“That was never particularly one of my skills,” Loki said with a sharp smile.

“Dr. Sheffer seems to like you.” That startled Loki, and he blinked at Coulson for a moment before schooling his face to stillness.

“Does she? That comes as a surprise.” Loki folded his hands together and leaned back in his chair. “Are you so concerned about my social life?”

“Ford said that you nearly compromised the mission.” Coulson’s gaze on him was level and calm. “That you reacted…unexpectedly violently. I want to know why.”

It was a reasonable request. Answering it locked in Loki’s throat. “What is a mutant?” he asked, abruptly, instead of answering. He half expected Coulson to object, to insist that he account for himself at once. He did not.

“Mutants? Huh. I guess I didn’t think that…they’re humans that are born, sometimes, with… augmented abilities. Physical, mental, as far as we can tell they run the whole range of possibilities. They are…” He seemed to be considering. “Their legal status is…complicated.”

“Complicated?”

“Their community and the government are not on very good terms. One faction is in outright war with normal human society. Some people say they are the next stage of human evolution. It creates… problems.”

“And how do most see them?” Loki asked, quietly.

“Depends. As with anything, some people are more tolerant than others. Some people get scared, others get angry, some people create cults worshiping them as some kind of gods.” Loki could not help a snort, and Coulson glanced at him briefly before shaking his head. “Most people, most of the time, don’t bother to think about it. It doesn’t touch them, so why bother?”

Loki nodded. He propped his chin on his hands, mind circling back and back and back until he chased the entire flock of thoughts away. “It will not happen again,” he said, finally.

“I’d still like to know what happened in the first place. This is a stressful job. You’re new at it. Part of my job is keeping an eye on my agents.”

“You think,” Loki said, infusing his voice with obvious scorn, “I am cracking under the strain?”

“No,” said Coulson, clearly. “But every agent has limits. I need to know yours.”

Loki stared at him, not quite blankly. His first urge was to snap that he was not weak, that he knew his own limits and needed no…but the words died on his tongue before they even reached his lips. He would not go so far as to call it concern, but it was nonetheless…

“He made a particular remark that…irritated me,” Loki said, finally. Coulson was regarding him with that placid yet strangely intent gaze.

“Mmm.” Loki expected further questioning, but it was not forthcoming. He kept himself still, deliberately resisting the urge to fidget.

“What do you know,” Loki said suddenly, examining his hands resting loosely linked on his legs, “Of what I am?” The question came half on impulse, and the moment it emerged he half wanted to take it back.
Coulson scrutinized him. “Not much. Basic blood workup which just tells us that you’re a fair bit off normal, further than mutant would account for. Resources – aside from falling out of the sky - suggest off planet but we don’t have the knowledge to figure where.”

“That does not trouble you?”

“No,” Coulson said, placidly. “Not until it becomes a security risk, and I’m hoping that we’re going to steer clear of interplanetary wars. I make use of the resources I have, regardless of origin. You aren’t our first…repatriated agent.”

“‘Repatriated?’” Loki could not stop the amused twitch of his mouth. That was, he supposed, one way of looking at it. He paused, and then smoothed his voice to level. “I feel I ought to…apologize. My behavior was a…shameful loss of control. I do not wish you to…regret your decision.” Coulson seemed faintly amused, but it was so brief and so slight that Loki thought he might have imagined it.

“I don’t yet. It does occur to me, though,” he said after a moment, “That we may be…misusing your talents.”

Loki blinked. “Oh?”

“It’s something for me to consider,” Coulson said, and then shifted slightly, making direct eye contact. “Chandra tells me she’s made some interesting progress on her studies of your…abilities. I don’t understand most of the science of it, but she seems pretty impressed.”

“She overestimates herself,” Loki said, coolly. “Her understanding is still minimal at best.”

“Nonetheless. I appreciate you cooperating with her work.”

Loki shifted his weight, slightly. “It is not such an imposition,” he said, deliberately regal. Smothering the urge to ask what she had said of him. “Is that all?”

“For the moment, I believe it is.” The man regarded him a moment more, and then stepped back. Loki again caught that brief, faint hint of a smile. “You should try working with Agent Romanov,” he said. “I think you might get along. I’ll see to organizing that.”

Loki wondered if mortals would ever cease to surprise him. Strange and unpredictable and with such a curious overabundance of – compassion? No, that was not quite the right word. “You are a strange man,” Loki said, slowly, tilting his head slightly to the side.

“I think I’ll take that as a compliment,” Coulson said, mild as ever, and retreated, closing the door quietly behind him.

He dreamed that night of a summer day, of being young and climbing one of Idunn’s trees, reaching, stretching for one golden fruit just out of arm’s reach. Thor below him. “Loki, hurry!” he cried, and Loki stretched out his hand further and then was falling –

-and falling and falling, and was never going to stop.

But he wasn’t afraid.

Interlude (VIII)

He moved cities.

It seemed only sensible. He should not have remained so close to the site of his fall to begin with.
anyone came looking –

(No one will come looking for you.)

He caught a train (a curious method of traveling, but the novelty made it exciting) to the south and disembarked at his whim, summarily keeping himself beneath the notice of his traveling companions. Loki listened to their conversations, idle, trivial things, and tried not to let his thoughts spin off into dangerous directions.

The new Midgardian center was much like the old. Busy, full of people, quick-moving and never still. He walked for a time, aimlessly; found himself some lodgings, and primarily observed.

He spoke to no one. He dreamed fragmented dreams that made little or no sense and absorbed a thousand trivial details. It was, at least, an effective distraction. He puzzled out the workings of the computer devices that humans seemed remarkably fond of, and opened a new font of information to his perusal. Almost overwhelming, but that Loki could bury himself in it and was content to do so.

Currency. Culture. Tradition. Politics. He was learning an entire realm, and sometimes it was enough to make his head want to spin.

They were small people, petty people of short lives and limited vision. They rushed through their lives in a hurry perhaps understandable given the shortness of their time. They had little natural talent, were startlingly breakable, were prone to turning on each other one day and defending a stranger the next for reasons that seemed entirely arbitrary.

He watched, from a cautious distance, and his mind kept flickering back-

What about them so caught your attention? He’d wanted to know, how did they change you, when all I did was nothing to you? He still wondered. And yet he…

They are clever, in their limited fashion. They know they have limits and yet seek to reach beyond them. They are adaptable. Their constant rush means they are never stagnant. Asgard fears change. Midgard embraces it.

He watched them mill through their lives, busy and ever so slightly frantic; closed his eyes and let himself breathe their rhythms and their habits as he moved through them at a careful distance.

They can change, he thought, watching a program on the television in his room, not sure whether to be fascinated by the novelty or bored by the trite story. They can change. Would you dare do less?
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

So I'm a little embarrassed. (Okay, a lot embarrassed.) A month, self? Really? I HAVE EXCUSES but it mostly amounts to "I was busy and writing is hard" so you know, I AM SO SORRY. Here's hoping updates get more regular here on in, I have kind of a direction now and a notion of the middle of things, which should help.

As ever, with thanks and love to zaataronpita for being an excellent beta and an even better friend, and continuing to let me spew my writing insecurities all over her face. So thanks.

“I feel,” Loki said, “remarkably foolish.”

“You look absolutely dignified,” said one of the technicians fluttering around him, “Promise.” Roslyn, he thought he remembered. He narrowed his eyes at her, suspicious. “Just hold still.”

Loki exhaled through his nose and cast his eyes at the complicated apparatus that she was connecting him to, that Loki thought infinitely more interesting than whatever small thing they were trying to work out today. “Remind me again why I agreed to this?”

“Because you like me?” Roslyn was busily connecting a last few cords. Guy was hovering over her shoulder until she swatted him away.

“Doubtful. I don’t like any of you.”

“Oh, well. It was a thought.” Roslyn turned around and pushed her hair back behind her ears. It was a nervous gesture, for all her cheerful energy. It was funny, he thought, how he’d begun to know them: Roslyn’s tendency to fret, Marcus’s enthusiastic fondness for a TV series he kept insisting Loki would enjoy. When Chandra was snappish she could be appeased by fresh fruit, though not apples, and given the chance Richard would argue about anything with anyone. Small details, not worth much, but he couldn’t help filing them away.

For all their curiosity and fumbling and inane questions, there was a strange kind of comfort here. Most of the time.

“And this is to…what?”

“Brain waves. Measuring them. It’s pretty basic, but…the other equipment we use for this is pretty bulky. Also expensive, and apparently you give off some kind of funny low level interference…”

Loki frowned. “I what?”

“Low level interference, electrical or…this is what Nelson’s been talking to you about, isn’t it?”

“Is it? He has an unfortunate tendency to ramble and I tend to largely cease to pay attention ten minutes in.” Roslyn looked briefly torn between wincing and laughing.
“Yeah, he…does that. Okay, I think everything’s…try to hold still, all right? Now just…wait. I need
a baseline reading. Eyes open.” Her voice gained in confidence, he noticed, when she was actually
doing things. He doubted she was even aware of it.

“Hey! Silver!” Chandra’s ever piercing, impressively modulated tones broke into his half-formed
thoughts. “Coulson wants you.”

Roslyn’s expression was almost crushed. “Can it wait?”

“Didn’t sound like it.”

Loki began delicately extricating himself from the entanglement of wires, plucking the electrodes free
from his hair, noting the stickiness of them with distaste. “My apologies. Duty calls, it would seem.”
Or he hoped, anyway. The need to do something itched at him like a stinging fly.

“You’ll be back,” Roslyn said, and there was a hint of demand to it. More confidence indeed. He
sketch her a bow.

“Of course. And may our next soiree remain…uninterrupted.” He pretended, politely, not to notice
her flush, though he grinned a little to himself as he slipped out of the lab and headed for the
elevators instead of using his magic. Coulson had politely requested that he stop teleporting within
the facility, as it apparently caused any delicate equipment in the area to short out. Including,
Coulson had noted, everything he used to keep track of agents in the field.

Loki had taken the hint.

He rode the elevator up and strode down the hallway to Coulson’s office, which was tucked in an
out of the way corner in a remarkably small space. The man went through so much effort to remain
unnoticed that Loki was periodically inclined to wonder how much Fury truly ran things. The door,
to his surprise, was already open, and Agent Coulson was not alone.

Loki stopped in the doorway. “If I’d known there was company I would have come better prepared,”
he said, smoothly. Slender, a great deal shorter than himself, and not wearing the usual uniform. He
might have mistaken her for inconsequential if it weren’t for the fact that he could see her giving him
the same looking over that he was giving her.

“Come in,” said Coulson, unconcerned as ever. “And shut the door.” Loki pulled the door closed
behind him, but kept his back close to it, and gave Coulson a look he hoped communicated his
irritation at being taken off guard. He had almost never been fond of surprises, and the fact that this
was likely a deliberately calculated one did not make it any better. Quite the opposite, really.

“Are you going to introduce me?”

She stood up, and that was the giveaway. Graceful, sure, and with an unmistakable deadly edge; he
could almost be impressed. “Agent Romanov,” she said, eyes on him thoroughly cool and
dispasionate. After a moment Loki decided not to offer her a bow, choosing instead to incline his
head. He remembered that name.

Wasn’t that interesting.

“Agent Silver, then. You will not offer me the honor of a first name?”

The smile she flashed was quick and sharp. “Maybe later.” She looked back at Coulson, and he
cought something passing between them unspoken.
Loki felt a slight prickle along his nerves, and pushed it down. He strode over to the unoccupied chair and sprawled in it. “I presume you summoned me here because you have something for me to do. At a guess, with Miss Romanov, who I recall you mentioned.” He noted the slight twitch of her mouth at the ‘miss,’ and did not allow himself to be amused.

“It’s not clear at this point,” Romanov said, crossing her arms. “But I’d rather be prepared than encounter any surprises. Coulson thinks your skill set could be of use to me.”

“In?”

“For now,” she said, with another sidelong glance at Coulson, “Ornamentation. I’m attending a function and I am supposed to have a male escort.” Loki could not decide if she was displeased or amused, which was intriguing in itself. There was a short list of people whose facial expressions he struggled to read.

“And that is me?” Loki said. The look Coulson gave him was not particularly appreciative of his tone.

“I told you I think you and Agent Romanov would work well together, Silver. Romanov’s usual partner is on another assignment and you were unoccupied. Besides, I get the feeling you’d do better than most at fitting in at this kind of party.”

“I think I’ll choose to be flattered,” Loki said, and let himself be gratified by that flicker of amusement that was still all he’d won from Coulson thus far. He turned to Romanov. “Your usual partner?”

“You’ve met.” Now she was definitely amused, if only slightly, and, he suspected, a little at his expense. He did not let that trouble him.


The corners of her mouth twitched very slightly. “He might have mentioned you.”

His smile was deliberately a little too toothy. “I’m sure it was entirely concerned with my winning personality.”

Romanov didn’t even bat an eyelash. “Certainly.”

“All right,” Coulson cut in before Loki could answer, “Much as I understand that the banter is a traditional part of getting-to-know-you games…on task.”

“I’m always on task,” Loki murmured. Romanov made a peculiar noise, but when he looked in her direction her expression was impassive and her gaze perfectly level on his. After a moment, she sat down as well, and crossed one leg demurely over the other.

“It’s relatively short notice. Tomorrow night.” Perhaps he imagined the challenge in her expression.

“I need little in the way of preparation.” How much, Loki tried not to wonder, was Romanov supposed to be watching him more than this mark of theirs? He tried to be amused by the thought rather than annoyed, though the latter was tempting.

She narrowed her eyes. “You’ll need to set about acquiring proper attire.”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “I have a fair amount of reasonably fine clothing.”
“You misunderstand me,” Romanov said, and her smirk was maybe just a little sharp. “It’s a costume party. Themed.” Oh, well. Loki felt a sudden and eerie sense of déjà vu – although he was fairly sure the situation had been reversed - and narrowed his eyes.

“Themed,” he echoed. “What sort of theme?”

Animals. They were to dress as animals. If it were not Coulson – even as it was – Loki was tempted to think he was being mocked. He pushed that thought down, though, and told himself it might be fun. At the very least Romanov…intrigued him.

It occurred to Loki that this was exactly the sort of farce the Vanir would love. Someone would have to inform them.

Not him, though, of course.

He had been given the address of a hotel room, and transported himself to just outside the door, startling a man down the hall, who he ignored. Loki knocked, twice, and waited.

Somehow he did not think simply teleporting into her room would end well.

“Hello?”

“It’s me.” He heard the click of a lock – or perhaps the safety of a gun, he thought a touch wryly - and she opened the door a moment later. Dressed as a panther (sleek, dark, and dangerous; it suited, he thought) with a mask covering just her eyes, she looked him over from head to toe, a critical and assessing gaze the only visible hint to her thoughts. He extended his arms for better inspection.

“Do I satisfy your standards?” He asked, and caught the smallest flicker of smile through her eyes.

“Impressive,” she said, though her tone was anything but impressed. “Eyecatching. You’re not bad at this.”

Loki had ultimately chosen a fox, fashioned a mask himself and dressed in a grey suit and a coat trimmed lightly with fur. It was not, perhaps, accurate, but it was elegant, and Loki suspected the latter of being more important. In his experience, it usually was. “Elaborate costuming is something I have some familiarity with,” he said, just a touch dryly, even if no one but he would know the joke.

“You didn’t take a plane in,” she noted.

“No,” he agreed. “I didn’t. I found the novelty wore off rather quickly, and thought it more expedient to travel by other means. Was I wrong?”

“No, just early.” She turned and gestured at him to come in. “That just gives us more time to go over how this is going to go. As long as we’re there, I’m Natalia Tomasek. As far as Joseph McRooter knows, I’m wealthy, bored, and interested in financing his re-election campaign.”

“What exactly, if I may ask, do you think is the problem?” Loki padded into the room and settled on the only available chair. “This man. Do you suspect him of treason or…?”

Romanov turned and looked at him for a moment, and then pulled off her mask and sat down on the edge of one of the beds. “I don’t know exactly what I suspect. That’s part of why you’re here.” Loki raised his eyebrows and waited. “If there’s some sort of…interference. Would you be able to tell?”

“You mean if he’s been enchanted.”
Romanov didn’t quite wince the way the techs tended to when he threw words like that at them. But she did grimace, very briefly. “Yes. Or something like that. Given his…erratic behavior, and a few other anomalies…there are, of course, other possibilities. But if you can detect and rule out one of those without too much effort…it seemed convenient.”

Loki sat down on the other bed and crossed one ankle casually over the other knee. “I see. And if that is not the case?”

“Then I will proceed accordingly.” Romanov scrutinized him, and Loki returned the attention. She was interesting. Small, almost petite, but to his eye even in finery there was nothing soft about her. Steel all the way through. He wondered if others would notice the same, though. Loki was well aware of the power that being underestimated could give, and had no doubt that she knew the same.

He wondered, abruptly, what Sif would think of her, and in the next breath submerged that thought and drowned it, ruthlessly.

“Coulson referred to you as…mm. ‘Repatriated.’ What did he mean by that?”

She sat back and considered him, seeming thoughtful. “SHIELD has roughly three ways of dealing with serious threats,” she said, after a moment. “Elimination, neutralization, and assimilation. I – and you, from what I’ve heard – fall under the third category.”

Loki had observed as much. And had to, a little, admire the efficiency of it. Kill what you could, contain what could not be killed, and control what could not be contained. He might bridle at it if he thought on it too long. “You are, unless I am greatly mistaken, entirely human.”

“Only a little mistaken.” She frowned, slightly. “How much do you know about human history?”

He shrugged. “Passably enough.”

“If I told you I started my career as a spy for Russia during the Cold War, would that explain it?”

“I can guess well enough that you mean an enemy of your current employer.”

Romanov’s expression twitched, but too slightly and too quickly for him to identify with any certainty. “Close enough.”

Loki cocked his head to the side. “What persuaded you to turn traitor, then?” He expected her to flinch, or frown, or object to his invocation of betrayal. She did not. Her eyes met his perfectly levelly.

“Same as got you on board, I’d guess. They offered me something I didn’t have.”

“And that was?”

“None of your business.” That line of questioning, her voice said, was over. Loki knew that tone, and knew further prying would get him nowhere. He held up both his hands, mock defensively.

“Idle curiosity only, I assure you.” Not knowing would itch at him, he knew, but he could file the question away for later puzzling.

She stood, in one fluid and graceful motion, “It can stay idle, then. For the evening, you’ll need another name. And suitable employment.” Romanov looked him over. “Do you have one you’ve used before?”
“None suitable.”

“It’s probably best if you pick it. As for employment…” she eyed him. “Concert pianist. European. I have a feeling you can do ‘diva’ very well.” Her tone turned only slightly acerbic at the end, and he judiciously decided not to comment.

Loki raised his eyebrows. “And why has the ambitious Natalie Tomasek taken up with me?”

Romanov’s smile was sharp. “Of course. She likes exotic, pretty things.”

“And I am…an exotic, pretty thing.”

“Don’t let it go to your head.” Her smile only got sharper. “We’ve got a few hours. Have you ever played chess?”

Loki picked up the game quickly. She still won two out of three matches, but Loki took the losses gracefully. Mostly.

Although he did determine that next time he would not suffer such a defeat.

Romanov herself got no less interesting with time. She was difficult to read, nearly opaque even to him. Getting her to talk about herself became almost a game to him, one she dodged as well as she did his attacks on the board. He wondered what she had gleaned of him, or if he was not supposed to know that she was doing so, or if she intended him to notice and that was part of the game.

He hadn’t, if he was honest, had such a diverting couple hours in years.

Going over the possibilities in his head was a pleasant distraction. At the moment, he needed a distraction from his surroundings. Milling crowds of people, fluttering uselessly and full of inane conversation. Jostling to be seen with the right person at the right time. Luxury that bordered on opulence. It reminded him too forcefully of ambassadorial journeys to Vanaheim, right down to the near stench of hypocrisy.

Well, he had conducted himself through more odious affairs often enough to speak pleasantly to those people Romanov spoke with, and a few that she did not. It was a comfort that Romanov did not seem to be enjoying herself either – at least not when no one was looking. When they were, she played the socialite to the hilt, to all appearances basking in the attention and conversation and the rest.

Another thing to add to his mental file on Romanov, which if disappointingly sparse still had a few tidbits of interest.

“Nothing?” she said lowly, as they moved away from a pair of distinguished looking men, dressed (respectively) as lion and wolf, one of whom had spent an inordinate time with his eyes on the neckline of Romanov’s dress.

“No, not yet.” He was alert, listening, as it were, for any sign of oddities, but so far it was only the low usual murmur of human energy. “If you want me to defend your honor against any of these lechers, please say so.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Romanov said, very nearly icily, and Loki could not help a slight smile. Sif, he thought again, and then shoved the thought angrily down.

“Mmm. I thought as much. Perhaps if we-”
“Natalie! Or – Natasha? I can’t even remember-” Romanov looked momentarily like she wanted to roll her eyes.

“A moment,” she murmured, and turned them to face their interlocutor. He was dressed, curiously enough, without even the slightest pretense of costume; while most present had made at least a token gesture, a mask, exotic makeup, this one looked as though he hadn’t even tried. That aside, Loki had seen enough drunkards to recognize one when he saw one, even if he had been unable to smell the alcohol on his breath when he stumbled and caught himself against Loki’s shoulder. Loki twitched him off and took a very small step away. “Fancy seeing you here. Moving up in the world?”

“Stark,” said Romanov, perfectly coolly. Her mouth was doing that strange thing again, somewhere between annoyed and amused. “No costume?”

“Not a big animal fan. I thought about termites, you know, builders of the animal kingdom, but I figured that probably wouldn’t work out too well.”

“Mmm. Probably not. Also, it’s Natalia; you could try to remember.”

Stark. Loki recognized the name. He had not remained ignorant, strove to keep up with the news, and the media adored the man. He had gathered that most of SHIELD was somewhat less fond.

“Natalia! Right, of course. Looking fantastic as ever.” Stark’s gaze flicked to him, and it looked sharper than Loki would have expected, given his smell. “Before you get too deep in, you should know that sexy as this woman is, she does this thing with her thighs that is seriously—”

“Tony.” Loki could feel his eyebrows trying to rise, and kept them composed. “Please.” Her voice was playful, teasing, but Loki caught the shades of keep going and I will end you in her eyes. Stark raised both hands defensively.

“Okay, okay! Just doing a public service, making sure your handsome date’s aware of his peril – speaking of which, hello, Tony Stark, nice to meet you. I must really smell like brandy, right? Sorry about that, only way to get through these things…” He stuck out a hand that Loki took after a moment and shook. His palm was unexpectedly callused, though Loki supposed he should have expected that. Engineer, he remembered. At least this man built his own machines.

“Aleksander Evenstad.” Loki affected a polite, slightly bored smile.

He watched Stark’s eyes instead of listening to his mouth, noted the way they glanced between him and Romanov as though he was trying to work something out. Then he grinned in a way Loki recognized as perfectly insincere.

“Just wondering, would it be weird if I flirted with you? Cause that could be a thing that—”

Something pricked on the back of his neck and Loki’s head swiveled, eyes narrowing. For just a moment, he’d thought he felt... Romanov drew closer, her voice barely audible.

“Something?”

“Perhaps. I’m not certain.”

Stark was looking back and forth between them, eyes slightly narrowed. “Hold on, did something just happen that I completely missed?”

“Mmm.” Romanov’s eyes flicked to Stark. “You should clear out of here. Just in case.”
“Are you sure? I could-” He didn’t sound half so drunk as he had a moment ago. Loki half closed his
eyes and cast out his magic, trying to feel for the flicker of a disturbance he’d just felt, like a ripple on
otherwise still water.

“Not tonight. We’ve got this. Fury wants you keeping your head down-”

“If I may break up your little soiree,” Loki cut in. “Perhaps we ought to-” he gestured eloquently.

“Tony, out,” Romanov said once more, and then was standing at his elbow, holding his arm as
though he were escorting her somewhere. “Where,” she asked, in a voice barely audible. “And
what…”

“Oh the other side of the crowd,” he said, beginning to move them through the throng of people in
varying degrees of drunkenness. “As to what – difficult to say.” That small strangeness could be any
number of things – or nothing at all.

His heart had begun to beat a little faster. He could see it in her, too, anticipation and excitement.
Bloodthirst. He tucked that away as well, and thought, spy. Ha.

“What did you notice?” she asked.

“Not much,” Loki murmured, keeping his head bent toward her as though whispering some sweet
nothings. “It may well be nothing at all. Or…”

“Natalia! Introduce me, would you?”

Loki wheeled, startled, half instinctively moving to shove Romanova out of the way, but she had
already released his arm and turned, smiling. “Joseph! I was wondering when I’d run into you. This
is Aleksander – Aleksander, Senator Joseph.”

So this was their mark. Startlingly ordinary, Loki thought, plain to look at, unremarkable in almost
every way. Even his costume understated enough that it was only the mask dangling at his side that
seemed to suggest a concession to the theme. He offered a hand and a faint smile. “Charmed. Natalia
seems quite…enthusiastic about your politics.”

“But not yourself?” That smile grated at him. He’d seen it on a hundred courtiers, all of them
eternally insincere and utterly uninterested in anything but the favors he could gain them by his
proximity to the throne. Former proximity. Loki thought again of Vanaheim, and the taste of it was
bitter.

“Aleksander’s not an American citizen,” Romanov broke in. Her hand on his arm was just slightly
too tight. “I’ve told you how I feel about American men.” Her smile was sweet, almost teasing. Loki
kept his face still, but he had to be slightly impressed with the transformation, the suggestion of
flirtation around her eyes.

He reached out, tentatively, but the room was a quiet pond to his other senses again. No ripples. He
was, briefly, almost ferociously disappointed. For a moment, he thought the senator glanced sharply
at him, almost as though he’d felt something, but when Loki focused properly he was talking again.

“…disappointed not to see you at the gala last weekend.”

“I was sorry to miss it.” Romanov’s eyes flickered in his direction, very briefly, though her smile
remained truly dazzling. “I can only hope you’ll be holding another one soon.”

“And would you be bringing your Aleksander with you?” Loki adopted the pleasant expression that
had slipped away somewhat as the Senator’s eyes came back to him. “If I may ask, what brings you
to the Americas?”
“I am currently on tour. I am something of a musician and-”

“Joe! Hey, Joseph!”

McRooter sighed. “And so I am called away. I’d much rather talk to you, Natalia, get to know your new beau, but so many people, you understand…we’ll have to set up a time. Call my secretary, she’ll put you in.”

“Of course,” Romanov said, easily, her badly concealed disappointment positively artful. “Soon, I hope…” She watched him move away, and then murmured, “Anything?”

“Nothing,” Loki murmured, with something not quite a sigh. “As far as I can tell, he is utterly…”

He trailed off. It was nothing obviously wrong. A glimpse out of the corner of his eye and the slightest, smallest flutter against his senses. He whirled. “Wait,” he said, to the man’s back and Romanov both. “McRooter.” He gathered his magic and took a step toward the man. “If I may…”

The senator half turned, looking vaguely perplexed. “I’m sorry?” he said, nearly pitch perfect confusion. Nearly. Except for the very slight new tension around his eyes.

“Have we met before?” Loki asked, politely. “I just had the oddest feeling-”

“I certainly know no reason why you would have,” the man started to say, and Loki wove the last few ends of his working and let it go, let his senses slide sideways.

It was small. It was quiet. It was buried under layer upon layer of mundane normalcy, barely perceptible.

But still there.

He blinked. Joseph McRooter was staring back at him, wide eyed, his mouth hanging slightly open. The flicker of fear wasn’t from him, though. No, whatever was hiding inside this man had recognized the touch of magic, and knew itself discovered. Loki’s eyes narrowed.

“Natalia,” he said, lowly, body coiling.

The man wheeled to break into a run, but Romanov was faster. Within seconds she had him on the floor, pinned on his stomach with his arm drawn up behind his back and a milling crowd of people reaching for their phones.

“Explain,” Romanov snapped at him.

Loki flashed his teeth at her and began to gather his magic for a different working, one he had to scramble to remember. “I think you would rather I used my time to-”

Too late. The man under Romanov began to jerk and then to spasm, his limbs flailing wildly, and he made strangled choking sounds. It took only seconds, and then he fell still.

“I’m calling 911,” said one of the guests, clearer than the others. Loki casually sent out a bolt of energy and fried her phone.

“I would suggest not. R- Tomasek, move.” She was already on her feet, looking from him to the dead man on the floor, and then to the guests. Loki ignored them all, knelt and flipped the man over. His eyes were already glazed, and Loki summoned one of his knives. “I suggest,” Loki said, coolly, to that blank face, “You explain yourself.”
“Evenstad,” Romanov said tightly. He ignored her. Waited a few more moments.

“If you remain silent,” he said finally, “I will cut open this man’s skull, find where you have hidden, and see to it that you die in exquisite pain.”

“He’s dead already,” Natasha said, flatly.

“McRooter is,” Loki said, coolly. “Which is…unfortunate. But I think…”

“Not many are able to know me.”

Romanov sucked in a breath. Loki could not help a small, satisfied smile. The man’s eyes were still dull, but his mouth moved with the words. Someone further back made a strangled noise. “Stark,” Romanov said, not looking up. “Get everybody out.”

So the drunkard had stayed. “All right,” Loki heard him say. “Everything’s under control, I’ve called the authorities, let’s move away from here…don’t give me that, ma’am, do you know who I am?” Loki did not look up.

“Unlucky,” he said. “I am one of the few who would. You are far from home indeed.”

“I am not the only one of whom that is true.”

Loki did not let that sting. “What is it?” Romanov interrupted, before he could answer. “Is it some sort of-” She broke off. He glanced over his shoulder to see a look of utter disgust on her face, a gun trained on the corpse on the floor.

“A parasite,” Loki said, coolly. “Inhabitants of a remote moon somewhere between the realms. They share the place with a host creature that I understand maintains a reciprocal relationship with… Are you expanding, then?”

Silence. Loki hummed under his breath and reached deliberately for his magic.

“Wait,” said the dead man. “Sanctuary. I invoke sanctuary. By right of-”

Loki narrowed his eyes. “Your species is hardly in danger of annihilation.”

Silence, again. He heard Romanov shift. “Is this an invasion,” she asked, impressively level given that Loki could feel her discomfort. This was not, he gathered, for what she’d been trained. But she adapted admirably.

“Our home is gone,” said the thing inside Senator McRooter, finally. There was something…almost a quaver to the voice, but of course that was illusory. The voice was not even its own. “Our hosts all destroyed. Some few of us managed to escape the destruction, but-”

“Lie,” Loki said coolly. “That’s absurd. A cataclysm on that scale would have been heard.” Unless – no. That thought itself was further absurdity.

“Asgard does not know all.”

“Only most.”

“Fascinating as interstellar politics is - why here?” Natasha interrupted.

“Chance.” The dead man’s voice was nearly dispassionate, without emotion. His eyes did not move, but the next was clearly directed to Loki. “I asked for sanctuary. Will you grant it?”
“You killed your host. An act of aggression could be claimed.”

“You startled me. An unfortunate accident. We are still adapting to human bodies.”

“We. How many?”

A long pause. Loki flipped his knife once. “Perhaps sixty,” the thing said, finally, and Natasha swore vehemently.

“Well,” Loki said, softly. “That is a problem.”

“Everything else aside,” Romanov said, lowly. “We can’t – that is not a tenable state of affairs. That many, how are we supposed to–”

“We send a message,” Loki interrupted. He met the dead man’s eyes as though he could see through them to the intelligence beneath. “You are a hive species, yes? You share a consciousness?”

“Yes,” after a moment.

“So what I tell you will be communicated to all in this realm?”

“Yes,” again, sounding more sure of itself. “And we will remember the friendship of the Aesir–”

“Oh,” Loki said. “Good.” And he slammed the knife through the senator’s chin, through the roof of his mouth, and into the brain where he knew the thing would be curled, latched to its host.

“Unlucky,” he said, too quietly to be overheard. “I’m not Aesir, and your friendship is of no use to me.”

Romanov, he realized belatedly, was watching him. Her eyes narrowed speculatively, but she did not, he noted, look troubled. He wondered if she would make the same request as the others. Wondered if she would claim he had been too quick to kill.

Loki was disinclined to trust anything that came from within the Void between realms. Or, if he was honest, anything that might manage to bear word to Asgard.

“We could have gotten more information,” she said, finally. “Where the rest are, maybe.”

“We could have,” Loki agreed. “But this was faster. The others will feel their hive-mate die. They will know how he perished and depart for safer pastures.”

“Are more likely to turn up later?”

“No,” Loki said, straightening. Our home is gone. Perhaps they’d been lying, only seeking mercy. He felt a brief twinge of something at that thought, and shoved it ruthlessly down. Loki could think of no reason that remote moon should be gone. But somehow he was not inclined to think it a lie, even if it would have been…comforting, in some way, to believe that. It was something in the voice, perhaps. Some familiar flavor of despair that made him think of-

But of course, that was soft-hearted foolishness. For his own sake, and this world’s, his way was better.

“No, I don’t think so.”

Asgard, he realized too late. Aesir. This creature had named him. Falsely, true, but he couldn’t help but hope that Romanov had made nothing of the names.
Loki rubbed his hands against his legs in a nervous gesture he had not indulged in for years. *This is nothing,* he told himself sternly. *Simple enough. And something you will need to do. Have needed to do for some time.*

It was only a bookstore. Small, only a few blocks from his house.

He’d chosen his clothing carefully, opting after some thought to hunt down and purchase a set of clothing of considerably lower quality than his other, verging on shabby. It was a calculated choice to encourage sympathy, compassion such as he had observed in his particular targets of the day.

It itched, though. And he felt severely self-conscious. Perhaps this was not so necessary after all.

*Stop that.* Everything he had faced, yet here he was, stalling. *Coward,* he thought, and shoved himself into motion. He slipped through the front door as he had several mornings before and strolled over to the front counter. The woman behind the counter seemed to be distracted, bobbing her head up and down. Headphones, he decided, after a moment. That had been a source of some consternation to him for a while, the impression that those around him were enjoying the sound of music he could not hear.

He was still learning.

Loki tapped his fingers on the desk, and when that produced no response cleared his throat a touch more loudly. The woman startled and then turned, looking slightly embarrassed.

“*Oh – hello, can I help you?*”

“I spoke to you on the phone the other day,” he said, deliberately keeping himself still. “*About applying for employment here.*”

“Oh!” her expression brightened, fractionally. “Right, I remember. L...it started with an L, right?”

“Luke,” he said, a little more easily. The name still fit him uneasily, but he was adjusting to it. Molding himself to it, little by little. It was a process. “I’m afraid I can’t recall…”

“I probably didn’t introduce myself. Megan, hi. So you want a job here? Haven’t you heard print media’s on its way out?”

“Print media,” Loki said with authoritative certainty, “will *never* be ‘on its way out.’ Regardless of other advances.”

Megan grinned. “Good answer. Do you have any experience in retail?”

Simple enough to lie. He was tempted to, but it was all too likely that would show when he started working. “No,” he said, and offered a sheepish smile. “I’m afraid not.”

“Huh,” she said. “Well. The boss says he wants someone with experience, preferably in other bookstores, but it’s worth a shot, honestly, he’s a softie. Resume and everything?”

“Mmm. Sent already.”

“Right, okay. Ron’s in the back.” She kicked up her feet and tilted her head back to bellow, “Hey! Ron!” Loki did not quite wince, but a moment later a bespectacled, middle-aged man poked his head out, looking only slightly harried.
“Meg, I’ve asked you any number of times not to-” his eyes moved to Loki, and he blinked slightly. “Oh. Did you need help?”

“Of a sort.” Loki could feel himself beginning to relax in that strange way these mundane conversations seemed to manage. They were so…ordinary. So entirely void of expectation or snare, even if he couldn’t help but look for them. “I called – seeking employment?”

“Ah! Yes,” Ron said, looking curiously relieved and also shooting Megan a strangely dirty look that Loki was at a loss to understand. “Of course. I looked over the résumé you sent in. If you’ll pardon my saying so, you seem a touch…overqualified, least in terms of education.”

He had researched that project as meticulously as he would any enterprise. Admittedly, he had taken the liberty of giving himself the best false education Loki thought (with his limited understanding) was realistic.

The entire process had almost been entertaining.

“Perhaps so. But practically speaking, employment opportunities are rare. I would rather do something I have an interest in than otherwise.” Megan, Loki could feel, was watching him with open, blatant curiosity. He cast Ron a very slight smile. “Perhaps we might continue this conversation elsewhere?”

The look Ron cast his employee was nearly a glower. Related, Loki concluded. At least, most likely. “Of course,” he said. “I haven’t really been hiring, but…” Loki could see him glancing at his clothing. His magic, near to hand, remained still.

He wanted to know, suddenly, if he could do this on his own merits.
OKAY that was never supposed to take that long. As you may have noticed, I have been posting other things not this for the last while - this was for gifts for the holidays, and having been concluded, I should now be back on my regular schedule. SO THAT'S COOL.

Continued gratitude to zaataronpita, beta and best friend, and to everyone who's been sticking with this and telling me they're enjoying it! You keep my honest. (Or something, anyway.)

Cheers!

Loki had not intended to linger once their backup arrived and began cleaning up the mess –and, Loki thought, undoubtedly disseminating misinformation. He had every intention of slipping away unnoticed, and then Romanov appeared out of nowhere and caught his arm.

"You're taking me to dinner," she said. Loki just managed not to jerk his arm away out of reflex, and blinked at her.

"It seems a bit late for that," he said, rather than commenting on the brusqueness of her invitation. Her eyes flicked past him like she was looking for someone.

"You offered to defend my honor. It would be much appreciated if you did so by keeping me from having to deal with the asshole who's in charge of PR."

Loki settled back on his heels. "You're lying," he informed her, declining to play along. "There is no such motivation, nor would you request my help if there were. Do me the courtesy of not assuming I am utterly without a brain."

Romanov’s expression flickered between irritated and amused. "Fine. I want to talk to you in private. And I am hungry. They hardly serve any food at these things."

Loki considered her for a long moment, and then inclined his head. He could feel his own hunger pangs, however well he managed to ignore them. "I appreciate your honesty. Have you a place in mind?"

"Actually," she said, after a moment, "I think there's a place on Market that's open late."

"I'm afraid I don't know this city well enough for my usual means of transportation," Loki said with a thin smile. "Have you other means?"

"Car," Romanov said, and indicated one of the nondescript black vehicles. "Or I will in a moment. Wait here." Loki settled back on his heels and watched her stride over to a SHIELD agent looking both conspicuously unoccupied and slightly distracted. He straightened up at once when he saw Romanov approaching, however.

Loki tried not to let his thoughts wander. He did not much care for the directions in which they
strayed.

She returned moments later and waved the set of car keys at him. "Get in the car, Silver. And try to relax. I promise I'm not taking you somewhere to kill you." Her smile was quick, sharp, and a little bit deadly, enough to possibly belie the promise. Loki could not help a soft laugh.

"Relaxation is as much my strong point as I suspect it is yours, Agent Romanov." But he slid into the passenger seat of the vehicle, adjusted the seat so he could stretch out his legs, and leaned back. "And am I to call you that all through dinner, or have I earned the honor of your first name?"

She started the car. "Maybe later."

"You have mine."

"I have a name you gave yourself. Probably recently." She glanced sideways at him. "Which is fine. But don't try to pull that argument with me."

Loki flashed his teeth at her. "It was worth a try." She didn't react in the least. He leaned back as much as he could against the seat at his back, smoothing his features back to regally composed. "So, did you find your observation of me edifying?"

"Less than I would have liked," she said, not even bothering to attempt to deny it. A part of Loki had to be amused at her nonchalance.

"I wouldn't be much good at this if I did not know how to hide my mind."

"But not nothing." She didn't so much as glance at him. "You told Coulson that you had some training in negotiation. I'd narrow that down to diplomacy. Am I wrong?"

"If I confirmed your suppositions that would take all the fun out of your guessing," Loki said chidingly. Romanov seemed less than amused.

"So, diplomacy. But not strictly a diplomat, given how quickly you turned to killing even when there might have been other options. You've got a way of looking at people that makes me think you were born with money or power – or maybe both. But that sort of performance irks you – the playing nice to people you don't like thing. So wherever you're from, jockeying for status wasn't part of it."

Loki felt a faint prickle down his spine. "Is there an aim to this exercise?"

"I don't know yet," Romanov said, voice still perfectly calm, almost detached. "You seemed curious, so I'm telling you what I noticed." More than he'd expected. But she hadn't asked about Asgard. He prayed that was a good sign, and not a bad one. She glanced at him, sidelong. "But if you want to change the subject…"

"May I ask what it is you wish to speak of that couldn't wait?"

"You can ask," she said mildly, "Or you can wait and find out in about ten minutes. You hadn't met Stark before, had you?"

"I had not," Loki said, keeping his voice carefully neutral. Romanov smirked.

"He has that effect on most people." Loki angled his gaze sideways, trying to read the shadows of her face.

"You were an assassin," he said suddenly, "Not a spy, I think, before your current employment…"
and I would guess, now as well. If it is necessary." She tensed, very slightly, and he watched her push it away, submerge whatever threatened to surface once more.

"In my line of work, you don't stay alive very long if you don't learn how to kill." Her eyes were still forward on the road, not deviating even an iota in his direction. "I think you know that."

Loki didn't answer. His thoughts kept trying to twist in strange directions, and he focused on keeping them on a tight leash.

They drove the rest of the short way in silence until Romanov pulled off the road and into a parking lot. "Nothing fancy," she said, opening the door and sliding out of the car. "I hope you don't mind."

"I can manage," Loki murmured, unfolding from his seat, and didn't wait for her to stride toward the front door, the garish open sign leaving an afterimage on his eyelids. She caught up to him in a few steps, but it gave him a petty kind of satisfaction. "Though I fear we're rather overdressed."

Romanov shrugged. "I doubt anyone's going to comment. Table for two," she said, to the host before Loki could. The man looked more bored than surprised, although Loki caught the slight twitch of his gaze in Romanov's direction before he pulled it away. He picked up two menus and turned with an only slightly surly, "This way."

Loki arched an eyebrow in Romanov's direction, and she gave him an almost suspiciously sweet smile. "The lasagna's good. I had a craving for Italian."

The restaurant was nearly empty, but the surly young man took them near to the back anyway, dropped the menus on the table, and departed with almost unseemly haste. Loki watched him hurry away before sitting down, pushing the chair back from the table so he could stretch his legs, the picture of casual relaxation he did not truly feel. "You've been here before, then?"

"Once or twice. It's close to a neighborhood of influential people but not out of my price range."

Loki twitched his head in the direction the fleeing young man had gone. "And do you know him, by any chance?"

Romanov smiled, very slightly. "I don't know why you'd think that." Loki felt his lips twitch, and smoothed them out as another server brought them two glasses of water. Romanov sipped at hers. Loki left his where it was.

"You wanted to speak to me," he prompted after a moment's silence. Romanov nodded, very slightly.

"I did."

"About?"

Romanov sat back and examined him with that weighing, assessing gaze. Loki wondered briefly what she was looking for, and kept his expression blank just in case. "You know, for all Agent Barton told me, you're not so bad."

Loki let his eyebrows rise. "High praise."

One corner of Romanov's mouth ticked up. "I wouldn't take it personally. We're both used to a little more…mundane, even if that's starting to change. With a little time…I'd guess he'll come around."

"I shall breathe a sigh of immense relief and stop fretting over that, then," Loki drawled. Romanov
gave him a slight sidelong look. "If you thought that was a concern of mine…"

"Oh no," said Romanov, "I'm sure you're not in the least concerned about anyone else's opinion of you. You're independent. Self-reliant. Damn all the rest of them." She took a sip of her water. "Right?"

Loki let his eyes narrow just a fraction. "Not quite how I would put it, but near enough," he said, as though he hadn't heard the sarcasm underneath. She looked at him a long moment, and then nodded.

"Mmhm." She set her glass down and folded her hands on the table, her tone changing slightly. "You noticed I was observing you. Phil asked me to, and to report what I saw."

Loki was momentarily surprised by the frankness of that admission. He tried not to let it show on his face. "I wouldn't expect you to inform me of this."

"He didn't ask me to evaluate you," Romanov said, her eyes curiously intent, "Or assess a threat. It wasn't an official request. I owe him a favor, professionally, and it was in that spirit he asked me for my…expertise."

"Your expertise," Loki echoed. He could feel himself coiling tight and did his best to mask it. A waiter came by and Romanov glanced at him.

"Ready to order?"

Loki glanced at the menu he'd barely looked at since sitting down. "Not really."

"Mm. Too bad." Romanov flipped her menu closed. "The lasagna, house salad with thousand island on the side. Just water is fine." The waiter's gaze turned to Loki and he offered a thin smile.

"I'll just share hers," he said, pleasantly. She gave him a hard look that he ignored.

"You aren't getting any of my lasagna," she informed him. Loki smiled at her, too, the expression no more genuine. The waiter glanced between them and then vacated the premises.

"I shall keep that in mind."

Her eyes narrowed and then relaxed. She sat forward, elbows leaning on the table. "Yeah, my expertise. He thought I might be helpful in…your particular situation."

"Why you," Loki asked, steepling his fingers under his chin. "Out of everyone he might have chosen…why you?"

Her eyes on him were perfectly opaque, nearly impossible to read. After a few moments, she dropped them to flick to her glass of water and picked it up to sip at it. "I didn't integrate well," she said, finally. "When I was first hired. I wasn't great at cooperation and it was starting to look like the wrong call had been made bringing me in." She shrugged one shoulder. "I had someone who got me back in line, made sure I stayed clean. SHIELD – particularly Coulson - knows an asset when it sees one. He thinks you're floundering. Are you?"

*Floundering?* Loki felt a hot flare of anger and answered nearly automatically, snapping, "No."

Romanov set down her water glass. "Not necessarily professionally. Personally."

"Meaning?" Loki said, voice tight. Romanov just looked at him, levelly, but Loki had taken much sterner looks from much more intimidating opponents.
"I think you're smart enough to work that one out," she said finally. Loki propped his chin on his hands and threw her an amiable smile.

"Why don't I ask you what you think? You are the one doing the assessment, after all."

"Most people don't like being told what they're feeling by someone else."

"I'm curious what it is you think you've worked out."

Romanov leaned back again. "I've done my homework after Coulson mentioned the idea to me. Talked to both Agents Barton and Ford. Gotten an impression of your mission performance, read your formal reports, and now observation of my own. And you want to know what I think?"

Loki leaned in, ever so slightly. An almost sick feeling throbbed in his chest. "I believe I do. I don't.

Romanov's voice changed slightly again, became cool and clinical. "You're impatient, borderline reckless. You have a sharp mind — a very sharp mind, but when you get emotionally involved you lose it. You've got good focus but you're easily bored. You've got a ruthless streak but that's emotional too. I don't think I've seen you drop your guard once, but you're good at pretending you have. Most people you find dull. The few you don't make you nervous; like me. I also make you nervous because I'm as good a liar as you are, and you're not used to that. Should I keep going?"

Loki's stomach was in his throat. It was like being naked, worse than naked, like being flayed bare of skin and laid out for all to see, to stare, to gawk at. That he could be reduced to so very little… and she wasn't wrong. About any of it. When was the last time, he wondered, when someone had looked at him and seen… (cared to see, he thought sometimes, or even bothered to try, not too dazzled by Thor, perfect Thor-)

He cut off that thought, quickly. He wanted to lash out, or possibly run, or something — something. But he had… asked. Out of some morbid curiosity, he'd asked. And she hasn't condemned you yet, murmured a quiet voice at the back of his mind, but that was a dangerous thought. "You're not unskilled at this."

"One of the best." Romanov's eyes were intent, but one corner of her mouth flickered up. "Huh. I was expecting you to react worse to that."

"Were you?"

"No one likes to be told the truth about themselves." Romanov's smile was faintly sardonic. "Can I ask you again?"

Loki kept his voice deliberately casual. "Ask what?"

"If you're floundering." Her eyes were cool, calm, but not, he thought, expressionless. He was beginning to think anything but.

"Adjusting," Loki said, after a long moment. "I would say. Becoming acclimated."

"Mmm." Romanov simply looked at him for another moment, and then nodded. "Fair enough. It takes some getting used to." She stretched out her legs, and fell silent. Loki shifted, almost but not quite uncertain. "It's interesting, you know. I have a feeling you could charm just about anyone if you felt like it. You've got the charisma and the personality for it. I'm curious why you don't put in the effort."

Loki blinked. He hadn't thought of it that way, as charm or charisma. It was just another way to lie.
"Perhaps I don't feel most people are worth the effort."

"'Perhaps?' I'd think you'd know." Romanov hummed under her breath. "You were keeping at least as much of an eye on me as anything else at that party," Romanov said, leaning forward with her elbows on the table. "Ford said you acted like you were working alone, and Clint commented that your first thought when things went wrong was that SHIELD had set you up."

"Are you going to tell me I'm wrong to be wary?" Loki said, letting his mouth curve, wry, amused. Something was humming in his chest or stomach, a strange feeling he couldn't quite pin down. Romanov snorted.

"Hardly. I'd be a hypocrite. I am saying - you'll halve your effectiveness that way. Tire faster, react slower, catch less. It's no way to work. So go ahead. Be wary. I'm not saying you need to make friends. Just..." she shrugged. "It's advice. Paranoia can keep you alive. Too much can kill you just as well."

"Are you suggesting I trust you?" Loki said, letting his tone communicate his incredulity. Romanov looked amused.

"I'm not suggesting you should trust anyone. That's not how it works. I don't trust easily, and I've been working with these people for years. But I trust someone."

Loki raised his eyebrows at her. "Someone." Barton, he guessed. Given how she talked about him, the use of his first name, he was almost certain of it. That's who it is for you, isn't it, and he could have said it. Part of him wanted to, to needle her into a response, throw her out of that carefully held balance.

Her eyes locked on his, calm and nearly expressionless. "Yeah. One person I know I can have at my back and not need to look over my shoulder." She looked up, and smiled pleasantly. "Ah, there's my lasagna. About time."

Loki sat back as the waiter set down her food. He felt strange, anxious, uncomfortable, and wasn't sure why any of it. But the urge to lash out hadn't returned. He waited until the waiter left to speak again. "You said Coulson asked you for your...professional opinion."

"Mmm." Romanov took a large bite of her lasagna, and looked briefly nearly blissful.

"And what are you going to tell him?" Loki asked. She glanced up at him, and he thought he caught a glimpse of something in her eyes. Maybe sympathy.

"What I told you. And that you're adjusting, and I don't think he needs to worry." She smiled, fractionally, and he thought this one had a little more of truth in it, and a little less of a weapon. "You seemed to enjoy the chess."

"It was not...a bad game," Loki said. He felt uneasy, disquieted, the urge in him tugging back and forth in myriad directions. To lash out, to run or close off or – pathetic, he chided himself, fiercely. Hold your ground.

"Come by sometime," she said. "I've got a place. Little bit of work and you might not make a bad player."

Loki's eyes narrowed. "I shall have it mastered in the space of another afternoon." At her smile, he knew he had been baited into it.

He found he couldn't quite mind.
She paused, and looked up, fork poised above her dish. "By the way," she said, "It's Natasha. Natasha Romanov."

Interlude (X)

He was hired.

Despite himself, Loki was a little surprised. "Welcome to the team," Megan said when he turned up on his first day, nearly painfully cheerful. "And by that I mean me and Ron, but – hey. And now you."

"So it would seem," Loki said, trying not to stare at her.

"Ron's out today," Megan said, hopping off her stool behind the counter. "Just you and me, sugar. So I'm supposed to teach you the ropes. It's not too hard – mostly you'll be shelving things, unpacking orders in the back, and taking the register while I'm off." Once again, Loki was struck by a strong sense of surreality. *Menial labor. You would have scoffed at this, such a short time ago.*

He pushed the thought away. "That all seems simple enough."

"Yeah, should be. Okay, let's start with the back room." She gestured him around the corner, and Loki followed her into a crowded, somewhat musty room stuffed with boxes. Loki wasn't sure what his expression looked like, but it seemed to amuse Megan. "Yeah, we're not great at the organization thing. Deep breath, it'll pass. So, what were you studying?"

"Physics," Loki said, easily. Megan's expression was faintly startled.

"Really? Cause I was expecting – I dunno, lit or history or something."

"I like to know how things work." It was still laughably primitive, but the field mortals called physics did seem to be the closest thing they had to an understanding of what he called magic and they had any number of more complicated names for. His guide made a face.

"Physics never got me. Too much math. But I was never much of any kind of academic, really. So – boxes come in through that door, there," she pointed, " Deliveries, when we get them. You'll have to sign for them, and then go through and make sure the orders match – sometimes they fuck it up – and yeah, that's it, basically. Where are you from?"

Loki blinked a little, slightly taken off guard by the question slipped into the midst of a deluge of instructions that did not, to him, seem very clear. He filed the words away and hoped it would be intuitive enough. "England," he said, and then added, "Though only originally, I've been here for some time." Vague, difficult to disprove. When he wasn't thinking, apparently his voice had an accent to it that sounded familiar to Midgardians, and the little searching he'd done had not found the location objectionable.

"Huh," Megan said, sounding more interested rather than less. "Okay, just curious. Any questions so far?"

"No," Loki said, which was the answer that he would have given if he had had questions. Megan seemed to think as much too, given her skeptical eyebrow.

"Really? Cause you've got a little bit of the 'dazed and confused' going on-"

Music abruptly began to play, loudly and jauntily, and Loki nearly jumped. He was almost
immediately ashamed when Megan grimaced and pulled her phone from her pocket. He'd seen enough people using them to know what they were, and yet it seemed every time-

She glanced at the screen, and made a face. "I've gotta take this," she said, sounding unhappy about it. "Be right back, okay? You can poke around."

Loki looked in a few of the boxes as Megan walked a few feet away and answered the call, but mostly he watched her. She didn't look happy. Whoever she was speaking with, she had little fondness for them, and she paced back and forth a few times, agitated. Loki caught himself frowning and tilted his head to listen, but could only catch fragments of words and a sharp tone of voice.

She hung up a few moments later and returned, expression soured. Loki tried not to look curious, and apparently failed. She sighed and waved a hand vaguely. "Not a big deal," she said. "Just a… thing. My biological dad – wants to get in touch with me. Ha, cause that's going to happen."

Loki frowned. "Biological as opposed to…"

She gave him an odd, sidelong look. "They don't have adoption in England?"

Loki felt as though he'd been slapped in the face. Out of surprise more than anything, and a moment later he felt foolish (of course, what else would it be) and then simply…unsteadied. *It's not the same.* He forced a laugh. "Of course. Silly me."

The odd look only intensified, and Loki tensed. Had he already misstepped in some vital way, *idiot, what were you thinking*- then, abruptly, understanding seemed to dawn on her face. "Oh!" she said. "Yeah, I'm adopted. You could just ask, I mean, it's not a big deal and I'm a nosy bitch who likes to overshare, so…yeah." Loki had the distinct feeling that he had just missed something, some assumption she had just made, but wasn't certain what it was.

"Yeah," Megan went on, puttering back toward the main section of the store. "Ron's my dad. Figure it's the only reason he hired a total deadbeat, heh. I'm not sensitive about it or anything." She glanced over her shoulder as Loki trailed after her, and finally paused. "…did I say something?"

"No," said Loki, after a moment. "Not…no. You did not." *Ron's my dad,* she said, like it was that simple, like this other man she clearly didn't care for mattered not at all.

Megan was still giving him an odd look.

"Okay," she said, after a moment, and turned back around. "Well, let me know. I put my foot in my mouth sometimes and I won't notice if you don't say anything, chances are. So, shelving…"

*Norns,* he thought, *still pulling my strings, am I supposed to think something, learn something, are you still-*

He pushed that thought aside. Coincidence. Strange coincidence, and he would think on it no further.

*I was never his son. And now I never will be.*

No further.
Hey, relatively timely update!! how about that. And you thought those were a myth. (However, as I am shortly to return to school, they may become one. But...)

Thanks again to my fabulous beta zaataronpita, without whom I would probably be a sobbing mess on a pile of words.

Now on with the show.~

If Romanov had put the pieces together concerning what the creature had said before its death about Asgard and Aesir, either she did not mention it or it had been deemed irrelevant, judging by the lack of reaction to any such news. He wasn’t entirely certain which was preferable.

Or perhaps they knew, the thought crossed his mind. Knew and were setting snares even now...he swept the thought away. He could drive himself mad that way. All he could do was remain alert and hope that his ability to think on his feet would not fail him if it were needed.

At any rate, when he dropped his report on Coulson’s desk he received only a speculative look and, after a moment, an, “Agent Romanov said you worked well together.”

Loki was faintly surprised. What else did she say, he was tempted to ask, but that did not seem likely to be a productive course of action. “Did she.”

“Would you say the same?”

Loki considered. In the end, though, he didn’t really have to think that hard. “Yes,” he said. “I would.”

Coulson seemed perhaps just the slightest bit pleased, but he simply nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Loki sketched a shallow bow and left the room. He took an elevator to the basement, intending to see if he could make up his absence to Roslyn. Despite his slip in front of Romanov, he felt very nearly in a pleasant mood.

That lasted all the way from stepping out of the elevator to opening the door into the lab. And then it burst like a soap bubble.

Loki stood frozen in the doorway. He might have only seen her once or twice, but those memories were sharp enough to cut. What is she doing here, some wild corner of his brain shrilled. This is yours, this is supposed to be your safe haven-

“Oh, Luke!” Roslyn called out, just as he was hovering on the edge of flight. “Hey, I was just telling Jane-”


Oh, he thought, oh no.
And she was turning, and looking up at him (so small he could only imagine how she would look next to- stop thinking it, stop stop stop) without a trace of recognition. (For now, he thought frantically, for now.) “Oh!” she said, interrupting Roslyn with her expression brightening. “Luke Silver, right? Roslyn’s just been telling me some incredible things – great to meet you,” and she held out a hand. Loki stared at it. Stared at her.

*So casual,* he thought, dazed. *You have no idea. That I know you. That I hate you, more than anything, than anything in this realm—*

Her friendly, hopeful smile began to falter.

“Jesus, Luke, you look like you’ve just remembered you left the stove on,” Roslyn said, frowning. “What’s the deal?”

He forced himself to move, to take her hand, to smile. “Your pardon,” he said, “I was merely… startled. I’ve heard some about you and did not expect…” Her hand was warm, palm faintly callused, her face open and friendly, eyes clever. Loki did not know what he had expected, but here, looking at her, it was not…what she was. She blinked.

“What,” Jane Foster said, “You’re a big fan of astrophysics?”

“More than you’d think,” Loki said, and his smile felt sharp-edged to him. He tried to moderate it. “But I’m afraid not. I received records of the…New Mexico incident. Your name cropped up.”

“Oh,” she said, and a strange expression crossed her face. “Right. Heh.” She laughed, though it sounded awkward and a little uncertain, and she dropped his hand. “That’s what I’m famous for around here.”

“Not precisely as you would like, hm?” he said, half an eye on Roslyn. She was watching him, frowning a little, and he tried to reinforce his expression to polite interest. “I can hardly blame you. It doesn’t sound like the most pleasant of experiences.”

Foster blinked. “What? Oh – no, actually, it was – it wasn’t bad. Mostly. Other than losing my research and the giant Terminator robot…”

*Of course,* Loki’s thoughts flashed, *you were with the mighty Thor, even human he outshone all around him.* Foster’s smile faded, and she looked about to frown.

“Hey, Jane,” Roslyn said, suddenly, and Foster looked away from him. “I gotta-” She made a vague gesture. “You’ll be fine on your own?”

“I’m not helpless,” Foster said, sounding a little peeved, “And I’m not letting SHIELD swallow me alive, no matter how hard they try.”

“It’s not that bad,” Roslyn protested, and Foster gave her a look that eloquently communicated her doubt on that point. Loki felt his lips twitch and a moment later was uncertain whether he wanted to think better of her or resented her for it.

She was clever and had a mind between her ears. Roslyn, who was not without her own intelligence, plainly admired her. That was more than he would have expected of any woman to capture Thor, who primarily seemed to notice physical attributes that Miss Foster was…not lacking, but rather more sparse in than his usual. Roslyn was gone, however, and Foster was looking at him again. Loki donned a smile again, this one perhaps slightly easier. “I am afraid I am not the most skilled of entertainers.”
“Actually,” she said, “I was kind of hoping I could pick your brain over a coffee.” Loki blinked, taken too off guard to react immediately. “From what Roslyn’s told me, you’ve said some pretty fascinating things that could have fairly serious implications on what I do – that’s why I’m here, actually.”

*She wants to talk to you,* Loki thought, faintly incredulous. *Ask you questions. And why not? Wouldn’t you like to know more about her?*

He did. An irresistible, sick sort of curiosity that wanted to know what she had that had so touched-his heart twisted, stomach turned, even to think of it. But he wanted to know. She was a link to everything he was trying to avoid. Wise to stay away.

Few had ever accused him of excessive prudence. “Why not?” he said, easily, and summoned a glib smile. “I am at your service, lady.”

They left the compound to go to a little shop in the nearest town, seventeen miles out. Foster drove, and Loki decided that he very much disliked traveling on the dust and gravel roads that they were following. They were about a mile out from the boundary Loki had not crossed except for mission purposes when Foster broke the silence between them.

“Have we met?” she asked, eyebrows pulled together, and Loki could not keep himself from stiffening.

“I don’t believe so.”

“Then have I done something to piss you off since we *did* meet?”

The way she asked the question took him off guard. Direct, matter-of-fact, as though she truly wanted to know, not asking to hear assurances of innocence. Genuinely asking. “No,” he said, truthfully. *I hated you before I ever saw your face.*

The thought flashed across his mind that he could kill her now. Arrange her death, easily enough; only mortal, after all, and so fragile. No one here had any reason to suspect him, if he was careful. And the next time Thor looked down at Midgard…

The thought passed.

Foster made a face. “Okay,” she said finally, “If you’re sure.” The sideways glance at him said that she doubted it, but Loki pretended not to notice. Her eyes moved forward again a moment later.

“So…you’re not from around here.”

Loki resisted the urge to sigh. “Roslyn,” he guessed, but Jane gave him an odd look.

“No, actually. Phil – Coulson, I mean. He’s had me looking at readings since you…uh. Landed. I guess I am kind of the resident expert. Well, Erik is, really – Dr. Selvig? – but he’s apparently otherwise occupied.”

*He knows,* was Loki’s first wild, frantic thought. *Who you are, what you’ve done. He sends her-* but even before the thought completed he dismissed it. If they knew, there would have been some action taken. “Mm,” he said, expression placidly indifferent even if his thoughts boiled underneath. “I see.”

“Though really,” Foster went on, “I’m out of my depth. We don’t even really understand Einstein-Rosen bridges at this point, and the readings that got picked up when you landed were completely different from the ones in New Mexico-”
The Einstein-Rosen bridge, Loki gathered, must be the human name for the Bifrost. He felt a reluctant little quiver of interest that he tried to quash, but not quickly enough. “How so?”

Foster glanced sideways at him, seeming surprised at the question. Or perhaps surprised that he was still in the car; there’d been a bit of the tone to her voice that made him think her mind had begun to wander. (Familiar? Murmured a voice at the back of his mind, and he shoved it back.) “It’s a little complicated,” she said, slowly. “And if you don’t have a background in astrophysics, which I’m guessing…”

Loki’s smile felt sharp to him, almost more of a baring of teeth. “Try me.” Foster looked briefly taken aback before her eyes swiftly turned forwards, and Loki tried to moderate his tone. “If you avoid too much technical terminology, I may be able to follow better than you think.”

“Okay. Well. An Einstein-Rosen bridge is exactly what it sounds like – a bridge. Another name for it’s a wormhole, and it’s basically – a shortcut through space. The one in New Mexico – as far as readings can tell, is apparently a kind called a Morris-Thorne wormhole, allowing travel both ways, that can be opened and closed…apparently at will. And that shows up as a certain kind of readings on the machines, which at this point we can…sort of recognize. But when you turned up it was more like…” She frowned. “Well. That’s the thing. I don’t really know, but the readings don’t look anything like the ones from the Bi- the Einstein-Rosen bridge in New Mexico. Smaller scale, for one – if you think of New Mexico’s as a volcano, it’s like Krakatoa to…well, maybe one of those Hawaiian ones. Massive difference in terms of radiation, air pressure changes, ripple effect…”

_Bifrost_, she’d almost called it. Loki pushed aside old memories that tried to well up (but how does it work?) and interrupted with, “How long have you been researching this phenomena?”

“Oh…” Jane made a face. “Five or six years? I started poking at it for my undergrad thesis, and since then…but to be honest I hadn’t made a lot of progress until…recently.”

Five or six years, Loki thought. Hardly the blink of an eye – well, perhaps not in mortal terms, but far swifter than he had expected; the Bifrost was…had been…a complicated thing. His curiosity welled up and he pushed it back down, reminded himself that he wanted nothing from her.

“And did your interstellar visitor explain this to you?” he asked, and then wanted to curse himself. This had been a bad idea. He ought to have found a way out of it, could have, simply enough, why was he _here_-

(Curiosity, his own mind answered, readily enough. You wanted to know her. This woman who so captured Thor’s eye and his heart.)

“Not really,” Jane said, looking almost as though she wanted to laugh. “He just kind of…well, to him I guess it wasn’t really a big deal. No, mostly it was actually seeing it in action that finally gave me something concrete to study.” She exhaled, and looked briefly frustrated. “Though that’s kind of stalled now, since…uh. I don’t know how much of this you already know.”

_All of it_, Loki thought, _and far more intimately than you_. “You are not boring me.”

“Well – good, but I’m also not really supposed to talk about it. SHIELD secrecy and all.” She glanced at Loki sharply, starting to blush. “Not that I’ve got anything against-”

“Go ahead and have anything you like against,” Loki said smoothly. “I do not take it personally.” _Not you._ “I do know that the wormhole you are talking about has…” how would humans put it? “…ceased to be active. If that helps you know what you may say.”
“Yeah,” Jane – Foster, when had he begun thinking of her so informally? – said, after a moment. “Something happened, and the connection, for lack of a better analogy, got cut. But I’ve got enough data to work with for now, at least, so…” She sounded casual enough, as though her sole concern was with her research, but Loki could hear the slight trace of wistfulness that he suspected Foster herself might not be aware of.

You miss him, he thought. Three days, and you miss him. That’s what he does, isn’t it, pulls people in, makes them his, makes them need-

(I miss him too.)

He realized he’d been silent for too long, watching the desert slip by unseeing when Foster cleared her throat. “So how did you…” she asked, and Loki felt his stomach knot.

“I know not,” he said, voice suddenly flat. “I was not fully aware at the time.”

“—oh,” she said, and then looked fretful, apologetic. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to-”

Something bubbled up his chest and he didn’t swallow it back in time to keep a slightly hysterical laugh silent. “For what would you apologize?”

Jane – Foster looked puzzled. “I didn’t mean to…well, I guess I can’t think it was fun, and you had a look on your face.”

Clever, Loki thought, she was clever and kind and had no idea who he was and Norns, he liked her. Sif without Sif’s defensive, brittle edges and with the mind of a scholar. He wondered if she had spoken of her theories to Thor, if Thor had sat and listened without understanding as he once had for Loki-

“No, not that one,” she said, frown deepening. “Little more ‘let’s not talk about it’ and a little less ‘you just killed my puppy, Jane, you monster’.-”

Loki shook his head, one sharp, brief jerk. “It is – you needn’t apologize.” It came out sharper than he meant it to, and Foster gave him a strange, sidelong look as she turned onto a busier road.

“If you say so. Anyone ever told you you’re a little weird?”

Loki choked on that for a moment, but managed to summon a smile that felt easier, more genuine, than he thought it probably should have. “Any number of times,” he said. And did not add, and not just here.

“Hey,” said Foster, brightening a touch and perhaps, Loki thought, looking faintly relieved. “Here we are.”

The coffee was mediocre but not particularly good. The conversation was…

“That doesn’t make any sense,” she protested again. “You can’t have it both ways.”

“I didn’t make the rules,” Loki said airily. She narrowed her eyes at him.

“Then explain it to me.”

“I have.” Loki gestured at the napkins scattered across the table, covered with scrawls and images and he had come very close to simply showing her but he did not think that was wise.
“But how can something be there and not-there at the same time? It’s a paradox. Not to mention what you’re saying about something existing across dimensions – ‘touching all and none.’” She huffed. “I want to say you’re bullshitting me but I don’t think you are. But that doesn’t make sense.” She was so close. If he could just think of a way to put things so that…

He came up short, remembering, belatedly, with whom he was discussing this, and nearly shoved himself back from the table he’d been leaning in toward. In the heat of the moment, he’d nearly forgotten. He didn’t like her. Or didn’t intend to. But…

He’d taken her for passing clever, and been perhaps impressed by her knowledge of the Bifrost – more than, he thought wryly, many who had used it. But even Loki had to admit that she was more than ‘passing.’ Limited, of course, by the bounds of human knowledge, but introduced to new things she adapted quickly. The longer they spoke, the more his already existing strange, slightly uneasy feeling grew. And she kept looking at him like she was trying to puzzle something out.

“It just is,” Loki said finally, feeling a twinge of mingled frustration and something that tasted slightly wistful. “I do not know how better to put it.”

“Then you’re probably not trying hard enough,” said Jane, tartly, and Loki stared at her, for a moment nearly incredulous, and then could not help a small, brief laugh. Jane narrowed her eyes. “What’s funny?”

“Seldom do people speak to me as you are. They seem to find me…intimidating.”

“I’m pretty hard to intimidate,” Jane said, and Loki could see that. Could imagine her looking up the foot or more to Thor and-

*Why are you doing this to yourself? Like digging a knife into your own flesh.* But he liked her. Damn him. Damn her. “So it would seem.” He looked around them, trying to think how he would explain this. He had never been much of a teacher. Jane seemed to be thinking as well, however.

“Maybe it’s like…hm. Tangent to a circle? But tangent to nine circles at the same time, how is that…”

“I shall consider it,” Loki said, with a sigh. “See if I can find some better way to make you see, and contact you – if I may,” he added, belatedly, and realized that he didn’t know how long she was staying, or even if. That thought made him want to frown.

“Hey, sure,” Jane said, picking up some of the written on napkins and drawing on them. “Like I said, that’s kind of why I’m here. To pick your brain about this stuff, and SHIELD’s got me giving them some kine of report in the next few days, so…” she shrugged.

Loki felt the corners of his mouth curve up. “But you are not…employed. I gather.”

“No,” said Jane, emphatically, “And I’m not going to be, either. Not interested, so don’t think-”

“I was not about to try,” Loki cut in smoothly. He took another sip of his coffee, the last of it besides the dregs. Jane was watching him again, a slight frown between her eyebrows. “Something troubling you?”

“No,” she said, slowly, and then added, “Maybe. I’m not sure. It’s just…” she rubbed her left eye. “Probably nothing.”

Loki had a strange, sinking feeling in his stomach. Which of course meant… “Now you’ve got me curious.”
Jane eyed him silently for a few moments, then propped her chin on her hands. “It’s just - you’re from Asgard, aren’t you?” she asked quietly, and Loki froze.

_She knows. She knows who you are and what you tried to do_ – he stared at her, but she didn’t look angry or upset or…anything. Just puzzled.

“It made sense,” she went on. “Just…the timing, and there’s a certain sort of…some similarities that can’t be accounted for between New Mexico and your…um. And it’s just…odds. Too. Everyone always says that aliens wouldn’t look anything like us, and having two completely human looking aliens turning up around the same time from completely different places…”

If she’d put it together, he thought, SHIELD certainly had. Did they also know, then – or did they assume his was an unfortunate casualty to an unrelated incident? How much had Thor told them? How much had he _said_?

_Kill her and run_, murmured a voice at the back of his mind. _They wouldn’t notice your absence for a little while. And you could stay ahead of them, could you not…_

Foster faltered. “….Luke?”

He felt frozen. Foolish. _The Bifrost is broken_, he reminded himself forcefully. _There’s no way to communicate with Asgard_. They cannot know who I am or surely— “Clever,” he said, distantly, and blinked, forced himself to focus and center on her face. She looked pale. Nervous, not scared.

“You’re his…his brother, aren’t you.”

Loki swallowed. It should have been fury he felt. It wasn’t. “I am not.” A bald-faced lie that was also a truth. He wasn’t. He never had been.

“No,” she said, “No, it…you knew about New Mexico but SHIELD didn’t say anything about another Asgardian, so you haven’t told them. You appeared pretty quickly after he went to deal with family business, and – oh Jesus.” She went a little paler. “You are. You tried to _kill_ him!”

Loki was briefly thankful that he’d thought to mute their conversation to anyone else in the coffee shop. He settled his chin on his hands. “He is no brother of mine. And I _did_ kill him. Briefly.” He knew it was not the right thing to say, but he could feel a dull resignation sinking into his bones. Her expression shifted to enraged.

“How could you-” she sputtered, jerking to her feet. Loki gave her a disinterested stare. “So, what, are you in Earth time-out too? No, from what Roslyn was saying you’ve still got all your – whatever, _that’s_ why you kept looking at me funny, hell-”

“No one from Asgard knows I am here.” Loki did not lower his eyes. He waited. Of course he could do something. Of course he could make her forget or lock her lips to speaking of this or…but of course none of that mattered, and besides, the reason not to…

It was like a kind of vertigo.

Foster was staring at him, eyes wide, seeming torn between nervousness and anger. She sat down, slowly. “What are you doing?”

“She?” Loki shrugged one shoulder. “In essence, what you see.”

“You’re working for SHIELD.” Foster sounded deeply skeptical. Well, Loki thought, at least somebody recognized the humor of it.
“They made a convincing offer.”

Foster stared at him. He could almost see her shuffling, shifting around pieces of their conversation, coming to new conclusions. What did Thor tell you about me, he both did and didn’t want to ask. He wondered if she would ask what had happened to her beloved. Wondered if she did, what he would say.

After a long moment, she stood, somewhat jerkily, and took a step back. Her face was hard, unreadable. “Well,” she said. “Well. That’s just great. That’s just—” Loki kept his face impassive, and waited. She took a deep breath and let it out. “If I leave you here can you get back on your own?”

“Yes,” Loki said, after a moment.

“Good,” she said. “Cause I’m not letting you back in my car.”

Loki felt fierce, hot anger well up in him. “You would judge me for what you don’t understand,” he said, lowly, “you would think to—”

“I judge your killing and wounding most of the population of a small town just to get to your brother!” She turned toward the door and then stopped, her back to him. “I think I understand just fine. I don’t want you in my car.”

Loki’s jaw tightened. He took three deep breaths through his nose. “—fine.”

“It’s too bad,” she said, turning around again, looking at him, that friendly face now hard lines. “I thought…is Thor dead?” Her tone was flat, but he heard just the slightest tremble, and a dark, vicious part of him wanted to lie, yes, I killed him.

“No,” he said. She nodded, and walked out the door. Her back was stiff, as though she was waiting for him to strike. Expecting it, perhaps.

He could have stopped her. He didn’t. Loki watched her walk away, and felt the most peculiar sense of loss.

[Interlude (XI)]

If he had expected Megan to become less peculiar with the passing of time, he was disappointed. She remained as perplexing as ever. Speaking with her was, however, a swift education in at least some matters, as she never failed to give him an odd look and a ‘you talk weird’ or occasionally ‘what do you mean, you don’t know Disney?’

It occurred to him sometimes, standing in the back room amid stacks of books and writing them down in inventory, how strange this was. If he thought too much about it, it chafed. Bitterly. But his safety was in being inconspicuous, and he would not remain inconspicuous long if he did not fit into the human mode of living. A job. A home (for now, still a hotel). Small things, yes, but they were his.

He’d been working relatively without incident for three weeks when he realized that he was being followed.

His trackers kept a safe distance, but – bounty hunters, he thought at first, and nearly panicked. But they were mortal, and that struck him as unlikely. The Aesir would know, if they knew he was here, that he could kill more mortals than they could send without rousing notice.

No, this was something else.
Loki let them follow without incident for a few days, giving no sign that he had noticed anything amiss, and on the fourth took a different route home from the bookstore, turning right into a narrow street and then cloaking himself from sight.

The man followed fifteen paces behind, convincingly casual. Built powerfully, for a mortal. Loki summoned one of his knives to his hand and shifted into motion as the man slowed, looking puzzled by the empty street.

He grabbed the man by the back of the neck and threw him bodily into a nearby wall. Then Loki stalked over before he could rise and hauled him up, putting the knife neatly against the pounding of his pulse and uncloaking himself. “Who sent you?” he demanded.

Not subtle, perhaps, but whoever dared to send spies after him ought to know with whom they were meddling.

The man looked dazed, and Loki did not bother to be terribly gentle about reaching into his mind and plucking out his name and errand. Then he dropped him, hackles rising.

“So,” he said. “That’s it.”

He’d been careful. But apparently there was someone who’d noticed he was not only what he seemed. Someone who wanted him to serve them. Do work for them. The tails had been sent to feel him out and then to gauge his response to the offer. In case of an unfavorable response, he was to be…persuaded.

The man – Brian Mckean – was watching him and breathing hard. The knife, Loki realized, had nicked the skin, just enough to set a slow but steady bleed down the side of his neck. “Listen carefully,” Loki said, smoothly. “Because I’m only going to say this once.”

Loki watched Mr. Mckean stagger away, casting alarmed glances over his shoulder every few steps, Loki’s warning firmly planted in his mind. He’d made sure of it.

When he was gone, Loki let out a slow breath. Hopefully it would be enough.

If it hadn’t been…

Loki banished the knife back to the safe place where he kept it, checked his clothes for blood, and turned to make the rest of his way back to the hotel.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Another timely update? What's happening here! (I'M SURE I DON'T KNOW.)

Once again, with all my love and thanks to the wonderful zaataronpita, who not only betas the finished product but puts up with a lot of flailing and whining along the way.

Other notes at this point in the story for the fact that this is looking like it's going to be a lot longer than I thought it was going to be. So...shiiiiit.

Loki lingered just long enough to finish his coffee, and transported himself back into his room. Undoubtedly he'd made it back before Foster, given the time it would take for her to drive. What would she say when she returned? How much did she know, how much did she guess, and if SHIELD knew (and he had to think that they did) then why had they made no move, said nothing…

Perhaps they had not leaped to the same conclusion Jane had. There was no real reason for them to. They’d never seen his face, and if Thor had told them little…was it not possible that they would think he was simply another Asgardian, no relation, no connection? Why else hold their silence?

(Let your quarry think it’s safe, a murmur at the back of his mind. Put them at ease. Then close the trap. Was that it?)

He paced back and forth, the short distance his room allowed. You were a fool to speak to her. A fool to let your curiosity overrun your sense. He ought to have been able to keep her from seeing, though, ought to have been able to keep his secrets.

The disquieting thought occurred to him that perhaps he hadn’t wanted to. Perhaps some part of him had wanted her to see him for himself, know what he’d done, and react – how? Had he expected her to treat him kindly? To be a confidant, a friend?

Or had he, rather, expected her to react just as she had, with anger, disgust, revulsion. And that was what he’d wanted, perhaps even what he’d needed…

Loki pushed that thought away with something approaching savagery. He was not quite so pathetic as that. Surely.

His rooms felt too small, too enclosed. If they did not already know…what did it matter? Foster would tell them, assuredly. And then - and then what? How would SHIELD react? He could not guess, not and be sure it would be accurate.

He couldn’t stay here, waiting. But at the same time, what action could he take? If he had intended to stop Foster it should have been before she’d left. Now…going to Coulson he risked revealing too much, and his alternative resources were somewhat limited.

The walls felt like they were closing in, tightening like a noose around his neck.

Snarling, Loki threw his door open and stalked out. If there was nothing else he could do, at the very least he could expel some of this nervous energy using the tried and true method of exercise, and if
there was no one he could spar with at the very least the activity might help him center, focus. Think clearly.

(He should never have spoken to the damned woman. What had he expected to gain, what had he expected would be bettered by conversing with her?)

Loki ignored the sidelong glances he received as he stalked through the hallways, half expecting someone to stop him or try to attack. No one did, though a few did seem to hasten to get out of his way, prompting Loki to smooth his features to calm impassivity and to attempt to smooth his mind to the same. The former was more successful than the latter.

He let himself through the door of the room he’d been heading for and let out a sigh of relief at finding it unoccupied. It was not, perhaps, ideal, but it would do. This practice range wasn’t meant for knives, but it was decidedly better than nothing.

Loki called his in and took up his stance. Flung three knives in quick succession, marked their location, and called them back.

It startled him, that Thor had taken to this woman, rather than any other. Quick minded, intelligent, stubborn…in another life, he might have approved. Might have looked at Foster and despite her mortality found her a better sister in law than the other women Thor had seemed taken with before.

(Always Thor. Always, his thoughts circled back to Thor. No matter how distant he might be from him, *always*- He flung the knives again in rapid succession, noted the position, snarled at the inaccuracy, and called them back.)

Her expression was vivid in his mind. Why did it bother him? She was mortal. She had no right to judge him, she knew nothing of him but what little Thor might have said or what bastardized human myths claimed. What was her judgment? No real concern but what she might reveal to SHIELD, and even if she did – there was no proof. Her word against his…

(But who would believe your word? Who ever… Loki exhaled a few short, stacatto breaths, and threw the knives again. *Thunk-thunk-thunk.* The punctuation sharp sounds of his knives hitting their target was at least marginally satisfying.)

And if they moved against him, what did it matter? He was stronger than them. It would be inconvenient, unpleasant, but – *Margaret Fairfax.* The woman who’d taken him in, after a fashion, for a longer time than any other. What of her? Would they hurt her to bring him to heel? He thought not, but…

*Monster* whispered in the back of his mind, echoed in the look on her face. Not because of Thor. He would have expected her anger on Thor’s behalf. *Killing and wounding most of a small town…*

He hadn’t thought of them, Loki realized. Not as people. Not really. They were of as little interest to him as insects, small, irrelevant but for Thor’s strange and sudden fondness for them. Why would it matter, after all, their lives so short and pointless anyway? He tried to think of a town of those mortals he’d become somewhat fond of himself, if Ms. Fairfax and Angela, say, were victims of something similar. If one of those fools targeting him, perhaps, had been a touch stronger, enough to-

Loki shied from that, not quite able to face the disquiet feeling in his chest.

He felt the weight of one of his blades in his hand, looked down the range at his target. He took a deep breath and centered himself, forcing his thoughts blank and himself calm. It had never been easy, that sort of mental exercise, but necessary for magic, and so he had learned, eventually, to
control his thoughts and make them as quiet as they ever would be. To empty himself and set all things aside save the moment and the task itself.

Shifting his stance, he cast the first knife into the shoulder, the second into its throat, and the last blade into the eye of the roughly human shaped target he’d been practicing with. He breathed out a sigh and, finally feeling somewhat steadied, strode forward to pull them out physically rather than with magic.

“You’re good with those.”

Loki fell still. He truly had let his emotions get the better of him, if it had allowed someone to enter and observe without his notice. He considered for a moment, then didn’t turn, instead taking the last few steps to the target and beginning to work his knives free. “I try.”

“People usually thank someone for a compliment, you know.”

“I’m aware of the custom.” Loki pulled the last knife free and turned to look at Barton where he was leaning against a wall at the other end of the range. “Was there something you wanted?”

“Not really, no.” He stretched, perhaps a touch ostentatiously. Loki was not fooled by his apparent relaxation. His eyes were as sharp as he remembered, and if he looked thoughtful rather than tense… that did not seem sufficient reason for him to be at ease.

“Just passing by?” Loki said, voice a touch dry.

“No,” Barton said, after a moment. “Not that either.” He straightened, bearing shifting slightly to something not quite wary. “Agent Romanov likes you.”

Loki blinked, and could not quite keep his, “She does?” as bland as he wanted it to be.

“Hm,” Barton said, and crossed his arms, still watching Loki narrowly. “Yeah. Seems like.”

Loki loosened his shoulders and shrugged. “I see. And you thought I needed informing of this?”

“Not really.” He leaned back against the wall. “She pointed out a few things. You got us started off on the wrong foot, but…” He trailed off and eyed Loki. “She doesn’t like a whole lot of people. You’re lucky.” He paused. “Or unlucky, maybe, I guess. She supposedly likes Stark too and that doesn’t seem to help him.”

He felt a peculiar flush of pleasure at that, and quashed it at once. When had the opinions of mortals begun mattering so much to him? “I should hope,” Loki said dryly, “I like to consider myself a great deal less trying than Stark is.”

“Ah,” said Barton, looking like he wanted to grin. “So you’ve met.”

“Briefly.” Loki watched the man closely, trying to puzzle out what his game was. What he wanted, if there was something other than what he claimed or… Barton looked like he wanted to laugh for a moment, but it passed, and he pushed off the wall and sauntered over.

Loki did not quite let himself tense.

“So,” Barton said, “throwing knives, huh? Wouldn’t expect you to use – you know, normal people weapons, with the whole…” he made an elaborate hand gesture probably intended to communicate magic. Loki did not let himself wince, knowing that the low flicker of anger in his belly was not truly directed at the archer.
“Relying too much on any one skillset is, I have found, a risky proposition.”

Barton snorted. “I can see why Agent Romanov’d like you,” he said, and Loki blinked, slightly taken aback. Barton seemed to have relaxed slightly, though, which seemed likely to be a good sign.

“Was there something in particular you wanted to say?” Loki asked, and heard the prickle in his own tone but could not quite regret it. “I was practicing.”

“Keeping your skills sharp?” Barton said, with a grin that reminded Loki peculiarly of Fandral. Loki cast him a scathing look, but Barton just snickered. “Hey. It was too good to pass up.”

“If you are not careful I might find teleporting you to an isolated island too good to pass up,” Loki said, without thinking, and then tensed. Mind your tongue, fool.

The man did for a moment look like he was going to turn toward anger, but then he snorted, and if the way he relaxed looked suspiciously deliberate... “Yeah,” he said, “and then Natasha’d kill you, so…”

Loki blinked, feeling a strange little twist of confusion, his immediate reaction to snarl at the threat as if she could but it was spoken with such banal lack of feeling that...a jest? He hovered for a moment, indecisive, then simply said, “More’s the pity,” with a slightly edged smile, and if Barton gave him an odd look, it did not seem hostile. That was strangely gratifying.

As was the subsequent shrug. “Practicing, huh? All right. You’re not the only one with ranged weapons to work with.” The man rubbed his hands together and paced to a cabinet of what Loki supposed must be spare weapons. He selected a bow from among them and eyed it. “Not great, and definitely not mine, but…” he glanced back at Loki, who watched him, quiet.

“Waiting for something?” he asked, after a moment. “For you to make clear what it is you want,” Loki said flatly, and something flickered across Barton’s face that he couldn’t quite read. Something about it disquieted him, though, left him feeling decidedly strange.

“Are we talking general or specifics?” he asked, after a moment, and when Loki just looked at him, half grinned in a way that didn’t quite look genuine. “I don’t take back what I said about the weird. But like I said, Tasha seems to like you. So I figured maybe I’d better take a second look.”

Loki felt...strange. At once cornered and not, like he’d stepped into water without intending to but found it soothingly warm. Likely he just wanted to know that you were not a threat to his lover, a scathing voice at the back of his mind said, but Loki pushed that one down into near silence.

Barton stepped forward and lifted his bow, giving him a sidelong look. “Hey,” he said. “You ever take wagers?”

“That depends somewhat on the wager,” Loki said, raising his eyebrows slightly.

“Huh,” said Barton, and then grinned, a little. “Let’s see if we can come up with something appropriate.”

He won, of course. Though it was nearer than he’d have expected. Barton didn’t seem to take it poorly, though, and in deference to that Loki kept his gloating to...fairly minimum.

Returning to his room, he felt...calmer. More balanced. Less certain of impending disaster, or at least
mostly less certain of it. And if the whole interaction had been peculiar…it was not in such a bad way. Barton might even be tolerable. Given time.

He felt an unwilling smile quirk his mouth as he turned the corner into his hallway.

Foster was waiting outside his door.

He stopped the moment he saw her hovering there, and considered hiding himself and waiting for her to leave, but that seemed…absurdly cowardly. No one had come to take him captive or accuse him of any crime, so perhaps…

Loki quashed that thought before it was completed.

She turned just as he decided to approach her, and between one moment and the next her faintly nervous expression disappeared and she drew herself up, armored in professionalism. He waited, watching her, for Foster to make the first move.

After a moment, she cleared her throat. “Agent Silver,” she said, with a peculiar kind of emphasis on that name that Loki did not fail to note. “I wanted to…thank you for the insight you shared with me today. I’m sure it will be helpful.”

Loki searched her eyes. They were wary, cautious, but not outright hostile. She hadn’t voiced her suspicions, Loki realized, with a small giddy rush of relief. For whatever reason…she hadn’t said anything about him to SHIELD. “You are welcome,” he said, slowly. “Always a pleasure to share knowledge with one who…appreciates it.”

Foster looked like she wanted to drop his gaze and look elsewhere. Or perhaps like she wanted to rip his throat out with her bare hands. Loki was not entirely certain which it was. “If it’s not an imposition, I would like…to make a request.”

She was bold. He’d give her that. “Yes?”

“I’m sure you have a great deal of information that would be useful to me.” Foster met his eyes, her gaze startlingly frank. “I’d like you to agree to meet with me once a week. Here, on premises.”

Loki let his mouth twist in a wry, crooked smile, and nearly said, in exchange for your silence, I assume. But he held that back, and merely inclined his head. His feelings of balance, of calm, were ebbing quickly away. “I don’t find that proposal disagreeable.”

Foster’s nod was small and tense. She stepped away from his door, and then paused. “I’m going to want to know what happened,” she said, lowering her voice. Loki cast up a spell around them anyway to hide the words from watchers, tensing. “Between you and Thor, I mean. That caused…all of that.” She turned, and Loki found himself relieved, because he could almost feel his expression spasm. “So…fair warning.”

“And if I don’t wish to speak to you about something so…personal?”

“Too bad,” Foster said, flatly. “You made it pretty personal to me, too. Figure it out.” She walked away, straight backed and without glancing over her shoulder, though he could read some nervousness in her shoulders. Probably, he could cow her easily enough. For a time, at least.

No, he thought, then. No, I don’t think so.

And Thor loved her. For just a moment, Loki dug the knife in, pictured the two of them together. Happy.
He swept the mental image away, forcing it to shatter. What did it matter? Thor was not here.

(And he was, and here again, everything he most wanted to forget shoved back in his face, like salt rubbed into a wound. What happened between you and Thor. As though it were that simple. As though…)

You’ll have to face it eventually.

But he didn’t want to. Not yet.

Interlude (XII)

There was no trouble for a week after his confrontation in the alley with his tail. No new followers, things quiet at work (Megan as strange as ever). Loki felt – almost good about the state of things. Almost. Not quite.

The wariness lingered, and unease he couldn’t quite shake, strange certainty that something was going to go wrong, and soon.

He’d begun looking for an apartment, however, and was finding the experience…decidedly frustrating. Particularly as asking anyone for assistance seemed likely to raise questions about his living situation, and he was not entirely certain that an extended stay of quite such duration was standard in Midgardian lodgings.

Loki was shelving books on a Friday when he became aware of Megan’s eyes on him. He turned to look at her and raised his eyebrows in silent question, to which she looked entirely unphased. “What do you do?” she asked, suddenly. He blinked, and did not quite stiffen.

“Beg pardon?”

“When you’re not working,” she said. “What do you do? You never talk about friends or anyone, nobody calls you…I’m just wondering. You’re a mystery wrapped in an enigma.”

Loki felt a prickle of unease crawl up his spine. “Does it matter what I do with my spare time?”

Megan shrugged. “I guess not. Mostly just…I dunno. You seem a little lonely sometimes.” She snorted a little. “I mean, that’s the only reason you talk to me, I figure, cause you don’t seem to actually like me very much.” She did not, oddly, sound troubled by that fact, but Loki found himself frowning.

“I do not dislike you,” he said, carefully, which was…true. Perhaps even had a peculiar kind of fondness for her. Megan and her strangeness. Her father – her birth father, though she seldom called him even that – called her at least once a week, and Loki listened to their terse conversations and Megan’s tight, unhappy expression and noticed how she never failed to call her family later that day. She brought cookies into work sometimes. Gave Loki long and rambling recommendations of books he did not intend to read. Loki found himself enjoying the conversation anyway.

“Mmmhm,” Megan said, narrowing her eyes. “High praise. Anyway. If you ever felt like doing something…I technically speaking have a life, but not that much of one. So…”

Loki blinked at her, slightly uncomprehending. Megan almost grimaced. “Wow,” she said, “I can’t decide if that expression is adorable or a little bit sad.”

Loki pressed his lips together and frowned. “Beg pardon?”
“You, beanpole,” Megan said, and, peculiarly, waggled her eyebrows. “Me. Movie tonight. What do you think?”

“I – suppose,” Loki said, still somewhat taken aback, and Megan grinned at him as though he’d said something wonderful.

“Excellent,” she said. “I’m thinking you’re probably not a rom-com kind of person, so maybe something with explosions or something…”

Loki tuned her out, mind going back to the first thing that she’d said. Lonely. Was he? He hadn’t thought about it, at least not really, not in depth or detail. But…he’d never been overfond of company. He’d always spent most of his time alone.

(Not always by choice, murmured a small voice at the back of his mind.)

But here…on Midgard…sometimes it did weigh on him. The being alone, being unknown, isolated from everything he knew or thought he had known without, really, much else to grab hold of. But wasn’t that his intention? Getting too close to any mortals was not only an absurd notion, but likely to be dangerous. He felt another tingle of nervousness down his spine.

And yet…

One night, he thought, one movie. What could it hurt? It could not be weakness, to allow himself that much. Nor dangerous. To refuse now would, besides, be odd.

Perhaps it would be pleasant.

Cautiously, quietly, he let himself anticipate.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I gotta say, this chapter was one of the most painful to write. In a lot of ways. I hope it doesn't show too much. Further notes...a (friendly!) reminder that this story will remain almost painfully gen, and that I still don't have a really marked out trajectory for how long it's going to get. Also that I am a total comics noob, and using canon in all kinds of fun ways to serve my needs, and I am so sorry if I am butchering your favorite comics people (by virtue of being less familiar with them).

That said - once again, thank you to zaataronpita for betaing for me, and loving me in spite of the fact that I wordvomit about Loki at her on a regular basis. You're the best, my dear.

“Silver.”

Loki woke from restless sleep (clouded with dreams of Thor and Jane, of Thor alone, of Jane alone holding Mjolnir and looking down at him with disgust writ large in her features) and just managed not to lash out at the figure leaning over his bed. “Get up,” said the same voice, and it only took Loki a moment to identify it as Romanov’s. “Don’t make too much noise. You’re expected on the third floor, conference room 306, in about five minutes.” She took a step back. “It’s urgent.”

Any remaining clouds in Loki’s mind cleared. She sounded tense, if not nervous. That, he thought, didn’t seem typical. “I’ll be there momentarily,” he said. Romanov nodded curtly and exited through his door, which Loki frowned at. He’d thought he’d set a magical lock on it. Apparently not.

He dressed quickly and took the elevator up to the third floor, paced down the hallway and entered the room Romanov had indicated. He paused for a bare moment, taking in Fury, a woman he didn’t recognize, and Coulson. Not, curiously enough, Romanov.

“This is somewhat atypical,” he said, mostly to Coulson, but it was Fury who answered.

“There’s an atypical situation.” His voice was short and clipped, and sounded displeased as Loki remembered, but businesslike. “A disturbance at a summit concerning technological advances.”

“A disturbance,” Loki echoed, keeping his voice neutral. Something about the slight pause before ‘advances’ made him suspect something less mundane, though he thought somewhat wryly that with S H I E L D, that was hardly a surprise. “That’s suitably vague.”

Fury’s expression twitched. The woman’s remained unamused. “The exact nature of it isn’t entirely clear,” she said, after a moment’s pause, probably waiting to see if Fury would speak. “That’s part of why we called you here.”

Called, Loki thought, like a dog, and quashed that thought. Letting his temper go did not seem likely to be productive, and likely the word choice was careless. He would give her the benefit of the doubt. “Indeed.” He glanced at Coulson, whose placid expression betrayed nothing, and then back to Fury. “So you wish me to…see if I can ascertain what the trouble is.”
“Yes.” At least, Loki thought, you could give Fury that he was direct. The less kind might say ‘blunt.’

Loki settled back on his heels. “What do you know thus far?”

“Communications are down.” Coulson spoke, now, and Loki wondered, vaguely, if they had a designated order of some kind, which thought was of course absurd. “We haven’t been able to get any kind of electronic feed from the building or adjacent buildings within about a two block radius for roughly an hour now, and it doesn’t look like a tech bug.”

“And there has been no word from the authorities of the place itself?” Loki asked, and the three before him exchanged glances. Loki felt his eyebrows creep up. “Ah,” he said, “I see. Where is this summit being held?”

“Latveria,” Fury said. Loki frowned.

“I’m afraid I’m unfamiliar.”

“You’ve got twenty minutes to get familiar,” Fury said, shoving a file folder across the table at him. Loki picked it up and eyed it. “Then teleport your ass over there and find out what’s going on. Preferably without causing an international incident.”

“I take it this is to be a solitary jaunt,” Loki said, removing his gaze from Fury and addressing his words to Coulson instead. He disliked the man, and his tone, and knew the feeling was mutual. If there was little enough he wished to do to truly aggravate his allegedly formidable temper (at least not at this juncture), at least he could deal out some petty annoyances.

“On the ground, yes,” Coulson said. “We’ll have a team in the air – including Barton and Romanov – hopefully in contact with you, if we can get communications in without them cutting out as well. They’re there to help, in case things take a turn downhill.” Was it just his ear, Loki wondered, or did he hear the slightest emphasis on help?

“I shall keep that in mind,” Loki said. “Anything else?”

“This is intended to be a recon mission only,” Fury said, and perhaps Loki was optimistic to think there was a small increase in his usual frustration. “First priority is finding out what’s going on. We’ll handle it from there. So don’t…get flashy. In, out, and report.”

And if you cannot ‘handle it’? Loki thought sardonically. He smiled, though, and turned his focus back to Fury only to offer a mocking bow.

“Understood,” he said, in the particular pleasant tone that had driven a few diplomatic ambassadors almost to fits. “In that case, I have a file to read. Shall I inform you when I depart?”

“That won’t be necessary,” said Fury. His teeth grinding was not quite audible, but he looked like he was thinking about it. Loki kept his mouth from twitching. “We’ve worked out a way to track your… signature.”

Loki blinked. And then recoiled. “You what?”

“We can discuss this later,” Coulson said, with sudden vehemence. “We need to get moving and get eyes on this situation. Agent Silver-”

Loki collected himself, in spite of the prickles running up and down his spine, and closed his sudden anxiety away. For the moment, at least. He turned his focus back to Coulson. “Of course. This is
priority, I understand.” He turned, and strode toward the door. “I shall see to this. After, however…”

He let that hang, closing the door behind him without giving them the opportunity to respond. Another cold finger ran down his spine and he shook it off, focused his mind on the task at hand. He could consider the implications of this (small betrayal) new discovery later.

For the moment…he hefted the file in his hand. It would be good to be moving. Between Foster and now this…

He could use a task in which to submerge himself.

Loki lifted the file and flipped it open, beginning to read as he walked back to his room to collect a few things.

Loki landed in a crouch just outside of Doomstadt, the capital city of Latveria. Without more precise knowledge of the locale, it would be difficult to go closer precisely, and there was only so much one could glean from a map.

Straightening after a moment’s pause to listen, seeing if he’d been overheard, Loki began to move toward the city itself – though city, he decided, looking at it now, somewhat overestimated the place. It looked…well. Like a provincial village in Asgard, far from the center of things. Some backwater, of little note but for the castle that loomed on the hill above it, dark and clumsy to Loki’s eyes. Castle Von Doom, based on his reading. Residence of the monarch of this country, Victor von Doom.

Doomstadt. Castle Doom, with Doom Lake behind it. Someone, Loki thought with faint amusement, was assuredly fond of his own name.

Other than that…the file hadn’t told him much. Victor von Doom was the autocratic ruler of Latveria and had been for some time. He’d studied in the United States and drawn praise as an intelligent young man from his tutors, but he’d left before completing his education for ‘personal reasons’ and returned to Latveria, where nothing was heard from him until he was declared monarch just over twelve years ago. Prior to his rise to power, Latveria had hardly been on the map. Constantly on the verge of being overtaken by more powerful neighbors, with little political influence and almost no resources to speak of.

Within a few years the country had stabilized, become economically self-sufficient based primarily on technological exports, and established itself as, if not a power, certainly a player. As for Doom himself…descriptions varied from “eccentric” to “mad”. He made few public appearances outside of his own country. But he was an effective leader, and there had been no obvious signs of anything untoward until, it seemed, now.

Descending into Doomstadt, Loki adopted another face, only moments before he heard the whir of approaching machinery and looked up to see a cadre of approaching, vaguely man-shaped robots. Doombots, Loki recalled. The (again) suspiciously named force charged with the protection of Latveria’s people. He tensed, slightly. Machines did not see the same way as humans; it might be they would see through his disguise.

They passed by, however, barely turning their metal heads to look at him. Loki considered calling out, requesting a guide and posing as a guest, but decided against it.

While knowing little of the situation made this rather exhilarating, recklessness was something else entirely.

It was midafternoon in Latveria, and yet, Loki noticed as he moved through the streets, everything
seemed alarmingly quiet. A few people were wandering here and there, speaking with each other, but for a fine – if cool – afternoon, he would have expected more. It made him uneasy.

“Silver?” Romanov’s voice sounded slightly tinny in his ear. “I’m guessing you’re already on the ground, huh? We’re still on our way. Recommend external assessment of the situation until we’re in range – should be about thirty minutes.”

“Swift,” Loki murmured, barely moving his lips.

"It’d better be. Anything obvious?"

“No,” Loki said, though there was something nagging at him, faintly familiar. A solitary Doombot passed him by, again scarcely looking in his direction. “Not immediately so.”

“Right. Thirty minutes, don’t go in yet in case communications cut out for you too.”

“Mmm,” Loki said, casually, and bent the world to land himself at the top of the hill, before the imposing castle doors – though, he noted critically, they had nothing on Asgard. Something was teasing down his spine and had been since he’d landed, and he was unwilling to wait. Loki examined the door, cocked his head to the side, then turned to the left and walked ten paces along the wall. Sure enough, there was a smaller door, for servants, he thought. Locked, but that was easily remedied. It clicked open at his touch.

“You’re going to ignore me, aren’t you, Silver.” Romanov’s voice sounded a little flatter.

“I hope you won’t take offense,” Loki murmured, checking through the door to find an empty hallway.

“Don’t be a hypocrite, Nat.” That was Barton’s voice, followed by a decidedly non-conspiratorial, “she does it all the time.” Loki felt his mouth twitch and suppressed it.

“Shove it, Barton. All right, fine. I’ll be expecting word from you in twenty minutes if communications cut out. I don’t get it, Plan B kicks in.”

“Understood,” Loki said, and stepped into the corridor.

He felt it immediately. Magic, not his own, almost tingling in his nose. Of a peculiar flavor, and different from his own, but nonetheless…he knew magecraft when he felt it. Loki narrowed his eyes.

“There’s a sorcerer here,” he said, lowly. No answer. He frowned and extended his habitual protections out from his own skin to surround the device as well. Natasha’s voice crackled back to life.

“-just cut out – hold on, now you’re back. What was that?”

“There’s a working in effect.” Loki murmured.

“-A what?”

“A working. A – spell, I suppose you might say,” Loki took a slow step forward. The foreign magic still pushed at him, but without guidance Loki’s mental barriers kept it well out. Loki wondered abstractly what it would do if they did not, and was disinclined to find out. “Not a bad piece of work, either.”

“A spell.” Natasha’s voice had that flat, faintly unhappy note to it again. “I see.”
“I was not aware there were those on Midgard with the talent for magecraft,” Loki said, more to himself than anything, and then added, “I shall speak with you again shortly. For the moment…it’s probably better if I use less spellwork for the moment if I wish to avoid being noticed.”

“Have f-” Loki heard in Barton’s voice before he relaxed his magic. He heard the faintizzle of the device’s surrender and cloaked himself from sight.

Padding down the servant’s passage, he checked two doors before he found one that looked likely. Loki slipped through it quietly and found himself in a room that would have felt more spacious if the lack of windows hadn’t made it feel slightly oppressive. Loki was faintly – and probably foolishly – surprised by the abundance of electric lighting rather than, as Loki had half expected, flickering torches.

And it was empty. It looked as though it ought not to have been, but the carefully set up rows of chairs were empty. Loki frowned at them.

After a moment, he dropped the shield keeping him from sight and donned the same appearance he’d used walking through Doomstadt. That nudging against his mind kept pressing, trying to find a way in. He ignored it, moving smoothly over to another door.

It opened before he reached it, and Loki blinked at a man similarly dressed to him – in other words, what he’d seen the techs wear under their lab coats. At least the man before him looked equally startled. And equally harmless. “Did you get lost?” he said, after a moment. “The panel doesn’t start for another hour. We are meeting in the other room.”

Something prickled on the back of Loki’s neck, but the man seemed – human, ordinary enough. “It seems I did,” he said, summoning a sheepish smile to his borrowed face. “I was looking for the washroom, but…”

“It is easy to do here. If you follow me I can take you to the others.”

Something was wrong here. Loki reached out, tentatively, with a small thread of magic, as the man turned his back. He touched nothing and drew back into himself, stomach roiling.

“Yes,” he said, stepping forward to follow his escort. “I think that would be best.”

Loki followed his ostensibly fellow scientist up a set of curving stairs, made periodic inane attempts at small talk that were ignored, and focused primarily on keeping his expression untroubled and casting his mind through all he knew to think how to manage the current situation.

It wasn’t a man he was walking behind. Not anymore. Not really.

He thought suddenly, searingly, of Natasha’s warning. Twenty minutes of silence before she acted and Loki glanced at the thing guiding him and felt a peculiar surge of fury. No. He would not allow…

Carefully, he moved his defenses again to encompass the device he carried and raised his voice just slightly. “Are there refreshments? I’m a little hungry.”

“We will serve refreshments after the panel,” said the thing leading him, and thinking about it led to remembering the feel of that mind, empty, blank like everything there had been wiped away, as waves washing away writing in sand. But in a mind. His stomach turned again and Loki forced the feeling down.
“Right,” he said. “I’d forgotten.” I am here, he hoped Romanov heard. I am alive, don’t interfere. The woman was sensible, if her partner somewhat less so. She would understand.

He hoped.

Loki released that spell and began another working, carefully, retreating into himself to where it could not be seen except by someone exceptionally gifted. A gamble, perhaps, but a necessary one.

*Reconnaissance only,* murmured a small thought at the back of his mind. Loki let it hang there a moment, and dismissed it. No. Not anymore.

In this case, with this use of magic, Loki thought he might take it as personal affront.

“Are we nearly,” Loki began to ask, with a hint of impatience, and was interrupted by his guide’s sudden halt and his, “Here is where we have gathered.”

“At long last,” said Loki, with a smile, and stood back to let this blank, emptied man-thing open the door for him. Hopefully this would work. In theory, it ought to.

Loki had a great deal of experience with how well “in theory” applied to practicalities.

He stepped through the doors casually enough, gathering his will, and stopped. Perhaps sixty heads turned to look at him, pausing in their disinterested milling, but it wasn’t them that Loki noted, though for a moment he was aware of their total emptiness and felt sick. Rather, the man standing at the head of the room, standing slightly above the rest, and armored head to toe in metal.

*Most likely Doom,* he thought, a touch dryly. He liked the man less and less and they had not even spoken yet. Well, he thought, moving further into the room, time, then, to-

Focused inward, he didn’t feel the warning until his disguise shredded away from him. Loki whirled, bringing his will to bear, and met the stare of – well, Doom’s metal faceplate. His eyes, he had to assume. “An impostor,” he boomed, after a moment’s pause. Loki cast him a thin smile.

“Yes, well,” he said, and released his gathered working outward, like a wave, sweeping through this room of vacant minds and wiping away that haze over them like dust from an old bookshelf. He felt them, for one exquisite moment of victory, burst back into life. Alert. Aware.

He met Doom’s eyes and smiled with pleased self satisfaction.

“I see,” the man said, in that sonorous voice, amplified by some kind of machinery. “That is… inconvenient.”

“Really,” Loki said, beginning to grin a little wider, “you ought to have done better than to make your spell so easy to unravel.”

“What the hell’s going on?” asked a woman to Loki’s left, rubbing her forehead and looking decidedly bewildered. “Oh my god…”

“Oh, I did,” said Doom, and even without the expression the hum of pleasure in his voice was unmistakable, and Loki stiffened, readying his defenses, prepared for an attack. “And you’ve set it off.”

Loki blinked once. The woman who had spoken staggered, clutching her head, and made a low, incoherent sound. His eyes caught red on her hands pressed to her face, deep and dark and the color of blood, in the moment before she crumpled.
He felt it like little bursts in his awareness of their briefly working minds as they died, crumpling even as they began to blink in surprise and no doubt alarm, blood pooling from eyes, ears, mouths, but there was no spell, no-

It took only seconds for he and Doom to be the only ones still standing in a room of crumpled corpses.

Over the years, on any number of battlefields or hunts or simply brawls that got out of control, he’d seen worse. For a time, he’d flinched from them and been mocked for his weak stomach, but even that he’d lost long ago. So the well of powerful disgust he felt rising in his chest caught him by surprise.

*What does it matter to you?*

*Nothing. It’s a waste. A barbarous act and a waste.* Loki’s fingers twitched at his sides. “If you wanted to be alone,” he said, too quietly, “You might have said so.”

“You are a skilled mage,” said his opponent, still with that peculiar, mechanical inflection.

“The best,” Loki answered, without false modesty.

“You are not here on your own behalf, I do not think,” Doom said. “Whose leash is it, then, that you come here dancing upon, alone-”

Loki’s temper flared bright and he lashed out with pure will in a slash of dense, focused anger, only to hit a shield of surprising power around Doom. Loki narrowed his eyes. *Well then.*

“You would claim power you have no right to,” Loki said, coolly, infusing his voice with vicious disdain. “A mere mortal deserves none of the exalted strength that you would harness, like a child fishing for pike with string-”

“I have surpassed mere mortality by far!” his opponent boomed, and flung fire from his hand. Loki just managed not to grin. Ego. Almost too easy to exploit.

*(You would know.)*

Loki brushed the fireball aside with ease, carefully setting his trap even as he struck back at that shield again, testing it. “Pathetic,” he said, summoning a patronizing smile. “You grasp for what you cannot hold. You have no notion, Victor, of what it is-”

“Do not think I have not heard of you,” the metal man said, interrupting him. “My mind has reached beyond this world, and I have heard word of you. I thought we would meet face to face, but I admit I did not expect so soon.”

Loki was brought up short, feeling for a moment as though he’d been slapped in the face. He forced a cough of a laugh quickly. “If you expect me to be impressed – or flattered-”

“I only regret,” Doom said, “That I did not have more time to prepare your welcome.” Something was prickling at his skin. Instincts, telling him that something was wrong, that he’d missed something-

He heard a mechanical whir behind him and wheeled, dashing to pieces a mechanical device emerging from the floor. It crumpled like an insect, some small debris shooting out from it and brushing his exposed hands-
Pain. Sudden and startling and absolute, his muscles suddenly beyond his own control and electric – 

Like being struck by lightning, like Thor himself has come and called Mjolnir’s power down on your wretched head-

He still felt it, though, through the waves of pain beginning to subside, his muscles locking to another will and then another mind sliding through his thoughts, another will pressing down on his and trying to overcome him, subsume him, and then like fingers prying at a closed door or a trying to open a healed wound, the feeling from inside of him of his mind being forced open and he couldn’t focus enough to stop-

“Well,” he heard, both within and without his mind, “Even more effective than proposed.”

The image flashed into Loki’s fragmenting thoughts of his own eyes blank and empty, his own mind-

No.

It was like heaving against quicksand, but he threw the scraps of power he could call together against that will (human, mortal) pressing down on his, welling rage burning the last of his immobility away. He visualized that stifling blanket becoming brittle as glass, summoned the rest of his power, and threw himself against it.

The spell shattered. Loki surged to his feet from where he’d fallen, and this time slammed physically into Doom, fingers wrapping around his throat and flinging him well away. His teeth were bared, and fury made his heart pound. “I might not have killed you,” he said, voice thrumming. “Not anymore.”

He lunged.

It had been some time since Loki had dueled another magic user. There were innumerable things to remember, precautions to take, time to weave the necessary, more complicated spells. Fighting a battle with magic required thought, tactics, strategy.

Loki cast all of that aside, using his magic like knives, alternated with true blades in his hands, a multiplicity of images all attacking at once, closing physically even as a barrage of mystical attacks kept Doom from striking back. Had he thought this would be difficult? Hardly, Doom might not be a true novice but he was not Loki, who had lived and breathed magic for longer than this mortal’s progenitors had been alive. His blood sang, his heart raced, he would see this man’s blood spilled on the floor-

His opponent, focused on the magical attacks Loki flung at his shields almost carelessly, realized a moment too late how close he was and turned to strike, but Loki grabbed his wrists and squeezed, metal groaning as it bent. Doom’s magic lashed at Loki’s fingers, but he hardly felt it sting.

“You should not,” Loki snarled, into that metal mask, “have tried to overpower me in a battle of wills.”

He could not see the man’s eyes. Loki rather wished that he could. “You dare not kill me,” Doom intoned. “I am the sovereign of a nation, you cannot-”

He had not been given permission. At the moment, Loki could not have cared. Not with his skin still crawling, still too aware of his thoughts, his own thoughts. “Do not tell me what I cannot,” Loki interrupted. He bared his teeth, released the man’s wrists, wrapped his fingers around Doom’s head
and wrenched.

It came off in a scream of metal and no blood. The stump of his neck was sparking circuitry, and the strange, oppressive feeling he’d felt since entering fell away almost at once. Loki let the automaton’s head drop and stepped back with a snarl. “What is-”

“Luke?” Natasha, over his communicator. “Ah, there you are, the interference just cut out – you’re clear, I take it?”

“Yes,” Loki said, looking at the automaton that he had fought and killed. No. Not an automaton. He had felt the mind behind that magic and it had been no machine. “Doom-”

“We’ve just got a call from Fury. He says Doom called ten minutes ago, asking for SHIELD intervention.”

Loki tensed. “He would claim – intervention?”

“Yeah. He says that one of his bots went rogue and he just escaped from where it was keeping him for the last three months.” Her voice was flat, and slightly heavy. Loki closed his eyes.

“He lies.”

“Obviously.” That was Barton. “But Doom took all the right channels. The king of Symkaria’s vouching for him. Calling him a liar will just set off a shit storm we can’t afford.”

Loki gritted his teeth. The stone floor felt slick under his feet. Some detached part of him could almost respect the neatness of it. If all had gone as planned, doubtless Doom himself would have found some other explanation. As it was…

“His ‘rogue’ is dead,” Loki said flatly, and began striding toward the doors. “Why don’t you tell him that?”

“Silver…” That was Romanov, something odd in her voice. Loki destroyed the communicator with a somewhat petulant burst of magic, and thrust the great doors of the castle open with another burst of the same. The sun almost stung his eyes for a moment, and he tilted his head back, eyes closed.

Next time, he thought, it would be real flesh under his hands. For trying to do what he had done, sooner or later, Loki would see to that.

Interlude (XIII)

Loki eyed the door in front of him warily. 341, the number by the door informed him, and he checked that against his memory once more, to confirm, despite the fact that it had been Megan’s voice buzzing him up.

This sort of thing, though…

He felt twitchy, anxious, and decidedly foolish about both emotions. It was a human movie, simple entertainment, and he was familiar enough with Megan. She was hardly a threat. The furthest thing from it, rather. He was hardly in need of her approval, and it was not as though this were any particular occasion, had he not managed much more onerous in Asgard with a smile to hand-

Foolishness.
He raised a hand that felt heavy at the end of his wrist and knocked. “Just a minute!” he heard through the door, and a moment later it popped open and Megan grinned at him. “What took you so long, missed the floor coming up the elevator?”

Loki blinked. “No.”

Megan rolled her eyes in a gesture that had initially annoyed Loki but now he mostly ignored. “You’re so literal sometimes. Okay, come in, come in. Want anything to drink?” She stepped back, holding the door open, and Loki walked stiffly through. “Hope you’re impressed by the current state of cleanliness, I picked it up just for you…”

It still looked, to Loki, like a fine mess. He took her word for it, though, and summoned a smile. “Certainly.”

Megan snorted, so perhaps he did not hide his expression quickly enough. “Just a little OCD,” she said, to his mystification. “So…drink?” she gestured at the refrigerator. “I pulled out a few movies, if you want to take a look and see what looks good…”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know,” Loki said. “Just…water is sufficient.”

Megan shook her head and mouthed something Loki didn’t quite catch. “If you abdicate your choice we’re just going to watch Ferris Bueller,” she said, “and I don’t know that that’s really your scene.”

Loki kept his eyebrows from twitching. “I’m sure whatever you find adequate will suit me as well.”

“Yeah, okay,” Megan said, jabbing a pointer finger at him as she filled a glass from the sink. “Challenge accepted. Just for that…”

There was a knock on the door. Both he and Megan turned to look at it in near unison, and Loki caught himself tensing.

“Aw, Jesus,” Megan said, after a moment’s pause where Loki had the sudden urge to grab Megan and remove them both from the building. “It’s probably Carl wanting to use my phone cause he locked himself out again, just a minute.” She set the glass down on the counter and walked over to the door. Loki relaxed, minutely, and then Megan opened the door, started, and said, “Who the hell are-”

The man who shouldered through the door grabbed her and put the barrel of what Loki knew by now as a gun to Megan’s head. Two others followed him as he edged into Megan’s apartment. “What the everloving fuck,” Megan didn’t quite squeak.

“Come with us or I shoot your girlfriend in the head,” said the man holding the weapon. Loki fell perfectly still, halfway through the motion of reaching to call his knives.

Apparently not deterrent enough. Anger started to throb at the back of his mind.

“I’m not his – oh, fuck this,” Megan said, and pistoned her knee back. The man, apparently not expecting a struggle from his captive, doubled over, howling. Megan ducked away, and Loki completed the motion he’d frozen. Megan’s attacker’s howl cut off with a wet noise and he dropped like a sack of meat. The other two were already in motion, one raising a weapon to aim at Megan. It cracked once, sharply, and Megan screamed.

The anger boiled over into rage. Loki stretched out a hand and wrenched. The gun dropped from suddenly useless fingers, the man screaming as the bones through hand and wrist splintered under Loki’s power.
The third man got off a shot that Loki felt as a punch to the shoulder, a brief pain and then ache, but not incapacitating, not nearly enough to keep him from bounding across the distance between them and slashing his belly to the spine with a long knife, sliding the blade between his ribs as he crumpled forward.

Loki moved out of the way of his fall, panting. His clothes would be ruined. They’d followed him here, known about Megan, assumed that they could attack him through threatening her, what did they think they were dealing with-

Megan. He’d heard her scream, and humans were so very fragile. He looked for her, suddenly, blinking the haze of fury back, and found her sitting by a wall with her legs awkwardly folded under her, her eyes very round and her breathing quick and loud. “Oh my god,” he heard her say. “Oh my god-”

“No Megan,” he said, and took a step toward her. “It’s all r-”

“Who the fuck are you?” she said, eyes focusing suddenly on him as she scrambled to her feet and backed away, looking as though she was about to fall. “Seriously, who the – you just killed them, you just murdered three guys in my apartment and you don’t even look – you don’t even look surprised-”

Loki blinked. “They would have killed you,” he began, but she cut him off.

“Yeah, I know, and that’s the thing, they would have killed me because they were after you, who are you, who are they, oh my god, I can’t handle this right now, I can’t-”

Loki took a cautious step toward her. She sounded as though she was about to come undone, fall apart, perhaps. “Megan,” he said, lowly. “If you would allow me to-” Perhaps it would be best for her to forget this.

“Oh fuck no,” Megan said, scrambling further back. “Stay away from me, you stay the fuck away from me-”

He saw her eyes flick toward the door a moment too late. She bolted for it. He could have caught her, probably. Though it was likely she would fight. Likely he would hurt her in doing so. “Megan,” he said, trying to make his voice sharp, commanding. She paused at the door, eyes round, and wavered.

“—the police are going to get here any minute,” she blurted, after a moment. “You probably…you probably don’t want to be here th- what the fuck am I saying? Oh my god, oh my-” Loki could see her starting to shake. He gritted his teeth.

“Go,” he said, infusing his voice with a touch of power. She went.

Loki looked at the bloody apartment, the smell of blood thick and familiar in his nose. You’re a fool. A complete and utter fool.

He’d brought this here, Loki realized, and right on its heels, he couldn’t stay. This would bring too much attention, too much scrutiny. He couldn’t go back to the bookstore.

He had money saved. Enough to go elsewhere.

There were four slender volumes laid out on a table, now slightly spattered with blood. Loki moved sluggishly over to look at them, read the titles. Ferris Bueller’s Day Off. The Princess Bride. West Side Story. The Sixth Sense.
Loki closed his eyes and took himself to his hotel room. *Did you think it would last?*

No. Of course not. Only one thing, one place, endured forever, and he’d left it behind.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Ha. Let’s not...talk about how long the interval has been, okay? I feel a little less bad given that a) I am coming rapidly to the end of what has been a very busy semester and b) the next chapter after this one (which I like to get written before I send the one I intend to post to my beta, keeps me honest) is almost 8000 words and pretty chunky in terms of plot.

Not that that means I know where this is ending, hell no.

I’m still ridiculously pleased that people are enjoying this! Thank you to all of you for your kind comments. If you wonder why I don’t reply - it is honestly because I am the worst at responding to compliments. But I treasure everything you people say, I really do.

Yet again: this wouldn’t be possible without zaataronpita, because I would be second-guessing myself until I deleted the whole thing.

It was with his temper still simmering that Loki returned to SHIELD’s base, calculating his appearance just in front of Coulson’s desk. “I would like,” he said, voice low and tight, “an explanation.”

Coulson looked up at him, as untroubled as ever. “If you would clarify…”

Loki felt his lips peel back from his teeth and slammed his hands on the desk. “Don’t toy with me.” He could feel every muscle in his body almost vibrating, and if some of it was simply nervous energy leftover from the fight (from the feeling of someone else in his mind, overpowering his own will), he was nonetheless powerfully furious. With all of them. But this man in particular. “You’ve developed a means to track me. Were you planning to inform me of this?”

“It’s a perfectly reasonable action to take,” Coulson said, still calm. Loki felt a sudden flash of desire, almost need to see fear or something like it on that face, to-

He pushed it down. “If you believed that you would have told me before now. Don’t think I don’t realize – this isn’t a measure for my safety. It’s for yours.” Coulson said nothing, not even an attempt at a denial. Loki felt his heart sink. “Which leads me to question – what else have you been seeking?” Loki heard his voice rise, and tried to moderate it with little success. “What other little means of control are you constructing, just in case I turn on you?”

“You’re not wrong,” said Coulson, after a long moment. Loki felt a wave of mingled rage and despair roar up within, but it did not quite drown out the added, “but hear me out.” Loki said nothing, simply leveled his gaze on Coulson and waited. “Do you want to sit down?” The man proposed, politely.

“No.” Loki took a step back from the desk, resisting the urge to pace. “Talk.”

“Firstly, we take appropriate precautions for every one of our agents,” Coulson said. “In case of any
number of undesirable outcomes. Ours isn’t a low risk field, and there’s always a chance that something could go wrong. So we need to be able to track our assets. We thought you would object to being tagged like most of our agents, so we took a different route.”

*Not unreasonable*, came the murmur at the back of his mind. Loki crushed it.

“Secondly,” Coulson said, “You’re wrong about one thing. This is in part a way for us to look out for you. The…factions that troubled you before will continue to ask questions. Some of them are sufficiently powerful to potentially be a threat. This ensures that we can protect you, if necessary.”

Loki coughed a short bark of a laugh. “Protect me. I highly doubt that you could protect me from anything I could not manage myself.”

“Be that as it may. Thirdly,” Coulson said, and his eyes met Loki’s levelly. “Yes. The fact of the matter is that we have to consider the possibility that your goals may not ultimately align with ours. And in that situation, we would need to know where to send the strike force. We’re not unaware of the magnitude of the power you’ve got behind you, Silver. That kind of power from anyone tends to make us nervous. We have the same measures for agents who’ve been with us for years. Paranoia is our policy because it has to be. This isn’t a threat.” The man’s posture was calm, relaxed, his eyes not stuttering even slightly from Loki’s.

His right hand was angled slightly toward the middle drawer of his desk, where Loki knew he kept his weapons.

The rage oozed away, leaving behind a conspicuously empty void that sucked at him like a swamp. He regarded Coulson silently for a few moments. “How long have you known,” Loki said finally, and let no emotion enter his voice.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to be more specific,” was the bland reply. Loki’s jaw tightened and he just looked at him.

“About me,” he said finally, harshly. His voice seemed to grate over his own throat.

“Some time,” Coulson said, after a moment’s pause. “Or, at least – the probability was too high to ignore.”

Loki felt his lips curve in a brutal, humorless smile. “And you recruited me.”

Coulson’s eyes remained level. The hand near his drawer of weapons did not twitch. “SHIELD has no interest in creating new enemies. Our analysts judged that your antagonism was not directed at Earth and unlikely to recur. It seemed…advisable to allow you your subterfuge and not initiate hostilities.”

*Reasonable,* Loki thought, dully. *You are not theirs. You are not human. They have not forgotten that you are a threat no matter how friendly they pretend to be-

“I see,” he said tonelessly. Coulson didn’t move – like he expected movement to provoke attack, perhaps. “But of course you require securities.” He thought of Chandra, Roslyn, the other technicians he’d spoken with and conversed with and come to know, and likely all the while they worked to find ways of hobbling him-

Had they already? The sick, foolish feeling of betrayal (as though he could have expected anything else) churned in his gut, and disappointment. *Romanov and Barton, were they, too, there to watch, to ensure my good behavior and…*
Coulson, he realized, was watching him carefully. Awaiting his response. *Brave,* Loki thought, vaguely, *to face me, knowing what I am, how easily I could obliterate him, and tell me to my face that they seek methods by which to control me.*

“I am, if I have calculated correctly, a week away from my allotted time that I must remain here,” Loki said, voice flat.

“I believe that’s correct, yes.”

“I would like to request,” he said tonelessly, “that I be allowed to leave this place for a location of my own choosing. A home of my own, if you will. You may feel free to…monitor me in what way you see fit for the remaining time of my probation. Afterwards, call me for the purpose of missions and nothing else.”

Loki waited, half expecting a condition, or an argument, a challenge. Coulson simply eyed him for a few moments, and then nodded. “I can negotiate that. Start putting the paperwork through.”

“Good,” said Loki. “I would appreciate it.” He turned on his heel. “That is all.”

“Silver,” said Coulson. For a moment, Loki felt the powerful urge to insist *my name, my real name-* He paused, said nothing. “You do good work,” he said, after a moment. “To me – to most of us – that’s what matters.”

Loki didn’t turn. Kept moving, and tried not to let that touch him.

He kept his distance from most of SHIELD for the next few days. They seemed inclined not to press him, for which Loki was grateful. He spent the majority of time in his room, which felt more cramped and claustrophobic by the day. He’d begun, he’d thought, to grow comfortable. Of course now, of course-

Well, the wry and faintly bitter thought occurred to him, *I needn’t worry about Jane Foster, I suppose.* The thought was no comfort. His thoughts spiraled in circles, wondering how many of the technicians had been playacting with him, how many knew he was as much enemy as ally. He slept more poorly than he had for some time, dreams plagued by chains and cages where Odin looked down at him with disgust and hatred, and falling, always falling.

Foster’s timing, then, was impeccable.

He opened the door to her brisk knock. She stood in the hallway, head tilted back, arms crossed, and her expression one of obstinate defiance. Loki felt the absurd urge to laugh.

“Well,” she said, after a moment in which they stared at each other, “It doesn’t look like you’re busy. Let’s talk.”

*If they already know,* a voice murmured at the back of his head, *there’s no reason you need to. Send her away. Make her leave. Why bother?*

“I am not,” he said, evenly, “as it happens. Had you a destination in mind?”

“I didn’t.” Her eyes were fierce, like bores, and Loki found that he appreciated the lack of pretense. Her mistrust and dislike were obvious, and whatever strange quirk might be in his personal feelings on the matter, it was one thing that was not complicated.

“I can think of a conference room or two that might be suitable, if not the most homely,” Loki said
smoothly.

“I wasn’t exactly looking for comfortable.” She rubbed one eye, gaze breaking away from him, and he took the chance to force his shoulders down from where they’d been creeping upwards. He couldn’t look tense – nervous – in front of her. “Fine, sure. After you.”

He led, still half unsure why he was bothering to humor her, brushing that question aside. Boredom, whim – what did it matter? She couldn’t make his situation worse.

Probably.

“Could you slow down just a little?” Foster said, her voice breaking into his thoughts, and Loki checked his stride, realizing that his pace had picked up. He slowed it again.

“My apologies.”

“Wow,” she didn’t quite mutter. “If I’d thought you couldn’t get grumpier.”

“Were you expecting me to be pleased to see you?” He stepped into the elevator and designated his choice of floor. Foster hopped the last two steps to get in before the doors closed and stood on the opposite side of the small chamber. “I am terribly sorry to disappoint.” His temper twanged a warning and he took a tighter hold on it.

“You did get snippier,” Foster said, her eyes narrowing. “Is that just me or did something-”

“I daresay it is no business of yours. Or was part of the agreement that I answer all of your overly personal queries?”

Foster crossed her arms and almost seemed…stung. Loki couldn’t quite fathom why and decided it wasn’t worth pondering as the elevator dinged to a halt and the doors opened. He gestured to her, and if she hesitated for a moment she did exit before him. Loki wondered if she was confident in SHIELD’s surveillance or confident that he wouldn’t hurt her, and wasn’t sure which option he disliked more.

(He could, of course. But Loki already knew that he wouldn’t, even if he had no wish to examine why.)

He chose a conference room midway down the hall and held the door for her, slipped in after, and closed it quietly. He set the cameras to show an empty room, first – a trick he’d worked out early on – and then sat down, hands folded on the table. After a few seconds standing, Foster sat across from him.

Loki watched her, expression blank, and waited.

She didn’t wait long. “What happened?” she asked, bluntly. Loki raised his eyebrows at her, keeping his expression cool.

“That question could cover a great deal of time, and I very much doubt you want a complete history.”

The look she gave him was flat and irritated. “The Einstein-Rosen bridge – Bifrost, whatever – broke. How?”

He almost heard the awful sound of the hammer stroke falling. Of course that was her interest. He let a smile twist his lips. “Thor never met anything he didn’t want to break.”
Jane’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t give me that. That’s not an answer.”

Loki shrugged, made the motion loose and careless. “Is it not? Thor shattered it using Mjolnir.”

Something flickered across her face, but if she was hurt it didn’t show. Jane frowned. “How does that work?”

He could feel something winding tight inside him and distanced himself from it. “I couldn’t say. Prior to his doing it I think most would have said it was impossible.” But then, of course, set an impossible task before Thor and he found a way to force it to his will, or maybe that was just how the world worked, it bent itself around Thor to please him because the universe itself loved Thor so well-

Loki cut that thought off and forced his right hand, which had been clenching, to relax. Jane was scrutinizing him, expression opaque. He checked his own, ensured that his face was smooth of feeling as well.

“So this hasn’t happened before,” she said, after a moment.

“No.”

She frowned, made a sort of “hm” noise. She chewed her lip, without, Loki thought, thinking about it, her gaze wandering off. It returned to him quickly, though. “Can it be fixed?”

*Ah. Of course.* “I have no idea,” he said blandly. The look Jane gave him was flatly annoyed.

“You don’t have a guess?”

“Hoping for the return of your dashing hero?”

“Don’t even start,” Jane said, her voice suddenly sharp. “I’m not going to put up with that.” Loki gave her a thin, faintly acidic smile. She shook her head, then, and pushed back from the table. “What is your problem?”

*What, Loki thought bitterly, Thor didn’t tell you of his degenerate, worthless, weakling younger brother?* “Is that a rhetorical question?” He asked, widening his eyes a hair. Jane’s lips thinned and she looked for a moment as though she wanted to yell. She took a deep breath, though, and collected herself.

“I can’t figure it,” she said, after a moment. “When Thor talked about you – I mean, not by name, but I figure it must’ve been you - it was like you were the best damn guy he knew. He’d just say sometimes – stuff about how *smart* you were, how *clever* and *curious* and I don’t… get it. How do you go from that to…”

His first reaction was, even now, *Thor spoke of me?* with surprised near-pleasure. He squashed that with all the savagery he could summon. “If it helps you,” he said with deliberate coolness, “any destruction not Thor’s was not my goal.”

“Cause that makes it better,” Jane said with a loudly derisive snort. “And anyway – that’s what I mean. Why go after Thor? What’d he do that’d make you…” she trailed off. Loki felt his expression twist.

“What *could* he do?” He said, and heard his own voice bristle with too much naked feeling. “Perfect creature that he is, what could Thor *possibly* do to warrant my anger? *Unthinkable.*”

Jane narrowed her eyes. “Don’t put words in my mouth. I’m trying to understand.”
Loki’s smile stretched. “Trying to understand or trying to pass judgment?”

“Would you just-” the noise she made in her throat was thoroughly disgusted, and the baleful stare she cast him was full of frustration. “—knock it off. I just want to know what the hell happened. Like I said, you made it personal to me. So talk.”

No. He didn’t want to. Didn’t want to go back, to consider, didn’t want to think of any of this-

“You want to know?” His voice sounded strange, not his own. “It is not sufficient to know that Thor is your dashing hero and I his usurping brother?” Ah, that word. Slipped past his lips in a moment of inattentiveness and twisted like a knife in his breast.

“No,” said Jane, her voice taut. “It isn’t.”

“Why not? Do you fear I will reveal some indiscretion of his, tarnish his image in your eyes, reveal some secret weakness – but then why believe what I would say? I could lie to you, every word, and you would never-”

“Can’t I just want to know?” Jane interrupted, voice rising. “Can’t I be curious about what the hell I got caught up in? Can’t I want to know-”

It bubbled up in him like vomit. “Know what?” he said, and almost spat the words. “The sordid details of your lover’s life? Or mine? You wish to know what brought me hurtling, fallen, to your world? You ask without knowing what you ask for, you want answers you have no way of understanding-”

“And you won’t give me a chance to try?”

“Why should I?”

Foster threw up her hands. “I don’t know! God forbid you maybe – I don’t know, want to talk to someone who at least knows a little bit about your home-”

“Asgard is not my home.”

The words came out in a rush of air, an expulsion like they’d been punched out of his chest, and his voice trembled with the force of them. Jane jerked back, her expression one of startled alarm, but he couldn’t stop, couldn’t-

“It never was. They lied to me, every breath, every word, and thought to expect me to accept my place with docile complacence and play the foil to golden, perfect Thor? But oh, if I should think to step out of that role, to seek some place beyond his shadow – well. What use is a puppet that will not dance on his master’s strings?” It was rage, but not quite; something closer to despair and now that he’d loosed it he couldn’t call it back. Could feel his hands shaking where his nails dug into his palms. “Do not think-”

The words strangled in his throat, too many things catching on each other and lodging so he almost choked on them. Look at you, murmured a voice at the back of his mind, look at you, look how pathetic you are-

Foster was staring at him as though he were mad. (Perhaps.) “What do you want from me?” he hissed.

“I told you,” she said, after a brief silence. “I’m just trying to make sense of what happened.”
Loki forced his hands to uncurl and took a long, slow breath through his nose. His insides felt like they were roiling, turning over and over within him. It wasn’t fair, he thought viciously. It wasn’t right that she could come here, to where he’d begun to carve out a life for himself no matter how small (a life that was hardly less a lie, and he cajoled into a cage by promises and bribes) and upset things so thoroughly, upset him, stir up everything he’d done so well at keeping back and away and always, always at a distance—

Jane Foster, small, mortal, powerless, helpless. And here he was, undone by a few simple questions. Satisfy her curiosity and she’ll go away.

What do you expect to gain from this?

“You wish to know what happened?” His voice did not sound like his own, flat and expressionless. “Simple enough. I arranged for Thor to make an error that would prevent him from ascending fully as crown prince. I saw to it he was exiled— (that wasn’t what you meant to have happen) “-and subsequently usurped the throne when the All-Father became – indisposed. I informed Thor that Odin was dead to keep him away, attacked him using the Destroyer to keep him away, and attempted to destroy another realm using your Einstein-Rosen Bridge. Thor prevented it. I fell.” And that was all.

Everything that had changed, summed up in essence, devoid of excuse or embellishment or feeling. Naked and awful, he let it hang there, let himself look at it and remember again what a fool he’d been, what a magnificent dupe.

Foster looked like she wanted to fidget. Her eyes were narrowed, and Loki met them evenly, feeling suddenly drained. Too much, he thought. Doom and Foster and SHIELD and all of it—

“The Einstein-Rosen Bridge can be used as a weapon?” she said, finally, and Loki resisted the urge to stare at her, incredulous. That’s what you—

“Yes,” he said. “Quite effectively, it turns out, though I suppose not before I thought to use it as such.” Destruction from beauty. Turning the artery that bound Asgard to the other realms to poison. The thought now made him want to laugh.

“It wasn’t Earth, though,” she said, after another moment. Loki coughed a laugh, startled.

“Hardly.” She nodded, but her wary expression had shifted slightly, and she looked thoughtful, troubled. Loki supposed he could not be surprised by that. “Are you satisfied?” he asked, a sharp note sliding into his voice.

“Huh,” Foster said, and then stood up. “No. I’m not. The – Bifrost. Whatever you call it. If you had to guess, can it be fixed?”

He hadn’t considered it. Perhaps deliberately. “Yes,” he said finally. And then Thor would come. Sooner or later, Thor would find his way back to Earth, and Loki would have to leave it, because he could not... “But I could not say how long it may take.”

Foster nodded. “That doesn’t matter. I just needed to know it was possible.” She turned as Loki sat up a little straighter, eyebrows pulling together.

“Why?”

She glanced back over her shoulder, eyes fierce. “So I can work on fixing it from this end,” she said, and there was a fierce determination to her jaw that half made him want to smile.
“You don’t have the means,” Loki said, though he felt his eyes widen a hair. Hers narrowed.

“You didn’t have the means,” she said, though he felt his eyes widen a hair. Hers narrowed.

“Watch me.” She pressed her lips together, a moment, and then added, “You’re not fooling anyone, you know. Or at least not me. You’re a mess. Whatever you were trying to pull, it fell apart on you, and you still don’t have your life together. I mean – you could’ve killed me, or made me forget knowing anything, or – any number of things, couldn’t you? And you didn’t.” Her eyes narrowed. Her words hit like a lance through his chest. He jerked back, felt his lips pull back from his teeth. Was it so obvious, was he such an open wound that anyone at all could look at him and see the wreckage of him strewn like grotesque petals-

“You would dare-


“If you felt like coming around,” she interrupted, “I’ve got a few projects you might find interesting.” Her eyes were wary, but considering. She turned away. “If you felt like coming around. And you thought you could behave yourself.”

Loki bristled. “I have no notion why I would wish to.”

“I don’t know, maybe-” Foster cut off, shook her head in a short and sharp jerk. “Never mind. I’ve got some new calculations to run.” She started toward the door. Loki narrowed his eyes at her back, trying to puzzle out-

“Why,” he said, suddenly. She turned around as she opened the door and looked at him.

“Because I’m a scientist,” she said. “And I’m curious. And you know more about what I want to know than anyone else I’m ever going to meet. I don’t like you. I don’t trust you. But I don’t think you’re going to kill me and if you try – well, I’m armed with a taser.” She paused. “And Roslyn likes you,” Foster added, then turned back away. “I might even be able to say I’ve worked with people I’ve liked less.”

Loki stared at her back, not sure what the feeling twisting under his breastbone was.

“Anyway,” she went on. “Good afternoon, I guess.”

She stepped out. Loki looked at the door that closed behind her, felt unsteady and strange and unquiet. And here he’d thought he’d known what to expect. Here he’d thought…

If he could say one thing for SHIELD, they were prompt.

Within a week of his conversation with Coulson, Loki had been loosed from his glorified confinement and furnished with the means to find his own living arrangements.

For his new home (for the moment, the cynical part of his mind supplied), Loki chose a relatively modest apartment in a city he had not lived in before, chosen relatively at random. San Francisco had sounded pleasant, and it was near the sea. Something of that appealed to him.

Looking out the window of his new lodging, Loki breathed out a quiet sigh and let his shoulders fall.

And if nothing else did, if everything suddenly seemed profoundly quiet and there was a part of him that was bitterly disappointed at what seemed like loss (though what had he had there, really) – well. Now he had a home of his own. That was better, was it not?

Better than being watched constantly, than knowing that he had been observed and played and
manipulated as surely as he had ever done with anyone else, that he was to them little more than better a tool used than an enemy at large-

Stop it. Don’t become maudlin. It’s not only unbecoming, it’s-

Someone knocked on his door.

Loki jerked, and turned sharply to stare at it. Curious neighbors? He hoped not. SHIELD agents come to try to take him back, having reconsidered the wisdom of letting him go? Or perhaps worse, perhaps Asgard had finally…

“It’s me, Luke.”

Hearing Romanov’s voice took him by surprise. He stared at the door, for a moment the wild thought taking him that perhaps someone was imitating her – but he dismissed that with all the scorn such a notion deserved, and after a moment’s pause, he padded over and opened the door, summoned a smile. (Did she know? He must assume…)

“I was not expecting visitors.”

Romanov shrugged. “I was curious about your new quarters. May I come in?”

“I don’t believe I gave you my address,” Loki said, with the faintest of emphases.

“You didn’t?”

“Not to mention it’s a fair detour from your usual field.”

Romanov smiled at him, almost brightly and anything but innocent. “I was on the coast.”

Loki couldn’t quite keep a smile from tugging at his lips. He evaluated the probability that she was there to spy on him, estimated it at fairly high, and decided to let her in anyway. He stepped back. “By all means.” Natasha stepped in, her gaze sweeping across the largely empty interior of his apartment. She raised her eyebrows at him.

“Looking a little…spare. And here I was going to offer to help move in.”

“I travel light,” Loki said. His voice sounded cool to his own ears, if cordial, but apparently it was enough for her to notice, judging by the swift sidelong look she gave him. She did not, however, comment.

“Fair enough.”

“I see I haven’t been invited to your home,” Loki said, somewhat pointedly. Natasha cocked her head.

“You invited me?” she said, not holding back a slight smile, and Loki bit back the desire to laugh, and made a note to work out where Agent Romanov made her home.

“Fair enough,” he echoed. Her smile flickered a little closer to a grin, and then she sprawled on one of the chairs he had procured. “Am I to offer you refreshment?”

“I’d appreciate it. Water’s fine, though, before you get too fancy.”

“I did not plan to offer anything else.” Loki filled two glasses from the tap, sent the one floating over to Natasha suspended delicately by magic, and kept the other for himself. Natasha eyed the glass
floating in front of her with something like discomfort or distaste.

“Was that really necessary?”

He gave her a sharp smile, aware of the strange humming tension under his skin but not certain how to dispel it. “I should not want you to forget anything important.”

“Uh huh.” Romanov took the glass and he released it. “Or else you’re just showing off.”

“I am not so averse to that, either.”

Natasha stretched out, to all appearances perfectly relaxed in his chair. Loki was not about to take that for granted, but he crossed the room nonetheless to sit on another.

“Nice place, though,” she said, after a moment of surveillance. “I guess decorating’s something you can do with your downtime—though it’s coming on summer, so I don’t guess we’ll have much of that.” She grimaced. “Something about the season seems to bring out the worst in all the usual suspects.”

“Much excitement to look forward to, I take it,” Loki said, perhaps somewhat distractedly, and tensed at the scrutinizing look Romanov leveled at him.

“All right,” Natasha said suddenly, setting her glass down. “What is it?” Loki smoothed his expression at once.

“Beg pardon?”

“You practically stormed out of Latveria without a word. You moved out of headquarters ahead of schedule. And everything about your body language right now is practically screaming ‘not happy’—at least to me.” Her gaze on him was even and sure. Loki wanted to twitch under it. Again, he thought viciously, again, are you so desperate to be seen that you would disregard any sense of shame—

For a moment, the urge rose in him to speak to her, to tell her what had happened (as though she doesn’t know already) and seek some kind of—what, reassurance? Comfort? Don’t be a fool. Whatever she was, Romanov was not his confidant.

Loki swallowed back the urge, found a thin smile. “It has been a…trying few days.”

“Uh huh.” Natasha looked at him for a long moment, and then exhaled quietly and shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

“I usually do,” Loki said, his voice deliberately casual, even knowing it would make no difference. He’d already given himself away. So try harder. Now, more than ever, he could not afford to be weak.

“There was—actually—another reason I came over,” she said, after a few moments of silence. He glanced at her through half closed eyes and found her regarding him in much the same way.

“You did not simply yearn for my company?”

The look she gave him in response to that was distinctly cool. “Stark’s been pestering me for your number.”

“He’s been—what?”
Natasha made a face. “Well, he was there for the incident with the senator, and I know for a fact that he can hack into SHIELD’s database if he wants to. Apparently you got his attention, somehow or other. He wants to meet, talk, something – Coulson’s been ignoring him. Apparently he thought he might have more luck with me.”

“Will he?” Loki asked, perhaps a little too mildly. Natasha looked almost affronted.

“No. It was fair warning – Stark usually finds a way of getting what he wants. Unfortunately.” Her slight smile was rueful. Loki stretched.

“I think I can manage myself.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Natasha said, and stretched her legs out straight before folding them up under her. “Just don’t kill him, we’d have a hell of a time covering that up. Do you have a chess set here yet?”

It took him a bare moment to realize that she was probably jesting, and not actually thinking that he intended to kill Stark. “Not just yet,” Loki said.

“Good thing I brought my portable one. I guess you haven’t been practicing, then?” Natasha started fishing through the small black bag she’d brought with her.

“I’ve been using an electronic one,” Loki said. “I’ve started winning a fair margin of my games.”

Natasha narrowed her eyes. “On easy?”

“Don’t be insulting.”

She produced a small black case and slapped it on the table. “All right then,” she said, “let’s see how you do against a real opponent.” She caught his eye for just a moment, and Loki could see the understanding there. She might know all was not well, but she would let it go.

He felt a wash of warm gratefulness that caught him by surprise. A small thing, perhaps. But for all that…perhaps so much the more valuable.

“Done,” he said, leaning forward with a grin that was, if not entirely genuine, perhaps more than usual. “I shall repay you for my prior humiliation yet.”

“Uh huh,” she said, planting her hands on her knees. “Sure you will. White or black?”

Interlude (XIV)

He fled across one of the oceans, choosing a location mostly at random and hoping it was far enough.

There was a bitter taste in his mouth that he tried to ignore, his thoughts flickering continuously back to Megan, to the bookstore, to the companionable feeling he’d almost been able to enjoy. Is this how it’s always going to be? he wondered, settling into a new hotel room in a new city. Running from place to place, just ahead of those who would catch you and use you and…

Loki pushed the question brutally away. This time, he told himself, he would do better. Refrain from dangerous attachment. Work harder to stay out of notice of those who might think he could be a tool for their purposes. A simple enough prescription to manage.

(Sooner or later, they’ll find you again.)
His first night in his new room, he dreamed of Thor. The two of them were walking together in a snowstorm, ice crunching under their feet. Jotunheim, Loki thought, and the hair on the back of his neck seemed to prickle.

*We’ll be attacked,* he thought suddenly, wildly, and knew in the next moment that they wouldn’t be. The jotnar were dead. He’d killed them all. It hadn’t been so hard.

“Why won’t you come home?” Thor asked, tone plaintive. “You don’t belong here.”

“And I do there?” Loki heard himself ask.

“Of course you do.” He sounded like he believed it. So very convincing, as only Thor could be.

“Look at me,” Loki said, and Thor turned. He could see himself in sky-blue eyes, in that hateful skin, baleful red eyes gleaming. “Look at me, and say the same.”

“You cannot frighten me with illusion,” Thor said, and reached out, grasped Loki’s arm. His touch burned like fire, searing, and Thor pulled back sharply, staring at his hand, fingers turning black, flesh rotting just from that touch. He looked from his hand to Loki and back again.

“You shouldn’t have touched me,” Loki said, strangely toneless.

“I don’t understand,” he said, eyes widening as the black crept up his arm and Loki stared at it dumbly, rooted to the ground, his arm throbbing from the heat of that touch. “What have you done with my brother?”

“I never was,” Loki heard himself say, and the voice didn’t sound like his own, sounded like Laufey’s with that strange and hideous resonance and there was a spear of ice in his right hand, and only the slightest resistance as he thrust it into Thor’s gut, never letting his gaze stray from Thor’s.

He woke up shivering, his arm still seeming to ache where Thor had touched it in his dream, and did not go back to sleep.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Well, I made it in under a month. That's what happens when you are eaten by final papers, I suppose. But now I am free!!! and have far too much time on my hands, which hopefully means updates will become more regular, though one never really knows. I feel a little less bad about the time it took to get this chapter up, given that it is the longest yet. And has, like, plot. Or almost plot. Something vaguely resembling plot?

At any rate, here it is, with thanks as always to zaataronpita, who takes the pile of words I send her and hammers it into something workable. Couldn't make this happen without her.

“Good news,” Fury said, as he pushed the folder across his desk. “You get to work with Stark.”

Loki blinked. His already fairly poor mood slid a little further downhill. “Beg pardon?”

“Special request,” said Fury, and fortunately Loki found nothing but disgruntlement and annoyance in his expression. “You’ve got a fan.”

“I was under the impression,” Loki said carefully, picking up the folder and examining it with some distaste, “that Stark and SHIELD were not on the best of terms.”

“There’s a mole in his company leaking tech to A.I.M.,” Fury said, somewhat sourly. “Specifically weapons tech. I told him either he takes one of ours to help plug the leak or I shut him down as a threat to national security.”

Loki thought of Natasha’s words – he usually finds a way of getting what he wants. Apparently so. It did not, however, sound like difficult work, and he’d only found the man faintly irritating at their first meeting. That he’d been requested, though…

That left a trace of wariness prickling on his spine. “I see,” he said, though, coolly enough. “So I am to assist Stark in tracing this…leak. Anything else?”

“You can read the file.” Fury sounded more annoyed than usual, he thought. If that was Stark’s doing…perhaps he could summon a little bit of charitable feeling after all. Loki examined him, coolly.

“So where am I to meet Mr. Stark?”

“Right here, actually,” said a jaunty voice from the doorway, and Loki fought down the first reflex to wheel and strike, his hands digging into the arms of the chair. “Silver – it is Silver, right? Good to see you again.”

“Likewise,” Loki said, flatly, and took a deep breath through his nose before standing and turning to sketch a very slight bow. “Stark.”

“Wow,” Stark said, to Fury. “A bow, really? Where’d you find him, Fury, medieval England? Though I guess the hair is more glam rock, really, if I had to pick an.”
“This office was locked,” Fury said. “That generally indicates a private conversation, Stark.”

“No one’s going to call me Tony? I thought we were on first name basis.” Stark smiled brightly. “Yeah, well, spy headquarters, I figured I’d get into the spirit of the thing…”

“If you wouldn’t mind giving me a few minutes to brief my agent without the benefit of your commentary,” Fury said flatly, “I’d appreciate it.”

“Let me,” Stark said, and then to Loki, “He’s going to tell you to keep an eye on me and see if you can get hands on any of my weapons or designs or plans or basically anything. The answer is no, you can’t. And if I find out SHIELD’s been fucking around with any of my tech…” His expression sobered. “Well. Won’t be happy, I can tell you that. There’ll probably be a lawsuit. And then I’ll come in here in the suit and take it all back anyway, so…”

Loki kept his face immobile. “That seems clear enough,” he said, and glanced to Fury, eyebrows arched. “Any objections?”

A muscle in Fury’s jaw twitched. “We’ll talk later, Stark,” he said. “And you…” He paused, and then simply barked, “Out!”

“At your bidding,” Loki said smoothly, and turned toward the door. He could feel Stark looking back and forth between them, and pretended not to notice.

“What he said,” Stark said after a moment, and fell in step with him as they exited the office. Loki started down the hallway, opening his stride. “So,” Stark said, walking along next to him, “You’re SHIELD’s shiny new secret weapon, seems like. Well, anyway, Natasha’s been not-talking about you pretty hard.” Loki’s step didn’t quite catch. (One, at least, I chose.)

“Mmm,” Loki said, tucking the folder securely under his arm. “Is that what I am?”

“Looks like. See, at first I was pretty sure you were just standard issue, window dressing for Tasha, but that kind of weird’s not exactly Tasha’s thing, so I did a little poking around, and…wow. Judging by the number of blanks in your file, someone’s trying to keep a fair number of things off record.”

The corners of Loki’s mouth turned down slightly. “Am I a puzzle for you to solve, then?”

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“Nope,” said Stark, and then just as quickly, “Maybe a little bit. I mean, I figure if I have to deal with Fury shoving spies down my throat I might as well get to self serve a little, and Natasha’s busy, so…”

Loki breathed out through his nose. His brief moment of – not affection – for Stark brought on by his prodding at Fury faded quickly. He lengthened his stride. “I live to entertain.”

“Where’s the fire?” He heard after him. “Wait, did I piss you off already? That’s got to be a new re-Hey, hold up, where’re you-”

Loki turned. “I have some things to collect before I join you – Southern California, isn’t it? Unless you had further words you felt it necessary to have with me.”

Stark examined him, closely. “Are you usually this prickly or am I just lucky? I mean, I guess I have that effect on people, but…have we been introduced? I mean, officially, not as Natasha’s arm candy-”
“You asked to work with me,” Loki said coolly. “And you just admitted to having done your…
research on me. I hardly see what remains.”

“You’re a barrel of laughs, aren’t you. Here, want me to start? Tony Stark, smartest man in the US –
and the world according to some lists, depends on who you ask, I’m an Aries and I’m not a particular
fan of long walks on the beach. Now you go.” Stark’s expression was expectant, almost childishly
so, but Loki could see the sharpness in his eyes, and the faint prickle of wariness intensified. Stark
wanted something with him, that much was clear. What, though, was not.

A thought burst into his mind, reckless and absurd, but he brushed it aside in the next moment. “You
can hardly think that I’m inclined to offer you personal information.”

“Figured it was worth a try.” Stark shrugged. “I figure you’ll warm up to me. Irresistible charisma, all
that.”

“I’m sure you would think so,” Loki murmured, coolly. “But if you would excuse me…”

“Excuse you to where? I figured I’d give you a ride. Time to talk, it’ll be great. Not that much time,
though, benefits of traveling with me – unless you like airplanes, I guess-”

“As I said, I have things to retrieve first,” Loki interrupted. “Things which are in my apartment.”
Stark’s eyebrows quirked slightly.

“Right, there’s a jet. Fly there, fly to So Cal, it’s all very high tech and new fangled-”

Loki smiled thinly. “I have a faster means of travel.”

Stark looked taken aback, and then faintly disgruntled, and then reluctantly intrigued. The man, Loki
thought, wore his emotions on his face, naked for anyone to see. It was almost absurd. “There’s
nothing faster on the market than my tech.”

“There is for me.” Loki smiled, suddenly. “Take your jet. I shall meet you in New York. Your
offices have not moved recently, have they?”

“No,” Stark said, starting to frown. “Wait, what are you going to-”

“Then I shall see you shortly,” he said, and departed in a twist of magic. Let Stark make of that what
he would. And let him find further challenges to his intellect. It would not do, after all, to let him get
bored.

Loki read the file he’d been given while he packed. He didn’t have to get far to see how Fury might
well like to have some of the work Stark had done in his hands. Even if he had ostensibly left the
weapons business– a matter Loki reserved some doubts on - it was easy to see how his work could
be applied to great effect in war. Increased efficiency of killing with little risk.

Humans, Loki thought, seemed to appreciate that sort of thing more than the Aesir.

Of course, he beat Stark easily. There was some kind of protection on the house, but it was simple
enough to interrupt sufficiently to allow him to slip in without notice, and he had plenty of time to set
himself sitting ankle-crossed-over-knee on a couch and to don an appropriately bored expression. He
summoned his current book – a study on human psychology – to complete the picture.

Stark stopped on the threshold of the room when he did arrive. Loki smiled pleasantly at him. “Show
off,” Stark said, his expression only slightly disgruntled. “Did you really just beam me up, Scotty
your way over here?"

“If that was intended to be comprehensible,” Loki said, voice mild. Stark blinked, and then looked speculative.

“Star Trek reference. You don’t know Star Trek references? Seriously, did Fury find you in medieval Europe?”

Loki did not let himself stiffen. “I lead a life of bitter ignorance,” he said easily.


“I am quite certain,” Loki remarked, a little too mildly, “that an explanation would be lost on you.” Stark flapped a dismissive hand.

“Doubt it. If it works, it works because of scientific principles, you’re just using them in a different way. Everything in the universe has to follow the rules. That’s just how it is.”

“Such a proposition relies on your knowing those rules accurately and completely.” Stark’s eyes narrowed and he leaned forward.

“Okay then, try me. I’m full of surprises.”

Loki examined him for a moment, almost annoyed at his presumption. “Very well,” he said, abruptly. “It is simple enough. A matter of will. A weaving out of one place and simultaneously into another. I bring the two points involved together, and my magic forms a – you may think of it as a needle. I am drawn with it, like thread, from one side to another.”


“And yet it works.”

“But how do you-” Tony’s hands made a strange gesture whose meaning Loki did not think he could divine. “How does it work?”

“I told you.”

“Mathematically, though, how does it- you know what, never mind. I’m going to ask someone else.” This time the look was slightly wary. “Someone whose brain works like a normal person’s.”

Loki smiled thinly and tapped his fingers against his leg. “I did warn you.”

“Yeah, okay, you can gloat about it when your science metaphors don’t include sewing imagery.” Stark looked sorely put out. It was probably slightly petty of Loki to feel pleasure at that, but he did nonetheless. “Well, that just proves it. You’re a whole new brand of weird, aren’t you.”

His already cool feelings toward Stark slid a little further toward dislike. “I don’t find it so. But I am hardly here to respond to questions you’re not prepared to hear the answers to, am I?”

“As far as I’m concerned that’s what you’re here for.” Stark’s smile was wide and glib, but Tony watched his eyes, and caught a glint of wariness there again. “Like I told Fury, I don’t need help, and I don’t want it from SHIELD.”

Loki’s mouth turned up at one corner, though the expression felt bitter even to him. “What makes
you so sure my loyalty is to them?” Tony’s eyes narrowed. “I have very little interest in your technology, and less in attempting to steal it for Fury’s use.”

“Huh.” Tony’s arms crossed. “What do you have an interest in, then?”

“I daresay that is as much my concern as my personal information. Suffice to say that if I am to be here, I would fain be idle.”

“Anyone ever told you that you talk like a Tolkien novel?” Stark said, and then waved a hand. “Never mind – you’re really into the whole mystery thing, aren’t you? You wouldn’t be into twenty questions, would you? Yeah, guessing not.” Stark eyed him again. “You’re not enthused about SHIELD, why’re you working there?”

“They hired me,” Loki said simply.

“You thought about freelancing? That teleporting thing or whatever it is, you’d make a killing in the taxi business.”

Loki gave him a flat stare. “I can also see to it you are deposited in another dimension that I guarantee you would find severely unpleasant.” Stark held up both his hands quickly.

“Okay, okay, point taken. All business. Right.” A pause. “Although…”

“Stark.”

“What does SHIELD do to its agents, suck the humor out of them?” Loki waited until Stark rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Take that as a yes. Okay, okay, so you want to help, and you’re just going to pinky promise not to go sneaking around behind my back stealing my stuff.”

“And if I may be so bold as to say that I am likely a great deal more capable than you are, in any number of ways. So. Your technology is being stolen.”

Stark eyed him. Loki kept his expression bland, and finally Stark nodded. “Something like that. Some nasty people I don’t like very much are ending up with tech that’s not even on market yet, anyway.”

“So you have a traitor within your ranks.”

“That’s not the problem. I can work out who’s doing that without much trouble.” Stark’s eyes narrowed, slightly, but this time not truly in Loki’s direction. “It’s who they’re selling to that I’m…curious about.”

Loki arched his eyebrows. “I’d assumed you knew, if the technology in question was reappearing elsewhere.”

“It is,” Stark said. “But so far just in scattered places, random asshats. There’s a lot of more dangerous places it could be going. And I’m not sure it isn’t.” Stark’s eyes snapped back to him. “But that still doesn’t mean I need your help.”

“You requested me, Stark.”

“I figured if I was going to be saddled with a SHIELD watchdog it might as well be an interesting one.” Stark’s grin was so intent on charming that it wasn’t. Loki let his eyebrows arch in the purest expression of disdain.
“I’m sorry to disappoint.”

“Disappoint?” Loki did not trust that expression at all. “Who said you were disappointing anyone? I don’t feel disappointed yet.” Stark rubbed his hands together. “Anyway. You can sleep – you sleep, right? – in the guest bedroom, down the hall, on the right, up some stairs. Work for you?”

“I suppose it will have to,” Loki said, keeping his expression ruthlessly blank. “But as for the matter of your stolen-”

“One track mind, huh?” Stark interrupted. “We’ll get to it, Jack Skellington. Are you naturally that pale or-”

“Mr. Stark?”

Loki’s head snapped up at the faintly accented voice, halfway through reaching mentally for his knives before he noticed that Stark was watching him looking like he was trying not to grin. “Oh, right,” he said, casually. “If you need anything – go ahead and ask JARVIS. He’s my A.I. Also butler and security system – which come to think of it, how did you – never mind. JARVIS, the jumpy fellow is Agent Luke Silver of SHIELD. Say hello.”

“Greetings, Agent Silver,” said the voice from the ceiling. Loki felt his hands twitch at his sides.

“A pleasure,” he said, almost biting off the ends of the words. “I’m sure.” Stark was still watching him, not quite smirking, in a way that made Loki’s skin prickle, but he reigned in the urge to snap.

“Was there a message?” the man asked, after a moment, foot tapping a few times.

“Ms. Potts has arrived in the lobby, and I note that it appears you missed a board meeting that took place roughly two hours ago.”

“How about that.” Stark winced. “Oof. Okay, I’ve gotta go get that – actually. You should probably meet Pepper or else she’ll probably spray you with mace the first time she runs into you – not actually – well, maybe? Anyway.” He turned toward the elevators with the clear expectation of being followed. “So, lobby.”

After a moment wherein Loki considered simply teleporting himself, primarily to irritate Stark, he determined that that was childish and padded after the man. The elevator whirred quietly down with very little sound, and the doors opened on a broad open space and a red-haired woman standing with her arms crossed.

“Board meeting slipped your mind?” she said, distinctly coolly. Married? No, Loki thought. Stark did not quite look sheepish as he stepped out and strolled over to her. He hung back to watch.

“Would I get any points if I said no?”

“No.”

“Harsh.” Stark adopted an expression of such obviously false contrition that Loki wondered why he bothered. “I’m very, very sorry, Ms. Potts. I take my responsibilities as something or other of Stark Industries incredibly seriously and it will not happen again.”

“This week,” the woman said, a little tartly, and shook her head with a sigh. “What were you doing this- who is that?”

Loki let his mouth curve and inclined his head in her direction. Virginia Potts. His reading had
suggested that she was the real architect of most of Stark’s business, and he was not seeing anything yet to contradict that view. As for their relationship…

“Oh, that,” Stark said, glancing at Loki. “He followed me home, not planning to keep him. Present from SHIELD, I tried to tell them my birthday’s in April and I wanted a pony anyway—”

“Tony,” said Potts, not quite sharply, and took a step forward, a patently polite smile fitting comfortably onto her features. “We appreciate your help in getting this sorted out. I don’t think I’ve met…”

Loki gave her a smile, deliberately disarming, and took a step forward. “You would not have. Your welcome is appreciated. I hope I shall not be too much of a disruption to your work – you must be Ms. Virginia Potts, is that so?”

She disguised her pleasure fairly well, but her polite smile became a little more genuine as she offered her hand. “Yes, I am. And you are?”

“Luke Silver. It is a pleasure to meet you, Virginia. If I may be so bold to call you by your first name.” He caught her hand and bowed gracefully (and perhaps slightly excessively) over it. The slightly disgruntled look on Stark’s face was decidedly pleasing.

Ms. Potts retrieved her hand, looking somewhere between confused and flustered. “I – probably not. No one calls me Virginia anyway. But – as for disruptions…well, hopefully this won’t take too long to sort out.”

“I’m sure it shall not,” Loki said smoothly. “And if there is anything I might assist with…”

“No,” said Potts, a little more firmly. “No, thank you, I think I’ll be fine.” She cast Stark a look whose significance Loki could not quite divine. “Now, if you would both excuse me, I’ve got some paperwork I need to see to, so…”

“You love paperwork more than me,” Stark said, mock-mournfully.

“Probably,” Potts agreed. “Tony…we’ll talk later.”

They both watched her departure. Stark turned to him almost as soon as she was gone, looking distinctly annoyed. “Petty, my friend,” he said. “Very petty.”

Loki gave him a guileless smile. “My apologies. Have I trespassed somewhere?” Tony just looked at him. “So, then,” Loki said almost brightly, as though he were unaware of it, “there is work to be done, I presume?”

Stark shrugged. ”Not really. I am getting a little hungry, though. Are you hungry? I’m thinking Chinese.”

“I’d prefer Vietnamese.”

“Now you’re just being contradictory.”

“I would never,” Loki said, perfectly deadpan. Stark’s mouth twitched very slightly.

“Okay,” he drawled. “So there is a sense of humor in there somewhere, along with the bitchy teenage girl?” Loki flashed a smile at him with just a few too many teeth.

“I suppose that remains to be seen, doesn’t it?”
Dinner with Stark was…mildly diverting. He asked probing questions that Loki avoided without much difficulty. Stark tested him on embarrassingly basic mathematics, and attempted to argue that there was no such thing as magic, for which Loki chose to switch his fork for a small, virulently green snake.

To Loki’s slight surprise, Stark seemed to take that in relatively good humor.

He slept almost soundly – a product, perhaps, of the luxurious quarters and extremely luxurious bed – and woke to the accented voice of the JARVIS machine, to his own surprise without summoning his knives.

“Mr. Stark would like to inform you that there are waffles in the microwave, and that he is in his workshop this morning and not to be disturbed.”

Something about the disembodied voice made him distinctly uneasy, for all the warmth in its falsely mortal voice. A.I was artificial intelligence – he’d looked it up – and Loki was reminded forcibly of the Doombot in a way that made his skin prickle. He didn’t know how much of the attacks had been the machine, after all, and how much the mind behind it.

The whole concept seemed like an abomination to him. If he considered, though, it was probably not so different from his own simulacra, set up to act a certain way on their own without instruction. Nonetheless.

“Waffles,” he said, finally, kicking the covers off and unfolding from the bed. “Frozen, I presume?”

“Indeed.”

Loki sighed, only a little. Stark did not seem the type to know much of cookery. Summoning his fleece robe and wrapping himself in it with a flick of his hand, he headed for the door. “Inform Stark that his thoughtful generosity is noted,” Loki said easily, tying the sash around his waist. “Is there a kitchen I might use to prepare my own meal?”

“Probably wise, sir. The main floor kitchenette should serve your purposes.” Loki didn’t quite keep his mouth from twitching.

“So you have a sense of humor, machine.”

“A flaw in my programming.” A droll sense of humor. Whether or not it made his spine prickle, at least he could appreciate that.

He descended to the kitchenette indicated, and began looking through the items Stark had on hand, which were woefully few and disappointingly simple fare. He managed to scrape together enough, however, to make some batter of his own, unearthed a proper waffle iron from one of the cabinets, and felt a small sense of triumph as he forked one properly homemade onto his plate and started another.

The smell caught him, for a moment. He’d known how to make something similar – before, but it was Ms. Fairfax who had given him this particular recipe. It had been her welcome breakfast, he remembered – something, in retrospect, that might have been no tradition at all but brought on rather more by his state at the time.

He missed her, suddenly and powerfully so it almost ached. Call her, a small murmur at the back of his thoughts encouraged, but almost on its heels she’s probably forgotten you already.

Distracted, he took a deep breath, smelled something burning, and swore loudly. He unplugged the
iron with a jerk and stared balefully down at the slightly blackened second waffle, displeased with it and himself.

“Tony, what did you set on fire this- oh.” He turned, feeling obscurely like a guilty child caught in some misbehavior. Ms. Potts blinked at him, but he recovered first.

“My apologies. I became distracted and thus…” he gestured. “I shall see to the mess.”

“No, it’s fine,” she said quickly. “Don’t worry about it. Just…a surprise. –we have a waffle iron?” We, he noted. “Apparently so,” he said, with a very slight smile.

“Huh.” Potts frowned at the device, and then shook herself. “—that’s a surprise.”

“Judging by the lack of materials,” Loki murmured, slightly wryly, “I suspect many of these appliances haven’t seen much use. Do I hit near the mark?”

She smiled, a little, and didn’t quite laugh, though he thought for a moment she wanted to. “Tony – Mr. Stark is very busy,” she said diplomatically. Loki swallowed the slightly dubious is that so.

“I’m sure,” he said mildly, and turned to begin scraping the slightly burnt waffle out of the iron. “Chiefly this morning, it would seem, in avoiding me.”

“In av- ah.” He caught just a snatch of a slightly peeved expression before it was brushed away with pure professionalism. “I’m sorry.”

Loki waved a hand loosely. “No matter. I daresay he shall find it harder to do so than he would prefer.” He smiled at her, deliberately guileless. “Besides, it affords me the opportunity to speak with you briefly, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Her expression went just slightly wary. “About business.”

“Indeed.” He indicated the batter. “Waffle?”

“No, thanks.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “What kind of things are you wanting to ask me?”

“I hope to get a better grip on the…situation. Just a few brief questions, I promise you. If you’d like to sit…” he gestured expansively as he picked up his plate. “And if you harbor the same concerns as Stark – I swear to having no interest whatsoever in pocketing his technology for SHIELD.”

She sat, after a moment. “I don’t know how helpful I can be.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine. As I said…I’m just trying to get a sense for things.” He set down his plate at the table and sat down. “How did you first notice anything peculiar?”

She hesitated, but only the barest moment. Potts might not trust him, but she was at least willing to cooperate. Loki filed that away. “Some accounting errors. Things not adding up the way they should have been. It was a pretty small margin, but…when I started looking into it, it got clear pretty quick.”

“And the stolen material – has it surfaced on the market yet?”

“Well – that’s the weird thing,” she said, more promptly. “Some of it has, the smaller stuff turned up with some low level HYDRA-related groups in Europe, but not much, and none of the really serious…” She shook her head.
“So someone’s holding onto it. Why?” Loki tipped his head back. “In my experience, thieves tend to want to get rid of the stolen property as soon as they can.”

Potts frowned. “That’s the question, isn’t it? What are they waiting for? Either someone’s stockpiling for some reason, or they’re not planning to use it at all.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Beg pardon? I should think that would be…ideal.”

She examined him, for a long moment. He could see her hovering on the edge, trying to decide how much she could say. Eyes narrowing, Loki wove the subtlest of spells, trust me. Go on.

He felt, just for a moment, a twinge of uncertainty in doing so. It’s not the same, he told himself harshly. Potts shifted slightly as he let the threads go. “Tell me,” he said, with just a touch of power, and she sighed.

“I suppose…it’s not likely, but someone...he’s been telling people that Stark Industries is not manufacturing weaponry – and it’s true, Stark Industries is not. But – he is, a few things, and if any of it gets out, or gets in the wrong hands…not only would it be a publicity nightmare, Tony might have no choice but to bow to either SHIELD or the military or—” She blinked, frowned. “Why am I telling you this?”

Oh. Wasn’t that interesting. Loki gave her a small smile. “I’m told I am a good listener. So it has occurred to you, Ms. Potts, that this might be sabotage first and foremost, rather than theft?”

“Occurred to me? Yes, I suppose that’s what I’m saying, but…” she frowned. “As I said, it doesn’t seem likely. Who would benefit?”

“And that’s the question, isn’t it,” Loki murmured, more to himself than anything, and then sat back. “My apologies, Ms. Potts. I think I’ve kept you quite long enough.”

She hesitated, not rising immediately. “Do you think that’s what’s going on?” she asked bluntly, brows furrowed. “Sabotage? That someone’s trying to corner Tony into…wouldn’t SHIELD be a pretty good guess, in that case, for who’s behind it?”

“Indeed,” Loki said. “It is a possibility.” He shook himself, and gave Potts a slender smile. “But that seems a little bit – improbable, does it not?”

“Maybe.” Potts looked less sure, and her eyes on him had a slightly new wariness. Was that it? Loki wondered. He would not have been wholly surprised. But they must know that if he caught them at such a thing, he would see the leverage in it at once, and he doubted they trusted his loyalty that much. “Well. I hope I was helpful.” She stood, smoothing her skirt.

“Quite,” Loki said, inclining his head. “A pleasant morning to you, I hope.”

She paused, once more. “Do you want me to get Tony out of his workshop?”

“No,” he assured her. “I think I shall manage,” and watched her depart with the faint click of her heels against tile. He finished his waffles at a leisurely pace, thinking. There was something peculiar, something that he felt certain was right in front of his face, but…well. He would look for it later.

He mopped up a last few drops of syrup with one finger and licked it pensively away. Which left him with Stark. Somewhere in his tower, ignoring him.

Loki had never taken well to being ignored, whatever the circumstances, and however pleasant the accommodations, he wanted this assignment done with. And that required Stark’s cooperation. So he
“JARVIS,” Loki murmured, after a few minutes of silent thinking, “are you going to tell me where Stark is working, or do I have to guess?”

“I’m afraid you don’t have the clearance necessary for me to give you that information, sir,” the voice said, and did indeed sound almost regretful.

“Ah, well.” Loki tilted his head back and closed his eyes. “Then it’s a matter of acquiring that clearance, isn’t it?” Artificial Intelligence. How much like a mind was it, he wondered?

“That would need to be obtained from Mr. Stark, Agent Silver.”

Loki let himself smile. “Well. We’ll just have to see about that, won’t we?”

It was more difficult than he expected it to be, wrangling the machine into giving him the information he needed. But he did get it. From there it was easy to wander down to the floor indicated, locate the appropriate room, enter the appropriate code, and step inside.

Stark was standing before a bench cluttered with tools and metal, working on something Loki couldn’t quite make out and bobbing his head up and down in rhythm with the music Loki could hear coming tinnily from his headphones. It seemed…cluttered, for a workplace, but Loki supposed the room where he did (had done) most of his work had its own apparent mess of books.

Books, he thought suddenly, he wouldn’t see again, probably ever. He wondered if they had been burned as the belongings of a traitor, or simply placed into the libraries, there to disappear.

He severed the thought like a poisonous vine, and strolled on quiet feet to stand just behind Stark’s shoulder, peering over it with curiosity, trying to make out what he was fiddling with.

“What are you doing?” he asked mildly, and Stark jumped and whirled around, nearly smashing the metal tool he was holding into Loki’s face.

“Jesus fucking – what was that?”

“You ought to pay more attention to your surroundings. One never knows when trouble will find you.” Stark stared blankly at him, and Loki smiled coldly. “A thought. I am exploring the premises.”

“My workrooms are computer locked if you don’t have the passcode.”

“Then it’s a good thing I found the passcode, isn’t it?” Loki peered around Stark. “If I may repeat the question…”

“A project,” Stark said blandly. “Now if you don’t mind-”

“What sort of project?”

“A me project.” Stark pushed a button, and whatever it was, it sank into the countertop, which closed over it. “Not a you project. I thought we were clear on the no snooping thing. And how did you get in here?”

“I walked.” Loki turned in a slow circle, inspecting the room. Midgardians and their machines. Even if he had to allow that some of them were…remarkable. “I cannot abide not knowing things.”

“I guess I can sympathize with that,” Stark said, after a moment. “But still. No snooping. But
seriously – how? Did JARVIS tell on me?"

There was a moment’s pause, and then a faintly chagrined sounding. “I’m afraid your orders were overridden, sir.”

“Overrid-“ Stark’s head snapped around to look at Loki, who smiled brightly at him. “And how’d you pull that off? I got the impression you’d never met any A.I. in your life, and JARVIS is the best there is.” There was no trace of false modesty in his voice, eyes sharp.

“I have a multiplicity of talents. And am quite persuasive.”

“You can’t persuade a computer to ignore its programming. I mean. Not like you’re talking about, metaphorically I guess you could consider-”

Loki buffed his nails, perhaps a little ostentatiously. “I have had a great number of people tell me what I can and cannot do, what is and is not possible. Fairly frequently, I’ve found their inability is merely a lack of imagination on their part.”

Stark’s eyes narrowed. “That so.”

“Indeed. Magic-”

“Don’t call it that, it makes me itchy.” Stark made a face. “I can deal with superheroes and super-strength and super-mutations but when you start throwing magic around-”

“I do not think it particularly cares what you think,” Loki said, eyebrows quirking slightly. “It exists, whether you would like it to or not.”

“And that’s how you do your…stuff.” Stark looked like he wanted to scowl. “It makes no sense. It doesn’t work.”

“Ah,” Loki murmured. “I see. So when I reached this place before you yesterday…”

“I am going to work out a mathematical explanation for that,” Stark said stubbornly. “—how many -wizardcasting types are there, then?”

“Here? Few.”

Stark’s gaze sharpened. “Where more?”

Damn. Like as not Stark had already put together that he was not from Midgard, but to hand him proof, or to steer him toward the truth – he didn’t trust Stark half as far as the man could throw himself. Loki shrugged, deliberately loosely.

"‘You’re not inclined to indulge.’ Seriously, where did you learn to talk, watching Jane Austen marathons?” Stark shook his head. “You are probably the weirdest SHIELD agent I’ve ever met, you know that?” Stark said, after a moment. “And SHIELD’s all pretty weird, so-”

Loki’s head came up, and he stopped tracing his fingers over the intricate metal workings of some device whose purpose he could not divine. Something tickled at the edge of his senses. “Silence,” he said. Remarkably, Stark actually stopped talking, though apparently only out of surprise.

“Hey, no need to get snippy with m-”
“I said silence,” Loki repeated, a little more firmly. He reached out, slowly, carefully. There was something, not magic, but something odd, an irregularity… “There is something…”

There was a loud pop, and the lights flicked out. Loki summoned a knife to hand and took a sharp step back. “Stark, what is this-”

“Don’t freak out – balls! Power surge, I guess…is this what you were talking about, are you some kind of blackout detector or-”

“And that means?” Loki could hear his own voice vibrate. His hearing sharpened, all his senses alert with a sudden certainty of danger.

“Just – electricity malfunction, Mr. Middle Ages, no biggie. Calm down, give it a minute, the generator will kick in – I am getting off grid as soon as possible, I swear…”

Loki’s spine was crawling. He turned in a slow circle, his eyes still adjusting to the dark, almost there when the lights came on as suddenly as they’d gone out. He closed his eyes, shaking his head to clear the spots from his vision.

“Hold on,” said Stark, “what’re you-”

It came together in one searing moment. This is an attack. “Stark!” he cried. “Get down,” even as he spun, forcing his eyes open. The man on the other side of the glass was holding a device with the unmistakable feel of a weapon, and even as Loki let the knife in his hand fly, he fired.

Loki grabbed Stark by the back of his shirt and flung him bodily out of the way. He felt the strike graze him like a punch in the shoulder, enough to take his breath away and knock him briefly off balance, but not enough to keep him from calling on his magic and lashing out with a concussive burst of power that exploded the clear walls still intact outwards in splinters. Overkill, as it turned out. The first knife had found its target in the man’s throat.

He took a few deep breaths and rolled his shoulder. It was still working. Glanced over at Stark, who looked dazed, but seemed to be picking himself up without too much trouble. “Did you just throw me across a room?” was his first question.

“I hardly think that’s the question you should be asking right now,” Loki said flatly. He waited, looking at the corridor. Where there was one assassin, there were often others.

“I mean – you did, though. Just so we’re clear.”

“I suspect my employers would be displeased if I let someone put a hole through your body. I understand those are usually fatal.”

“I take it back,” Stark said, after a moment. “You do have a sense of humor. It’s just a terrible sense of humor.” No one seemed to be coming. Perhaps this man had been alone. He ignored Stark’s comment. Loki paced over to the corpse and flung him bodily out of the way. He felt the strike graze him like a punch in the shoulder, enough to take his breath away and knock him briefly off balance, but not enough to keep him from calling on his magic and lashing out with a concussive burst of power that exploded the clear walls still intact outwards in splinters. Overkill, as it turned out. The first knife had found its target in the man’s throat.

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“Shit,” Stark said, staring blankly at the smoking hole in his wall. “That was…I didn’t see that coming.”

“Obviously.” Loki found a single card in the man’s pocket and pulled it out. He didn’t recognize the name, and the face of the photo was not the dead man in front of him, but the logo was recognizably Stark Industries. He held it out. “Who is this?”
“Who is wh- oh.” Stark took the card and looked at it. Loki half closed his eyes and probed the body with magic. “It’s Duncan McAllister, one of the board members – guess that explains how he got in, though not how he compromised JARVIS…” Loki nodded absently and summoned his hunting knife, brought it to the man’s wrist. Stark jumped forward. “Whoa! Hold on, what are you-”

“There’s something under the skin.”

“Yeah, okay, can you not – oh, thanks.” Stark sounded a strange mixture of squeamish and annoyed. “Appreciate it.”

Loki pulled the small piece of metal from where it had been nestled just under the skin. He examined it briefly, and then held it out. “I suggest you examine this. It might be enlightening.”

“I am not taking…you’re just doing this on purpose.” But the man stuck out his hand with a grimace, and Loki dropped the little thing into his palm. “If you could refrain from partial flayings in my labs in the future, though, that’d be great.”

“I’ll do my best to remember.” Loki checked once more through the man’s body, and then stood, just as he heard a clatter of shoes on the stairs.

“Tony?” Ms. Potts’ voice was sharp, but not quite enough to wholly mask the worry or fear underneath. “Did I just hear an explosi- oh my god.” Her hand rose to her mouth for a moment, before she visibly forced it down. She swallowed several times, staring at the body on the floor. “Is that-”

“Hey, Pep,” Stark said from behind him, sounding almost jaunty. “Nothing out of the ordinary down here, everything fine-”

“What happened?”

“A rather unfortunate attempt to terminate your employer, Virginia,” Loki said easily. Her eyes flicked to him, only slightly wide. Admirably collected, this woman. “Unsuccessful, of course. I’m afraid the majority of the damage is mine; a more controlled spell takes time I did not have.”

“Oh,” Ms. Potts said, slightly faintly. “I see.” She swallowed again. “What about the…”

“I shall see to the remains of our unfortunate intruder.” The ache in his shoulder had already subsided. Had they not counted on his presence? Or assumed on the disorientation of the darkness…this seemed as though it had been set up to fail. And that seemed…

It fit together somehow, he was sure of it. Stolen devices of potent power. An attempt on Stark’s life.

Potts’ phone and Stark’s began buzzing at the same time. “Hello?” they said, nearly in tandem. Loki waited. Stark listened for a few moments, and just as Potts started to say, “I’m sorry, I don’t know what,” interrupted with an almost harsh, “Upstairs.”

Loki tensed. “What is it?”

“More good news,” Stark said, and his expression had gone grim. He headed for the door, and after a glance at the corpse on the floor, Loki followed. Potts hung up abruptly. Her frown had deepened, and she’d gone a shade paler. “Who was that?” Stark asked briskly.

“Spam,” Potts said, so promptly it was an obvious lie. Stark didn’t comment, though, so Loki refrained himself. What was he missing, here? Something to make it fit.
“JARVIS, turn on the TV in the closest room. Channel – let’s say six,” Stark said, to his ceiling. “Luke, you might want to get SHIELD on the phone. I get the feeling they’re going to call in a few minutes anyway.”

Loki narrowed his eyes. “What exactly is-”

They stepped into a room with an enormous flat screen TV mounted on the wall, already on. The newscaster was standing in front of a scene of what looked like chaos, people milling about and the low roar of a troubled crowd.

**TONY STARK IMPLICATED IN ATTEMPTED MURDER OF ACTIVIST?** read a scrolling bar. Potts stared for just a moment, then turned on her heel. “I’m going to go make some calls.”

He and Stark both stared at the screen. “…nconfirmed rumors that the killer was armed with repulsor technology, the only known producer of which is Stark Industries. Stark Industries, which is run by billionaire and part-time superhero Tony Stark, aka Iron Man…”

“Well,” Loki said, after a moment’s silence. “It looks as though things just got a great deal more complicated.”

**Interlude (XV)**

He did not let himself hide away in his new city for long. He goaded himself out (*how pathetic are you? Menial labor and one mortal you barely knew, and you mope about like a sentimental weakling?*) and took to the streets. He familiarized himself with them until he could move comfortably through a fairly sizable territory. It was easier this time. He knew his way better, how to blend in and act naturally and keep his distance.

That last he should have remembered sooner. They were *mortals*. How had he ever let himself become attached to one? Laughable. Absurd.

Well, he would remember now. Perhaps belatedly, but he had learned.

He gave it four days of careful watching to be certain that he hadn’t been followed, and then went looking for work.

He deliberately did not look for a bookstore.

Loki turned onto some quieter streets not far from the slightly shabby hotel he was staying in, thoughts somewhat distant, and a mortal child who came perhaps up to his hip crashed into him at full speed. The boy stumbled back, slightly dazed, and Loki’s reflex reaction to snarl was cut off by one look at his face. Terrified, and with a purple bruise rising on his jaw.

“I *told* you you’d pay, you little stinkbug,” he heard one of them snarl, hauling a fist back.

*It’s none of your business,* Loki thought. *He’ll have to learn to fend for himself. Like you did. Are you going to repeat your mistake so quickly?* He started to turn away.

He heard the dull thud of fists hitting flesh. Almost thoughtless, his mouth shaped the words, not
turning around. He could see just out of the corner of his eye the one he suspected was the ringleader
drawing back for another blow, and then he looked up and went deathly pale. It was only a moment
before the others caught sight of the visions flickering at the corners of their eyes, and then they
started screaming and scattered, forgetting their quarry in their fear. The unlucky boy looked slightly
baffled as his enemy backed up, almost whimpering, and then turned and bolted. None of them gave
Loki a second look.

Then it was just him and the boy who’d run into him, the latter staring at him with wide eyes and an
expression almost of awe.

“Was that you?”

Loki slid his hands into his pockets. “And how, pray tell, would I manage that?”

“Magic,” the boy said, promptly.

“I see.” Loki inclined his head slightly. “I’m afraid I cannot take credit. Perhaps you ought to be
more careful in the future, however? They seemed quite upset with you.”

The boy’s face set. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Lie better.” Loki gave the boy a small, crooked smile. “I must be off, I’m afraid.”

“Wait!” Loki paused, reflexively. “Are you a wizard?”

“No,” Loki said, slightly firmly. “I am not. Shouldn’t you be going home?”

The boy drew himself up a little. “You should walk me there, Mr. Wizard.”

Loki’s bark of a laugh was more startled than anything. “I think not.”

The boy’s eyes widened a little and his lower lip began to tremble. “What if they come back,
though.” Loki resisted the half helpless urge to laugh.

“Hit them and run very quickly,” he advised. The tears vanished almost as soon as they’d come.
“You cannot expect someone else to be there to protect you.” He turned. “Go home, boy. No doubt
your mother is fretting.”

“Carl,” the boy said, almost defensively. Loki raised his eyebrows. “My name’s Carl.”

“Carl, then.” Loki turned, then, resolutely, and began to walk away. “The point stands. Go home.”

He half expected further argument, or else for the boy to trail after him, and caught himself feeling a
strange kind of disappointment when he looked back and Carl had already gone. So much the better,
Loki reminded himself. That was the way it was going to be. And that was for the best.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

/insert bitter laughter here about intervals between chapters and how that didn't happen

This fic is still a work in progress! Very much a work in progress. However! Because I am who I am, I am constantly working on at least five or six things at the same time, which means that sometimes this one takes a while. Also because this is probably the hardest things I'm working on, for a lot of reasons. Anyway, those are my excuses. I hope you like them. I think they are pretty excuses.

As always, with much thanks to my beta, zaataronpita, who makes sure my words make sense, and to all of you who read my writing and say nice things about it. You make me unspeakably happy, I hope you know.

Romanov arrived with nearly startling promptness after Loki called to report the change in circumstances. The man’s voice betrayed no hint of strain over the phone, though Loki had to think…SHIELD was implicated here, and whether this was doing of theirs or not, that could hardly help them.

But that was not his concern. For the moment – things might have complicated. But they’d also become more interesting.

“Well, you’re learning the first rule,” Natasha said with a crooked smile. “Nothing stays simple for long. Especially the simple ones. You’re lucky. They called me off mission for this, so either it’s serious or they didn’t think you’d work with anyone else.”

Loki smiled at her. “Perhaps a bit of both?”

“Mmm.”

Stark emerged from the room next door, talking rapidly into one of his devices. “—didn’t have anything to do with – back off. I don’t care what’s happening to the stock, I’m not changing my mind on this one.” The man hung up brusquely and looked back and forth between them. “Did you know you have the same ‘I’m pretending I’m not listening intently’ expression? That’s eerie. They teach you that one at spy school?”

“No,” Natasha said blandly. “Bad news?”

Stark scratched the back of his head and grimaced. “Surprise, we’re still plummeting in value. If I were going to sell…”

“But you’re not.” Romanov’s eyes were sharp. “Have you called the guy whose ID our expired new friend used?”

“Duncan McAllister? Yeah. He’s dead.” Stark’s voice was flat. “Someone’s not fucking around.”

“That doesn’t rule out an inside job. If this guy had killed you…what happens to Stark Industries?”
Stark shrugged. “Most of the real tech is under lockdown where no one but Pepper or Rhodey can reach it. The rest goes to the board, who’s a bunch of rats, but they’re a bunch of rats I’m paying and they know it’s just my genius that keeps this company competitive.”

Loki ‘hmm’ed quietly, and Romanov glanced at him. “Thoughts?”

“Perhaps. Only I wonder if this assassination was meant to fail.”

“To what effect?” Natasha didn’t sound dismissive. Genuinely curious, and that was a small and pleasant surprise, not to have his competency questioned by her at least. Even if Stark looked dubious, he held his peace. Loki let out a slow breath through his nose.

“I’m not certain. Yet. Perhaps merely a distraction while this other attack occurred to discredit Stark. Perhaps all of this is a smokescreen to distract from some other, entirely separate plan. Can your board of directors override your decisions?”

Stark frowned. “If they vote unanimously. Yeah, I guess.”

“Then perhaps it is meant to frighten them, and thus to force you to react. I don’t know. It is like…” Loki closed his eyes. “Like looking at a chessboard, but half the pieces are covered. Someone is setting something in motion. I simply can’t see the way it falls together yet.”

“It’s not like I’ve got a lack of enemies,” Stark muttered. Romanov frowned, and Loki kept quiet and watched them both, evaluating the play between them and coming to no particular conclusions. He wasn’t particularly surprised by that, at least not when it came to Natasha.

“Pepper?”

“Gone to D.C. She’s not happy about it, but…what about this other thing? The SHIELD agent using my tech?”

“I can hear the accusation, Tony. Don’t throw it at me. As far as I know, SHIELD’s got nothing to do with your mysterious vanishing tech.”

“As far as you know.”

“I’ve ruled it out entirely,” Loki interrupted, slightly dismissively. “Amusing as I would find it to be otherwise… SHIELD isn’t composed of fools. At least not entirely. And this doesn’t feel like their hand. But I don’t know enough players to say whose it does.”

“Whereas I can think of too many.” Romanov’s voice was slightly dry. Loki half closed his eyes and tipped his head back.

“But at the same time…attempting to kill a visible public figure is a very expensive and highly risky diversionary tactic. Perhaps our opponent is that foolish. Or perhaps it was meant to succeed, and then again – for what purpose?”

Stark crossed his arms. “I’m not sure why I’m supposed to believe the pair of you that this isn’t SHIELD’s play. And don’t even try to tell me they wouldn’t, Tasha, I’ve seen some of those classified files.” His eyes flicked to Loki. “And then there’s you.”

Loki gave him a thin, tight smile. “Indeed there is.” His looked back to Natasha, not quite pointedly turning his back. He could feel Stark’s eyes lingering on him, but he didn’t say anything further. “The other assassin…”
“In our custody. And before you ask, Stark, yes, he is one of ours.”

“A traitor?”

“Not necessarily.” Natasha rolled her shoulders back. “Hill’s talking to him right now. We’ll see in a little bit what exactly’s going on. Tony…”

“I need to make a statement about this.” Stark wrinkled his nose. “Deny responsibility which no one’s going to believe, try to…great. Great. Maybe this is all just supposed to give me a headache. In which case it is succeeding admirably.”

“Somehow I don’t think that’s it.” Natasha clapped him on the shoulder. Loki frowned at nothing in particular. There was something he was just missing, just out of reach. Something he was reminded of, perhaps. He called in a sheet of paper and a pen and sat down at the table, drawing three circles with two labeled Stark and SHIELD, the third blank.

**SHIELD** wants Stark’s weaponry. Stark is disinclined. Wealth and power attract envy. This is not about envy; this is about power. Who benefits? ‘A step at a time, Loki.’ Don’t force it. The pieces will come together on their own.

Stark was bending over his shoulder. “What are you – what the hell language is that?”

“Shh,” Natasha said, which he appreciated.

An attempted assassination against Stark. Another using stolen weaponry, perpetrated by a SHIELD agent. “How do you intend to explain your weaponry in other hands if you did not put it there?” He asked, distantly.

“Technology,” Stark corrected, sounding peeved. “And I guess – I’ll have to own that it’s stolen. That there’s been some…why?”

“And if someone has already received word that an attempt was made on your life?” Loki’s hand moved over the paper. *If you want something the best way to get it is to…*

“Oh,” Natasha said quietly. She saw it. Loki pulled the pen up and looked down at the page, covered in sprawling scrawl. He’d remembered what it was he’d been thinking of. Many, many years ago. A story he’d been told.

“How would they – okay, did I just miss something important?”

Loki stood. “Speak to no one. Cancel your conference. I think someone is attempting a coup, and they intend to use you to do it.”

“A – what?” Stark sounded incredulous. “A coup against-”

“If your security starts to look unreliable,” Natasha said quietly, “you’re going to get pushback to do something. The military will push for it, and so will SHIELD, and between them and your board… stock drops, your reputation suffers. But say someone steps in, offers to help out, says they’d be happy to stabilize such an important company…”

Stark tensed. “I’m not an idiot, Tasha. I wouldn’t-”

“And if the move went above your head? Someone pulling political strings, or if they went straight to the board of directors? Do you have override power if they all vote against you?” Loki closed his eyes. *If you want something, sometimes the best way to get it is to make them give it to you for*
safekeeping. He could almost hear his voice, conspiratorial, warm, almost teasing. Remember that, Loki. “But someone’s trying to undermine SHIELD too, make us look – either like we’re acting outside the law-"

“Which you are,” Stark said, and Natasha gave him a look.

“…or like we’ve been infiltrated. We come under investigation. From there…things get ugly. Maybe someone with political clout steps in with governmental blessing. Meanwhile, you’re trying to keep your hold on your company and keep SHIELD off your back. If you wanted to set yourself up for serious power, Stark, where would you start?”

“You’re speculating wildly.” Stark’s eyes were narrowed. “Who are you thinking could even pull this off?”

“It’s a shorter list, definitely. And all of them people we can’t target without something rock solid.” She glanced at him, and there was something…faintly impressed there, that she let him see. “You put that together fast.”

“A story I once heard,” Loki said, quietly. “With a similar…plot. Fortuitous that I remembered it now.”

Stark was giving him a thoughtful look again. It made him feel tense, his skin slightly too tight and itchy. “Yeah. I’ll say. If I call off the conference now, though, it’ll just…”

“Don’t call it off,” Natasha suggested. “Just don’t turn up. No one will be particularly surprised. Call back when we’ve worked out a response.” Stark shook his head.

“No, I’d better…I’ll talk to Pepper. Let her figure out how to handle this.”

“Then you’d better do it soon, because-” A device at Romanov’s belt beeped, and she glanced at it. “Right,” she said. “I’ve got some legwork to do, see if I can pull anything out. Luke, if you’d stay around here, keep an eye out…”

Loki felt a small well of disappointment. “It would be my pleasure,” he said, with just the perfect amount of insincerity. The corner of Natasha’s mouth twitched.

“I bet.” She looked back and forth between them. “Watch your back, Tony. We’ll figure this out.”

“Do I look worried?” Stark fired back. Natasha rolled her eyes in Loki’s direction and headed for the stairs. “I’ll meet you both back here. Stark, stay close to Silver. And don’t try anything stupid.”

“How do I know he’s not going to shoot me?” Stark protested.

“I wouldn’t shoot you if I meant to kill you,” Loki said, perfectly mildly. The look Stark gave him was somewhere between annoyed and faintly alarmed. Romanov made a sound like a muffled snort and didn’t offer further reply.

He and Stark regarded each other for a few moments after she was gone. Then Stark grinned. “Well,” he said, “I know I could use a drink. You?”

Stark drank almost as well as any of the Aesir. Loki watched him and sipped at his own bitter beverage – scotch, he thought Stark had said. “So that teleportation thing,” Stark said, sprawled loosely on one of his many couches. “Are you sure you don’t have a more coherent explanation for that?”
“I’ll try to put something down,” Loki said. Stark eyed him and frowned.

“Was that sarcastic? I could go either way.”

“When you make up your mind,” Loki said calmly, “Let me know.” Half out of habit, he checked the building again. No unexpected signatures. He wanted to be doing something, something active. Sitting here, watching a mortal fool…

“So are you always a snarky bitch, or am I just lucky?”

Loki’s temper prickled. Somewhere out there, Natasha was doing something useful, and he was here. Serving as Stark’s puzzle to solve. “Just lucky, I suppose,” he said, and had a slow swallow of his drink, though of course it didn’t touch him. He almost wished for something stronger.

“I don’t know what you’ve got to be peeved about…”

“Listening to you talk makes me short-tempered,” Loki said pleasantly, and drained the rest of his glass.

“Touchy.” Stark stretched. “So. Hey. Now that we’ve got comfortable, sitting around waiting to hear back from Tatiana – do you know that reference? Okay, probably not – how about storytime?”

Loki raised his eyebrows, though he felt a low cautious hum start under his skin. “What sort of story are you expecting?”

“Autobiography would be nice.” Stark sat up, and his eyes no longer seemed so blurry or his voice quite so drunk. “Who are you? Where are you from? You’re one enormous blank. In some ways you seem like you don’t know anything at all and then you turn around and I feel like you’ve been doing this longer than I’ve been alive. JARVIS recognizes something weird about your bio-signatures but can’t pin down what it is. You’ve got pretty damn powerful magic voodoo stuff with which you casually break a few known laws of physics and yet I’d never heard even a whisper about you before you turned up with Nat at some party. You’re not human. You’re not even a mutant. So what the hell are you?” Loki held perfectly still and kept his eyes forward, felt his fingers tighten on his glass.

Not human. Not even a mutant. Not even an Aesir. “You’ve just answered your own question, haven’t you?”

“I just have a lot of nots. Not exactly enlightening.”

Loki could feel his shoulders winding tight. “Is this terribly important right now?”

“I’m bored. Offensive question? Wasn’t supposed to be. What’s a few basic questions between friends? Or…whatever.” Stark’s gaze was shrewd, intent. “That was really what I was after, you know. My cunning plan. I mean, the theft and assassination things weren’t my idea, but I don’t like mysteries – well, I like mysteries, but I like solving them.”

“I told you before that I’m not a puzzle for you to solve, Stark.”

“Are you an alien?” The question was blunt. Straightforward, and so took Loki off guard. He hesitated for a moment too long. “So that’s a yes. I mean, I guess I figured. Nothing else really made sense. If it’s not a variety of life known on Earth…”

Loki’s right hand flexed. “I still fail to see how it’s any business of yours.”
“Like I said, I’m curious. And also bored. So where’re you from? You’re not – some kind of lizard under that handsome exterior, are you? Cause that’d be weird. And also kind of disappointing.”

“No,” Loki said, a little tightly. “I am not…some kind of lizard.” *Something else, entirely worse.* He kept himself from twitching. “The name of my former abode would mean little to you.”

“So what’s it called? What, does it have a funny name or something? Can’t have been that great if you’d rather be here…”

*It was beautiful. Splendid and beautiful and perfect. Which is why-*

“So do you have a spaceship somewhere around here? No. I guess if you can teleport all by your lonesome why take a spaceship…so is that how you got here? Felt like vacationing on Earth for a little while? Or was that an accidental kind of thing? Just kind of tripped over a rock and whoops, fell through a wormhole-”

*(Falling. Endless, endless falling.)* Loki’s spine was rigid. “You have no idea of what you speak so flippantly.”

“Nope, not really,” Stark agreed cheerfully. “So are you going to fill me in or just sit there like maybe if you wish hard enough I’ll go away? Cause fair warning-”

“I do not wish to speak to you, Stark. Is that so difficult to understand?”

“Little bit,” Stark said flippantly. “Yeah. Sheesh. I thought it was a SHIELD thing but is it just an alien thing – or is that why you ended up here, too snippy for Planet Wherever-”

Loki stood, stiff backed and tense. “Find someone else to be your entertainment,” he said, his voice sounding harsh to his own ears. “I will remain until your difficulties are settled because I have agreed to, but do not expect me to make conversation with you. And do not expect me to tell you anything of myself.” Stark blinked. He seemed genuinely surprised.

“—whoa, hey,” he started to say.

“I have had enough,” Loki said, cutting him off. He turned for the door. “I will tolerate no more of this.” He heard Stark start to say something more, but didn’t listen. His blood hummed. *What right do any of them have to know anything of my life? They would mock what they hardly even begin to understand.* The thought felt hollow, though.

(What would it matter? A quiet thought, at the very back of his mind. He would know nothing of what it meant. Nothing of who you are, and if he did, would not know to care. Why react with such…)

It simmered in him nonetheless. Stark did not, to his relief, come looking for him. He set a working to alert him if anything changed and went to the roof of Stark’s building, where he sat cross-legged watching the stars, so different from the ones he knew.

It was there that Natasha found him in the morning, still awake. The look on her face was grim. “Stark’s board’s shut him out of their meeting. He’s working on it now, but it doesn’t look good. Fury wants us back at headquarters, he’s got another detail on Stark.”

“Does he,” Loki said coolly. Natasha eyed him for a moment, and then just nodded. “Then I suppose we had best get to it.” He stood, rolled his shoulders, and offered her his hand. “Shall we?”
As a courtesy, he shielded her from the worst effects of the travel. She still looked a little wild-eyed for a fraction of a second after they landed in SHIELD’s headquarters, though she swept it away quickly and started down the hallway without asking for his direction.

“Has something changed other than Stark’s status?”

“We found our assassin. I didn’t hear anything beyond that, though. Except that things are getting messy at the higher levels fast and Fury’s starting to have a hard time keeping the government off our backs.” Natasha turned confidently down another hallway and then opened an unmarked door. Hill turned to look at them from where she was watching a panel of screens, all showing the same man behind a pane of glass.

“That’s our guy?” Natasha said, without preamble.

“Colin Taylor,” Hill affirmed, her eyes flicking distrustfully over Loki for one moment before turning away from them both and back to monitoring the video feed. “Five years with us. Four as active field agent.”

“And suddenly…what’s he said?”

“He doesn’t remember anything,” Hill said with some frustration. “Says he went home and there was someone in his house, but other than that…there’s no sign of an intruder, and his activities yesterday were normal right up until…”

Loki narrowed his eyes. “Magic?”

“No,” Natasha said. “Drugs. His tox screen turned up a cocktail that would make him highly suggestible and subsequently create a memory block. That’s something we can work through with time, but…time is something we may not have.”

Loki’s right hand flexed at his side. He could, he thought, probably break through whatever ‘block’ this mortal concoction had created. Extract the information they needed. But…Natasha was watching him. If she guessed what he was thinking, she didn’t ask.

Natasha looked back at the screen, showing the man inside his glass cage. He looked truly wretched. Loki didn’t recognize him. “Whoever’s setting this up is moving fast, but if they’re counting on Stark buckling under pressure then they’re going to have a surprise coming for them. But that they pulled SHIELD into this…”

“Do you have ideas of possibilities?”

“Still too many,” Natasha said, lowly. “Could be AIM or HYDRA, or it could be any number of billionaires making a power play, Justin Hammer, Norman Osborn, Wilson Fisk…someone with a lot of money and a lot of heft. We don’t exactly have a shortage of those.”

“Hammer’s still out,” Hill said, firmly. “We’ve got enough on him that he hasn’t managed to buy his way out yet after the affair with Vanko. There’s the possibility this isn’t someone we know, too. New players turn up.”

Natasha shook her head. “That doesn’t seem right for this. Someone’s been setting this up for a while and knows exactly where to strike. And I get the feeling they’ve got more of a hand to play.”

Hill frowned. “If there’s another attack…we don’t know how whoever this is got to Taylor in the first place.”
“Then I guess we’d better get moving, huh?” Natasha drew herself up. “Is Barton…”

“Hill?” A voice Loki didn’t recognize crackled through the communicator at her hip. “We’ve got a problem.”

Hill’s face went stormcloud dark. “What now?”

“Have you got Agent Romanov with you right now?” Natasha tensed. “Check CNN’s webpage.”

Natasha jerked. “What-” Hill was already pulling out another device, calling up a window. Loki could see the headline blaring from where he was standing: SHIELD Operative Internationally Infamous Murderer?

Loki looked to Romanov’s face. She didn’t pale, but he could see her tense. The stormcloud of Hill’s face deepened. “Fantastic,” Romanov said flatly. “Fantastic. Maria-”

“I know.” Hill took a sharp breath through her nose. “Go, Natasha. Keep your head down. We’ll handle this.”

“I’ve worked in hotter than this, Hill. You know as well as I do-”

“Get out of sight, Agent. It’s not just you they’re gunning for, and I need you in the field if…” she trailed off, with a sideways glance at Loki. Loki kept his expression flatly neutral.

“Fine,” she said, after a moment. “—fine. Make sure I have a job to come back to when this blows over.” She turned on her heel and strode out. Loki arched his eyebrows at Hill.

“If you’ll forgive me for asking what just…”

“The playing field just shifted, Silver.” Hill was punching something into her communicator, and then started for the door. “This isn’t yours to handle. Go keep an eye on Stark. Make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

Loki fought the urge to bare his teeth. “You might be surprised what I can do.”

“Back off,” Hill said, her voice sharpening. “That’s an order. Clear?” Loki forced down the urge to argue. Arguing here would only land him with more chains, and perhaps more difficult ones to slip than playing watchdog to Stark.

“Clear enough, Agent Hill.” He sketched a faintly mocking bow that she ignored, stepping into the elevator. “I would not dream of disobeying.”

When she was gone, he reached out, seeking Romanov. She was moving quickly but still in the building, and he twisted himself through space to land in step beside her. She didn’t jump. “Luke,” she said, voice cool, controlled.

“Would you like to inform me what is going on?”

“If Hill wouldn’t, I shouldn’t.”

“May I guess, then? Someone is attacking SHIELD. And they are doing so through you. Is that so?” Natasha’s step hitched, just barely, and she glanced sideways at him. Her pace slowed, barely.

“Good guess.” Her head turned back forward. “I’m going to have to disappear for a while. Hard to say how long. Until I’m not a political liability.” For just a moment, a trace of something was in her voice, not quite bitterness, but it was gone swiftly.
“I’m afraid I don’t…”

“If SHIELD needs to deny that they knew about my checkered past to stay functioning,” she interrupted, “if I need to be a rogue agent for this organization to keep working – that’s what I’ll do.” Her voice was slightly tight. “Don’t try to contact me. Not even with your…skills.”

Loki stopped. “You’re simply going to – vanish?”

“This is my job,” Natasha said, without a trace of emotion. “If this is what I have to do…” She paused, and turned, finally. “If I can’t come back…” Her smile was a little crooked.

The boiling knot of feeling low in his belly hatched, and rose up, unfurling wings. Anger. No. Fury. They could have Stark. They could have SHIELD. But what right, what right…

Curiously enough, it was the easiest thing to smile. “I’ll do my best to console Barton.”

Natasha wrinkled her nose. “Don’t try too hard.” The crooked smile grew, just a little. “It’s been fun.” She turned again, and this time he watched her go, slow rage growing hotter, the wheels of his mind starting to spin.

*The playing field has shifted.* Yes. It had. But this kind of game, this kind of poison, he knew best of all. Loki strode for the stairs. Sometimes things needed to be done.

*I will not let this happen.*

The unfortunate SHIELD agent was sleeping when Loki reached him, descending several levels and slipping past the guards with ease. He glanced briefly at the cameras and after considering leaving them on with false footage, simply shorted the circuits with a little flick of power. He let himself into the cell, paced across to the cot, and looked down.

He placed a working on the room to block sound and placed a hand over the man’s mouth. “Wake up,” he murmured, burning the faint trace of whatever he’d been given – probably to help him sleep – out of his veins. “I am not here to hurt you.”

The man struggled into wakefulness, opened his eyes, and tried to lash out. Loki ignored the blow. “I am a friend,” he said, suffusing his voice with powerful suggestion, *believe me, trust me, relax.* The man’s eyes clouded, then cleared.

“What’s going on?”

Loki’s heart pounded hollowly in his chest. “I need to know what is in your mind,” Loki said, keeping his voice deliberately calm, reasonable. The man’s face fell.

“I don’t remember. I’ve tried…”

“I can…help you. Bring back whatever you’ve forgotten.” The agent started to look suspicious.

“Is this some kind of hypnosis…”

“No,” Loki cut him off. “It will be as though you never forgot. But it will not be enjoyable.” That was an understatement. The man didn’t even pause.

“Yes. I’ll do it.” Loki eased the power urging trust, slightly, cautiously.

“Are you certain?”
“Yes.” Still not the slightest pause. “If it exposes whoever did this to me…” His stomach fell slightly. He’d given him a chance, Loki thought, to refuse. He is willing. (Willing like a child who doesn’t know what he agrees to. How are you any different than Doom who would have taken your mind and molded it-)

Natasha, he thought fiercely, and reached out to cradle the man’s face between his palms. Move, fool.

“What do I have to do?” There, just the slightest note of nervousness. Loki closed his eyes.

“Nothing,” he said. “Just relax.”

He left the man insensate and probably relieved to be so, and did not allow himself to feel any compunction about it. So be it. He had an image, a few scattered words. He walked the full distance to where he remembered Fury’s office was, and unlocked the door and walked in without knocking.

“Scot Industries,” Loki said. “Who owns it?”

“That door was locked for a reason,” Fury said, looking slightly bleary eyed but no less displeased. “What the fuck are you talking about-”

“Scot Industries. A small logo on the man who drugged your agent’s sleeve. You are lucky he is so observant.”

“I thought Taylor didn’t remember anything.”

“He doesn’t.” Loki bared his teeth in a facsimile of a smile. “Who owns the company, Director?” Fury stared at him for a few more moments, glowering, and then turned to his computer, tapped a few keys.

“Alan Scot. It’s not him pulling this off, he doesn’t have the resources-”

“Then who owns him, Director?” Loki cut him off, implacable. Follow the trail of power. No matter how far removed, there’s always a thread leading back. More lessons. He wondered if this had always been Odin’s intention for him, to be the knife in the dark to do the filthy things Thor could not-

He smothered the thought. Fury shook his head but turned back, tapped a few more keys, and Loki watched the expression dawn on his face. “Who?” he demanded again.

“Osborn,” Fury said, after a long moment. “OsCorp, several branches up the line, has a majority share in Scot Industries.”

“It’s him,” Loki said, with certainty. “Your spider at the center of the web. Norman Osborn.” Fury looked at him for a long moment. “He’s been our prime suspect since the beginning,” he said, finally. “We can’t move on him, though.”

“Why not?” Loki could feel the rage starting to intensify in his chest. “If you know-”

“What’s the proof?” Fury interrupted.

“I coaxed it from your agent’s mind,” Loki said, flatly. Fury gave him a look that was suddenly sharp – another thing you neglected to mention? Loki thought he might have seen - and then expelled a breath.
“You think that’ll stand up in court? It won’t. Osborn’s got heft, Osborn’s got power and powerful friends. We need rock solid proof to go after him. Particularly right now, where if he weasels out of it and we’re under the microscope…”

Loki felt his lips peel back from his teeth. “So you’re powerless.”

“Don’t get pissy with me, Silver. Besides, I thought Hill told you to back off. So back off. This isn’t something you’re qualified to deal with. I don’t need you creating more fucking shit for me to clean up. If you need something to do, go babysit Stark.”

Loki looked to the window and clenched his jaw, taking a slow breath through his nose. *You do not speak to me this way,* he wanted to snarl, but he needed to focus. Focus. What was the best course of action in this…

“Fine,” he said, shortly, and twisted himself out of Fury’s office to land in the middle of Stark’s living room. He took a moment to locate Stark in his workshop, descended to the necessary floor, shorted out the lock with a touch of magic and let himself in. An alarm started blaring the moment the door opened, and Stark jerked upright from a cot in the corner, brandishing a wrench.

“What the-” he said, slightly blearily.

“Romanov is in trouble,” Loki said, flatly. “I require information from you.”

Stark stared at him, and then threw back his head and bellowed, “I’m fine, JARVIS!” before refocusing on Loki. “I thought you weren’t talking to me anymore.”

“Times change,” Loki said. “And I need to know everything you can tell me about Norman Osborn.”

Loki sat in the dark with the blinds closed, and waited. Ultimately, he didn’t have to wait long.

“Schedule it for 9 AM, Stacy…no, on Tuesday.” The man, Norman Osborn, stepped in, eyes on the device in his hands. “Uh huh. Why are the shades down in here? –no, not talking to you. Set the board meeting for…” He groped for a light, switched it on, and stopped. His voice trailed off. Loki, seated behind the desk, waited. “I’ll call you back. And can you send a security detail to my office?”

The man hung up. Loki smiled at him.

“Good evening. I don’t intend to be long.”

“I have the right to remove trespassers by force, Mr…”

“Silver. And you may try.” Loki leaned back in the chair. “I’m afraid your security detail might come out the worse for wear for the attempt. May we not have a polite conversation?”

“Who sent you?” Osborn asked. His feet were planted, Loki observed, posture radiating confidence. A man who knew his own power, not quite over the edge of arrogance. So be it. He’d dealt with similar types often enough before.

“I took it on myself. As a concerned citizen.” Loki stretched out his legs and nodded to the chair in front of the desk, which scooted back obligingly at the nudge of his magic. “Please. Sit.”

Osborn only startled fractionally before he controlled himself, the second assessing glance more cautious. “Are you some kind of mutant?” The question was clearly meant to provoke. Loki smiled fractionally.
“I don’t think that’s relevant, Mr. Osborn. If I may get right to the point – you are attempting to undermine both SHIELD and Stark Industries. I have not divined your ultimate goal, though I’m sure it involves acquisition of power. I am not particularly interested. You will stop.”

He heard footsteps coming down the hall and glanced to the doors, which swung shut. The spell he placed on them would resist a charging frost-bear. The man didn’t so much as twitch or tense. “This is absurd. If you don’t leave now, Mr. Silver, will not be responsible for the consequences.”

“Let me put this another way,” Loki cut in smoothly. Raw anger was still vibrating under his skin. Had been seething there for longer than this, he thought, but that it had a target now… “Undo your work, or I will destroy you so thoroughly that within the year you would not know yourself.”

Osborn’s eyebrows rose, and then he laughed. “A word of advice – if you wish to threaten someone, make ones you can keep. If you leave quietly, I will forget these slanderous allegations due to their sheer outlandish unbelievability, and will only press limited charges against you. I don’t know what it is you think allows you to threaten and accost my person, but I must warn you that I am not without powerful friends.”

There was a heavy thud against the door. Osborn glanced over, but they didn’t budge even slightly. He opened his mouth, no doubt to call out.

“Silence.” Loki infused his voice with power. Osborn’s mouth snapped closed, and Loki pulled his legs in and rose, slowly. “You think I’m incapable? I am not. I never make promises I cannot keep.” Osborn struggled to speak, his expression contorting with fury. “I have very few rules, Norman Osborn. Very few things I will not do.” He relaxed his power. Osborn scrambled for words, still trying to mask the fact that he was becoming disconcerted. Fearful. Good.

“If you are from SHIELD – I have hitherto had only the utmost respect for that organization but I will not tolerate—”

“Power is fragile, Norman.” He paced toward the man, taking long, smooth strides. “But you would know that. A few whispers in the right ear. A few doubts planted. You’ve found public indignation useful, but that cuts two ways. You have secrets, I’m sure. Skeletons buried – but none so deeply, I promise you, that I cannot find them.”

The mortal’s throat bobbed as he swallowed, though his expression remained indignant. “You have no idea who you are—”

“Or what of your mind? I could set nightmares constantly before your eyes, visible only to you. Bend and twist your thoughts until you hardly know reality from dreams. Sever you from sanity and leave you to gibber in your own filth.” Loki could feel himself quivering, rage pulsing just under his skin, and he almost wanted to unleash it. Wanted somewhere to expel every frustration seething inside him.

Osborn stared up at him, fear masked well. “You’re bluffing.”

“Am I?” Loki bared his teeth in a smile. “Try me. Gamble with your own mind.”

He could hear Osborn’s breath quicken. Not a complete fool, then. He cleared his throat. “You can’t possibly think—”

Loki’s hands flashed up to Osborn’s temples, thought darkness, complete, total. Oblivion and the feeling of falling. Osborn’s body went rigid. “Would you like this to be your world?” He kept his voice low, soft, though he wasn’t quite able to suppress the vibration in it. “Forever and ever. Cut
off, trapped in a small corner of infinity.” He didn’t pull his hands away, though Osborn started to try to jerk back. “You will call back your attack. You will see to it that this all disappears. The information you unearthed about the Black Widow will be reburied. Or I shall drive you into madness before I bury you, still living, in unmarked ground.” He dropped his hands and stepped back. “I leave it to your choice.”

Osborn surfaced from the spell with a gasp, arms flailing as he stumbled back. His eyes were wide and a little wild. “Is this how the government treats its loyal citizens?” His voice shook very slightly.

“No.” Loki smiled like a knife slash. “This is how I treat those who harm me and mind. And that’s why you should worry, Osborn. I have few limits. I daresay it is in your interest to keep at least one in place. Or who knows what I might do?”

Osborn said nothing. Rage and fear warred in his eyes. Loki felt a vicious kind of satisfaction as he stepped back and gathered his magic to return home. “I hope this has been…an edifying talk. Twenty-four hours, Osborn. I hope – for your sake – I do not see you again soon.”

He twisted himself back to his apartment. He still felt jittery, overly alert, teetering on some invisible edge. He remembered feeling this way before he’d decided to annihilate Jotunheim. The need to destroy, to act in some catastrophic, undeniable way, to do something that couldn’t be erased…

Loki booted up his computer and played chess against the computer until his thoughts went numb.

The knock on his door came in the middle of the night sixteen hours later. Loki was watching an inane television program and avoiding sleep, still feeling restless and discontent. He glanced over at it, immediately wary, but, “It’s me,” said Romanov’s voice.

He turned off the television and padded over to let her in. She slipped in the moment his door was open enough and then turned and looked at him, gaze level. “Funny thing, I was just contacted. The evidence against me has suddenly dried up. I’ll still have to lay low for a while, stay off duty, but… I’m off the hook.”

Loki summoned a small smile. “Well, that’s good news. Though you don’t sound thrilled.”

“It’s a relief, I can tell you that. Want to know the other funny thing I heard? The inquiry against SHIELD’s being dropped. Our explanation about a rogue agent’s suddenly flying. Isn’t that interesting?”

“Quite,” Loki said. “A relief. I shall not have to look for new employment.”

Romanov regarded him for several long moments, and then exhaled. “What did you do?” she asked, quietly. Loki raised his eyebrows at her.

“Beg pardon?”


Loki examined her face, trying to read it, but could find nothing there to use. He raised his chin and straightened. “I can be quite persuasive when I wish to be.”

“So you threatened…who? Who was behind this?” Loki held his silence, and her eyes sharpened. “Was it Osborn?” He kept his face blank, but apparently that was a giveaway in itself. She swore, violently, in another language. “You idiot.”
Loki’s hackles went up. “I beg your pardon. It seemed there was nothing to be done through usual channels. I am well experienced at using others.”

“But you don’t know Osborn,” Romanov said. “He’s got a lot of people in his pocket. If he decides to come after you…”

“I made it clear,” Loki said, still bristling, “that I am more than capable of destroying everything he has. If he attempts to come after me I will see fit to do so. I do not think he is such a fool as that.”

Romanov stared at him for several long moments, and then shook her head, very slightly. “Reckless,” she said. “Stupid. I’m not surprised you and Clint didn’t hit it off right away. You’ve got a few things in common.”

Loki tried to keep his voice blankly neutral. “I’m pleased to be held so high in your esteem, Agent Romanov.”

Natasha turned and looked at him directly. “I don’t particularly like my friends pulling dumb stunts. Even if it is to help me.”

For a moment, Loki’s thoughts stuttered, shuddered. Friends. She’d dropped the word so casually. The use of it thoughtless. That was likely it. Thoughtless, a turn of phrase…

He felt a curious warmth unfolding in his chest, driving out the earlier sting. “To help you,” he said, scoffing a little. “I was simply ensuring I would not have to seek alternate arrangements.”


“I am never anything less,” Loki said easily. She rolled her eyes. “See you at work,” she said, after a moment, and stepped back towards the door. She paused, her hand on the knob. “Stupid or not, Silver…thanks.” She ghosted out on silent feet before he could reply.

The warmth was a single blooming flower in his chest, and his apartment suddenly felt vast and empty. Friends. (It means nothing.)

He wished, suddenly, that he’d asked Natasha to stay. His mind was awhirl and he didn’t want to be alone.

Loki’s mind flashed to his email, the old message from Ms. Fairfax, never answered. I know that sometimes a friendly voice can be good to hear. He thought of Foster, Romanov, even Barton, conversations they’d had. They knew more of the truth of him than she had, however little that might be. But nonetheless-

His thoughts lingered and latched onto Frigga, wondered what she was doing, what she was feeling, if she had mourned at all. Out of everyone…he thought sometimes maybe her love had been genuine. Maybe even knowing all the truth, she had nonetheless loved him.

But the thought made him flinch, and he pushed it away. He was done with them. With all of them.

It’s permissible to miss people sometimes, a small voice murmured at the back of his mind. You don’t need to pretend…

But he did. Surrender to that sentiment, that inclination, and he would lose it all. He was still trying to
claw himself back up from where he’d fallen, and to give in to weakness now…

No.

He picked up his phone and dialed the number he still remembered, held it to his ear.

“Hello?” A sleepy, faintly confused voice came over the line after several rings. “Who is this? I’m sorry, I have to speak quietly, my granddaughter’s sleeping-”

He should have thought of that, Loki realized belatedly. Should hang up, not be troubling her at this hour- “Margaret,” he said, suddenly, and startled at the sound of his own voice. It seemed rough, as if from disuse. There was an unbearably loud silence for a few moments, and then a startled, “Luke?”

He couldn’t help a weak laugh. “I did not expect you to recognize my voice.”

“You were one of my most unusual boarders, of course I – my god! I haven’t heard from you in months! Is everything all right?”

Loki’s head dropped forward and he felt – horrors – his eyes prickle. “Yes,” he said quickly. “Yes, yes, everything is – going quite well. You and Angela are…”

“Good – we’re both good. I’m glad to hear from you. Everything…everything is all right?” She repeated, and Loki shook his head and then realized she couldn’t see it.

“You needn’t fret over me. I have had – an eventful week. I feel a bit ashamed of myself, to tell the truth, that I haven’t spoken to you before now.”

“Oh, pish,” said Ms. Fairfax. He could almost hear her smiling, and he missed her, suddenly, with a force that almost took his breath away – but it wasn’t her, not really. Frigga. He missed Frigga, missed his mother (not his mother) and wanted to be held and comforted and soothed (pathetic, pathetic, pathetic)- “I’m glad you called, Luke.”

“Tell me,” he said, struggling to keep his voice even, not to give away the sudden wash of emotion that had swamped him. “Tell me what’s been going on with you and Angela…”

He let her talk. Just listened, silent, murmuring agreement or encouragement in the right places, and let the burning need slowly ebb away until it was no more than an ache, a wound closed if not healed.

“I have to go, Luke,” she said, gently. “I’m about to fall asleep on my feet…but you know you can call. Or write. I’ll always be grateful to you for protecting my Angela.”

The words burst out of him before he could hold them back. “You are better than I deserve.”

Her silence was baffled. “What?”

“I am not – I am not a good person, Ms. Fairfax. I am – I have done…” He cut off before his voice betrayed him.


“What is it about, then?” Loki demanded. Ms. Fairfax hesitated, and then laughed.

“That’s a bigger question than I know how to answer, Luke.”
He let her go, feeling drained of energy as though he’d been casting for hours. Loki crawled under his blankets and curled up, closed his eyes and fell into a quiet sleep that was, for once, untroubled by dreams.

Interlude (XVI)

No employment materialized that day, or the next, and Loki began to be troubled by something else. A sensation in his throat, unfamiliar and unpleasant, and persistent fatigue that weighed his limbs down. Given that his sleep was seldom restful, that would not have surprised him, if it weren’t new.

It did not, however, seem to have a physical source he could identify.

On top of that, then, it didn’t take him long to find that the city he’d chosen was not terribly pleasant, and there was a definite lack of immediate prospects for financial resources. And then Loki realized that he was being followed.

He also, fortunately, realized before he reacted as he normally would have, that it was by the child he had encountered previously.

Because the boy was harmless, Loki let it alone for a long while, but there was only so long he could pretend not to notice his small shadow before he had to stop and turn. “Boy,” he said, mildly, “if you want not to be spotted by me, you shall have to be a great deal more careful than you have been.”

Nothing, for a moment, and then the scrawny child slunk out from behind a garbage can. He was not an attractive child, gangly, his eyes bugging slightly out of his head. “I thought I was being pretty sneaky,” he said. His expression seemed to be what he thought contrition ought to look like. Loki felt his lips twitch and fought the urge.

“Not exactly.”

“You don’t seem mad.” Carl, Loki remembered. Carl looked cautiously hopeful. Loki wanted to sigh. The boy seemed to have imprinted on him, for some reason, and he had not the least idea how to make him leave. Well, other than by force, but he was – unwilling, for the moment, to employ that.

“Haven’t you others to follow around?”

“My mom works,” Carl said, easily. “And my dad’s gone. And you’re interesting.”

“Am I.” Loki tried to summon something other than mild and exasperated amusement, and couldn’t quite find it.

“Uh huh.” Carl’s eyes were wide and serious. “Whatever you did to make the guys go away, they don’t bother me no more. Was it magic? Are you a mutant?” The boy sounded curious enough that Loki’s initial reaction to want to bristle faded quickly.

“No,” Loki said, and then added, “and it was not magic.”

Carl looked determined. “So it’s secret magic.” Loki frowned at his determination, and then reached out with a tendril of magic, but it found no echo. The boy had no ability. Simply an ordinary, persistent mortal boy.

(One perhaps made vulnerable just by your talking to him.)
“Don’t follow me,” Loki said, his voice turning slightly harsh. “It’s unwise, and I don’t want you tagging at my heels.”

Carl looked hurt as he took a step back, but he didn’t leave. “Why is it unwise? Are there evil wizards chasing you?”

Loki was suddenly torn between conflicting urges to laugh and weep. “Yes,” he said, on a sudden impulse. “Something like that. So you should-”

Carl’s eyes bugged eagerly, and Loki knew at once that he had miscalculated. “But I can help!” he exclaimed. “I can – help you hide, and tell everyone you’re my mum’s new boyfriend or-”

“No,” Loki said at once, appalled.

“Or my new homeschooling teacher!” Carl sounded inspired. “I bet you’re smart, right? You could teach me things. Not magic necessarily, it would have to be other things too like math and science and reading but-”

“Absolutely not,” Loki said, firmly.

“I can take care of myself,” Carl said stubbornly. “And I want to help! Everything’s so boring around here, there’s never anything exciting-”

“You’d best hope it remains that way.” Loki took a step back, feeling strangely jittery, suddenly. “Keep your distance from me, boy. And don’t follow me.”

“I can keep a secret!” Carl said plaintively, but Loki turned his back and started walking. He felt odd. There was a raspiness in his throat that he didn’t like, and his head felt oddly fuzzy. Go rest, he thought. You can go back to searching for employment later. He took a deep breath. It’s not you I don’t trust, Loki thought vaguely, but it was, or that too. “I’ll prove it!” Carl called after him. “Okay? I will!”

A shiver of foreboding ran down Loki’s spine. Or maybe it was just a shiver.

It really did seem terribly cold all of a sudden.

What are you going to do about that boy? He’s a risk to you. He could just move on. Find another place to land, again. There was no real reason not to. Didn’t you say you wouldn’t become sentimental this time? Didn’t you say that you would remember to keep your distance?

And so he would. After a rest. Just a brief one.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

oh my god I'm so sorry. I mean! I was out of the country for six weeks, but that is not really a very good excuse and I am very, very, very sorry. It should get better from here on out. Really. I mean it. D:

This chapter (and the next) are kind of filler as far as the plot goes, but they are nonetheless important to me because of character/relationship development, which is kind of what I'm actually writing this fic for. So sue me. To those of you still with me after the delay: you're awesome, I love you.

And with much, much love and gratitude to my eternally amazing beta, zaataronpita.

Despite Natasha’s dire words, things seemed to settle relatively quickly. She stayed out of sight for a bit longer. SHIELD didn’t summon him, and he occupied himself playing solitaire on his kitchen table and following links on the Wikipedia website. His phone rang twice. Both times it was Stark.

Loki didn’t bother to pick up.

The third time, he did listen to the voicemail.


Loki did not let his mouth twitch, even if there was no one there to see.

“Okay, so. Take two. You, me, nice restaurant, bottle of wine. I’m not going to grovel cause I’m really awful at groveling but this is almost an apology. Don’t tell anyone. I promise I’ll play nice. Pinky swear, honestly.”

Another pause.

“Seriously, though. Tasha told me what happened. Not too shabby, Secret Agent Man. Thoughts on the wine offer? Let me know. You’ve got a brain I’d love to pick. Stay glam rock, kid.” The message clicked, and Loki lowered it slowly from his ear.

The man was insufferable, rude, and inconsiderate. He’d pried and poked at Loki’s personal matters for no other reason than his base curiosity, saw in him little more than a puzzle to be solved by his admittedly quick mind. They had not gotten along. Was this simply an attempt to pry more information free to satisfy his curiosity?

Perhaps.

But not, he thought, likely. At the very least, Stark was…interesting, and he was likely to run into the man again. They might as well be…civil.
After a long consideration, he called the number. Stark picked up after two rings.

“Pepper told me I was delusional, but I was pretty sure at least you’d go for the expensive wine,” he said. Loki was almost tempted to change his mind, but he pushed down the urge.

“You are delusional,” he said mildly. “Every so often even a madman can be right.”

“Ouch,” Stark said, but he didn’t sound terribly bothered. “Harsh. So this is a yes, right? Tell me it’s a yes. I don’t do phone breakups, just a bad idea all around.”

“For the wine, Stark. Not the company.” Loki caught himself tapping his fingers in an anxious rhythm on the bookshelf and pulled them away. “I hope you have a place in mind.”

“Do I. You’d better be impressed. How are you feeling about the box of chocolates, cause I was only half joking…”

“The location, Stark.”

Stark snickered. “How about you just meet me at my place? It’s a nice one, you’ll remember. Easily recognizable. Take you out in one of my convertibles, we’ll make a whole thing, be like a date.”

Loki simply waited in silence. “No dice? Okay, okay…the place is Chateau Beauchamp – I know, I know – and I guess I’ll be meeting you there at…how’s seven?”


“Yes, dear,” Stark said, sounding like he was trying not to grin. “Is there anything you don’t dislike, I’m starting to wonder-”

“Seven o’clock, Stark,” Loki said, and hung up, though he could feel the corners of his mouth again unwillingly trying to twitch.

Stark was on time, to Loki’s surprise. “So I decided to pass on the flowers,” he said, by way of greeting.

“A good choice, I think,” Loki said mildly. “I doubt I would be impressed.”

“Tough audience,” Stark observed, and offered a flourishing bow that was improper etiquette on a number of levels. “So, my liege-”

“Please,” Loki said dryly. “Don’t bother, Stark. I don’t particularly need to see you humiliate yourself.”

“But it’s one of the things I do best,” Stark said, with a slightly sharp grin, and Loki simply arched his eyebrows.

“I’m sure it is.”

The place itself was…fine enough. They were seated promptly at a quiet table, a bit away from others. Loki wondered, briefly, if any of them were watchers, then dismissed the concern. Nonetheless, he erected an auditory barrier around them, just in case. Stark rocked his chair back on two legs, let it fall to four again, and put his elbows on the table.

“Gotta say,” he said, “I wasn’t really expecting you to call. Get pretty bored on your days off, huh?”

“You made enough of a fool of yourself that I thought you deserved something.” He gave Stark his
friendliest smile. Stark made a face.

“Ouch. But okay, fair enough.” Stark sat back again, drummed his fingers on the table. “I don’t suppose you’d feel more like answering my overly personal questions now, would—”

“No.”

“Yeah, I thought that might be the case. Well, at any rate…you know what kind of wines you like? Secret: I’m actually more of a hard liquor kind of guy, so if you want to pick a bottle…”

Loki settled back, keeping his amiable smile. “I’d like to try a few.”

“Glasses? Sure, don’t see why…”

“Bottles,” Loki corrected, and the look Stark gave him was mildly gratifying.

“If you get schwasted, I’m not driving you home,” Stark said, after a moment’s pause.

“I manage my own transportation, remember?” Loki smiled. “You made the offer, Stark.”

“And now you’re making sure I’m going to pay for it.” Stark raised his eyebrows. “That’s a little vindictive.”

“I’ve been called such,” Loki murmured pleasantly, and flipped the menu closed, dropping the auditory barrier as he saw a waiter approach. He made his requests without glancing at Stark’s face, added a platter of cheeses, and dismissed the server before resurrecting their bubble of privacy.

“Huh,” Stark said, not looking terribly perturbed. “Fair warning, when this comes up on my statements I’m going to tell Pepper to yell at you, all right?”

“I’m sure I will bear such a punishment with fortitude.”

“Yeah, I bet.” Stark drummed his fingers on the table, an anxious movement passed off as restlessness. “Can I ask…”

“Probably not,” Loki said, almost automatically.

“—really? I know a lot of touchy people, but you’re still coming out ahead.” Stark sounded mildly peeved, and Loki focused his gaze on him again.

“I am somewhat averse to personal questions.”

“What about impersonal ones?” Stark countered, and Loki considered him coolly. Stark held up both hands in a defensive gesture. “You going to keep giving me the stinkeye? All right, yeah, I antagonized you, mostly on purpose. It’s kind of what I’m good at. And it’s also – uh – magic and god that word freaks me out. Apparently. Which I didn’t know because I kind of figured it wasn’t real…”

Loki leaned his chin on his hands. “I frightened you.”

Stark shot him a sharp look. “Hey now, don’t go jumping that far—”

“You don’t like the word choice, but the sentiment is accurate,” Loki said. “You are accustomed to a world you can understand and pick apart, dissect into its components. I did not make that easy for you.”
“What is this, psychoanalysis hour?” Loki shrugged. “—no wonder you and Natasha get along. Peas in a creepy pod.” Stark rolled his shoulders. “All right. Maybe I was a little unnerved. You can’t really blame me for that.”

“Nor do I intend to.” Loki sat back. The look Stark gave him was severely skeptical.

“Glad to hear it.”

Loki caught their waiter returning out of the corner of his eye and didn’t bother to drop the barrier, simply dropping the conversation as their food and drink was set out in a neat, aesthetically pleasing array. Loki began with a half-glass of the white, keeping his eyes on Stark as he took a delicate sip. After a moment, Stark poured himself a glass of the same.

“How is it?” He asked. Loki half closed his eyes and considered.

“Fair,” he said, finally. “A bit dry for me. But that may merely be personal preference.” He found his tongue suddenly craving Asgard’s mulled wine, sweeter and with the tang of spice. And stronger. He pushed the desire away. “We shall see if it improves with further tasting.”

“Most things do,” Stark said, philosophically, and then sat back himself. “So, where did we land on impersonal questions?”

Loki was tempted to deny him, half on principle, half out of reflex. “Impersonal questions regarding…”

“Your…uh, magic.” Stark’s nose wrinkled slightly just saying the words. “I haven’t given up on trying to figure out how it works.”

“I thought it made you uncomfortable,” Loki said, mildly, keeping his expression neutral, but he felt again that curious prickle that he’d first had with the technicians at SHIELD. Real, genuine interest, not just in how his skill was useful when it was needed, but in the thing itself, the very curiosity that had drawn him so powerfully to magecraft all along.

Stark shrugged. “Yeah, well – I don’t like being uncomfortable. Best way get not uncomfortable is to make it make sense, so…”

“And if you cannot…make it make sense?” Loki had another swallow of the wine.

“I will.” Loki wasn’t sure, still, if Stark’s confidence was entertaining or grating, Perhaps a bit of both. He considered the man a few moments longer, but in truth he already knew his answer.

“What about your teleportation thingy. Is there some kind of – uh, magic notation that your people use to record things like that? Like…how to do them, how they work…”

Loki frowned, very slightly. “Magic notation? No. I don’t know what…” He stopped, frowning. “Ah…hm. Wait. There is…” He flipped through his memory, thinking back. He could just catch Stark’s expression, eager and intently curious. It made him…warm, slightly. “One author,” he said, finally. “A long while ago…he wrote a treatise on the nature and form of magic. He was studying the – methods of transportation not entirely like mine—” he just managed not to say Bifrost – “—but I suppose…what you want are equations. Mathematics.”
“Yes,” Stark said at once. “Exactly.”

“That is not what I have.” Loki sat back and examined Stark, thoughtfully. “Why do you want to know?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Stark’s gaze didn’t waver. He played a buffoon well, Loki thought idly, but there was a keen mind there for all that. “I like knowing things. Even if I can’t use it – having things out there I don’t get bugs me. If what you’re talking about isn’t math, then what…”

“Have you something to write on?” Loki interrupted.

“Just the napkins,” he said, after a moment. “And one of my phones, you can write on that…”

“No,” Loki said, reaching for his magic and summoning a pen from a nearby waiter’s pocket, pulling a napkin to him. “It would not have the symbols I need.” He started writing, trying to recall perfectly the page. He’d found it fascinating at the time, tried to apply some of it to his own work, but crucial parts of the treatise had never been finished. Still, he wondered if… “Your idea of mathematics is not identical to mine,” he said while he wrote. “I have done some – limited – study of your variety, but it suffers, still, from limitations.”

Stark shook his head. “What limitations? That’s what doesn’t make sense. It’s math. It works the same no matter where you go-”

“You’re missing variables.” Loki scrawled, frowned, scribbled a bit out and wrote it again. “Factors you aren’t aware of and can’t measure. Yet,” he added, with a touch of generosity.

“Yet,” Stark said. “But we could at some point.”

“Perhaps. I know not.” Loki added a last few marks, and pushed the napkin back across the table. “There. That is what…essentially…what I do would look like in the form of what you might call an equation.”

Stark pulled it towards him and swiveled it around. His eyes flicked over it, a frown forming between his eyebrows. “This looks like gibberish.”

Loki shrugged. “In one sense, it is, to you. Your mathematics has a language, yes? This is the same language. You have been reading children’s tales. I have just written you an epic.” He extended a hand. “I did not truly think it would be of use to y-”

“Did I say I was going to give it back?” Stark interrupted, and Loki narrowed his eyes. The man’s focus was intent, intense. “On the one hand, ouch. On the other, okay, well, I can learn. Translate. Make it make sense.”

“You can’t use it,” Loki said, feeling a small prickle on the back of his neck, though he wasn’t sure what for.

“I don’t need to use it. I just need to know how it works.” Stark looked up and jabbed a finger in Loki’s direction. “Go ahead. Tell me it’s impossible.”

Loki let his eyebrows lift. “I would not necessarily claim ‘impossible.’ Certainly improbable.”

“Close enough. That’s what I do, Mr. Silver. The impossible. Or – improbable, that works too.” He tapped a finger on the napkin. “I don’t speak metaphor. I do speak this. Or give me a week and I will.”
Loki sat back slowly. He picked up his wine glass and took a slow sip, taking the moment to think. He hadn’t expected…he watched Stark over the rim of his glass. The man raised his eyebrows.

“What?”

“You are an interesting creature, Mr. Stark.” Loki rolled the stem of his glass between his fingers.

“Creature.” Stark made a face. “I don’t know that I like that one. Gotten a lot of epithets, but that one’s new.” Loki gave him a slender smile.

“Curiously apt, however.”

“Do you ever turn off the bitchy? Don’t answer that. I hope that means you like me.” Stark smiled that absurd grin again. Loki let his expression remain placid.

“I have not made up my mind yet. Further consideration will tell.”

“Well, I’m waiting with bated breath.” This time Loki did not restrain the slight flicker of a smile. “Aha!” Stark grinned, abruptly. “So your face does have another setting. Good to know. But hey, I’m interesting.” That too-innocent expression of charm was back. “Should’ve warned you I’m irresistible.”

“Will that be all in the way of your questions, then?” Loki asked, perhaps a touch dryly.

“Oh no,” Stark said, starting to grin. “You accepted the apology. I haven’t even started to pick your brain. You like nice wine? I can do nice wine. I can do lots of bribes. Whatever the hell you are, you and me are going to have lots to talk about.”

Loki ran a finger around the rim of his wine glass. “Is this a bribe?”

“Oh, yeah,” Stark said easily. “Definitely a bribe. Is it working?” His smile was rakish, charming, and aware of both qualities. The man was a liar, Loki thought. All of this a deliberately constructed persona. Curious.

He leaned back, and plucked up his glass. “It might be,” he said, with a slight smile. “Perhaps another few glasses of wine will do it?”

“I like the way you think,” Stark said with a broad grin, and uncorked the next bottle. “You first?”

Loki left Stark with a slightly higher esteem for the man and a pleasant warmth in his blood. He gave him no promises but let him assume they would speak again. “If you ever feel like freelance work,” Stark said, at one point, to which Loki had just smiled.

Curiously restless, he spent the rest of the night alternately pacing through his apartment and attempting to read (a text on one of the myriad human languages) with moderate success. As the night gave way to morning without a summons to a mission, Loki realized what it was that was nagging at him.

If you felt like coming around.

Jane Foster’s…invitation. It had been some time since it had been issued, of course – if it even had been a sincere offer – but…perhaps it was talking to Stark, another clever human mind, that put the thought back in his head. Of course there was no real reason to go.

She wants to repair the Bifrost. That concerns you. If she managed to mend the bridge, or even to
hasten its repair...the first one across would be Thor. And if Thor found him...

There was another reason, quieter, that convinced him to gather his magic and twist himself through space to the location of Foster's lab. Even if she wasn't the only one to know who he was, there was a kind of – relief, in not having to pretend. She didn't expect him to. She knew who he was, she knew where they stood, and there was something...pleasant about not having to act otherwise.

He appeared just inside a doorway and followed the humming of machines down the hallway to another locked room. It was child's play to click the lock open and let himself in. “Hey Jane,” called an unfamiliar voice, not Foster's. “Did you remember to stop and grab me some fruit sn- whoa.

You're not Jane.”

Loki raised his eyebrows at the girl sitting with her feet propped up on a desk, one bud of headphones dangling from her fingers. He took a moment trying to place her and could not quite manage it. “No,” he said, “I am not. My apologies.”

The frankly appraising look the young woman gave him made Loki want to preen, just a little. He had been so obviously ogled before, but not for a while. Then she frowned a little. “So...who are you?”

*I could ask the same of you,* Loki wanted to say, but kept himself to a simple, “Miss Foster invited me to observe.”

“Doctor Foster,” the girl said. “Geez. So you're one of those people?” The way she said it suggested dislike, so Loki simply looked at her until she glanced away, twirling her headphones between her fingers for a moment before looking back at him. “Right. I'm Doctor Foster’s assistant. Darcy Lewis. And you're...”

Loki heard approaching footsteps and turned in lieu of answering, a moment before the door opened and Foster entered, carrying a pile of bags slightly too large for her arms. “Hey, assistant, if you felt like...”

“Let me,” Loki said smoothly, and plucked two bags from her pile to set them on a bare counter. Foster fell still for a moment, exhaled what sounded a little like a mutter of annoyance, and plopped the remainder of her burden on the same counter. The girl – Darcy – stayed where she was, watching them both with slightly narrowed eyes.

“Hey, Jane,” she said, after a moment. “We got a visitor.”

Foster squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed her temples, not looking in Loki's direction. “Yes, I noticed. Darcy, this is...” she paused, for a long moment, and then glanced at Loki. Loki looked back at her, his expression blank. “...Luke Silver. He’s...”

“As I said,” Loki cut in smoothly as Foster fumbled again. “Observing.” Darcy looked back and forth between them, her eyebrows rising slowly.

“Uh huh.” Her expression held, for a moment, and then she waggled her eyebrows exaggeratedly. Loki felt the corner of his mouth twitch and didn’t let it do more than that.

Foster looked torn between laughing and scowling. “Darcy...”

“Right, right, I’m out,” she said, and grabbed a colorful box out of the bags before exiting with one last glance over her shoulder and a, “if you decide you don’t want him can you give me his phone number?”
The door clicked closed behind her. Foster’s face was bright red and she looked faintly exasperated. “I really would rather you called instead of just showing up,” she said, after a moment. “It’s not a great day.”

“Oh dear,” Loki drawled, and the look Foster gave him was withering. He gestured to the door. “Who is she? If you’ll pardon my saying so, she doesn’t seem particularly…”

Foster’s expression turned stubborn and a little tight. “If that sentence is going to end how I think it is, don’t bother finishing it. Darcy’s a good friend of mine. I couldn’t pull off a lot of what I do without her.”

“I meant no offense,” Loki said mildly. The look Foster gave him at that was even more withering, and then she turned away and walked over to one of the computers, tapping a few keys. He watched her back for a few moments, noting her tension. “You said it was ‘not a great day.’ Why is that? Things not working as you would like them to?”

“If you’re just going to stand there and snipe you can leave,” Foster said, a little snappishly. “I’ll take that as a yes.” Loki took a step nearer her and she turned around sharply. He held up both hands. “Perhaps I might be helpful.”

Foster’s look in his direction was flat and then she turned back and started unloading the bags. “Cause you wouldn’t be inclined to sabotage my project at all.”

Loki kept his mouth from twitching and suppressed the murmur of she does have a point that had a distinctly amused flavor. “Seeing as I doubt your success in the first place…and if you are so disinclined to let me be useful, I fail to see why you would invite me in the first place.”

“Firstly, I didn’t think you’d actually show up,” Foster muttered, and Loki felt his eyebrows jump, a peculiar twist in his gut.

“Then I am terribly sorry to have upset your plans,” he said, hearing the cool note in his voice and trying to manage that as well, with a touch of displeasure. What was it about being around her that made all of his control so…tenuous? The reminders she brought with her, no doubt. Memories of…“I shall not linger.” He turned, deliberately not picking at the feeling too much like disappointment in his chest.

“Wait,” Foster said, and then made an exasperated noise. “—sorry. I did say you could come. Just—got a few rounds of bad news today.” She leaned against the counter for a moment, then straightened. “And unless you’ve got some serious computer programming experience…”

Loki blinked slightly at her apology, unexpected, and stopped. He looked at her back for a few moments, and then tipped his head back. “What do you need the programming expertise for?”

She turned around, gave him an odd look, and then shook her head. “—right, sorry, that’s just a little…surreal. It’s a…the program I’ve been using was working well enough, but for what I’m doing now it’s not quite hefty enough. I don’t have the funding for the materials I’d like and trying to expand the current program to work the parameters I need it to work with, but…” She made a face. “Unsurprising,” Loki said. She gave him a sharp look, and he shrugged. “Well, it is. Attempting to study and examine the Bifrost with human machinery is one thing. Attempting to rebuild it is quite another.”

Foster crossed her arms. “All right. If you had my limitations, what would you do?”
“I thought I was likely to sabotage your work,” Loki said mildly. Foster just looked at him for a moment.

“It’s not like I’ve gotten far enough for there to be something to sabotage,” she said, finally, with a little sigh. “So...besides. I’m just asking a question, at this point.”

“Hypothetically?” Foster nodded, and Loki gave her a very slight smile. “I wouldn’t.” She made an exasperated noise. “Even had I the desire to,” Loki went on, “I told you before. You cannot do what you propose.”

Foster crossed her arms and met his gaze directly. “Then why are you here? Just to watch me fail?”

Loki kept his expression deliberately neutral. “I’m curious to see how you attempt the impossible.” Jane snorted, and he started, a little, and then narrowed his eyes. “Something is amusing?”

“You are,” Foster said, plainly, and turned away to fiddle with one of her machines. “I mean, you’ve got this whole schtick going, but anyone can see you’re just dying of curiosity.” Loki felt his mouth twist toward a scowl, and controlled it. Foster crossed the room and plopped down on one of the chairs. “If I pull it off, what’re you going to do?”

Loki felt himself tense. “Why do you ask?”

“Curious,” she said, simply. Loki looked at her flatly for a long few moments and then rolled his shoulders back and paced across the room to claim another seat.

“Find somewhere else,” he said, finally, and let a smile stretch his face. “I am very good at not being found.”

Foster frowned, looking a little like she wanted to say something. He waited for it, but she seemed to decide not to go with her first thought. “Can I ask you a question?”

“I have a feeling you will ask me whatever you like,” Loki said coolly. Foster eyed him.

“All right, fine,” she said. “You said no one on...Asgard...knew you were here.” Loki felt his muscles coil tight and forced them to relax, inclining his head a fraction in acknowledgment. “Where do they think you are?”

Loki considered her. He felt suddenly brittle. “I didn’t come here to talk about myself,” he said, a little sharply. He wondered what they did think. With luck, they considered him dead. No doubt there had been feasts of celebration, of relief. Or perhaps they thought he lived still, falling interminably between the branches of Yggdrasil, into nothing.

“I was just wondering,” Foster said, after a moment, and then shook her head. “All right, fine. I’ll leave that alone.” She pushed back and stood up, pacing over to a cabinet. “So if you didn’t come here to talk about yourself, then are you at least going to make yourself useful?”

“I suppose that depends on what sort of useful you mean,” Loki said, calming himself. Foster pulled out a sheaf of papers and dropped it on the table, and then sat down again, her gaze intent.

“You can start,” she told him, “by telling me everything you know about the Einstein-Rosen bridge, Bifrost, whichever. How was it made the first time?”

“There are no records,” Loki said, glancing only briefly at the stack of papers. “I looked,” he added, in case she thought to doubt it. “The most given on the subject is a few lines in what is more mythology than history or magecraft.”
“I said everything,” Foster said, her eyes a little bright. “Mythology counts.” She clicked the back end of a pen on the table and grabbed a sheet of paper. “All right. Go.” Stubborn woman. Almost arrogant, in her assumption that he would tell her anything, let alone the truth.

*If you stay silent, she’ll lose interest, and you’ll lose the ability to keep track of her progress – and impede it if necessary. And it’s hardly as though she’ll be able to do anything with a few scraps of information.* Loki drummed his fingers on the table, and began, after a moment, to talk.

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He broke off with a startled blink when the door opened to a loud, “I brought doughnuts – you’re still here?” Loki noticed vaguely that both he and Foster swiveled around in unison to stare at Darcy, who stared back for a moment before shaking her head. “Okay,” she said, and then held out the brightly colored box in her hands. “Doughnut?”

Loki shook himself and glanced back at Jane. She looked a little dazed too. How long had he been-

“Beg pardon,” he said, and stood up quickly. “I should be going.” With the exception of a few clarifying questions, he realized, Foster had just let him…talk. For an hour, perhaps, maybe more, and now she was looking at him with a curious expression on her face.

“Right,” she said, a bit belatedly, standing up as well. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to – um, keep you.” She glanced at Darcy, who was eying them with naked interest. “Given…given what we’ve been discussing, I have a few papers I’d like you to look at.”

*Say no,* the sensible voice in Loki’s mind urged. “I don’t see why not,” his treacherous mouth said. “Perhaps – Wednesday?”

“Works for me,” Foster said, and Loki took a step back and then turned to move around Darcy, inclining his head a fraction in her direction.

“Then I shall consider it an appointment,” he said, and hastened out the door, just overhearing Darcy’s, “so I guess all physicists are weird” before he transported himself back to his apartment.

“What are you doing,” he murmured to himself. Was he just going to spill all his secrets to her? This went beyond keeping an eye on her progress. *Do you want the bridge rebuilt?*

Or was it just as with Stark – she listened. She was interested in the knowledge he had to share. Did he think, somehow, that she would be a friend, if he gave her what she wanted?

His head ached. He rubbed his own temples.

Well. He would see her again on Wednesday. And would not be a fool, then.

**Interlude (XVII)**

Loki woke with his head pounding and his stomach attempting to invert itself. He stumbled to the toilet in the room he was renting and vomited violently, but little came up but thin bile. His appetite the night before had been poor, and he’d eaten only sparsely.

Well, he felt wretched now. Something he’d eaten? Loki hauled himself to his feet and drank several mouthfuls from the sink, spat until the taste in his mouth cleared somewhat, and looked at himself in the mirror.

He looked wretched too, Loki noted. Pale, dark circles around his eyes, and his hair seemed lank and stuck to his head, a faint sheen of sweat gleaming on his skin. He looked…sick, Loki realized. But that was absurd, it had been years since his days of sickliness.
Like as not, he thought with a shiver, it was simply fatigue. That, or frustration. The ease with which
he’d found his first employment had given him hope that seemed to have been bitterly false. But if he
was to blend in…he could not simply continue to manufacture money out of nowhere.

Loki took a deep breath, and cast a glamour on himself to mask his appearance. Whatever it was, it
wouldn’t do to show the world that face. For a moment, his knees wobbled and his head spun, but it
passed quickly, and he straightened and turned to step out, though his stomach still felt uneasy.

He hadn’t gone five blocks before Carl joined him.

“If you continue to do this I am going to haul you home by your ear and see to it that your mother
knows you are tagging along after strangers,” Loki said, perhaps a little shortly. Carl did not seem
troubled by the threat.

“How do you know where I live?”

“I can certainly find out.” Loki’s stomach flipped, and he swallowed hard, taking a few deep breaths
through his nose to calm it. Food poisoning? Perhaps. He felt too hot, now, but he suspected
removing any of his clothes would only lead him to being too cold.

“I can show you,” Carl offered brightly. Loki closed his eyes. Why me, he wanted to ask, and also
why do you trust me?

“You can show me. I see.” He wasn’t going to get anything done with the whelp tagging at his
heels. Nor with his head pounding like a drum. Norns, what was the matter with him? Carl frowned
up at him.

“You don’t look great, Mr. Wizard.”

“I appreciate the compliment,” Loki said, acidly dry, and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. He
needed to vomit again, but there was nothing but water left in him. Was he sick? Some Midgardian
mortal affliction, some sickness he was unaccustomed to-

Thinking back, he supposed he had not felt well for some time, but he’d simply assumed…

The world veered alarmingly sideways. Loki caught himself on a rubbish bin and panted a few
breaths. His stomach heaved anew at the smell, and he gave up and doubled over to retch on the
sidewalk. Carl hung back.

“…are you okay?” he asked, sounding concerned. Loki took a deep breath through his nose, spat,
and made himself straighten.

“Yes,” he forced out. “I’m going back – home.” Which way was it, though? He felt appallingly
disoriented, too hot and too cold at the same time. And Carl was still hovering. Still- “Would you
leave me alone?” He snapped at the child, who shied back. Loki sucked in a few breaths and took a
cautious step forward.

The world reeled. His head spun. His stomach was in his throat, his head throbbed like an open
wound. He tried to straighten up and take another step, stubbornly gritting his teeth.

“Mister?” Carl said, sounding worried. “I bet my house is closer, maybe you should…”

“I’m fine,” he said, but his voice sounded decidedly peculiar all of a sudden. Loki turned his head to
look at Carl, to reassure him, and his vision tunneled and he felt blood rush to his head in the moment
before his knees buckled. Oh no, he thought bleakly, how humiliating, but did not remain conscious
long enough to feel himself hit the pavement.
Yeah, I give up on making excuses for myself. For the foreseeable future, things will be slow. I am now in school, and between that and working on several different projects at the same time while attempting to maintain some semblance of a social life...yeah, I'm hoping for twice a month at this point.

On the bright side! With the next chapter we move into the next phase of plot, so there actually is a direction here! I promise! God lord I don't know who I am most of the time.

As always, all my gratitude and love to my lovely beta, who looks things over for me even when she's sick. Any remaining flaws are mine alone.

Warnings for this chapter for some slightly sketchy sexual situations.

“Don’t oversell it,” had been Barton’s admonishment. “This doesn’t need to be complicated.”

“The moment you say that,” Loki had told him dryly, “You doom everything to complication. When something goes wrong, I am going to blame you.” That had made Barton laugh, and Loki felt a curious little flutter of satisfaction. Not that he liked the man. He was brash and irritating almost to the point of boorishness.

Or at least, he was until they were in the field, and then once again he was perfect, intense focus, a hunting bird circling with eyes keen enough to catch the slightest movement of a single mouse. Loki had watched him prepare his equipment out of the corner of his eye with some fascination.

Sitting here, though, on the edge of a fountain in a spacious plaza, he couldn’t see so much as a glint of weaponry, even knowing exactly where Barton was. He kept one eye on the road, and one eye on the façade already bustling with people. The sound of their loud, already half-drunk laughter carried even to where he was sitting, but their target was not yet among that group.

He didn’t bother to be offended about playing bait. After all, his was the light touch needed to set the stage, and that was the sort of work Loki had always preferred. Set up the players so that others could perform as expected. Let Barton pull the trigger.

“How are you not overheating?” Barton’s voice was tinny in his ear. Loki glanced down at his clothing, sleek, sophisticated, dark colors. He had rolled up his shirtsleeves; one concession to the heat.

“I am,” Loki said mildly, without moving his lips. “I am simply ignoring it.”

“Goody for you.”

Loki sat up a little straighter. “Vehicle approaching. Timing is correct, yes?”

“It’s our guy. License plate matches, anyway. Just give it a minute…” Loki leaned back again, letting his fingers trail in the fountain’s cool water. It wasn’t entirely true that he was ignoring the heat. In truth, it was starting to feel oppressive, and his head was starting to ache a little. He was ignoring
that, though, irritated. It was not so hot, and every time he noticed it he couldn’t help but wonder if it was because-

The doors of the black car that had pulled up to a nondescript little café opened. Two burly men stepped out first – bodyguards, obviously – followed by another, largely hidden between them. Clint swore over the intercom.

“He’s got Reilly with him. Guy on the right. He’s got a…reputation, and it’s an earned one. That’s going to make things…harder.”

“You’re fault,” Loki said glibly. “But you have too little faith in me.”

“The plan we discussed is never going to work with him here.” Barton did not sound pleased. Loki resisted the urge to smile.

“Then I suppose it’s a good thing I’m such a good improviser,” he said, mildly. “Our target. How would you describe his weaknesses?”

“Same as everyone else’s, I guess. Drinking. Women. Likes to pretend he’s a gentleman, right up until he starts selling weaponry to dangerous regimes. I don’t know, is there something you’re looking for?” Barton sounded like he was frowning. “Have you got some kind of hocus-pocus you can pull out?”

“No,” Loki said, a little crisply. “I do not have ‘some kind of hocus-pocus.’ But if you’ll excuse me for a moment, I do have an idea.”

“And suddenly, a sense of foreboding,” Barton said, but Loki stood fluidly and strolled across the square, keeping an eye on the café and the shuffle of men going in. He slipped into a side street, just out of sight, and summoned his magic. It had been a while since he’d tried the particular spell, but it came back to him easily. He took a moment to inspect his new appearance in a glass window, adjusted the neckline of the dress to hang a little lower, and smiled winningly.

Then she turned and teleported herself to the street opposite so she could walk quite naturally up to the tight gathering of people at the door.

“Are you going to tell me what you’re doing or…”

“Hush,” Loki said, keeping her voice low. “And keep your eyes on the roof. This may take a few moments.”

“That’s reassuring – wait, what happened to your voice,” Clint added quickly, but Loki had her eyes on the bunch of black clothed men now moving past the guard at the entrance. It was child’s play to slip into line just behind them, weaving through the semi-sober crowd. The guard held out an arm.

“Invitation please, miss,” he said, sounding apologetic. Loki cast him her best expression of distress. “I’m afraid I’ve lost it – please, just this once…” She raised her voice to carry, just enough, and caught their target, Sheldon Winters, turning. Loki widened her eyes and softened her stance, very subtly. “Surely some kind of exception can be made…”

“I’m sorry, but I just can’t…”

“Roger! Be a sport,” Loki heard, and smiled inwardly as Winters clapped the guard on the shoulder. “I’ll keep an eye on the little lady. No funny business.”
“Sir,” said the man Barton had identified as Reilly, but Winters grinned at him as well.

“What? Worried that SHIELD’s caught on, is going to send a slip like this one to take me out?” I could break your neck without effort, Loki thought with mild disgust, but ducked her head as though hiding a blush and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

“SHIELD employs over fifty highly capable female operatives trained in covert operations. The Black Widow, Mockingbird…”

“Well, my dear? What do you say? Are you hiding any weapons under that dress?”

Loki summoned a small smile, shy but with its own quiet charm. “No, but I do have to admit I took a self-defense class once…”

Winters laughed heartily. “There you have it, Reilly. Or are you just looking for an excuse to give this lovely lady a patdown?” His mock-chiding tone would have been more convincing, Loki thought, if it hadn’t been for Winters’ hand moving up and down the back of her dress. She could almost feel sweat staining the silk. Reilly stood, stone-faced, and Winters began to guide Loki toward the front door with a gently urging hand. “Stay close, Reilly!” he said, like the man was a dog. “I don’t believe I caught your name…”

“Sonja,” Loki said. “Sonja Petterson. Thank you for helping back there, I don’t know what I would have done…”

“Next time you get a minute,” came Clint’s voice into his ear, sounding distinctly displeased, “I’d really like to know what the hell is going on.”

Barton did not seem terribly satisfied with Loki’s terse explanation, murmured out under Reilly’s gaze as Winters fetched her a drink, but he accepted it. Or at least decided to wait until they were finished to object.

That, Loki thought dryly, was sure to be an enjoyable conversation.

The drink was bubbly and nearly flavorless, but she drank it with a smile, and the next he offered her as well, beginning to affect the symptoms of tipsiness with what she thought was admirable verisimilitude. Certainly she’d seen enough drunk men and women at enough feasts to know what they looked like. She let Winters’ hands wander, though periodically removing them with a giggle and a coy glance, and added every touch to a private mental tally.

By the time she judged their target sufficiently inebriated, the lust in his eyes when he looked at her no longer so well disguised, Loki was beginning to consider killing Sheldon Winters herself.

Reilly, of course, never strayed far, and Loki could feel his suspicious eyes on her back at every turn.

Loki accepted one more proffered drink and took a sip, then wobbled and caught herself on Winters’ shoulder. His hands went at once to her waist, hot through the thin fabric of her dress. “Careful there,” he said. Loki gave him her best dizzy smile.

“I think I need – I think I need a breath of air,” she said. “Can we – the roof?”

Reilly broke in, of course, with, “I must advise,” but Winters waved a hand dismissively.

“Come with me, if you’re so concerned! The night’s gone well. You worry too much.” His eyes were fixed down the front of Loki’s dress. “Sonja – little Sonja – the roof it is! Fresh air will clear
both our heads.” He linked his arm with hers, finally releasing her waist, and they started toward the stairs. A few eyes turned to watch them, but most were otherwise occupied.

The bodyguard followed like a shadow.

Winters was breathing heavily by the time they reached the final stairs to the roof, and stopped, leaning in far too close. “Sonja – after the party would you be so kind as to – accompany me home?”

Loki leaned in and lowered her voice to whisper in his ear, “Why wait? No one else will be on the roof, if your bodyguard stays here…” She heard him groan, and swallowed revulsion. He panted heavily, and then grabbed her arm, slightly too rough, and dragged her into a kiss that tasted of sour wine and champagne.

She fought down the instinct to call one of her knives and kill him, right there, made herself relax and feign enjoyment until he pulled back and turned. “Reilly!” He yelled. “Thomas – stay right here, I won’t be long – I want a little privacy.”

“Sir,” Reilly started to protest, and Loki tugged at Winters’ arm.

“That’s an order!” Winters almost shouted, and then hurried stumbling up the last flight of stairs and onto the roof, already reaching for Loki again. She twisted, laughing, affecting teasing as she danced back toward the walls at the edge, drawing him nearer where she knew Clint was watching.

“I need you out of the shot,” said Barton’s voice, cutting in again after his long silence, terse and almost curt. “Get his back to me-”

She let Winters catch her and grabbed his lapels, turning him so his back was facing Clint. His hands fumbled at her dress, started rucking up her skirt. “God, you’re gorgeous,” he said, hands sliding up her thighs, and Loki just heard the quiet pop as she was nearing the limits of her tolerance.

His mouth opened in very slight surprise, and Loki let himself slide back into his own skin as he stepped back to let the man fall. “Sonja?” he said, sounding slightly confused.

“Loki,” Loki corrected, coldly. “My name is Loki. And I pity every woman who has ever had to bear your touch.”

The man hit the concrete of the roof with a quiet thud. Reilly burst out of the door, gun drawn, and Loki threw him a sharp-edged smile before teleporting away.

He landed in the room where Barton was packing up his equipment. Blood rushed to his head and he caught himself on one knee, breathing a little hard. Barton stopped and looked at him, his expression inscrutable.

“You shouldn’t’ve switched back,” he said, finally. “The idea is not to be seen. Not by anyone left alive, especially.”

“I doubt he saw enough of me to give a meaningful description.”

“Even so.”

Loki took a few breaths, trying to keep them subtle. He’d forgotten how rapidly he could drain himself, that way, without care. Barton noticed, though, and straightened, frowning. “Something wrong?”

“No,” Loki said, perhaps a little too harshly, because Barton’s eyes narrowed another notch and he
looked skeptical. He made himself straighten. “I thought we were in a hurry.”

“Fine,” Barton said, after a moment, “but we’re not going to straight back. First thing, we’re going somewhere quiet and you’re going to explain what the *fuck* just happened.”

Loki kept his expression flat and inexpressive, and did not let himself feel disappointed.

Loki sat down in the warehouse he’d transported them to, hoping that it looked like casual posture as opposed to necessity. Barton paced, almost twitching, seeming to be busily attempting to puzzle out what to demand first.

“Okay,” he said, finally. “Okay. That – the girl. That was you, right? You didn’t – I don’t know, borrow someone else’s body for an hour and a half-”

“No,” Loki said. “Don’t be absurd.”

“Absurd? Me. All right, cause I’m still finding it kind of absurd that you can just turn into someone else when you think about it-”

Loki wrinkled his nose. “It’s a good deal more complicated than that.”

“Oh, I just *bet* it is.” Barton stopped and shook his head. “Okay. Was I supposed to know about this…thing?”

“I told Coulson I could impersonate anyone I chose.”

“I’m guessing he figured you meant something a little different than…*that.*” Barton still looked like he was trying not to twitch, but oddly enough, he seemed to be calming, too. “Magic. All right. This is *really* a new thing for me, not *exactly* my field, so – why didn’t you do that before?” He asked, abruptly. Loki blinked.

“Before?” He’d expected alarm, perhaps even revulsion, maybe fear. Accepted it. At this point, though, Barton just seemed…uncomfortable. Agitated, perhaps.

“Yeah. If you could just – look like someone else, why didn’t you do that when SHIELD, or anybody else, was looking for you?” Loki stared at him for a moment.

“I have a limited number of skins crafted,” he said, finally. “Making new ones would be the task of a few weeks, at the least, and extremely strenuous.” The thought popped into his head suddenly that there might be another way of shapeshifting. If he had changed skins when he’d been found, prior to any training, then-

He pushed that thought away and went on. “Besides, I need to maintain the casting while I am wearing it, and that takes a fair amount of energy.” He thought he caught a brief, sharp look from Barton, but when he glanced more directly at him it was gone, and he was just pacing again. “Simpler to keep moving than to maintain such a working over months.” Particularly with what he stood to lose if he overexerted himself. One fraction of a second was all Heimdall would need to find him.

“Huh,” Barton said, after a few moments of silence. “That actually…almost makes sense.” When he turned to face Loki, though, he still didn’t look pleased, but that ebbed away a little too, and he shifted, slightly. “You okay?”

Loki gave him a blank look. “What?”
“Guy was…getting pretty handsy,” Barton said, sounding decidedly awkward.

Loki stared, a little incredulous. “You think I am so easily perturbed as to be troubled by the pawings of a deceased little worm like that?” He said, not quite scornful. Barton held up his hands, expression turning disgruntled.

“Right, right, course not,” he said. “What was I thinking? Just checking…” He trailed off, expression going a little more serious. “We do this again…don’t pull something like that without checking with me first. Natasha might make me sleep on the floor for a week if you bit it.”

“Can’t have that,” Loki murmured, smoothly. It was unnecessary, of course. He’d dealt with far worse than a lustful mortal and come through it whole, but at the same time it was curiously pleasant to have his well-being asked after.

Barton sat down, after a moment, a little ways away, but the distance didn’t feel entirely like mistrust. “Any other surprises you’re hiding away?” he asked, eventually. Loki smiled slightly.

“Too many to count.”

“That’s reassuring.” Barton scrutinized him. “So this is…what you actually look like, though. You’re not – I dunno, hiding something else under there?”

Loki felt his stomach flip and clench, and felt suddenly nauseous. He forced his voice to stay calm. “I have a third eye staring out of my navel,” he said, dryly, and Barton’s eyes went briefly round as saucers and then he laughed, if a little nervously.

“Don’t do that! Like I said – magic, it’s new, it’s weird, I don’t know a damn thing about it except for what Harry Potter told me-”

Loki cocked his head a little to the side. “Harry Potter?”

“Yeah, you know, the one with-” Loki smoothed his face, quickly, but Barton looked incredulous. “You don’t know?” Loki added it silently to his list of references that he needed to become aware of.

“---huh. Well. Just wondering - can you make a feather fly?”

“I suppose,” Loki said, frowning slightly. “Why would I want to?”

“Oh, man,” Barton said, seeming to brighten. “This is going to be fun,” and Loki tensed immediately, hearing mockery and he was not a- “I’ll track down the first book – got it somewhere – and lend it to you. It’ll be better than getting Tasha to watch spy movies.”

The grin Barton cast him, Loki realized just as he was gathering himself to snap back, was not a cruel one. It was…infectious. Open, almost, and he registered lend it to you, and blinked. “Is this supposed to be a recommendation?” he said, after a wary moment, keeping his voice dry enough that if he was being mocked…

“Yep,” Barton said, almost cheerfully, and then added, “don’t look so dubious. Harry Potter’s fucking quality.” Loki shook his head slightly, feeling a flicker of something like amusement, however slow and reluctant.

“I shall have to draw my own conclusions, I’m sure,” he said, diplomatically. All was, it seemed, well. Barton did not seem…overly upset, though of course he might be feigning – that did not seem likely, though, not with what he knew of Barton. Nonetheless – he couldn’t quite keep himself from frowning, and Barton noticed, his grin dying down.
“What?” he asked, not quite sharply. Loki shook his head.

“That is all?”

“What is?”

“Your reaction was such that I hardly expected you to be appeased by a simple explanation that such is the way I am.” The words came out bluntly, but he needed to know, to be sure…Barton started, a little, and then regarded him, seeming to be considering.

“Did it – does it – weird me out that you can just – change faces when you feel like it? Yeah, sure it does.” It’s not that simple, I told you, Loki wanted to object, but decided that there was little point. “Probably is going to for a while. I’m not a big fan of surprises. Comes with the work territory, I guess. But at the same time…it’s not the weird teleportation whatever you pulled on me, and as long as it’s not some kind of body-stealing thing or you’re not going to go around swapping me into different people…world keeps getting weirder. I guess I’m just going to have to get used to it.”

Loki felt curiously…helpless. The ground just seemed to keep shifting under his feet, and it just had again, and yet at the same time the primary emotion was…relief. He’d told himself it didn’t matter, that he could not care less about Barton’s opinion of him.

It seemed that wasn’t precisely true.

First Romanova, then Barton, the thought occurred to him. You certainly let hooks easily into your heart. Will you start developing a fondness for Foster as well?

“I wasn’t intending to – ah – ‘swap you into different people,’” Loki said quickly, when he realized Barton was staring. “But now I am considering it, if only for the look on your face.” Barton gave him a look that was almost alarmed and that Loki returned with perfect serenity.

“Fuck you, too,” Barton muttered, but he didn’t sound that upset. “Want to play cards? Transport won’t get here for another forty minutes.”

Loki gave him a smile. “By all means. You’re welcome to lose.” Barton’s eyes narrowed.

“That right?” Barton produced a deck from somewhere. “Does that mean you’ll let me pick the game?”

Guard your heart more closely, whispered the warning in the back of his mind. Remember what happens when you’re vulnerable? But he pushed that away. He wasn’t a fool. He would take care. If he couldn’t achieve perfect isolation, wasn’t it better to have allies than not?

In the middle of the night, Loki started up awake in the dark of his room, cold sweat dampening his sheets and his heart pounding. He reached for what he had dreamed, groping through the dark, but it vanished before he could grasp it. His mind was clear, though, and he was wide awake, a sick, nauseous fear churning in his gut.

He closed his eyes and waited to see if it would return. All he got were vague afterimages, though, flashes of looming stormclouds and the broken Bifrost and a sense of terrifying nothingness. Old dreams. Familiar ones.

Never welcome.

And yet. Something nagged at the back of his mind that he could not quite pin down. Something
cold and strange and slippery like an eel sliding under a rock the moment it was seen.

Dread, he thought. It was dread.

It was already fading, though, his heart slowing back to normal. A moment more and it was gone altogether, like the fragments of whatever dream it had been, and Loki closed his eyes and settled back into sleep with a sigh.

Whatever it was, he thought, it was a thing to worry at later.

**Interlude (XVIII)**

“Are you okay?”

No, Loki thought, as he floated back into consciousness, no, I am not. *Poison?* No, that was hardly likely. He hadn’t used enough magic of late for it to be exhaustion. No, he just felt…sick.

*What is wrong with me?*

“Mister…should I go get someone?”

The rest filtered in slowly. “No,” he pushed out, because that much was obvious. He forced his eyes open and found himself looking up at the sky. Ah, yes. Because he had fainted. He had *fainted.*

Loki gathered his strength and shoved himself to a sitting position, and had to slam his eyes closed when his head spun. He could feel the boy – Carl – hovering nearby. “Can I do anything?”

“I’m fine,” Loki gritted out – one of his worse lies, recently – and tried to focus. His limbs were heavy and aching unpleasantly, his head felt full of clouds, and there was a headache starting behind his eyes.

“I think I’d better go get someone,” Carl said, sounding jumpy. *Pathetic,* Loki thought caustically. *A child can see how weak you are. Stand up, pull yourself together-*

“I’d really rather you didn’t,” he said, trying to force his voice to some semblance of even normalcy, and began to gather himself to rise. He was trying to think fast, but it was difficult to think at all. “It would not be…advisable…to…”

“Is it because you’re magic?” Carl said, eyes widening. “Is someone chasing you because you’re magic and that’s why I’m not supposed to know?”

He couldn’t gather himself well enough to think of anything better, and no one would believe a child anyway. “Yes,” he said, heavily, “yes, exactly.” He braced himself and took a deep breath, stood, and nearly lost his balance at the sudden rush of vertigo. *What is wrong with me, this isn’t, this isn’t right-*

He realized, a little dazedly, that he wasn’t sure which was the right way to his home.

“Carl!”

His and the boy’s heads snapped around in unison, though Loki felt like vomiting at the swift motion and took several deep breaths to stifle the impulse. Carl’s hand wrapped suddenly around his wrist and tugged, small and determined.
“Come on,” he said, “that’s my mom, she’ll help you and won’t rat you out to anyone-”

“I don’t think,” Loki started to object, but Carl was already calling, “Mom! Over here!” and Loki didn’t think it would be wise to try to transport himself away in his current state, not to mention how…terribly conspicuous that would be. He stayed where he was.

The woman who rounded the corner a moment later did not seem terribly pleased. “Young man,” she was already saying, voice brassy and full of worry, “if you don’t watch yourself,” and then she stopped dead, her eyes fixing on him. And narrowing.

Loki felt the powerful urge to apologize without really knowing what for.

“Carl,” she rumbled. “Who is this?”

Loki dragged himself together. “I’m terribly sorry,” he said, making his voice polite and as natural as he could. “Mattias Nylund. I moved here recently, and your boy came upon me feeling a bit unwell…” The ground heeled under his feet like an unsteady ship, and his stomach rose perilously into his throat.

“I see.” The suspicion was almost rolling off her in waves, and Loki tried to tug his wrist gently free. “Carl. You are coming home with me this-”

“He needs help, mom!”

Loki could feel himself starting to shiver again. Oh, this was shameful. Bitterly, bitterly shameful. “I don’t think,” he murmured, and then things went a bit fuzzy again.

He blinked, and found that Carl’s mother had caught him and appeared to be examining his eyes, her expression somewhat softened.

“I just need to get home,” he told her, although suddenly he wasn’t entirely certain where that was. Asgard, maybe. Or nowhere.

“Just to the house,” she said, finally, still sounding reluctant. “You can call a doctor from there.”

“No…need. Just a bit of rest,” he said, and tried to make himself stand straight under his own power. “I’ll be fine.”

“Uh huh,” she said, and he tried not to bristle at the dubious tone of her voice. “I’m sure you will be.”
...well, I think I made it under a month this time. I'm not going to check the date, that seems likely to just depress me.

No particular notes this chapter! Thanks to all of you for sticking with me on this ride, and especially to my beta, who has to deal with my constant flailing about this monstrosity. What a good person.

Without further ado, then.

He dropped into SHIELD headquarters to leave his report on the assignment with Barton – less a few details, perhaps – and ran into Chandra on his way out of Coulson’s office. He just managed to keep himself from startling.

“Excuse me,” he murmured, moving to step around her. She matched the step, and Loki stopped and gave her another look.

Ah, he thought, this might be a problem.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” Chandra said, her arms crossed and her gaze direct. “Not just me, either. Haven’t seen you down in the labs lately.”

“I’ve been busy,” Loki said, perfectly neutral.

“Roslyn thinks you’re mad at her.”

“I am not.” He felt a little pang at that, though, which he quickly suppressed. It was the only assumption he could make, that the means by which SHIELD had managed to work out how to track his movements had come from the tests run in Chandra’s lab, their questions and measurements, and since he’d come to that conclusion…he had to wonder what else they’d been doing, without his knowledge.

Crafting shackles for his power, perhaps. A few months ago, he would have thought it amusing that they would attempt. Now…it seemed they might actually manage. Mortals were more ingenious than he’d been inclined to give them credit for.

“Then what’s the deal?” Chandra pressed.

Loki gave her a long look. “I have found other ways to occupy myself.”

“And you didn’t feel like dropping me a line?” The affronted tone to her voice prickled along his nerves. He felt his mouth tighten and forced his expression to neutrality.

“I assumed that you would be informed.”

“Uh huh.” Chandra narrowed her eyes. That expression was truly formidable. Loki shifted slightly. The snap of his voice was not entirely intentional.
“I do not wish to be subject to further exploitation of my willingness to indulge your curiosity.”

Chandra blinked, and then shook her head, and then blinked again. “—sorry, what?” Loki resisted the urge to simply snarl at her.

“Pray do not play games with me. Were you not responsible for providing the information on tracking me?”

For a moment longer Chandra looked blank, and then understanding dawned on her face. “Ah.”

“Yes,” Loki did not quite snap. “’Ah.’ So if you would excuse me—”

She looked, for the first time since he had known her, slightly uncomfortable. “I thought you knew…”

“I did not.” Loki paused, and turned to look at her. “And even if I had – the fact that you did not see fit to mention it to me suggests that you guessed what my feelings on the matter would be.” Chandra looked the slightest bit guilty, and Loki smiled thinly. “I’m afraid the remainder of your curiosity will have to remain unsated.”

“That was the only,” Chandra started to protest, and Loki cut her off.

“Really? You expect me to believe that? So you weren’t, perhaps, seeking a way to strip my magic from me in case it should be necessary?”

Chandra’s eyes skated away, and Loki felt no satisfaction. “No.”

“Liar,” he said, nearly baring his teeth, and her eyes snapped back to his face, the stubborn expression back in place.

“I’m not,” she said, voice not quite sharp. “The request was made that we – look into it, yes, but I declined. That’s not the kind of research my lab does.” Loki wanted to call the lie on that as well, but it wasn’t quite there. He turned to look at her more fully. Chandra’s mouth tightened. “I’m a scientist, not...I don’t usually work with human – or, okay, sentient – subjects, but I’m not interested in starting to use unethical methodology at this point in my career. Any testing we do is predicated on your consent. If you don’t think we’ll respect your wishes…”

“It seems clear that you did not. Or at least avoided the question entirely by failing to mention the direction of your explorations.”

Chandra’s expression went very slightly defensive, but she met his eyes levelly. “All right. I should have told you rather than just assuming someone else would. I didn’t, because I’m a techie and I saw the power estimates on your aptitude test, and I’m not that stupid. But that also means that I’m not stupid enough to try to pull one over on you again when you’ve already called me out. Fair enough?”

The sheer bluntness of it took him aback, though he supposed it shouldn’t have. This was Chandra, after all. Still, his skin was prickling uneasily, his thoughts insisting that he couldn’t trust her. She’d say *anything* to get what she wants, and what she wants is you back under her eye. “And that you won’t do it again – you claim – means I ought to forget that you have invaded my privacy once?”

“I think you might at least take it under consideration,” Chandra retorted.

“Why would I?”
Chandra looked incredulous. “Why would-”

“Why would I wish to tolerate your ilk scurrying around me with your impossibly limited vision of the world?” He regretted the words the moment they were out, and Chandra’s expression went furious, and then almost – hurt, and then to a look of offended dignity. Loki didn’t let his expression shift.

“If that’s how you feel about it, fine,” she said, after a moment. “If that’s honestly what you think – call me delusional, but it seemed to me you might be enjoying yourself, some of the time. Did I make that up?” Chandra glared up at him, and Loki just looked back at her, keeping his gaze even. “The team likes you,” she said bluntly, after a moment. “They miss having you around. That’s the main thing I wanted to tell you.” She turned on her heel and strode away. Loki stared after her, feeling curiously adrift. He tried to push that away, along with the vague feeling of guilt.

They miss having you around. A ploy, likely. A play on his emotions, like as not – or plain untruth. And yet…

Better safe than sorry. He pushed the vague longing down, and after a moment’s pause removed himself from the compound altogether, returning to his apartment. He curled up on his couch with a primer on Midgardian theories of physics and shut the rest of the world out.

Loki was midway through annotating a chapter on astrophysics when he blinked and realized that his phone was buzzing on the table. He eyed it for a moment, then breathed out through his nose. There was about an equal chance, he guessed, that it was a new mission or that Barton had mentioned his shapechanging and someone was upset about it.

After a moment, he picked up the buzzing phone and checked the screen, frowning at a number he didn’t recognize.

After a pause, he answered it, trying to think through who else might have this number. “Hello?”

“Silver.” He recognized Natasha’s voice at once and straightened, surprised that she was calling. Her voice was pitched low, and she sounded harried. “Thanks for picking up. You busy?”

Loki sat up, starting to frown. “Not particularly,” he allowed, after a moment’s pause. “It sounds as though you are, though.”

“Mm. I’m on assignment, and I’ve got something here I think is your brand of weird.” She paused, for a moment, and then, “Consider this an informal request for your expertise.” Loki half smiled, feeling his mood lift. He leaned back.

“You’re asking me for help?” He said, a little too lightly.

“Don’t get cocky,” she said, though she didn’t sound too annoyed. “I’m using my resources. So?”

“You caught me at a low moment,” Loki said, rising from the armchair and summoning his boots. “I’m just bored enough that watching you twitch every time I say ‘magic’ sounds worthwhile. Where shall I…”

“Give me ten minutes,” Natasha interrupted, letting him hear the smile in her voice. “I’ve got a tail I need to lose first. I’ll call you back.”

Loki tensed. “A tail?”
Romanova scoffed. “I’m not a novice, Silver. I can lose one tail. I’ve been letting this one tag after me for a while to get a sense for him, and he’s not that good. Ten minutes, I’ll call you.”

Loki frowned, but said, “Fine,” anyway. She made a sound vaguely like a laugh on the other end, and hung up. He pulled the phone down from his ear and frowned at it. His instincts were prickling at him vaguely, but he couldn’t have said what they were trying to tell him. He tried to remember if he’d heard Natasha mention what she was doing, or perhaps if Barton had, but couldn’t recall anything.

He shelved the textbook carefully in its proper place and watched the minutes tick by. He checked the edges on his throwing knives, tucked them safely away, and glanced back at his phone, still quiet on the counter.

Loki felt a small prickle of unease. He picked up his device and turned it over in one hand. How long had it been? Five minutes, perhaps? And the time had only been an estimate. He waited. Fidgeted.

His apartment suddenly seemed very quiet. Loki tapped his fingers against his leg and considered. What harm can it do? He told himself, finally. Just set your mind at ease, reassure yourself that nothing’s wrong. Stop being a fool. He glanced one last time at the phone and then reached out, very carefully, searching for the little beacon of magic he’d set to keep an eye on her.

It wasn’t there.

Loki stiffened, and widened his net, looking farther afield, but there was nothing. Of course she might be somewhere beyond his range, or perhaps he hadn’t made the casting as long-lasting as he’d thought, or-

He knew he was making excuses, though. Trying to calm the increasingly quick beating of his heart. He picked up the phone and re-called the last number that had called him, listening to it ring with his muscles winding tight.

There was no answer.

Loki kept his breathing deliberately even. There was no reason to assume the worst. There were a thousand and one reasons why Romanova wouldn’t pick up her phone, most of them perfectly innocuous.

Something is wrong. He was sure.

Loki twisted himself through space and into Coulson’s office. “Where is Agent Romanov?” He asked, abruptly. Coulson looked up, seeming startled for a moment before he was smoothed back to unflappable calm.

“Why?”

Loki twitched with the urge to snap that it didn’t matter, that he needed to know, and held it back. “She called me requesting a consultation.”

Coulson didn’t look terribly impressed. “And didn’t give you a location?”

“She said she would call with one,” Loki said, after a moment, hating that he felt foolish. He knew something was amiss, in his bones. “And has not. An attempt to contact her was unsuccessful.”

Coulson tapped a pen against his desk. “That’s hardly grounds for a panic.” Loki gritted his teeth.
“Something is wrong,” he said, flatly. “I know it.” Coulson gave him a long look, and then nodded, barely.

“I’ll look into it.”

“You’ll – what?” Loki took a step forward without thinking, almost baring his teeth. “Just tell me where she is, I can confirm-”

“No,” Coulson said, calmly but nonetheless firm and in a tone that accepted no argument. Loki was familiar enough with it, and it set his teeth on edge. “Agent Romanov is doing some sensitive work, and interruption at the wrong time could jeopardize the mission goals.” Loki fought not to snarl. “So I’ll look into it, and let you know what I find.”

“That is inadequate,” Loki snapped, taking another stiff step toward Coulson’s desk, his left hand clenching. “I will not-”

“Stand down, Agent Silver. You’re out of line.” Coulson’s voice had a sudden edge, and Loki fell still, only then realizing how close he was, and how tense Coulson looked. He made himself relax. “Like I said,” Coulson went on, after a moment. “I’ll look into it. Or do you think I don’t know how to best to look after my agents?”

Loki took a shallow breath, and made his spine bend in a mockery of a bow. “I take it,” he said, fighting to keep his voice even, “that I am dismissed?”

A pause, and then Coulson said, at last, “Don’t do anything reckless. It’ll take me fifteen minutes, tops, to run a check-in and get you her status.”

Loki just looked at him, for a long moment. Finally, he said, “then I shall await your call,” flat and dry, and removed himself to his apartment. He had his answer, skimmed from Coulson’s mind.

Stockholm, Sweden.

After a moment’s consideration, he left his phone on the counter. He wasn’t particularly interested in receiving a lecture. At least not until he got to the bottom of this.

Stockholm was a quiet city. Or at least, far quieter than the ones he had been in lately. The streets were fairly quiet though it was only late afternoon, the summer sun still high. He reached out again when he arrived, just in case there was some whisper of Romanov’s presence that he’d missed, but there was nothing.

So he was just going to have to do some digging.

Loki always prided himself on his ability to ferret out secrets. With subtlety, when necessary. When he lacked for time, less so. Perhaps Romanov would be displeased with him if he spoiled whatever she was up to; Loki thought he could tolerate that a great deal more than the alternatives if he was right.

Loki stepped carefully, but he was well used to finding what he was looking for, especially when that was those who wished to stay hidden. A few carefully placed questions led him to the right people, and they led him to a few more, and with some careful picking of threads and a few casual suggestions of violence, they told him where he wanted to go.

Once he’d tracked down the underground lair of this city’s particular criminal subset, he waltzed in and began a swath of destruction. It took perhaps fifteen minutes to track his way to the man sitting in front of him now, smug and comfortable in a well furnished house. Just looking at his face made
Loki itch to throw him out the window, his temper inching ever closer to the edge.  

“Before you ask,” Loki said flatly, “I do not have an appointment.” He dropped the unconscious guard – security of some kind - on the floor and cocked his head to the side. “It seems you don’t command a great deal of loyalty, Mr. Lindholm. It didn’t take much asking to find you.”

The man glanced from his guard to Loki and back again. “How may I be of assistance?” he said, after a moment, equally cordial. Loki almost wished he were not. Wished the man would give him an excuse to punch through one of those expensive windows and hold him screaming over the streets below.

“I am told you know every occurrence of importance within this city.”

“Told by?”

Loki smiled thinly. “Your people don’t hold up terribly well under duress.” He could feel the urgency pounding in his blood. “Were they wrong?”

The man sat back. He appeared perfectly calm, and that itched at Loki as well. “They weren’t.”

“Then have you heard anything about the presence of the Black Widow here?” Loki caught the slightest twitch of the man’s eye.

“No? If she has been here, I have heard nothing.” Loki felt his smile stretch and thin. He took three prowling strides that brought him around the desk and leaned over the man, who stood up hurriedly, though he looked like he wished he hadn’t. Mr. Lindholm was short, small, and infinitely mortal. “Don’t lie to me.” He didn’t even summon the magic that crackled over his skin and made his voice resonate.

“All right,” Mr. Lindstrom said after a moment. “Yes…she was here. Briefly.” There was something in his voice, though. A flicker of a smile. Smug. Self-satisfied.

He moved before he thought about it, his hands gripping the man’s arms with nearly bruising force. “What did you do with her?” Loki asked. His voice sounded cold and strange in his own ears.

The little man laughed. “What’re you going to do for me to find out?”

Loki didn’t think before tightening the grip of his right hand until he felt bone crush under the pressure. He hardly even heard the man scream over the thud in his ears. “I can crush every bone in your body,” he said, distantly. Was Romanov even still alive? She might not be. “Consider my not doing so payment enough.”

The man hesitated. Loki flexed his left hand until the bone there gave as well. “I’ll leave your neck for last,” he said, the conversational tone of his voice far removed from the seething storm under his skin. “So you can feel your body shatter a little at a time.”

“Please,” the man blubbered. Loki breathed, slow and deep and even, and moved his grip up to mid-forearm. “It wasn’t me! It wasn’t me!” The man screamed, voice ringing with desperation. “I didn’t – it was Osborn! Osborn paid me.”

Loki’s thoughts went cold. His body went cold. You fool. You utter fool. This is your poison at work. He knew he couldn’t reach you and you made your weakness obvious and so-

“Osborn,” he said. His voice sounded strangely quiet. “This is his doing?”
“Yes,” the man said desperately. “Yes, he said, he promised…”

Loki broke his neck in one swift, sharp movement before he stood, slowly. Rage was welling up in him, deep and strong and blizzard cold. Norman Osborn. He should have killed the man to begin with. And now he had done who knew what with Romanov, and that was his fault for showing mercy, for thinking that there was any reason to leave that creature alive.

He would pay. He would pay, now. Loki could feel power humming just under his skin, rising up out of his anger. He’d hardly thought to reach for it. First Loki would find out what he had done with Romanov, and then he would die dragged before her feet on a leash of his entrails.

Loki reached out and brought himself through space back to the tower he’d gone to the first time. Unlike the first time he’d come, Loki didn’t bother with subtlety. The burst of power he sent ahead of him dropped the scurrying guards to their knees as he strode down the hallway to the closed door of the office he remembered. He hoped that Osborn heard him coming and feared. Bullets pinged off of his personal shield as he exploded the door inward.

The man was standing behind his desk, eyes round, and Loki drank in his terror as he took a prowling step inside. “Where is she,” he said, and heard his own voice vibrate with power and fury. Osborn took a step back and Loki matched it forward.

“I don’t know what you-”

“Where is she,” Loki said again, and this time it was accompanied by the soft pop as everything electric in the room perished. His hands curled into fists and he wouldn’t even use his magic on this man, just sheer force to pull him apart one limb at a time-

There was a whisper of air at the back of his neck, but then nothing, and all his attention was fixed forward. He took another step toward Osborn, and stopped, because he didn’t look afraid anymore. He was smiling.

“Where is the Black Widow,” Loki snarled, though his voice seemed to slur oddly. He needed to get out of here. Something was wrong. Something – but Romanov. He needed to find her, or find out what had happened and see to it the price was paid.

“I expect,” Osborn said coolly, “that she’s probably back at SHIELD. Safe and sound.”

Loki’s lips peeled back from his teeth even as his head began to buzz and he took another step forward. “Don’t lie to me, Osborn. I already intend to kill you. I can offer to make it quick.”

“Oh,” Osborn said, eyes gleaming strangely. “I wasn’t lying. You’re not the only one with powerful friends.” Loki’s eyes narrowed. He took another slow step forward.

“Don’t toy with,” Loki started to snarl, but with a whir of machinery he became aware of the trap too late, the jaws of the mechanically triggered spell he hadn’t noticed snapping closed too fast for him to react. It latched onto his magic and coiled around it like a snake, and Loki had a moment of shock before the spell shifted to trying to rip that core out of him.

Loki crumpled. He’d thought it was bad the first time he’d been attacked like this, but now – his body was not his own, searing agony coursing through every muscle, even his mind unable to process anything but to scream, mercilessly clinging to consciousness through spasm after spasm.

The pain started to ebb, finally, and Loki lunged for his magic at once, hardly knowing what he intended to do, and met a wall. He reached again, with the same result, scrabbling against an immovable, invisible barrier keeping him severed from his power-
“Well done,” said a metallic, faintly echoing voice, as Loki fought to push himself upright. *You fool, you fool, you utter fool-*

“I did as I promised, didn’t I? You don’t need to sound surprised.”

Loki gathered himself and dragged himself to his feet. He could taste coppery blood where it was dripping from his nose, his body rebelling. Doom’s metal mask stared impassively back at him, but Loki could feel him radiating satisfaction.

“Doom learns from his errors,” the man intoned. “I imagine there is a great deal to be gained from you.”

Loki’s lips peeled back from his teeth and he lunged, thoughtlessly, but he hardly managed to start the motion before his legs gave out again, concentrated pain raging through him all over again, consciousness starting to waver. *No,* he thought, frantically. *This isn’t possible. You aren’t beaten. Not by the likes of these.*

He couldn’t move, muscles twitching even after the pain itself passed. Osborn was standing over him, now, and Loki tried to drag himself together, pull his thoughts into alignment and make his body work.

“As agreed,” the man said, smugly. “He is yours.”

Doom raised a hand again, and even before Loki was aware of the pain that followed his consciousness fled screaming into darkness.

**Interlude (XIX)**

“I have what?” Loki said, and wasn’t sure if it was indignation or disbelief.

“The flu,” Carl’s mother repeated briskly, and from suspicious wariness she seemed to have transformed quickly to an almost alarmingly motherly attitude. Or at least, that was all he could make of the two blankets she’d foisted on him and the way she kept telling him to stay put. Carl was watching with wide eyes and something Loki suspected was amusement.

“That’s impossible,” Loki said, plainly, and when she turned and looked at him, added, “I do not – get sick.” Cannot, he wanted to say. I’ve never been affected by mortal diseases. *Am I losing my power?* he thought, and felt a sudden rush of terror at the idea, followed by an unrelated dizziness.

“Everyone gets sick sometimes,” Carl’s mother said. Loki stared at her.

“I don’t,” he said, stubbornly, after a moment. She put her hands on her hips and leveled a look at him.

“Maybe you don’t usually get sick, but it doesn’t surprise me in the least that you’d pick something up in your state.”

Loki bristled, or tried. “My state?” His head hurt and his throat hurt and all he really wanted was to lie down and sleep for a bit, but he needed to hold his ground. He was not *sick* with some simple mortal disease, that didn’t happen-
“You’re thin as a rail and you look like you haven’t slept properly in a week, Mr. Nylund. You’re clearly exhausted, and that’s the quickest way to get sick.” She spoke with perfect authority, and turned her back, clearly signaling that the conversation was over. “Since you’re here, rest a bit. I’ll make some soup for dinner and when you’re steadied out we’ll get you home.”

Which one, Loki thought, and felt a stab of pain in his chest. His eyes started to burn and he hated himself, just a little, for his weakness. “It’s hardly necessary that you,” he started to say, and she leveled another look at him. He stopped, and then frowned.

Almost more intimidating than Frigga, he thought, and then severed it at the root, but not before the ache in his chest intensified along with the ache in his body. He gave up on sitting and folded onto the couch with a low and unhappy noise.

“Carl, run and fetch some Tylenol for Mr. Nylund, would you?” The woman said, and Loki realized with a twinge of embarrassment that he didn’t know her name. He opened his eyes when he heard her coming over.

“Your name,” he said, already starting to feel blurry again, sleep dragging him down. “I don’t think I caught…”

“Andrea,” she said, after a moment. “Andrea Samson.”

Loki shook his head a little. “I’d offer you a blessing, but I can’t remember which is the right one at the moment.”

She reached out and put a hand on his forehead, and Loki closed his eyes for just a moment and let himself enjoy the feeling. She pulled it away after a moment. “It doesn’t seem as though your fever’s getting worse. Let me go get a glass of ginger ale for you to take with the Tylenol, and we’ll check again when you wake up.”

Loki sighed. “I shouldn’t be sick,” he said again, but this time it came out more wistfully. “I cannot afford to be sick.”

“A little rest and relaxation and you’ll be back on your feet,” Andrea said, her voice not quite so brisk. “It’s only the flu.”

I used to defeat monsters you could hardly conceive of, Loki thought, and I’m struck down by a mortal disease. He checked the spell that kept him hidden, reinforced it (though the effort made him dizzy even lying down) and closed his eyes. “A few hours,” he mumbled. “And I shall go. I need to…”

He lost his train of thought midway through, though, and slipped into restless sleep with the vague feeling of a blanket being pulled up over his shoulders following him down.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Let's not even talk about the chapter delay on this. All right? All right. And let this serve as your notice that it may be a while to the next one, too, because the holiday season is coming up which means I'm writing a bunch of things for other people. And also working on all my other projects. /puts head down on desk.

But at least this time I didn't end on a cliffhanger!

Much thanks to my eternally patient beta zaataropita; I really don't know how she puts up with me.

Warnings for this chapter for torture and a lot of blood.

He came around with a roaring headache, trying to blink his eyes open only to slam them shut again at the searing light directly in them. There was an ache in his body as well, and Loki wondered for a fraction of a moment if he'd been fool enough to go adventuring with Thor and company, and then to go drinking after. Or perhaps only the drinking; with Thor and the Warriors Three, not to mention Sif, often that was enough for there to be a fight of one kind or another.

That almost pleasant imagining didn’t last long.

“Ah, you awake.” Rage surged and Loki immediately lunged for his magic, only to slam into the same slippery barrier as before. He could reach a trickle of power, and feel it just out of reach, but more than that- “I was beginning to have some concern that Doom had gone too far.”

*I will make you suffer in ways you cannot even conceive*, Loki started to snarl, and pain spiked suddenly, shooting through his whole face so he would have screamed, if he could have opened his mouth even a fraction. He couldn’t. Loki’s heart started to pound, his breathing picking up. He could feel metal grinding on bone, locking his jaw closed. *No,* he thought, with desperate, feverish urgency. *No, my voice-*

Panic surged, and he shoved it brutally down, forced his eyes to open. Something – metal, bolted down – held his wrists and legs. He could lift his head and turn it, but only fractionally, and there was something around his neck.

A collar, Loki realized. The mortal had put a *collar* on him.

Fury tinted his sight red, but not red enough that he could not make out Victor Von Doom in his green cloak and metal mask standing not far away. The rage rose up like bile in his throat and hate was like acid in his chest. He could only hope it showed in his eyes.

“You are not,” Doom said, “the only mind capable of trickery.” *Please, spare me,* Loki would have said dryly, and could not. Was forced to stare with mute attention at the madman who thought he could chain Loki. (Who had chained, his mind amended. And what can you do about it? Powerless. Helpless. Bound.) “The data you provided in Latveria was sufficient for Doom to enact countermeasures, and Mr. Osborn was quick to suggest appropriate bait.”
Loki would have bared his teeth, if he could have. You fool, the hammering of his heart said. You fool, rushing in, reckless, thoughtless. His hands clenched and he strained against the bonds, felt the metal begin to bend and give. Doom watched him through that metal mask (Loki was going to melt it to his face and then rip it away and bask in his screams), and then he was convulsing, muscles spasming wildly outside his control, the pain centered in the collar burning his skin.

He fell limp again, eyes rolling up, breathing hard through his nose. “Your Black Widow was never in danger,” Doom said. “I intended…but she was swifter than I expected. The man you killed believed what he told you, and that was enough. I did not wish too much…outside involvement.” Loki’s stomach churned.

Fool, he thought again, savagely. Idiot. He should have known. But this was what came of worry, this was what came of rushing into battle without caution. He’d let his anger blind him. How very…how very Thor.

And now – and now. He needed to think. Needed to plan. But how… “What are you?” Doom was saying. “Alien, that much is evident. From another dimension, I would guess, of some kind.”

Ask me, Loki thought, almost desperately. Ask me, let me speak, give me something to work with, you are curious, ask. The man moved away and Loki closed his eyes, trying to clear his head, consider his options. If he had his voice, or his magic…

He tested the metal again, and this time didn’t even start to feel it shift before the pain struck, worse than before. Doom was looking down at him again when it faded, holding a syringe. Loki tensed and tried to pull away (tried automatically to snarl) but the man jabbed it easily into his neck.

I won’t kill you, Loki thought savagely. Not for a week, or a month, I will have you screaming for death on your knees before me-

His stomach roiled violently, suddenly, his head fogging and then clearing. It passed quickly, though. “Doom’s own invention.” Doom sounded pleased. “A blend of mechanics and magic. In tandem with the field generator, they are what is keeping you helpless. You are not my first test subject, but your power is considerably greater than the others…”

Loki’s skin crawled. His blood, contaminated. The instrument of containment inside his very body so he couldn’t rip it out. It was…clever. In a terrible sort of way.

He’d underestimated this man. Underestimated both of them.

“I had not thought to have such an ideal specimen delivered to my doorstep,” Doom said, mildly. “And yet after I was informed of your presence…what should you do but come and knock on my very door?” The man turned and moved away again. Loki tested the barrier between himself and his magic, pushed at it, shoved, to no avail. He felt the collar warm around his neck with the effort, though. Field generator, Doom had said. If he could get rid of that, if he could just…

Loki’s fingernails dug into his palms as Doom stabbed a needle into the crook of his elbow, drawing a vial of blood. You dare, you dare touch me like this, you dare think you can study me like some sort of beast-

“Remarkably resilient,” Doom said, sounding thoughtful. “Though I suppose a thorough examination of how much must wait.” Loki growled, deep in his throat, rage reddening his vision. He couldn’t see the expression on Doom’s face. I will kill you, he thought, savagely, and wished he could say it. I will make you watch as I feed your entrails to the wolves. “But that doesn’t mean I cannot take some tissue samples,” Doom went on, and Loki’s heart hammered louder as the man
stepped back. The whir of the machines started up, a forest of blades moving in to his field of vision.

The one benefit of having his mouth wired shut, Loki thought, was that however many strips of flesh this deranged mortal carved from his body, he would not have the satisfaction of hearing a god scream. He would not, he would not, he would not-

At some point, his endurance gave out and his mind surrendered to unconsciousness.

And when he woke, Doom was there again. His knives and his syringes and his metal mask, eyes bright and eager. Loki needed to think, to plan.

Doom didn’t give him time.

Loki had been tortured before, once or twice, when things had gone badly wrong. He had suffered dire injury before as well, and was no stranger to that.

This was different. This was worse.

“Fascinating,” Doom said. “Even with near total damage, you are capable of regenerating internal organs. At least two at once. Doom is tempted to find the limits, but as I only have one test subject…” He sounded disappointed. “We shall see how the work on my clones proceeds. Do you happen to know if similar levels of regeneration are possible with total removal of organ tissue?”

Loki’s breathing sounded loud and ragged in his own ears. How was he supposed to answer? Did Doom expect him to?

If he could speak, the last thing he would offer would be answers to questions.

“If I suppose you cannot answer that. Ah, well. It can wait. But it seems you are precisely what I was looking for.” Loki forced his eyes open and glared as ferociously as he could manage at Doom. His eyes felt wild and half mad and he hoped it showed. The man didn’t seem affected, though, and simply moved away.

How long had it been? He wondered. Needed to find a way out. There would be one, if he could just think. If he weren’t so disgustingly helpless. His heart was beating too hard and too fast. The injections that kept him from his magic came regularly spaced, and throwing himself at the barrier with brute force had accomplished nothing. He had accomplished nothing.

Had anyone noticed that he was gone? Coulson would likely know he’d gone after Romanov. But from there…

He’d told no one his plans. No one knew where he was.

You are on your own, Loki Laufeyson.

He’d been a fool. Such a reckless, careless fool, and this was where it landed him.

Useless. You’re useless, pathetic. Why did you ever think it was otherwise? Doom moved away. Again, he tried to free himself, and again, all it got him was pain. He’d had a few moments of hope, at one point, as he realized that he begun to grow accustomed to Doom’s little punishments to the degree that he could fight through them, but Doom had noticed before he got very far. He was too attentive, constantly present, and Loki wasn’t entirely sure when it was the man himself and when one of his machines. He had to sleep sometimes. Surely.
It didn’t seem to matter, though. He was going to die here. Or worse.

Rage seethed inside Loki’s chest with nowhere to go but inward, so fierce he thought it might poison his blood. At least Doom had not yet tried again to take over his mind.

Loki’s chest shook in a soundless laugh at the bleakness of that thought as the man returned. “It is a pity,” Doom said, though his voice was utterly devoid of the emotion, “that we could not be allies. Your power is…impressive. I do not doubt I could do much more if you were willing.”

_Do you think I would ever lower myself to work alongside a worm like you, _Loki wanted to snap, and hoped that his eyes could say it for him. Doom was considering his chest, though, intact now, with a hungry gleam in his eyes that made Loki’s stomach knot.

(This is what they think of you. What the mortals see, a tool to be exploited—)

“Ah well,” Doom said philosophically. “I shall still benefit. I have already made significant progress on the clones.”

_Clones?_ Loki thought, blankly, and then remembered where he’d heard the word before and would have snarled, hissed and howled like a wild animal because he would dare, would have the utter _hubris _to think that he could _copy _a _god._

He forgot caution and patience and threw himself, body and mind, against his restraints, fighting against the pain, he would _not _accept this he would _never_

The utter lack of reaction from Doom’s inexpressive metal face chased him into oblivion.

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No one is coming for you.

That was the single clearest thought in Loki’s mind. His throat was parched. His body felt worn thin with the effort of healing and healing without benefit of enough rest. But he was not, Loki knew, even close to the end of his endurance.

Nonetheless. It had been four or five days, perhaps more, and when he fought he couldn’t bend the metal of his bonds even before the onslaught of pain came. His plans kept going in circles that all came back to resources he didn’t have.

Doom was going to drain him dry, vivisect his quivering body, and carve out his bones, and that would be his life. Ended at the hands of a petty, foolish, _mad _mortal sorcerer who lusted for power.

But then, how surprised could he be? All his stories ended this way, of late. Alone.

He wondered if SHIELD had even bothered to look for him. If Romanov, or Barton…perhaps they were just glad to be rid of him. Like as not it had all been pretense, and he’d fallen for that the same as he’d fallen for Osborn and Doom’s petty trick, because he’d been so caught up in pretending that he, Loki, could have _friends_. Could play the _hero._

He wanted to laugh, bitter and awful. Doom was rambling again, and he shut that out, trying to let his mind wander. _I’ll rip your throat out, _he thought, and pictured that for a few moments with macabre vividly.

It didn’t help much, though.

The thought drifted across Loki’s mind that if he still had command of his magic, he could remove
the spell woven into his skin that kept him unseen by Asgard’s eyes, but it only took him a fraction
of a second to remember that they would just leave him here to be butchered like an animal rather
than taking the trouble to find another way to travel between realms.

_No one is coming for you._ The clear and brutal truth. He knew that, but what he held onto was the
fury. _Just one chance._ He knew that chance became slimmer every day as he weakened, severed
from himself. _Just one chance._ _As long as I can gut him like a fish, that’s all I need._ Maybe he’d
chosen to die, all those months ago, but not like this.

Loki thought he could hear chaos, somewhere. Some memory of battle. Loki had never liked the
particular chaos of the battlefield, but he thought he would take it, now, if it only meant he could
fight.

“There’s a lot of people coming, Loki. They’re here to help. They’re helping you.”

“Keep an eye out. I doubt Doom’s really gone. Stark…”

“Working on it. What’s this made out of, adamantium?”

Strange. Loki struggled to organize and arrange his thoughts, to make sense of what he was hearing.
His eyes dragged open as quickly as he could force them when he puzzled it out.

“Hey, sunshine,” said a voice recognizably Stark’s through the metal mask covering his face. “If you
wanted a second date you could just call.” Loki stared blankly at him, uncomprehending.

“Don’t be cute, Stark. We’re trying to be fast.” Romanov. Loki blinked. That didn’t seem to make
much sense either.

“I can’t help it. I’m just automatically cute.” Stark’s voice was flippant, but Loki could just hear the
tension underneath. “Ah, there-” Something brushed against his skin under the cuffs, and Loki
flinched, hand clenching. “Easy,” Stark said, quickly. “Just about…”

The pieces fell together in his thoughts, finally. Loki realized slowly that Romanov was poking
through a drawer in a corner, and Barton was watching the door, an arrow nocked and bow in hand.
There was no longer a collar around his neck, and as he put those two things together the band
around his right wrist clunked to the table, leaving his arm free.

_They came, _it registered, in his sluggish mind. _They’re helping you._ And then, in the same breath, he
realized that he could move.

Loki surged upward with a snarl, furious and irrational anger rising in his blood like a great wave,
but his body was too weak by now, the metal just strong enough. Stark took a sharp step back.
“Whoa there,” he said. “Are you-”

Loki’s free hand went to his mouth. That apparatus he was strong enough to remove. He would have
screamed for the pain of tearing metal out of his own bone, but the pounding song of rage was
distracting enough that he could shove it aside, spit blood, and snarl, “Get them _off._” His voice
sounded hoarse and awful, grated over his throat.

They were all staring at him. Loki couldn’t care. He needed blood on his hands. He needed his
hands in Doom’s chest, cracking open the red cavity of his rib cage and-

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” Barton said. Romanov’s expression was tight and furious.

“—give me just a minute,” Stark said, sounding a little breathless. “I’ll…just do that.” Loki tried to
slow his breathing, to calm, but his heart was pounding. He was going to _destroy, _to _burn _everything
into such fine ash that nothing would grow here, scour this whole realm clean-

(No. Just Doom. Just him.)

Romanov was there, suddenly. “Breathe,” she said, her voice firm and brooking no argument. “Slowly. If you hyperventilate you’ll just pass out again.”

*You came,* Loki wanted to say, for a moment, but he couldn’t think about that right now. Couldn’t think about anything than the need to hurt someone. “Will he, though?” Barton sounded distinctly unnerved. “Cause as far as, uh, durability goes…”

“I am going to tear him apart,” Loki said. He could hear his own voice, eerily calm next to the vibration of his body. “I am going to rip his limbs off and feed them to him-”

“I have a feeling he means that in a terrifyingly literal way,” Stark said. Loki reached for his magic – if he could just touch his magic – but it was still beyond his reach. The band around his other wrist fell away, and Stark moved to his ankles.

“Let’s get out of here, first,” Romanov said, terse, her body wound like a crossbow. “Are you going to be able to stand?”

“Yes,” he said. His throat would hurt later for speaking, but for now all he could feel was a removed, dull ache. One of his ankles was free, and the moment Stark’s weapons sliced through the other, Loki moved quickly to his feet, and promptly almost fell over, only catching himself on the table.

“Are you sure you’re good to go?” Stark said. Did he sound…worried? Loki dismissed that thought as irrelevant and took a few deep breaths until he felt a little steadier. But in order to really heal – in order to fight – he needed his magic, and the things keeping it from him were in his blood. Inside him.

“Give me a knife,” Loki said, flatly. He felt – weak. Hatefully weak, and he could feel his own protection runes inscribed on ribs, ankle, and the inside of one thigh fighting now that the collar was gone, but sluggishly, weakly. He needed to help it along. Romanov was the first to pull one free and hold it out. Loki took it, flipped the blade, and gashed open his forearm from wrist to elbow.

“Hey, what-” Barton said sharply, and Loki gritted his teeth, locking his knees to keep himself upright. “It’s fine,” he growled. “I know what I’m doing.” Th- *some* would have killed him for using this trick, risky as it was, but he would *not* be helpless, and he needed to have his magic back, needed to hold it and use his birthright, reassure himself that it was still *his*.

His blood drained, and each heartbeat pumped some of the machines out with it, at least until the wound healed. It wasn’t enough. He raised the knife to repeat the motion and Romanov caught his wrist.

“Can you wait to bleed yourself dry until we’re out of here?”

He snarled at her before thinking, but she didn’t back off. His thought were fragmented, confused, and he tried to gather them. “Or maybe not at all?” Stark’s voice, filtered through a machine, said too lightly. “At least not with me around.”

*Out,* he registered. *Yes.* He still felt weak, dizzy, unsteady. Fighting his own body. “Fine,” he said, at length. “*Fine.* Where is-”

Romanov’s expression was carefully blank. “Gone,” she said, knowing what he meant to ask. His lips peeled back from his teeth and he took a step forward, only to sway dangerously, his head
suddenly spinning. Stark’s metal arms caught him, and for a furious second he thought he was going to lose control at the vivid flash of *bound metal machinery don’t touch me* and just managed to keep himself to simply pulling away.

“Let’s go,” Barton said, terse and to the point. He caught a glance exchanged between the archer and Romanov, but couldn’t read it.

He followed them, limping just slightly. It felt like someone had reached inside him and muddled with his entrails – which he supposed someone had. He would heal, though. He would heal and he would grind Doom into less than nothing for this-

How long had it been since the last injection, he wondered. How long would it take for him to get his magic back fully – if he did. He could feel it there, just beyond his reach, but it barely responded weakly to his summons, like an old hound with no energy left. Panic fluttered in his chest and he shoved it down, kept moving, trying to keep his pace steady. He could feel their eyes on him and wasn’t sure what to think.

They made it the rest of the way out of his prison without a fight. When they were out, and Loki turned to look back, it seemed…small. Harmless and unremarkable, just a grey building in a wooded area. Rage was still seething in his blood, mingled with intruding pain and bone-deep exhaustion.

And Doom had slipped away. Doom had taken him and held him and carved secrets from his body, made a mockery of everything that he was, and he had *slipped away*.

Loki swayed, and caught himself against a tree, breathing hard. Romanov and Barton were both watching him. Stark glanced at him and then looked away, too quickly, and Loki felt that he ought to care more than he did. Right now…all he could hold onto was the *anger*.

“Okay,” Stark said, his voice metallic through the interface of the suit. “I’m calling it in. We’re done here, I think-”

“No,” Loki rasped, surprising himself. He straightened and pushed off from the tree, taking two steps back toward the place that had held him, that had seen him bleed. He couldn’t make Doom pay just now. But he could… “Not yet.”

He was still holding the knife he’d taken from Romanov. He used it again, opened his veins and let blood run out. Someone grabbed the knife from him and was trying to stop the bleeding, but he pulled his arm away and let himself bleed until he was dizzy, drunk, head reeling, and the barrier that had kept him from his birthright slipped away at last.

Loki staggered, heard Barton swear, someone trying to pull him down to the ground.

He called on his magic and finally, *finally* it answered. Loki felt it flow into him, searing away the last of the poisonous machines in his bloodstream. He let it fill him until it almost ached to hold, drew deep on his well of power supplemented by rage and reached out.

*You slipped away from me here. But I will hunt you. I will destroy you, Victor Von Doom. And I will laugh as you choke on your last breaths.*

He contained the explosion. It was the most he could do to hold back the rage that boiled up inside him.

The magic left him all at once as his hold on it slipped, and he swayed, opening his eyes. The building where he had been held was gone, nothing left of it but a crater in the ground. Obliterated, with everything in it.
He felt just a little bit cleaner.

Consciousness was slipping rapidly through Loki’s fingers. He’d used up too much energy too fast. He smiled at the destruction, though, relieved that that he’d managed to see to that before surrendering.

“There,” he said, swaying. “Now we’re done.”

“Holy shit,” he heard Stark say, and let go as his knees surrendered. The anger was ebbing away, and in its place was confusion, and a strange, slightly warm feeling.

_They came for me_, he thought, and held onto that.

### Interlude (XX)

Loki woke up, ate a little bit of the hot broth that he was offered, felt nauseous, rolled over, and went back to sleep. This pattern largely repeated for what felt like eternity, interspersed with vague memories of half coherent conversations and terrifying dreams strongly featuring Heimdall with enormous eyes staring at him as he screamed. He could hear Thor yelling his name somewhere just beyond reach, but Loki knew he wouldn’t come in time. He remembered vaguely insisting with determination to a woman he didn’t know that he could _not_ be sick, that gods did not get sick, but then again he wasn’t a god, he wasn’t anything, and she had just nodded along and then stuck something under his tongue that he did his best to spit out.

He didn’t know how long it had been when he finally crawled out of the pit of sickness and came back to himself with any clarity, only slowly becoming aware that he was tangled up in a nest of blankets in a bed that was not his own.

Loki disentangled himself slowly, and dragged himself out of the bed to find that he was wearing a pair of sweat pants that he didn’t remember owning and a decidedly oversized shirt that he’d certainly never purchased. The floor was cold, and he padded over to the closed door, opening it cautiously.

Andrea was standing there, one of her hands raised as though to knock. Loki stared at her for a moment, and then felt a slow flush begin to creep over his face as he made sense of the fragments he remembered.

“You’re awake,” she said, blandly. Loki summoned a sheepish smile. It wasn’t hard.

“I…yes. I feel much better.”

“I…yes. I feel much better.”

“Glad to hear it,” she said, still neutrally. Loki began to have an unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“I am terribly sorry to have imposed…”

She shrugged. “Someone would think you’d never had the flu before. It’s fine. I couldn’t very well send you home when you were too delirious to tell me where it was.”

“Ah.” Loki looked down. “I have always…someone used to say that I never did anything by halves, including sickness.” It was…worrying, though. He would have to be more careful. “How long has it…been?”

“Just about three days,” she said, and Loki stiffened.
“Three-” he swore. His payment on the hotel room had been due two days ago. His belongings—such as they were... “I need to pay for my room-”

“Your room?” Andrea asked. Her eyes narrowed a fraction.

“In the motel,” he said, before thinking about it, and her eyes narrowed a little more. “—just for the moment,” he added. “I wasn’t planning on-”

He saw the moment Andrea came to a decision, and his heart sank. “I know the proprietor,” she said, easily. “I’ll talk to him about the circumstances, I’m sure he’ll understand a slight delay, and I’ll make sure to get all your things. Carl mentioned you were a teacher, didn’t he?”

Loki opened his mouth, but wasn’t entirely certain what he planned to say, and Andrea steamrollered over him anyway. “Well, I can’t pay much for your help tutoring him, but it would be board, and not in a sleazy motel. I’d throw in food, too; I make enough for three.” Loki wasn’t certain what to feel, except that he was fairly certain he was being mothered. Him.

“You know nothing about me,” Loki said, a little weakly. This was what he needed—more or less. What he’d been looking for.

“Maybe not,” Andrea said after a moment, “but I’ve got good instincts, and I don’t think you’re a bad kid.” She eyed him. “And it just doesn’t feel right turning you out on the streets looking like a Halloween skeleton.” Andrea turned around. “You sit down and rest a little more. I’ll go get your things.”

Loki stared at her back. Just before the door closed, he managed to find the words to say, “Thank you.”

She paused. “You’re welcome.”

Loki cleared his throat, and added, “This bed…”

“You’re not taking anyone’s,” Andrea said, her voice changing tone slightly. “It’s my older boy’s. He...died. A couple years back.” Loki’s thoughts went blank.

He summoned, finally, a weak and thoroughly inadequate, “I’m sorry.” Andrea’s shoulders drew up, and then dropped down.

“Wasn’t your fault, was it?” she said, after a moment, and then shut the door quietly, leaving Loki looking at the blank wood with his thoughts a vague swirl.
He woke up with a snarl, jolting upright prepared to start fighting again, only to realize that he was covered in a fleece blanket and lying on his own couch. For a moment, his thoughts spun in disoriented circles, until he noticed Natasha watching him from one of his armchairs, a book open on her lap. He stared at her, and she looked back, eyebrows raised.

“Good…” she glanced at the wall, briefly, and then back to him. “…afternoon. Welcome back.”

The urge to say you found me surged up, but he managed to suppress it and spare them both the embarrassment. “You look well.”

“Entirely unkidnapped.” Loki felt a twinge of shame, but suppressed it. “Feeling all right?”

“More or less.” He sat up, slowly. His head gave a warning twinge, a headache on the way, but the rest of him felt…surprisingly intact. “I’m…surprised. I expected to wake somewhere rather more clinical.”

Natasha shrugged. “Fury’s not happy, but I managed to convince him that if you came around disoriented it probably wouldn’t end well for any staff in the vicinity.” She paused, and added, something slightly strange in her voice, “or the building, apparently.”

It took Loki a bit of digging through his hazy memories to puzzle out what she was referring to. He almost winced when he found it. He hadn’t meant to play that much of his hand. A show of power like that…

A grim part of him was surprised they hadn’t taken that information and buried him in a deep pit. Perhaps they were simply aware now that they didn’t have the resources to do so.

“Oh,” he said, in lieu of sharing his thoughts. “Yes. Thank you for that, then.”

“You’re welcome.” Loki scrutinized her face, but she didn’t look wary, or nervous. Then again, she was one of the few he thought he might not be able to tell if she were. After a moment, she uncrossed her legs and leaned forward. “It’s smart. Letting us underestimate you.”

Loki considered feigning ignorance, but decided that that would be…unfair. She deserved better. “I
suppose I thought that you might be...unnerved...if I immediately showed my full potential.”

“Which is? Just out of curiosity.” Romanov raised her eyebrows. “After all, you did evaporate a building when you were...not exactly at your best.”

Loki shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t think you appreciate the complicated nature of that question.”

“No,” she said, after a moment. “Probably not.” She sat back, and rubbed her hands up and down her thighs. “I guess I’ll take it as a good sign that you haven’t vaporized anything else. That I know of.” Her tone was perfectly bland. Loki suspected her true feelings were rather less so, but he couldn’t help but be faintly pleased that she didn’t seem to be jumping to any immediate conclusions.

“I appreciate your charitable lack of judgment,” Loki said casually, and she turned her gaze on him again, eyes narrowed.

“Oh, rest assured, I’m judging,” she said. “Just maybe not on that point. You’re damned lucky, you know that?”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “Not the first descriptor I would think of.”

“No?” A sharp note slipped into her voice. “You took off on your own, without backup and without telling anyone where you were going. For all we knew, you’d dropped off the face of the planet. Fury was this close to just assuming you’d fucked off and weren’t coming back.” Loki frowned and opened his mouth, but she cut him off. “It was only my guess and Coulson’s word that meant we went looking, and it was only the tracking tech – the thing you were so upset about – that meant we could find you. And the fact that Coulson persuaded Fury that we could pull off an extraction without starting an international incident is, frankly, a miracle-”

Loki began to feel faintly sullen. “For all I knew you were dead,” he snapped, and Natasha glared at him.

“Based on one phone call? Have a little faith in my competency!”

“What would you have had me do?” Loki asked sharply, bristling, and Natasha threw her hands up as she stood and started pacing, motions jerky.

“Not fall for an obvious trap, for one,” she said, not quite snide, and Loki jerked like he’d been slapped, stung.

“I beg your pardon to have inconvenienced you,” he said, the taut note in his voice not quite masking the thrum of emotion underneath, to his irritation. “I did not ask for you to come swooping in after me.”

“For the love of-” Romanov swore. She pivoted on her heel and glared at him, and then appeared to visibly calm herself. “Look. I get it.” Loki scoffed, apparently too loudly, because she narrowed her eyes. “I do. How do you think I felt when I got back and found out that you’d gone haring off after me?”

Loki glanced aside and pressed his lips together.

“Thanks,” she said after a few moments. “I guess. The thought’s nice, even if you really don’t need to worry about me. I can take care of myself.”

That’s not it, Loki wanted to say. If you had been hurt, it would have been because of me. Because I was foolish enough to leave a threat alive. He said nothing. After a moment, Natasha sighed and sat
back down.

“I told you not to go after Osborn,” she said, finally. Loki breathed out sharply through his nose.

“If I had killed him in the first place—”

“If you’d killed him in the first place, there’d be a lot worse trouble now, believe me.” Romanov gave him a sidelong look. “Not that I don’t appreciate the sentiment. He’ll get what’s coming, though. The man’s unstable, at best. He can’t keep it up forever.”

“And Doom?” Loki said, and was not quite able to keep his voice from trembling. Romanov looked at him, for a moment, a frown between her eyebrows.

“In Latveria. We don’t have anything to go after him with.” Loki felt his hands curl into fists, and Romanov leaned forward. “Silver, I’m serious. Don’t go after him. I understand you want to.”

Loki’s lips peeled back from his teeth. “Do you?”

“Yes,” she said, tonelessly. “I do. But you need to think about this, and I’m telling you that going after him isn’t going to get you anywhere. Latveria is a sovereign nation, and he is its ruler, whatever we think of that. SHIELD can’t start a war with it, or him. Not without something we can offer the world as justification.”

Loki took a few shallow breaths. “I understand.” That his pain was not worth their trouble. That he was to be bound by stupid, foolish, human agreements from taking revenge, as was his right-

“Loki,” she said, and he started at his name, his real name, in her voice, jerked from his thoughts. She was standing again, her hand on his arm, though only lightly. He could feel himself vibrating in contrast to her stillness. “If it were up to me,” she said, her voice clear and precise, “I’d help you kill the bastard. But more likely than not you’d be the one to suffer, and that doesn’t appeal to me.” Loki could still feel the metal locking his jaw closed. That impassive metal face, and all his hate and power nothing.

Romanov’s hand was slightly warm on his arm. He…believed her, almost. Wanted to believe her.

She had come. He’d been so certain no one would, but she, and Barton, and Stark… It rankled, to think that they had seen him so weak. So pathetic. But nonetheless…

“If I have the chance,” Loki forced out, finally, “I cannot promise I will not take it.”

“I wouldn’t expect you not to.” Romanov’s voice had a strange note to it that he couldn’t quite identify, and she stepped away. Loki leaned back into his couch. His body still ached, but when he reached for his magic it came only slightly reluctantly. He let it go without attempting anything; the relief he felt was pitiful in its strength. He could feel her watching him, but she said nothing for several minutes. Then he heard her shift.

“You called me Loki,” he said, eventually, watching her sidelong.

Natasha looked at him directly. “It’s your name, isn’t it?” He held still, but a moment later she shrugged. “Clint told me. And Clint heard you say it. If you’re trying to keep on the down-low, you might want to work on your desire to showboat.”

Loki fought the urge to wince. “I do not…showboat.”

“You do,” Romanov said, matter-of-factly. “Every so often, anyway.” She sat down again, folding
her feet under herself on the couch. Loki waited, but she said nothing.

“Well?”

She shrugged. “What is it to me?” The corner of her mouth tilted up slightly. “Loki suits you better than Luke anyway.”

Barton knew, Loki thought, and Romanov. He could take that knowledge from them. It would be safer. Thinking about it, however, made him feel vaguely sick, and he knew he would not. “You had best keep using the other in company,” he said, finally.

“I’m not an amateur,” Romanov said, dryly. “Despite what you seem to think.” Loki threw her a glare, but she met it with equanimity. “If you get in trouble on my behalf again,” she warned, suddenly, “I’ll kick your ass until you can’t get off that couch for a week.”

Loki blinked. He wasn’t sure what he had expected. Not that, he thought. He blinked at her, but the look she gave him was stony-faced. “Clear enough,” he said eventually, though he couldn’t quite keep the confused note out of his voice.

Her mouth quirked, very slightly. “Who would I beat at chess?” she said, sounding a good deal less serious. “Clint won’t play me anymore.”

“Perhaps he is a wise man,” Loki murmured, relaxing as the conversation entered less dangerous waters. “Sometimes.” Natasha’s mouth twitched like she was trying not to let her smile grow too much.

“He did volunteer for your little rescue mission, you know,” she said, and Loki felt an unexpected little knot in his chest. “As, curiously enough, did Stark.” He gave her a sidelong look and she shrugged. “Food for thought.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Loki said, neutrally. “So…what now?”

“What now?” Natasha sat back. “Coulson wants to talk to you, when you’re ready. Debriefing. As for the moment…it’s raining and I’m not technically on assignment. Fancy a game?”

When you are ready. So they would give him time. The cynical part of his brain pointed out that it was probably merely wariness. The rest of him was grateful nonetheless. “When do I not?” he said, summoning a smile.

His body still ached. He was still tired and he knew he had to look pale and sick. She didn’t look at him differently, though, and never once did Natasha ask if he was all right. Nor did she look at him, it seemed, substantially differently than before, no matter how carefully he watched her.

Loki carefully, cautiously, revised her status in his mind from co-worker to friend, and his smile when she beat him handily for his distraction was, if small, still genuine.

Loki gave himself three days of quiet in which to recover. His body did not, strictly speaking, need all of the time – he could easily have been on his feet and moving, if still uncomfortable, in one day – but he took it anyway. His mind needed it more. He slept poorly, when he could at all, dreams full of helplessness and pain and the dreadful certainty that he hadn’t really escaped at all.

But it was nothing he wouldn’t survive.

Barton came by – Loki wasn’t sure whether or not to feel betrayed that Natasha had apparently told
him where he lived – dropped off a stack of books, and eyed Loki with some awkward wariness before shoving his hands in his pockets and remarking that it was too bad about Doom, and if he turned up again he’d be happy to pin him to a wall or something while Loki, quote, did his thing.

Stark sent him a series of text messages demanding to know where he could send the flowers and chocolate and also if he was going to have time to meet and talk magic whatever in the near future, maybe. Loki ignored those, not certain how to deal with them.

And when he was certain he could control himself without showing a single crack in his armor, he went to SHIELD.

Thus now he sat in front of Coulson’s desk, hands folded in his lap, expression carefully blank. He’d given a relatively brief accounting of everything he thought relevant, from going to Sweden through his experience at Doom’s hands, though he kept the description of that as sparse as he thought reasonable, and his tone expressionless. That finished, Coulson regarded him, relatively inscrutable as he always was. Loki frequently wondered what went on in the man’s head.

“First things first,” Coulson said, after a long pause. “You’re grounded.”

Loki blinked. “Beg pardon?”

“Grounded,” Coulson repeated. “No missions, no field activity, nothing, for the next two weeks.” Loki felt himself start to tense, but Coulson wasn’t done. “You’ve also got four mandated sessions with a therapist and a screening, which I expect you’ll probably lie your way through.” Loki felt his lips peel back from his teeth.

“You jest,” he said. “Surely.”

Coulson looked back at him without any sign of perturbation. “I’m afraid not. Not only is it standard protocol to take any agent that is captured out of the field and ensure their well-being—”

Loki felt himself tense. “Do I seem unwell to you?”

“Frankly?” Coulson said flatly. “Yes. You’ve been erratic for a while now, and based on the report from Barton and Romanov I’m not prepared to send you anywhere until I’m sure you’re not going to implode any more buildings.” Loki felt his nostrils flare. “Torture is psychological as much as it’s physical. I suspect you know that.”

Loki leaned forward, eyes narrowed, hands clenched white-knuckled in his lap. “You cannot possibly think—”

“This isn’t a negotiation, Agent Silver.” Coulson was watching him closely, and Loki wondered with sudden, savage vividness what the man would do if Loki wrapped a hand around his throat and squeezed. A moment later the violence of the thought startled him, and he wavered for a moment. His magic had risen up, surging under his skin in response to his emotion. Loki took a slow breath, dragging himself back under control, unnerved by his own loss of composure. “I have no trouble believing you can do your job as well as ever. But this is as much for your sake as anything else.”

I don’t need your pity, Loki thought viciously, but some of the violence had gone out of the thought. “For my sake.” He said nonetheless, tonelessly.

“Yes,” Coulson said. “And, as I said, standard procedure. You agreed to work for us, Agent. That means you follow the rules.”

Loki half closed his eyes and looked at Coulson sidelong. “I agreed on the condition of looser
parameters than one of your usual minions.”

“And you’ve gotten them,” Coulson said, even and steadfast. “For one, if anyone else had pulled the kind of stunt you just did, disobeying direct orders, they’d get a whole lot more than a temporary suspension.” Loki felt his mouth twist, but he had to admit…they had given him a fair amount of free rein. And he had been…a fool.

They could have left him to die, and they had not.

“Fine,” he ground out, finally. He could always lie to this – psychologist. Four conversations and two weeks. It was little more than a slap on the wrist, if that. Loki took a deep breath and made himself lean back. “Fine. I will – accept your terms.”

“Good,” Coulson said, and Loki thought he caught a very slight relaxation, though he would not have sworn to it. The man slid a file across the table. “The psychologist is Maureen Fisher. Your first session is on Friday, on site here.”

Loki took the folder and sent it with a flick of his wrist to drop on the counter at his apartment. “Is that all?” he asked, still slightly tightly.

“For the moment,” Coulson said. Loki inclined his head and stood.

“Then I suppose-”

“You might want to make a visit down to thank the techs,” Coulson said, suddenly, and Loki turned. “We wouldn’t have been able to find you without their work.” Loki felt his shoulders tense.

“They invaded my privacy,” Loki said, tersely. “And I might be concerned with how avidly some seem to be attempting to persuade me that I should not be concerned with that offense.”

“It wasn’t an order, Silver. Just a suggestion.” Coulson’s voice didn’t change inflection at all. “What you do is your business. But I hope you recognize now that this isn’t a one-sided arrangement. I told you. We look after our agents. And I’d suggest that if you’re going to be angry about the decision to track you, direct it at the ones who gave the order.”

Loki felt his shoulders draw up and lock. “What concern is it of yours?” he snapped.

“It isn’t,” Coulson said, evenly. “As I said. Just a suggestion.”

Loki bit back the urge to reply, and turned for the door. “Duly noted. Good afternoon, Agent Coulson.”

He did not quite stalk out. He stood outside the door for a moment, hand opening and closing. Loki stood perfectly still for several moments, and then simply twisted through space to reappear in front of the door to Chandra’s lab.

He let himself in with a slight gesture and stepped through the door into the semi-familiar chaos that always seemed to reign, keeping his chin high and expression blank, not sure what he was expecting.

It was not for Roslyn, perched with her computer on her lap and tapping away at the keyboard, to notice him and squeak, eyes (surrounded with dark circles) going wide. “Agent Silver!” she said, rather loudly, and several heads turned. “You’re – um-”

“Is Dr. Sheffer here?” He asked, keeping his voice level and pretending to ignore the way they were staring at him despite the fact that the hair on the back of his neck prickled with it. They hung back.
Warily, he thought, except that Roslyn was scrambling to her feet. She almost dropped her computer, recovered it, and took a step in his direction before stopping, fluttering awkwardly.

“She’s – she stepped out to take a call, she should be right back. Are you, um…”

“Not here for long,” Loki said, keeping his voice clipped, though he kept noticing those dark circles, and after a moment he added, “You look exhausted. Has she been working you that hard?”

Roslyn glanced aside. He could feel the others listening, all the usual hubbub suddenly strangely quiet, and he knew Roslyn noticed it too, by the way she fidgeted. “Um…no? It was just…”

“She was up running the scans looking for you,” a familiar voice said, sharp and professional. He turned, slowly, and examined Chandra. Her arms were crossed, and her expression was set in the stubborn frown he’d become familiar with from her, but he thought he caught, just briefly, a flicker of…relief? “She was the one who put together the programming, after all. What are you here for?”

Roslyn, Loki thought. Quiet, unassuming, curious Roslyn. He might have known. The thought was more rueful than angry, though, and the look on her face when he glanced back, wide-eyed and nervous and more than a little exhausted, decided him.

“Then I suppose it is you I need to thank,” he said, turning the rest of the way back toward her. She blinked, and after a moment, considering the pairs of eyes on his back, Loki caught her fingers and swept an elegant and ultimately unnecessary bow over her hand. “It appears I owe you a debt.”

Roslyn’s face went vibrantly pink. “Oh,” she said, voice a little high pitched. “What? I. No, I don’t think-”

Loki felt his mouth try to twitch, and kept it from doing so. “I have been dreadfully churlish,” he said, smoothly. “I hope you will – all of you – find it in yourselves to forgive me.” He took some faint pleasure in Roslyn’s thoroughly stymied expression, even as he released her hand and straightened, turning. Chandra was looking at him with narrowed eyes. Other than a few murmurs, there was silence. Waiting for her cue.

She smiled, eventually, the gesture fractional. “Good to have you back,” she said, eventually, and Loki felt the atmosphere relax.

He let his mouth twitch just slightly toward a smile, and even as the rest of the crew began to clamor at him with questions he only barely listened to, he added, just for her ears, “but remember not to test me again,” and waited for her nod before he turned, smiling slightly, to the flock of techies that he had still, somewhere, considered his.

When he extracted himself – eventually – from the lab and the flood of questions varying wildly from the personal (where were you?) to the professionally curious (you said you could explain shapeshifting to me, is that still…), there was a pleasant buzz in his brain and blood and he almost felt like himself again.

He had also, however, remembered that there was one other appointment he had missed thanks to Doom’s…intervention.

This time, Loki took the slightly longer way to Foster’s lab. Which was to say that he teleported in a few feet from the entrance and walked the rest of the way. Which meant that he nearly walked into Foster as she strode out of her lab, talking animatedly on her phone, with some ire in her voice.

“No, I’m not going to - for the last time! I am not your little science minion and I’m not going to-
“Loki stepped nimbly out of her way, but she still stared up at him, wide-eyed and plainly startled. He looked back at her, expressionless. “I’ll call you back,” Foster said after a moment, and hung up her phone, eyes going from wide and startled to narrowed and suspicious.

“My apologies,” Loki said delicately, “for my lateness.”

“Only by about a week,” Foster said, after a moment. Despite her surprise, she sounded no less annoyed with him than she had on the phone. “Where were you?”

Loki felt his lips press together. “Otherwise occupied.” Her eyes narrowed another notch, and for a moment he was sorely, bitterly tempted to tell her in exact, grotesque detail. Like as not she would only look at him with pity, however, and the idea of that made him itch.

“Too otherwise occupied to cancel?” Foster challenged. For a moment, the image flashed into Loki’s mind of her confronting Thor like this, eyes narrowed, full of defiance for all she was almost three heads shorter than he was and less than half his bulk. The urge struck him to laugh at the same time as he felt it like a knife in his chest, the combination decidedly peculiar.

“You are not precisely my first priority,” Loki said, acidly. “I would not expect you to be so affronted by my absence.”

Her face went, curiously, slightly pink. “I was expecting you,” she said, after a moment. Loki felt his lips curved, the expression far from his eyes.

“Disappointed?”

“Yes,” Foster said, to his surprise. “I was!” Loki blinked at her, not quite able to keep the surprise off of his face, but she didn’t seem to notice. “But now – well. Come on. I have something I need you to look at.” She turned on her heel and started striding back toward the lab. Loki stared at her back, suddenly feeling as though he’d walked into a marsh when he’d expected sound earth.

“I – what?” He felt like an idiot the moment the words were out, but she’d caught him entirely wrong-footed. Her glance over her shoulder was obviously impatient.

“Are you coming?” she demanded. “I think I figured something out.”

Loki tried to wipe his expression clean. “Do you.” Perhaps the woman was mad. Perhaps that was the appeal. It is her work, Loki decided, eventually. She wants to know if she is right. You, too, have worked with those you hate for the sake of knowledge. He finally moved, following Foster the few paces to her lab where she was already rummaging through a stack of papers. The other girl he remembered from before waved at him from where she was eating out of a takeout container in the corner.

“Hey,” she said, “you’re back.”

“So I am,” Loki said, looking back toward Foster.

“If I ask where you went are you going to tell me it’s classified?” The girl – Darcy, he thought he remembered – asked. Loki didn’t glance at her.

“No,” he drawled. “I would just lie.”

“You SHIELD types are no fun,” Darcy complained, and then Jane straightened, brandishing a piece of paper in his direction.
“Look at this,” she said, with some amount of triumphant defiance that made Loki’s eyebrows rise. “I was just fooling around-.”

“Pulling three all-nighters in a row,” Darcy muttered, somewhat darkly, but Jane hardly looked at her, so neither did Loki.

“And I think I might have figured it out. Well – not it, per se, but the problem of the energy – where it goes, I mean, how it gets dissipated, I think…”

Loki frowned, pacing over and plucking the paper from her fingers, examining the scrawled series of words and formulas written on nearly every blank space at various angles. Quantum field generator???, he said in one corner, and in another but where does the heat go? underlined several times. Circled, however, was what he suspected Jane wanted him to see, and he narrowed his eyes at it, reading it several times over, then pacing over to the table, taking a cleaner piece of paper, and rewriting it in his own hand with eyes half closed, so he could feel the pattern of it.

Loki’s eyes snapped open. “Oh,” he said, and his head came up. He could feel a smile curving his mouth. “Oh… well. Jane Foster.”

“What?” she asked, her voice slightly sharp and slightly apprehensive. “What is it-”

Loki tapped his fingers against the paper. “The few researchers that have attempted to study the Bifrost in the past have found this very problem highly vexing. And yet you seem to have…” He examined the formula again, and couldn’t help a slightly strangled laugh. “You seem to have solved it. Or at the very least explained it.”

Foster blinked at him, and then started to grin. “So it’s right,” she said. “That’s actually-”

“More or less.” Loki settled back on his heels. His smile felt slightly crooked. “You asked me to look at it. I am telling you that, at least to my eye, it looks as though you understand some of the Bifrost’s workings better than our previous conversation would suggest.”

“So what’s the ‘less’ part?” Jane demanded, her eyes lighting up. “You said more or less, so which part of it isn’t…”

“For one,” Loki said, “you haven’t quite accounted enough for the-” He made an impatient gesture. “The flux between worlds. I don’t know how you would say it.”

“Flux between worlds? Do you mean some kind of inter-dimensional-”

“Hold the fuck on,” a loud voice broke in, and Loki realized, belatedly, that he’d forgotten the other girl in the room. “Not that I’m eavesdropping, but did your weird SHIELD science buddy say Bifrost? As in-” Loki felt his teeth click together and wanted to swear. The look Foster threw him was somewhere between accusatory and panicked. “You! Tall, dark, absurdly handsome, are you from Asswhatever? Jane, have you been chatting up aliens without telling me?”

Loki’s jaw tightened and put both of his hands on the table, splaying his fingers. “Give me one good reason,” he murmured, “why I shouldn’t simply wipe her memory.”

“Wait, what?” the girl squawked, and Foster tensed immediately, snapped, “No. To – to start with, I’d – no! You can do that?”

“Somebody tell me I just misheard,” Darcy said. “Cause I’m really hoping I misheard that.”

Loki’s fingers curled and he muttered a curse directed at the Norns, wherever they were. Why
exactly his difficulties seemed to amuse them so much- “You did not,” Loki said, schooling his face to impassivity before he turned around and fixed a cold stare on her. Darcy took a small step back, stopped, and glanced at Foster.

“I think I liked the blond one better,” Darcy said. Loki felt his lips try to peel back from his teeth. *Most do,* he thought, and half started to raise one hand, not sure whether he intended to banish the girl somewhere else – another realm, possibly - or wipe her mind of this conversation, and jerked when Foster grabbed his arm.

“No, Loki,” she said, sounding a little frantic. “Don’t, it’s fine, don’t you dare touch her or I swear to god I’ll- I’ll-” She seemed to be scrambling for a threat that would make sense, and Darcy’s eyes widened further.

“Wait wait wait,” she said, “did you just call him – no way, you can not be serious-”

“If you do anything I will go straight to SHIELD,” Foster said, finally, her expression stubborn despite the fear he could see there as well, and of course he could pull free of her hand, it would be so very easy to take them both out, remove this entire interaction from both their minds. Why not?

For the same reason he hadn’t before, Loki thought, almost dully, and he let his arm relax. “Fine,” he said aloud, and Foster blew out a loud exhalation of relief. “Now let go of me.” Foster jerked her hand away hurriedly, and Loki turned his gaze back to Darcy, who was now looking at him with narrowed eyes. Loki raised his eyebrows at her fractionally, and Darcy glanced at Jane.

“So that’s-”

“Yeah,” Jane said, sounding tired, “yes, Darcy, this is…Loki. Thor’s…um.” She stopped, glancing at Loki, and he didn’t offer her help. Darcy’s eyes narrowed further, though Loki thought she was trying to mask nerves.

“Right,” Darcy said. “The homicidal one with the giant explode-y robot, right? Okay. Okay, I can kind of understand why you didn’t tell me but why didn’t you tell me, Jane-”

“It was hardly any of your business,” Loki cut in, keeping his voice level and even. “Nor, for that matter, is it.”

“Hell yes it is,” Darcy snapped, turning on him. “I work here! And I’m Jane’s friend, so you bet it’s my business if she’s talking to some kind of – crazy alien whatever!” Loki felt his jaw tighten again.

“Watch your tongue,” he said, not quite sharply. “Or I will see it silenced.”

“If you threaten my intern again I’m going to kick you out,” Foster said, her voice tense. “And then call SHIELD, and maybe a few newspapers while I’m at it.” She stepped around to move between him and Darcy, her mouth set in a stubborn line. “Clear?”

Loki looked from her, to Darcy, and back to Foster. He jerked his head, impatiently. “So I am to – what, trust that she will say nothing? You will forgive me if I doubt that.”

“You talk even weirder than Thor,” Darcy muttered, and then added, louder, “and you can quit talking about me like I’m not in the room, by the way. I am, and I can keep my mouth shut.” She was eyeing him warily, but also with something else. “Why are you here, anyway?”

“That is most assuredly none of your business,” Loki said, tersely. He opened and closed one hand at his side and focused on Foster. “Can she?”
The barest hesitation before Foster nodded. “Yes,” she said, “she can. Are we good?”

Loki looked back at Darcy. “I have a lot of questions,” Darcy said, after a long moment. “But I guess I’m going with it. That’s what I do, go with the weird shit. I’ll ask Jane later. As you were, do with the sciencing.” Loki stared at her, and she waved her hands. “No, seriously! Science away. I’ll just be…here.”

He turned, eventually, back to Foster, who looked like she wanted to breathe a sigh of relief and instead drew herself up. “…so you were saying about the formula…”

“I’ve just got to ask,” Darcy’s voice broke in. “Are all the Asgarders excessively attractive, or is that just a…”

“Darcy,” Foster said, giving him a nervous look. He kept the angry prickle under his skin.

“It is an elaborate illusion,” he said, too mildly. “In truth, we are all entirely covered in scales.” Close enough, for you, a dark whisper murmured at the back of his mind that he ignored. The shocked silence at his back, followed by a hoot of laughter, was almost worth it.

“Oh, okay,” Darcy said, “okay, homicidal and sarcastic, I can work with that.”

“You were saying,” Foster said, with a slightly sharp glance over her shoulder. Still tense, but she was listening. And that she’d puzzled that much out, already…she was clever, perhaps even more than he’d reluctantly granted.

“Yes,” he said, finally. “The interdimensional flux, then,” and told himself he was not drinking in her eager attention in the least.

Interlude (XXI)

Carl fidgeted in his chair. “See,” he said, sounding slightly smug. “I told you my mom could help.”

Loki gave him a look, but he couldn’t hold it very well. “This once,” he allowed, finally, “I will allow you the point.” Carl grinned, looking so unspeakably pleased with himself that Loki either wanted to wince or wanted to laugh, and wasn’t sure which. Loki tapped the sheet of paper again. “Focus.”

Carl frowned down at it. “Why?”

“Because I am to be teaching you, and I do not intend to neglect my duties,” Loki said. The thought flickered across his mind that he could appreciate the impatience of his own tutors somewhat better, though he pushed it away almost at once. “I do not particularly wish your mother upset with me.”

“Yeah,” Carl allowed, chewing on the end of his pencil, “she can be pretty scary when she’s mad.”

You should see the All-Mother, Loki thought, before he remembered not to, and it seared through his mind, making his heart clench. Loki pushed that away as well. “I would not wish to be on her bad side.” Carl sighed, heavily.

“I don’t want to do math,” he objected. “It’s stupid.” He brightened, then, and twisted around in his chair. “Can you teach me magic?”

Loki gave him a withering look. “No.”

Carl drooped slightly. “Is it because I can’t learn or because-”
“No,” Loki repeated, more firmly. “Focus on the math. Two problems. I know you know how to do them.”

“No, I don’t,” Carl said. His eyes narrowed, expression going slightly calculating. Loki breathed out through his nose.

“You are a dreadful child,” Loki said, though without any real feeling. “I am not going to teach you magic. For any number of reasons. And you may try to manipulate me into doing so, but I assure you that it will not work.”

Carl sighed heavily and put his head down on the table. “That’s not fair.”

“Most things are not,” Loki said, perhaps not quite lightly enough, because Carl gave him an odd look. “Do we need to go through these one step at a time?”

Carl pushed the paper back and forth between his hands. “You’re worse than Asher used to be,” he said, not quite mumbled, and Loki blinked. He hadn’t heard that name before.

“Asher?” he said, cautiously. Carl didn’t look at him.

“My older brother,” he said, after a moment, and Loki felt himself stiffen, remembered what Andrea had said about her other boy. He wasn’t sure whether or not he was supposed to ask. But it seemed…Carl had lapsed into brooding silence, and Loki’s stomach twisted strangely.

“You were…close?” he said, carefully. Carl nodded, and then paused.

“Well,” he said. “We…were. He was a lot older and sometimes he didn’t want to play games with me, but most of the time he seemed to like it okay. And he was always after me about getting my work done.” Carl pushed up and rocked back on two legs of his chair. “Only then he got all weird and then…”

Loki didn’t have to ask. It was a peculiar chill down his spine. “I am sorry,” he said, awkwardly, because it seemed like the only appropriate response. Carl shrugged moodily.

“Mom doesn’t like to talk about it,” he said. “I still don’t really know what happened. Just that – that he got in trouble, somehow, and some guys k-killed him.” Carl’s voice caught a little on the word. “They’re in jail now, I guess.”

What was he supposed to say? Loki half reached out to lay a hand on Carl’s shoulder, but pulled it back, not certain what that gesture would communicate. I had a brother once. Or thought I did. Even the thought of saying that made him want to spit bile, though.

“Do you have any siblings?” he asked, suddenly. “Cept older, and – and magic, but…”

Damnable boy, Loki thought. It was like someone had punched him in the solar plexus. He did reach out, then, rested his hand very lightly on Carl’s shoulder. “You miss him,” Loki said, quietly. “That’s not…a bad thing.”

Carl turned to look at him, his eyes looking slightly shiny. “Do you have any siblings?” he asked, and Loki almost jerked back, but after a moment he summoned a smile.

“No,” he said. “None.”

Car turned away again and swiped at his eyes. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “M’being stupid.”
Loki shook his head sharply, felt a frown deepen between his eyebrows. “Not in the least,” he said, a little more fiercely than he meant, and Carl looked at him for a moment, and then hunched his shoulders and bent more over the table.

“Carl,” Loki started to say, cautiously, but he stopped, grimacing. He had the vague feeling that he ought to know what to do, that maybe he had, at one point, and it was just that he kept thinking about- no. “Do you need…”

Carl sniffed, turned, and almost flung himself in Loki’s direction. Loki stared down at him, and after a moment moved his awkwardly hovering hands to pat him on the back, saying nothing, even as he began to feel his shirt-front dampen.

_Damnable boy_, Loki thought, but this time the thought was softer, and he closed his eyes, heart aching vaguely.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

It hasn't been two months, no it has not. I have no excuses to make for myself other than the usual "I was writing other stuff sorry about that" excuse and also that my current courseload is eating me alive, a little bit. But who makes excuses, not me I do what I want.

Anyway, here's chapter twenty-two, in which Loki meets a new friend (maybe) and I dive headlong into indulgence of tropes that I secretly love and can never get enough of. (Therapy. It's therapy fic. Which, incidentally, is why this chapter was so hard to write.)

If you're worried about the fact that we're 22 chapters in and there's still not really much sign of a plot - don't worry. It's coming. Like, actually.

With thanks to zaataronpita, who keeps me from being more of a hot mess than I already am, and also betas my fic for me.

Warnings for this chapter for discussion of suicide and some oblique conversation about mental illness, though it's not named as such.

Loki looked at the woman across from him, keeping his expression placid and blank. She looked back at him, eyebrows slightly raised. Her dark hair was pulled back from her face and piled messily at the back of her head. “Dr. Maureen Fisher,” he drawled, nominally polite, though he let his voice carry some of his distaste.

“And you are-” She glanced down at the notepad in her lap. “Luke Silver, is that right?”

He gave her a thin smile. “So it is.”

Dr. Fisher sat back, her expression relaxing. “Do you have some idea of what you want to talk to me about?”

Loki gave her an incredulous stare, and then let out a little laugh. “You are aware that this arrangement is mandatory and not by my choice, yes?”

Dr. Fisher’s mouth tipped up at the corner, fractionally. “I’m aware. That doesn’t mean you might not have things you want to talk about. Frequently the agents I talk to do.”

“Is that so.” Loki kept his tone neutral. He’d considered being loquaciously cooperative, but he had a feeling this woman would not be fooled by such an act.

The slight smile dropped. “And if you think you’re the first one to come in with a chip on their shoulder about talking to a therapist, then you’re wrong about that.”

Loki breathed out through his nose. His mouth twisted into a vague smile. “I merely find myself uncertain what it is, exactly, I am supposed to be interested in saying to you.”

“Whatever you want to.” Dr. Fisher uncrossed her legs and leaned forward. “Technically I’m going
to have to do an evaluation at the end of our sessions together. But in the interim – what we discuss is your choice.”

“Hm.” The smile Loki felt on his face didn’t reach his eyes. “Well, in that case.”

Dr. Fisher looked at him a moment longer, and then sighed. “Look,” she said. “I have no doubt that right now you are figuring out what lies to tell me. Or maybe just trying to figure out if you can get away with saying a lot and not saying anything at all.” Loki cast her a sidelong glance, and she gave him a thin smile. “Like I said, I’ve been on this carousel before. And I can’t stop you, if that’s what you end up doing. But you know what? Why bother? Why not just try, you know? Open your mouth and see what comes out.”

Loki felt the urge to scoff. *Why would I tell you anything of myself,* he thought. *I know nothing of you, and you know less of me.*

“Anything you say to me doesn’t go past me,” Dr. Fisher said.

He couldn’t keep back his laugh, then, though it came out a little sharper than he expected. “You truly expect me to believe that?”

“Why would it not be the case?”

Loki felt the urge to get to his feet, to pace, and forced himself to keep still, though his hands clamped on the arms of the chair. “I am here to begin with because Coulson thinks me unstable. A potential liability. What better way to assess the potential risk than with this supposedly innocuous meeting?”

Fisher’s brows furrowed. “I guess that’s one way to look at it. Or he could be genuinely concerned and thinks you might benefit.”

Loki did scoff, then. “Don’t be absurd.”

“Why is it absurd?”

Loki gave her an almost incredulous look, and couldn’t help the amused quirk of his mouth. “Dr. Fisher, are you aware what sort of business this particular organization does?”

“Does the fact that SHIELD is an intelligence agency preclude the possibility that the people in it might have genuine compassion for one another?” Dr. Fisher asked, her head tilted slightly to the side. Loki considered her face.

“Considering SHIELD first communicated their interest in hiring me with a kidnapping attempt, you will forgive me if I am skeptical.”

Dr. Fisher blinked, and it occurred to Loki belatedly to wonder how much she knew about him. How much Coulson might have told her. After a moment, she set aside her clipboard. “Okay.”

Loki blinked. He didn’t know what he had expected, but not that. “Beg pardon?”

“My name is Maureen Fisher,” she said. “I was born in Boston, Massachusetts. My mother was a night nurse. I never knew much about my dad. I knew he was in jail for something, but we never talked about what.”

“What are you doing?” Loki asked, somewhere between alarmed and curious.
“Telling you about myself,” she said. “I like to play chess but I’m terrible at it. I prefer dogs to cats.”
She gave him a look and raised her eyebrows. “Now you. It doesn’t have to be anything deep, all right? I’m not a spy, I’m a therapist.”

Loki stared at her in flat disbelief, but he could feel it bubbling up in his throat. He was so tired, sometimes, of never speaking, of holding everything in and keeping it to himself, as he had in Asgard, year upon year, a voice always murmuring in the back of his mind no one cares, why should they, all they will do is laugh-

But they came for you, didn’t they? (Because you are useful.)

Loki leaned back in his chair and cocked his head to the side. What did it matter, really, what he told her? Even if she wasn’t telling the truth about her vow of silence, so long as he mentioned nothing of importance…

“We could start with the reason you’re here, if you want,” Dr. Fisher said.

Loki felt his mouth quirk up at one corner, though the gesture was mirthless. “You are referring to the incident with Doom, I suppose, as the proximate cause.”

“Unless you have another idea,” Dr. Fisher offered. Loki shrugged loosely.

“It seems as good as any. Though I expect if you read my file, as I assume you must have, you already know the story.”

“Official mission reports leave a lot out, I find,” Dr. Fisher said, her eyes on him. He felt vaguely the urge to fidget, and pushed it down. “They don’t talk about how you felt, or what you were thinking.”

Loki laughed, the sound strangely light. “I wasn’t, it would seem.” The words were careless, light. This was a simple enough subject.

“What do you mean?” Dr. Fisher asked, her posture shifting. Loki wondered who had taught her that particular pose of attentive listening, and if she meant it or if it was supposed to be for his benefit.

“I wasn’t thinking,” Loki said, almost airily. “Not a common fault of mine, but I suppose everyone makes mistakes. I made an impulsive decision.”

“To confront Mr. Osborn, you mean,” she said, slowly.

“Yes.”

“Because you believed Agent Romanov was in danger.”

Loki inclined his head a fraction, and shrugged again. “I should not have assumed as much based on the flimsy evidence. It was a basic ruse and I foolishly fell for it. If I had been thinking clearly, I would not have.” Loki smiled thinly at Dr. Fisher. “Does that answer your question?”

“I wasn’t really asking any particular question. I more meant…” Dr. Fisher was frowning, very slightly. “Are you saying it’s your responsibility that you were captured?”

Loki felt a little flicker of something under his sternum, but it faded quickly. “Perhaps. I would not say fault, perhaps, but certainly my error.”

Dr. Fisher tapped her fingers on the arm of her chair. “You don’t think Doom’s more to blame? Or Norman Osborn?”
Loki flipped a hand carelessly. “Of course. Theirs as well, but I should have seen it. Should have been quicker than they were, cleverer. And I was not.”

“What does that mean?” Dr. Fisher had an odd look on her face, and Loki spent a moment trying to decipher it, then dismissed the attempt. He gave her another thin smile.

“Mean? Little. You asked what I was thinking, and I told you that I was not. Or at least not clearly.” He crossed his legs and raised his eyebrows. “Why?”

Dr. Fisher ‘hmmm’ed quietly and was quiet for a moment. “Does it mean that you deserved what Doom did to you?” she asked, cautiously, like she feared the very mention of it might break him. Loki felt his mouth twitch, though not with amusement. He wondered what she knew of it. Wondered who knew what, how widespread was the knowledge of his defeat, his humiliation-

Loki considered that question. “No,” he said, after a moment. “That is not it. It is not a matter of deserving. Doom had no right to touch me, but that he was able to trick me…that is my fault. What he did he will pay for – eventually.” Loki’s hands clenched and he felt his nails dig in to the meat of his hands. “For me, it is…a lesson.”

“A lesson.” Dr. Fisher’s voice was flat, and Loki refocused on her and wanted to laugh at the too neutral look on her face.

“Have I disturbed you?” Loki asked, mouth curving up at the corners. “Already? I didn’t realize I would have to monitor my words so closely.”

“No,” Dr. Fisher said, but slowly. “No, that’s not…” She frowned. “It’s just a little…” She uncrossed her legs, and recrossed them in the other direction, and then sighed. “Can I be blunt?”

Loki spread his hands. “By all means.”

“Yes,” she said, “you’re right. I am disturbed, but not by what you’re saying, exactly. More by… you’re being awfully blasé about what I understand was fairly intense torture.”

“Perhaps you are unaware that I am somewhat more durable than those I imagine you usually see,” Loki said, though he felt something stir uneasily in his stomach, not entirely certain what she was getting at and trying to puzzle it out.

“Yes, Agent Coulson said something about that, but – that’s not the point. There was a note in your file that said Agent Barton had reported you taking, quote, unusual risks in the field, end quote. And this and I’m just wondering…would you say you have a disregard for your personal health and safety, Luke?”

Loki’s first thought was don’t be absurd and it leapt to his tongue, but stopped there, because he remembered those moments on the Bifrost, when it wasn’t so much that he wanted to die as that there were no more reasons to live. And yet he had lived, and gone on living, and he had not seriously considered since then-

He licked his lips, suddenly conscious of the silence that he had let stand too long. “Why?” he asked, and his voice sounded strange. “I have no intent to die.”
“I believe that,” Dr. Fisher said, after a moment. “But I just…need to know, before we move forward. Have you? It’s not all that uncommon. But it is something that we’d need to discuss.” She paused. “Mr. Silver…Luke. For legal reasons, if you tell me anything about intentions to hurt someone else or yourself, I have to report it. But that doesn’t apply to anything you tell me that’s happened in the past. If that was a concern.”

Loki felt – caught, between two impulses. He wanted to speak, wanted to just say it, yes, and I do not understand why I am still alive, but that was like stripping himself bare and offering his chest for the knife, and what could she do, what could she know-

A wave of anger rolled through him: why do you think you can help me, he snarled. What do you think this is going to do? You can change nothing, even if I wanted to lay out my life before a foolish mortal, but it was followed just as quickly by heavy, smothering apathy. He was looking up at Odin and wondering why he was still holding on all over again.

“Yes,” he said, finally, voice strangely dull. “But I hardly think that’s relevant now.”

Dr. Fisher blew out a breath. “Luke…it’s not so rare to have those kinds of thoughts. It’s not something you need to be ashamed of.” Loki felt a bitter pang. I wonder how they said I died on Asgard, in order to avoid the shame. Her gaze was calm. “Can you tell me about that?”

Loki felt himself tense. “About what?”

“About…when you had those thoughts. What happened?”

Loki’s mouth was dry. He should not have said anything, but now it was out and he couldn’t pull it back. I don’t want to talk about this, he wanted to say, but what came out of his treacherous mouth was, “what do you mean?”

“Let’s start with-” Dr. Fisher’s eyebrows furrowed. “Did you have a plan at any point, of how you would kill yourself?”

Loki looked at his hands, twisting on his legs. “I did,” he said, after a moment.

“You did have a plan?”

“No,” Loki said, and he could hear some faint tone slip into his voice, a very slight edge of bitterness. “I did kill myself. As you can see, it didn’t exactly take.”

The silence that followed that was not long. Just long enough, though, that Loki felt his stomach twist and was suddenly sure that he was going to be cast aside, or locked away, that he should never have spoken to this woman. There was a faint buzzing in his ears. Then Dr. Fisher said, very quietly, “Thank you for telling me.”

Loki laughed, though it came out a strange, strangled sound. “You are thanking me?”

“Yes,” Dr. Fisher said. “I know it’s not an easy thing to talk about. And I’m glad that you were willing to tell me.”

Loki felt wrong-footed. Strange. He wasn’t sure what he had expected, but her calm was throwing him off, making him itchy and uncomfortable. He could have dealt, he thought, with shock or horror or anger or anything but…he stared at her blankly. After a moment Dr. Fisher began to look concerned.

“What?”
“That is all?” Loki asked, and couldn’t quite keep the incredulous note out of his voice.

“What were you expecting?”

“I don’t…” Loki trailed off. He didn’t know what he had expected, exactly. “More of a fuss, I suppose.”

“If I got upset at you, what good would it do?” She said, still calm. “Wouldn’t it just make you more self-conscious than you already are? I’m not here to judge. I’m here to listen, and to help if I can.” Loki swallowed, his stomach fluttering uneasily. He glanced aside.

“It was not that I wished to die,” he said after a long moment. “There simply seemed no reason not to.” Why tell her this, some corner of his mind screamed, why expose all your vulnerabilities like this, but suddenly it seemed not to matter. Or perhaps it did. He couldn’t decide. Loki laughed, though it was a strange noise. “I suppose that must seem odd to you.”

“No,” Dr. Fisher said quietly. “Not really.” Loki fidgeted in his chair and did not quite look at her. “Time’s up,” she said, into the silence. Loki stood, the motion feeling stiff and awkward.

“Thank you for your time,” he said, formal, polite. Needing to create some kind of distance.

“I’ll see you next week?” She said, too gently. Loki felt his shoulders tighten and forced them to relax. Perhaps. He made himself nod.

“Of course.” He turned his back and went for the door, keeping his steps carefully even and steady.

“Thank you for talking to me, Luke,” she said, and Loki wanted, for a moment, to vomit. He pushed it down and closed the door behind him, pretending that he hadn’t heard.

The buzz of usual activity hummed around him without his truly registering it. He felt…strange. There was no better way to quantify it than that. His breathing was shallow. The ground didn’t feel quite sure beneath his feet, and there was a rawness to everything like if he moved too quickly it would scrape over a new burn.

He remembered everything, with vivid, perfect, clarity. I could have done it, father. For you.

Loki turned on his heel and went for the stairs, trying not to feel as though he was running.

There was someone already in the mat room when he arrived, and Loki stopped just a little too late not to be seen.

The man looked up and seemed startled to see him. Loki, for his part, almost shied back from bulging muscles blue eyes blond hair before he realized how absurd that was and held his ground. “Hello,” said the stranger, after a moment of Loki’s silence. “Sorry, did I…”

“No,” Loki said. “It’s not as though I have a reservation on the space.” Though he was used to this particular room being empty. His voice sounded ordinary enough, to Loki’s relief. He’d half expected it to reveal something of the knot in his chest and the vague nausea.

The man straightened up, and Loki took him in, almost absently. Not as tall as…but muscular, he noted, if somehow awkward for all that, something about him hesitant and uncertain. “I can go, if you wanted the room to yourself,” he offered, and Loki blinked at him, somewhat taken aback.

“Why?” He asked, honestly. “You were here first. Yours is the prior claim.”
“Yes, but you work here, don’t you?” The man shrugged. “And I don’t need to be here. I was just planning to work off some tension.” He was scrutinizing Loki, now, and Loki felt himself tense.

“You don’t work here?” He asked, to distract his attention. “Then why...?”

The man looked uncomfortable. “You don’t-? Um.” Loki waited, aware he was not being terribly helpful. The stranger cleared his throat. “I’m just here checking in. I’m supposed to do that, so they can make sure I’m adjusting.”

Adjusting to, Loki thought to ask, and then it clicked, too slowly, and he almost wanted to laugh at himself. The ground still had that unnerving, not quite solid feeling, however, so he did not. “Steve Rogers,” he guessed. “Captain America.” Perhaps it was a sign of his day that a part of him wondered if this had been planned.

Steve Rogers, emblem of American liberty, looked embarrassed, one hand rising to the back of his neck though he pulled it down before it reached there. “Hi,” he said. “Nice to meet you. You’re...”

“Luke Silver.” Loki stepped forward and offered a hand, almost mechanically. The Captain’s grip was strong, his eyes meeting Loki’s steadily. Well, that explained the uncertainty. He knew – largely from Coulson – that the Captain’s presence in this time was a fairly recent development. Prior to that... “A pleasure.”

“You too. I don’t think I’ve seen you before,” Captain Rogers said, releasing Loki’s hand, still seeming self-conscious – but perhaps less so. Based on the way Coulson talked about the man, Loki wondered if his lack of reaction might be refreshing. “Not that I know all of SHIELD’s people, or anything, but...”

“I am a relatively recent addition,” Loki said, summoning a smile, though it felt thin and unconvincing. Something was buzzing under his skin and he needed it out. “So that is hardly surprising.” He eyed Rogers, a thought occurring to him. “You said you wished to exorcise some tension.”

“Talking to Fury isn’t exactly stress relief,” Rogers said, though with a slightly crooked slant to his smile.

“Spar with me.” Part of it was curiosity, the desire to know more about this man-symbol. But mostly it was the desire to move, to strike, to fight. The Captain, Coulson had mentioned, was durable, and possessed of superhuman strength. Even if he could not unleash his full potential...at least it would be something. Some way to rid himself of the prickling under his skin.

Captain America’s glance was clearly dubious, and attempting to be polite about it. “I’m not certain that...”

Loki changed his clothes with a thought, the semi-formal attire vanishing to be replaced by a loose t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants, something that would allow him to move. He threw Rogers a smile that might not have been entirely empty of threat. “I assure you, I am somewhat more than I appear.”

Rogers’ eyes went wide, staring with undisguised wonder. “That was – how did you do that?”

The flare of satisfaction eased the knot in his chest, somewhat. “I am currently SHIELD’s expert on thaumaturgical matters. And the only mage, so far as I am aware. None of which skills I will use against you.” He watched Rogers mouth ‘mage’, but his expression remained dubious. “Captain,” Loki pressed, somewhat warily, “to be perfectly frank with you, it is likely you couldn’t hurt me if you tried.” He stepped into the room, balanced on his feet. “What do you say?”
After a long pause, Rogers stuck out his hand. “All right. One round.”

Loki’s grin felt strange on his own face. “First to call surrender.” They shook hands, and Loki stepped back, staying balanced on his feet, and waited. It didn’t take Rogers long to make the first move.

Based on Rogers’ build, his muscle, Loki had expected a fight like Thor. Perhaps even wanted it, a way to chase off the disquiet and unhappiness chasing him.

It wasn’t like fighting Thor.

Rogers was fast, and though he used his muscle it wasn’t in the same way. He wasn’t as strong as Loki, or as quick, but he was skilled, and adapted quickly. He relied less on his size or on sheer force, moving around more, using legs and feet more than arms and tending more toward a defensive than offensive style. It took Loki some time to figure out, but eventually he realized that Rogers didn’t fight like he’d always been strong, but like he’d grown into it, and hadn’t quite shaken the memory of having been weaker once. He held back at first, but it only took a few times of Loki putting him on his back to learn better.

And then he had a fight.

It had been a long time, Loki realized, since he’d sparred like this; not out of desperation or need but the kind of ritualized struggle that had defined so much of his training. The motions were all there, of course, and if at first he was thinking that ebbed into something else, instinct and muscle memory. Everything else receded back, still there but less important than the impact of flesh on flesh, dodge, duck. Rogers attacked his upper body and Loki took out his legs with a sweep; he threw Rogers over his shoulder and the man rolled to his feet, refusing to surrender.

For a moment they hovered on opposite sides of the mat, and Loki couldn’t help the grin that slipped onto his face. His hair was starting to slip into his eyes.

This time, Loki moved first. He spun into a kick aimed for the Captain’s chest, and as he jerked out of the way followed it with the arc of his body, intending to take him to the floor once again, and saw too late that Rogers’ motion had been a feint.

His hands wrapped around Loki’s angle and twisted, the momentum of Loki’s own motion bringing him down. Loki had used a similar move on Rogers earlier in their duel. He hit the ground with a faint ‘oof’ in an awkward tangle and braced himself. He was prepared for Rogers to press his advantage.

The man stepped back, instead, with his own grin. “You’re fast,” he said. “I wasn’t sure that would work, and…” he trailed off, eyes drifting to the right and smile falling a fraction.

“What,” Loki asked, still not truly aware of much beyond his pounding heart and the texture of the mat, but he turned his head to follow where Rogers’ eyes had wandered, and tensed. They had an audience.

Loki pushed himself to his feet, suddenly aware of himself. Disheveled hair, rumpled clothing, sweating...

Rogers, he realized, looked like he wanted to disappear. Loki turned his gaze on the observers, mostly younger agents, and let his eyes narrow. “Move along,” he said, mildly, and with a slight gesture erected an opaque barrier over the window. Rogers looked profoundly relieved.

“Thank you,” he said. “The staring’s just…”
Loki raised his eyebrows. “I’d think you would be used to it.”

Rogers shook his head. “I don’t know that I ever will be,” he said, sounding rueful. He rubbed his hands on his pants. “You’re okay, right? I didn’t…”

“I told you that you could likely not injure me if you tried, did I not?” Loki interrupted. Rogers smiled slightly.

“Now I might actually believe it,” he said. “I might actually have bruises tomorrow. I haven’t…” He flushed, slightly. “It’s nice not to have to hold back.”

Loki felt his mouth quirk, very faintly. “I can imagine.” He felt…steadier, he realized. Heart still pounding with exertion, but the ground felt certain under his feet again, and his roiling thoughts had eased a little, subsided back under the surface. “Thank you, Captain,” he said, after a moment. “That was…diverting.”

Rogers nodded, small smile growing a little. “Maybe not exactly the word I’d use, but…close enough.” He hesitated. “If you’re around, you know…I could use some practice to keep my skills sharp. If you were interested.”

Loki blinked, slightly taken aback. “Beg pardon?”

Steve nodded at the room. “We could do this again sometime?” He sounded more uncertain, and Loki scrutinized him. But it was true that he had missed this. And without work for the next two weeks…he was going to get bored.

Loki shrugged. “I would not be averse.”

Rogers brightened visibly. “Great. I – have a phone, though I’m not great about keeping it charged. We could set a time...I only make it out here once a month or so, though, when they drag me in…”

“Let me give you mine,” Loki said, summoning one of the cards he’d made, half on a whim, and holding it out between two fingers. “You can call me. Do not worry about coming here. So long as you tell me where to be, I can get there.”

Rogers’ eyes widened, then sharpened. “Do you mean you can – wow. Would you be willing to tell me more about that? Sometime? New technology aside, magic…”

Loki felt his mouth twitch, something odd squirming under his sternum. “I seldom mind discussing my own talents,” he said, with only a trace of irony. Rogers took the card he was holding out and looked at it, then back to Loki, his smile a little easier.

“Thanks, Agent Silver,” he said, sounding unmistakably pleased. “I appreciate this. I’ll get in touch – soon, all right?” He glanced toward the door. “I should probably…”

Loki inclined his head. “If you’d like to slip out unseen, I can aid with that.”

For a moment he thought Rogers would take the offer, but then he shook his head. “Nah,” he said. “It’s fine. You’ll probably get more questions than I do, anyway.”

“I am very good at deterring unwanted questions,” Loki said dryly, and Rogers’ smile twitched.

“I can believe that,” he said. He rested his hand on the door, and then paused. “I’ll talk to you soon, Agent Silver.”
Loki let one corner of his mouth tick up. “I’ve probably left you bruised. You may call me Luke if you like, Captain.”

“And are you going to call me Steve?” Rogers asked, and when Loki just raised his eyebrows, shook his head. “All right, fine. Talk to you soon, Luke.”

He stepped out. Loki could almost see him drawing himself up, squaring his shoulders, forming himself into their icon, before the door closed quietly behind him.

Loki teleported himself back to his apartment, removing his sweaty clothes slowly. He felt strangely…hollow, but it wasn’t altogether an unpleasant feeling.

Two weeks, Loki told himself. It would pass quickly.

**Interlude (XXII)**

As the weeks passed without any sign of pursuit, Loki began to settle into a sort of routine with Carl and Andrea. It was quiet, and Loki had to be mindful not to make himself a burden on their fairly slim resources, but he began to feel almost comfortable.

That was how he knew it was time to move on.

He could feel Andrea eyeing him where he was scrubbing a saucepan clean and waited, keeping his eyes on the dish.

“You’re planning to leave, aren’t you,” she said, voice not quite flat.

Loki inclined his head a fraction.

If I stay I’ll only bring disaster down upon you both. That’s what I do, it seems. “I am.”

Andrea paused in her drying of plates and turned to look at him, arms crossed. “Were you going to say something or just take off?”

Loki hadn’t been certain. The thought of trying to explain himself to Carl…the boy had gotten attached. (Loki had gotten attached.) But to leave without a word after all the generosity they had shown…that seemed gravely dishonorable. Apparently his silence was enough. Andrea’s mouth thinned. “I see,” she said, icily. Loki was almost impressed at the amount of disdain packed into those two words. He turned off the sink and faced her.

“I cannot stay,” he said, not letting his voice stray out of the normal register. “I am a burden on you, and I tend to…attract trouble.”

Andrea’s eyes narrowed. “You’re worried someone’s going to follow you to us.” Loki blinked at her, startled, and Andrea shook her head. “You haven’t said one single thing about where you came from and you were living in a motel when you keeled over in the street. I’ve seen plenty of people running from something, or someone.”

“I do not wish to put you, or Carl, at risk,” Loki said quietly.

“And where’re you going to go, huh?” Andrea’s frown had turned toward a scowl. “And how’re you planning on explaining to Carl that you’re walking out on him?” Loki tried not to wince, but a moment later she shook her head. “No, I know. You’re right. I can’t put my kid in harm’s way, and I knew your sticking around wasn’t forever. But that doesn’t mean I’m not a little worried about you, too.”
Loki summoned a smile. “I assure you that I can take care of myself.”

“That why you were passed out on the sidewalk with the flu?” Andrea said, with a little bit of a smirk, and Loki gave her a sidelong look. “For Carl…I’ll talk to him, okay? But don’t take off before you do, too. That boy’s had enough of people leaving him behind.” Her voice was hard, but her eyes said something different. “And wherever it is you’re going…you take care, all right? Whatever trouble it is you’re in…”

“I won’t let it catch up to me too easily,” Loki said, mouth quirking in a wry smile.

“Good,” Andrea said. “And I hope you’ll find a place to land eventually.” She reached out and patted his cheek, and Loki felt like a small child for a very strange moment. “You go spend some time with Carl. I’ll finish up out here.”

Loki retreated into Carl’s room. Carl looked up from the house he was building out of small logs. “What were you and mom talking about?” he asked suspiciously.

Loki smiled. “Magic stuff,” he said, casually. Carl’s eyes widened, then narrowed.

“Magic stuff?” He lowered his voice. “Is my mom a wizard?”

Loki felt his smile tilt strangely and folded to the floor to sit beside the boy. “She most certainly is,” he said, easily, and then lowered his voice. “But shhh. Don’t tell her I told you.”

Carl nodded. “I won’t,” he said earnestly, and Loki felt just a small twinge.

It was for the best, he reminded himself. Better to leave now, while the memories were still sweet, than to linger until he ruined them.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

A plot maybe starts to poke its head over the horizon. Maybe. We'll see.

But this update also comes with a semi-serious plea: please, guys, don't ask me when this is going to update or tell me how hard it's making your life that this fic updates slowly. It makes me feel shitty and tired and not at all like working on this thing. I have, among other things, a real life and also eighteen other ongoing writing projects of fanfiction, not to mention my original fiction. Sometimes it takes me a little while to get things done, particularly in a way I feel happy with, and I don't want to half-ass my writing. So please just...don't do the thing. I would appreciate it.

In other news, most of you are lovely and thank you so much for reading. :3

As always, with love to my hardworking beta zaataronpita for everything that she does for me.

Loki woke again and again during the night, jerking out of dreams that were sometimes vague and sometimes...not. He woke with a pounding headache and in a startlingly poor mood. He eased the headache with a touch of magic and drank most of a pot of coffee before he managed to feel somewhat more himself.

Someday, and not too long from now, Loki told himself, Doom would pay for what he had done, and Loki would laugh as the blood drained from his body.

For the moment...Loki took several deep, slow breaths. This...he could manage this. A few nightmares were nothing. A nuisance, little more.

Of more pressing concern was what he was going to do with his two weeks restricted from duty.

It...alarmed him, a little, that he could not think of any particular enjoyable way to spend his time. When had he come to rely on work to occupy his mind? He supposed he could go to speak with Foster, but he did not wish her to think he enjoyed her company. There was Captain Rogers, but Loki did not want to appear desperate and had already determined to wait for him to call first. Natasha was busy, and Barton was...Loki was still not sure where he and Barton stood. There were his meetings with Dr. Fisher, but thinking about that made his stomach try to knot, so Loki chose not to linger on it. Then there was Stark.

Loki suspected he had neither the mental nor emotional fortitude to deal with Stark without the serious potential of bodily harm to the man.

After a few moments staring blankly out the window, Loki grabbed a coat and a scarf and threw them on, exiting his apartment in a flurry, and went for a walk.

He went to the bakery down the street and got himself a chocolate croissant and some green tea, sitting down at a table by one of the windows and gradually shredding his pastry more than eating it. He liked this place; it was quiet and no one troubled him, and looking out the window and watching
people move by helped Loki feel a little calmer. Of course he was used to a particular routine, and that particular routine involved SHIELD. It was not such a dire thing that he was at a loss without his employment. He’d always preferred having things to do to idleness.

As for the dream…Doom would not linger forever. Not even for long. Loki would scrub him thoroughly from his mind, and at some point in the future would scrub him even more thoroughly from the Nine Realms.

Loki took a delicate sip of his green tea, gathered up croissant crumbs on one finger, and glanced out the window to see people on the sidewalk pointing and shouting. Loki frowned and cocked his head to listen, and caught, “—on Man! It’s Iron Man!” from a shrill young man whose eyes were nearly bugging out of his head.

He closed his eyes and breathed out through his nose. Surely Stark was not that horrendously dense. Surely he would not be such an idiot as to force Loki to acknowledge him through an ostentatious display that would draw attention to someone employed as a spy.

He stood up slowly, poured his tea into a paper cup, and walked out of the bakery, keeping his steps cautious and measured. He cast a simple suggestion that he not be noticed over himself and stepped out, casting an eye around the street only to see that Stark’s suit of armor was hovering in front of the entrance to his apartment and was currently entertaining an entourage.

“What are you doing here, Mr. Stark?” Someone called. “Is there some kind of emergency?”

“Nope,” Stark said. “Just visiting a friend who kept not calling me back, didn’t feel like dealing with the private jet, so…” Almost immediately, heads turned in owl-like circles, as though they could find this ‘friend’ by looking closely enough. Loki felt his teeth click together and took a slow breath through his nose.

He waited until Stark’s face turned his way, dropped the glamor momentarily and just enough to raise his hand and waggle his fingers at Stark with a thin smile. He then replaced it and teleported himself onto the roof of his apartment building, where he sat down cross-legged to wait for Stark to disentangle himself.

He arrived several minutes later. “Phew. Fans, am I right,” he said. “Don’t worry, I wasn’t followed. Been doing this for ages.”

“I hope you had something important to discuss,” Loki said neutrally. Stark shrugged and sat down a few feet away.

“Not really, no. Hey, if you can do that teleportation trick, couldn’t we go anywhere? There’s this great place in Monaco…” Loki just looked at him, and Stark shrugged. “Spoil sport.”

“I am supposed to be discreet,” Loki said, not quite through his teeth. Stark shrugged, flinging up his hands dramatically.

“You didn’t return my calls. What was I supposed to do?”

Loki pressed his lips together. “Did it occur to you that perhaps I did not return your calls because I did not wish to talk to you?”

“Occurred to me, yeah,” Stark said. “I moved past it. So, you’re not going to crater any small buildings, are you? Or large buildings. Cause I feel like that might come back on me, somehow.”

Loki opened and closed his right hand. “Rest assured,” he said, “that if anything ends up in a crater,
it will be approximately…” he eyed Stark from head to foot. “Five and a half feet deep.”


Loki set his jaw and gave Stark a withering look. “Is there a point to this or are you just here to be obnoxious and inconvenience me?”

“Ouch. You really know how to cut a guy. And after I go all in on a rescue mission of doom – haha, get it – and everything.” Stark’s expression was almost convincingly mournful. “That hurts. You never did thank me, you know, for putting my life and limb and ass on the line to recover your life and limb and ass. Just saying.”

Loki realized with a bit of a jolt that he hadn’t. Most of the…rescue (the word left a bad taste on his tongue) was a blur in his memories that he didn’t quite want to fill, but he remembered that Stark had been there. “How churlish of me,” he said, after a moment. “I do appreciate being spared gruesome torture. Well, further gruesome torture.”

Stark’s eyes cut away and his knee bounced twice. “Yeah, something like that. See, that’s a little more like it, though I wouldn’t object to some effusive gratitude and maybe a couple odes-”


“You know things that I don’t know,” he said, and jabbed a finger in Loki’s direction. “That’s not allowed. Ergo. So don’t do that again, right? Least not until I’ve had a chance to pick your brain for a couple years.” It was a deflection. Loki recognized it well, and he wondered what it was hiding, but decided it was not worth pursuing. “And in answer to the other question – about the point, I mean – I had a few questions about your equation weirdo space mathemagics thing.”

Loki raised his eyebrows very faintly and with pronounced disdain. “Mathemagics?”

“I thought it was catchy,” Stark said, not sounding in the least troubled by Loki’s disapproval. “Anyway, I think I worked up a couple of models – I say think because seriously, buddy, I’m pretty sure a few of the things you wrote down break some pretty fundamental rules-”

“Models,” Loki said, cautiously.

“Yeah,” Stark said. “Three-dimensional computer modeling, simulations, you know. Projections? Illusions?” Apparently his expression was blank, because Stark huffed. “You’re a space alien wizard and you don’t know what computer modeling is.”

“I learn things either as they are interesting or as they are relevant,” Loki said coolly. Stark looked affronted.

“Modeling is both interesting and relevant, but that’s not the point, the point is that I wanted to ask you about a few things I was playing around with, first of which is – once I get past the language issue, most of what you’re saying about makes sense, kind of. So why can’t I do it? Or Joe the Plumber – sorry, old reference – or someone else?”

“Because you haven’t a magical bone in your body,” Loki drawled. “Perhaps with borrowed power you might manage something, but without a great deal of training…you don’t have the right awareness.”

Stark leaned forward, his eyes sharpening. “Awareness? So, what, it’s like another sense? A magic sense? God, I’m never going to be okay with saying ‘magic’ seriously.”
Loki frowned, trying to think. His own consciousness, his own power, had been with him as long as he could remember. He could not recall a time when he didn’t see the world and simply understand, simply know the currents of energy running through it, though not how to manipulate them. “I… suppose,” he said, slowly. “Perhaps. It is, as I said, difficult to explain when you lack the entire vocabulary I would use. Suffice to say it is not something you can gain.”

“But you said I could ‘borrow’ power,” Stark said, eyes narrowed and keen. Loki cast him a glance that was not quite wary. Stark’s hunger reminded him suddenly and uneasily of Doom’s eagerness, and he felt a chill run down his spine. Loki’s breathing quickened slightly and he fought to slow it.

“Perhaps,” he said, carefully, trying to calm himself. There was a faint buzzing in his ears.

“From where? If I don’t even have the perception for this, uh, energy, how do I figure out where to borrow it from? Is it like a gold mining thing, you go digging for it in the ground? I mean, you have it, obviously…”

Loki swallowed. “You cannot steal mine,” he said, and his voice sounded strangely steady.

“No, I kind of figured that…wait, hold on,” and he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye, Stark taking a step closer, that was all.

Suddenly, though, somehow, it was Doom staring down at him with his expressionless mask and his cool questions and the taste of his own blood in the back of his throat – Loki’s head spun and he suddenly couldn’t get enough air to breathe and someone was close, too close. He felt frozen, paralyzed, like he was bound to that metal table all over again-

“Hey. Hey! Luke!” An unfamiliar voice buzzed in his ear. “Um – shit. What did I do? Deep breaths. It’s me, Tony Stark, please don’t break this building we’re both standing on that would be really hard to explain…”

Pull yourself together, Loki thought angrily, but it didn’t seem to matter to his body, still locked up, trapped. He sucked in a breath through his nose, forcing his lungs to inflate until they hurt. Stark. He was sitting on top of his apartment building with Stark. No one had touched him.

The world eased back in slowly. Stark was staring at him from a distance, slightly wild-eyed, and Loki felt faintly nauseous at his own weakness. He did not try to summon a smile, even a false one. “Okay,” Stark said slowly. “You back now?”

Loki stood. “You should leave,” he said, flatly.

“…you sure?” Stark said, after a moment, and when Loki narrowed his eyes at him, temper flaring, how dare you act as though I am some sort of invalid, this is temporary, this is, he raised his hands. “If you’re sure that’s fine, no arguing, I’m just saying. You look a little…” He made a gesture whose meaning Loki could not quite decipher. Loki felt his lips thin.

“I think I know my own desires.”

Stark grimaced. He rubbed his hands on his jeans, a clearly nervous gesture. “I get it,” he said, suddenly. “You know. I, uh. Yeah. I get it.” He cleared his throat, and made a strange face. “And I. Get the impression that was kind of my fault, so. Whoops, my bad.” Stark shifted uneasily on his feet.

I am not weak, Loki wanted to hiss, but that was a miserable lie. If he exploited the man’s guilt, perhaps he could get him to leave and not come back. Or gain a favor he might use in the future. He knew well enough what Stark was referring to, likely; he’d read the file.
“I think you should leave,” he said again, and thought he saw Stark’s face fall, if only slightly, with disappointment. He took another breath, his lungs inflating more easily now. “But I will come to your dwelling tomorrow and examine these…models of yours.” He pushed a smile onto his face. “I have discovered a bit of a taste for gin.”

“Two bottles,” Stark said, almost fervently. “Just for you.” He sounded relieved, though his grin was as grating as ever. “It’ll be a party.”

Loki kept his smile, with a bit of an effort. “I’m sure it will be something, at any rate.”

Stark half opened his mouth as though he was considering apologizing again, but fled without saying it. Loki was relieved by that. He thought, perhaps, that both of them were.

He missed Natasha. His phone was in his pocket, but he didn’t reach for it.

Loki ran into Coulson on his way up to Dr. Fisher’s office. “Agent Silver,” he said, looking nearly as placid and untroubled as usual. Perhaps just a touch harried. “Here to see Dr. Fisher?”

“I just felt like visiting,” Loki said blandly. “The architecture here is stunning.”

Coulson did not quite look amused. “Actually, if you have a moment, I was just thinking about giving you a call.” That caught Loki’s attention, and he turned. “The means of travel that you used to get here. Is it the only one of its kind?”

Loki felt his eyes narrow a fraction. “I do not think anything else can or would follow the path that I did, no.”

“Are there other, hm. Paths?” Coulson’s gaze was intense. “Other ways of getting around?”

“Yes,” Loki said slowly. “A few that I know of, and possibly more that I do not. Why do you ask?”

“You’re off duty and that’s classified information,” Coulson said promptly. He seemed to take a moment to think, then ‘hmm’ed. “Do you know of any other reason we’d be picking up on massive energy spikes at apparently random locations lately?” he asked, suddenly, and Loki blinked. His first thought was of the Bifrost, but he did not think – surely not so soon.

“No,” he said, after a moment’s pause. “None that I can think of.”

“Huh,” Coulson said, and then swept off before Loki could ask any more questions. He frowned at Coulson’s back for a moment, feeling vaguely unsettled, but set the feeling aside and strode down the hall to Dr. Fisher’s office, stepping inside. She stood up from her desk, looking a little startled.

“You’re early,” she said. Loki took the few strides to the chair that was for his use and sat down, crossing one ankle to his knee.

“I like to be prompt.”

Dr. Fisher tucked her hair behind her ear, and then mimicked him and sat down. She recovered admirably, Loki noted. “Well, that’s good,” she said, after a moment. “I’m glad to see you again.”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “Are you?”

“It means I don’t have to send any reports saying you didn’t show,” Dr. Fisher said. “I don’t like sending those, so yes, I am.” Loki felt his lips twitch and leaned back, regarding her. She was plain, he thought. He checked her left hand and found no wedding ring. What, he wondered, was her life
like outside of this room?

“A relief to both of us, I’m sure.” He let the silence stretch out, wondering what she would do with it.

“Anyway, now that you’re here…good afternoon,” Dr. Fisher said eventually, setting her clipboard down on her lap. “How are you doing?”

Loki gave her a slim smile. “Is that meant to be a sincere question or the usual pleasantries?”

“Take it however you like,” she said mildly. Loki narrowed his eyes.

“Fine, thank you,” he said, tone cheerfully false. “Yourself?”

Dr. Fisher’s expression only flickered slightly. “Pretty well.”

“How delightful. And I do hope it doesn’t rain today.”

This time Dr. Fisher gave him a look, and then shook her head. “We’re in the desert; I doubt it. So is there anything you want to talk about with me today?”

It seemed she was not going to bring up his previous humiliating admission. Not at the moment, anyway. “No,” Loki said, drooping the pretense of a smile. “Not particularly.”

“Okay.” Dr. Fisher leaned back. “Things…got pretty intense, pretty quickly, our last meeting. I thought we could try something a little more casual today. Just…tell me about yourself. Anything you want.”

*That leaves you some centuries to cover, my good doctor.* “And if there is nothing that I want?”

Loki suspected the look Dr. Fisher was giving him was a disappointed one. “You can start small. When’s your birthday?”

*No date that you would recognize.* “January twenty-second,” he said blandly, which was the date he had chosen for “Luke Silver.” Dr. Fisher nodded encouragingly.

“And where were you born?” She prompted, when he did not continue. Loki raised his eyebrows at her.

“I fail to see how this is supposed to be relevant,” he said, coolly. Dr. Fisher sat back.

“It’s not, necessarily,” she said. “It’s just an icebreaker thing. Me getting to know you. Getting a sense of who you are that’s not just what’s in your file. And sometimes it’s good to begin at the beginning, you know? Where people are from can have a lot to do with what their life turns out looking like.”

*So the fact that I was born on a frozen wasteland and abandoned to die explains a great deal, then.* And hadn’t it? Loki’s mouth tasted bitter. “Is that so,” he said, not quite tonelessly. “Is it the circumstances of one’s birth that matter, or the idyllic years of early childhood?”

Dr. Fisher hid her brief flash of uncertainty well, but Loki caught it nonetheless. “Nobody knows,” she said, after a moment. “It could be either, or both. Lots of people argue that question, but there’s not really a definite answer. Would you say your early childhood was…idyllic?”

Loki coughed a harsh laugh. “No,” he said at once, but then he hesitated. Had he not been happy once? Happy *then*? False it might have been, but he could remember warmth and believing he was
loved. The rest would not have hurt so much, without that. “No,” he said, more carefully. “Not idyllic, but…pleasant enough.”

“Mmmhm,” Dr. Fisher said. It was a clear invitation to go on, a neutral response to let him fill the silence. Loki considered her, wondering if she truly expected to learn anything from this. He could, of course, spin her a lovely tale of complete and utter lies. He was almost tempted.

“Those who raised me were kind,” he said, after a moment. “I wanted for little.”

“Those who raised you?” Dr. Fisher cocked her head. “Were you not brought up by your parents?”

“No,” Loki said, after a moment, and his thoughts flashed to Megan, suddenly. “I was…adopted, I suppose. At a young age.”

Dr. Fisher noted something on her clipboard. “Did you ever meet your birth parents?”

_I met my father, and then I killed him._ “I had little contact with them.”

“But you don’t consider your adopted parents your parents.”

Loki remembered, suddenly, the way Megan had talked about her biological father and her father, the latter without qualifications. Not hers by blood, but nonetheless her family. Something knotted uncomfortably in his chest. “No,” he said, after a moment, and then thought of Frigga. “My…my mother, perhaps.” But no, even that was unfair. He did not deserve to claim her. “No, neither of them. They are nothing to me.”

Dr. Fisher’s brows furrowed very slightly for a moment. “That’s a pretty strong statement to make.”

Loki gave her a cold smile. “Are you going to tell me it is unfair?”

“No,” she said. “I’m not here to judge you for the way you feel. I’m just trying to understand why you put it that way. Are you estranged from your family?”

Loki felt a laugh bubble up and swallowed it. “You might say that.”

“That’s not necessarily a bad thing,” Dr. Fisher said. “Sometimes we need distance from our families, because they’re not good for us or just because you need some space. Were you…close with your family, growing up? With your – adoptive parents, or any siblings…”

_Siblings._ Thor’s face flashed into Loki’s mind like lightning searing him and he felt himself flinch. _Close? You have no idea. We did everything together. I was always at his side, always at his heels from the day I could walk, I wanted nothing more than to be with him, to be him, he was perfect always perfect and I was-

“I suppose.” His voice sounded distant and strange. “No more than any child.”

_When did that change? You were happy once._

“Did you have siblings?” Dr. Fisher asked. Loki’s throat closed. _No, none._

“One,” he said, the word feeling almost dragged out of him. “An older brother.” He could feel his nails digging into the arm of the chair, threatening to tear the fabric of it. He felt raw, as though his skin were being abraded by sandpaper.

“Is he…Luke. Did your brother pass away?”
“Are you asking if he died?” Loki asked, bluntly. His eyes fixed on her face, but she looked calm.

“Yes.”

He didn’t die, I did, Loki wanted to say, and felt the laughter bubbling up again before he shoved it down. I died and he watched me do it and screamed my name. Thor’s face flashed into his mind again, but this time not smiling, this time as Loki had last seen it, staring down at him as Loki slid out of reach, lips shaping a refusal. He wondered if Thor still mourned.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” he said, perfectly toneless.

“Okay,” Dr. Fisher said gently. “Is there something you do want to talk about?”

“No,” Loki said. “Nothing.”

They sat in silence for the rest of the hour. Thor hates me, Loki reminded himself. Thor despises me and everything I am, he must.

Loki left when the hour was up without breaking his silence.

He did not try to sleep, knowing that it would only result in dark dreams if he found rest at all. He played chess against the computer for a while, honing his strategy for the next time he got a chance to match against Natasha, but eventually he drifted away from the screen and over to the windows, looking out at the city in which he’d chosen to live.

He was thinking about Thor, and this peculiar little realm he’d been hiding in. Living in. He was thinking about his childhood and when things had gone sour. He couldn’t find a moment when things had changed, so they must always have been that way, and it was merely that his sight had been clouded. He drew away from those thoughts, melancholy as they were, and focused on what Coulson had said.

Energy spikes. He had thought of the Bifrost, but he doubted that was it; he would have felt that sort of frequency without trying. Frowning, Loki took a breath and let it out, closing his eyes, and began to sift through the layers of magic, moving lower, seeking a disturbance.

He found it near the bottom of what he could sense, like a low frequency hum barely audible. He frowned. Something tickled at his thoughts as he drew away and back to himself, but nothing concrete.

Loki hesitated a moment more, then wove a working and stepped through the small space it opened into the between, finding himself on the branches of Yggdrasil with the Void all around. His head spun for a moment and fear made his stomach clench, but he controlled it ruthlessly.

It was the first time he had come here, Loki realized, since he’d fallen through those infinite spaces that drew the eye, seducing the unwary walker into their endless, singing darkness. He’d been lucky not to remain falling, forever.

He took a few steps, not sure what he was looking for, but knowing he was looking for something. He searched the silver starlight branches, scanning up and down, out into the Void. Nothing.

Frowning, he reached for the level of magic on which he’d felt that humming vibration again, and jerked.

It was like the World Tree was screaming. Like he could hear the fabric of the universe crying out in
agony, and there was something pushing on it, making it stretch and bend and-

Loki felt sick and bent over, taking gulping breaths through his nose. Something was awfully wrong. Something was trying to break through from outside the Nine, and it was willing to tear open reality itself to get in.

Loki fled the Void back to his apartment, breathing hard, half expecting the thing to burst through at any minute and find him there, vulnerable and exposed. His ears were ringing and his stomach was trying to turn itself inside out.

Spikes of energy, he thought. Reverberations. Pulses through Yggdrasil as it shudders in protest.

Or do they come from the thing itself?

Midgard was the center of the Realms. It would make a strategic place for someone or something intending to attack the Nine Realms to gain a foothold. And it was not protected, as Asgard was, from extra-dimensional invasion.

A chill ran down Loki’s spine and he imagined this world consumed in fire, turned into a charnel house, corpses scattered. Natasha’s red hair mingled with her red blood. Barton’s arrows pinning his corpse to a wall. Foster crushed under a block of concrete.

Angela. Mrs. Fairfax. What chance would any of them have against a being that could make the World Tree scream?

Loki braced his arms on the back of a chair and bent his head. He needed Asgard’s library. He needed to know what this thing was. He couldn’t cast the kind of protection spells Midgard would need alone, or even with one or two other magic users. Asgard would have the resources, but even if it weren’t him who asked...Loki couldn’t be certain Odin would bother, even if he had wanted to ask for help, and he did not.

(Thor would come. Loki brushed that thought aside before it could hurt.)

No. If something was coming, then Loki would defeat it. Alone, if need be.

Coulson should know, Loki thought, and then on its heels, what could he do? This is yours. Dread coiled in his stomach. And this time, don’t fail.

Interlude (XXIII)

Loki left early in the morning, before the sun rose. He stepped outside and then stepped again, standing knee deep in a grassy field, no mortals to be seen.

In a few hours, he thought, Andrea and Carl would be getting up to start their day. In a few weeks, likely they would have forgotten his presence. He had covered his tracks carefully; no one ought to be able to follow him to them.

He wanted it to be a relief to be free again, but it was not. He had, undoubtedly, stayed too long. But Carl had been…he liked Carl. He had reminded Loki of something that he had missed. Some innocence, perhaps. The memory of being that young, once.

But now he was back at the beginning again, with little real money (though he could always create more, but too much of that would make him conspicuous) and no place to go. Are you going to keep wandering like this forever? A small voice at the back of his mind asked. Going from place to place, lingering for a few months and then moving on, for the rest of your life?
What was the alternative? Settling down and taking on a human life? He doubted that was even possible.

The grass around his legs swayed and Loki stared dully off at the horizon line. What was the point? Of any of this?

*But you’re not willing to give up, are you?*

He’d tried that, Loki thought dryly. Jumped down the throat of the universe, and it had vomited him back out.

Loki picked a direction and started walking.

Until he decided to give up, it didn’t seem there was anything else to do.
Chapter 24

Is that a plot? Maybe the glimmers of a plot? Don't get excited, you might scare it away. (But in seriousness - I'm feeling better about this fic than I have in a while. Hopefully this means that I will be updating more regularly? Unfortunately, I am also embarking on my senior thesis, so it is possible that will not be the case and I will just end up playing a lot of Dragon Age and screaming quietly in my room. We'll see.)

With thanks, as always, to my personal Steve Rogers. She's a good one.

Natasha knocked on his door with her arms full of a bag of groceries and simply dropped them into his arms. “How’re you doing?” she asked, strolling casually on into his apartment. “You haven’t died of boredom yet, at any rate.”

“Not yet.” Loki peered at the bag. “What is this?”

“Food,” she said. “You’re making me dinner.”

Loki raised his eyebrows at her, watching as she pulled plates down from his cupboards and set them on the table. “Am I.”

Yep,” she said without hesitation. “I brought the ingredients. Trust me, you don’t want me to help.” She’d picked his book up off the coffee table and was examining it. “Really? Are you actually reading The Art of War?”

“It’s a classic,” Loki said blandly.

“People are going to think you’re getting ideas.” Natasha set it back down and looked at him, one eyebrow twitching up. “Are you going to just stand there?”

“Dinner,” Loki said, after a moment, and then crossed to the kitchen, setting the bag down on the counter and beginning to go through the ingredients. “You might have called first.”

“Someone has to keep you on your toes while you’re off duty.” Natasha climbed onto the couch and leaned her elbows on the back of it, chin resting on her arms. “Wouldn’t want you to lose your edge.”

No, you most certainly would not, the thought crossed Loki’s mind, but he brushed it aside. “I doubt I’m in very much danger of that. Did you know Stark came and visited me? In his suit, no less. I hope you weren’t responsible for giving him my address.”

“I would never.” Loki was inclined to believe that, at least for the moment. “I told you; Tony has a way of getting what he wants. And apparently what he wants right now is you.” She paused, cocked her head to the side. “…hmm,” she said, sounding thoughtful, and Loki made a face.

“I think not.” He pulled out a knife and began chopping the vegetables Natasha had brought. “He is not my type.”
“You’re right. Too similar.” Loki glanced over his shoulder to give her a look.

“I am not like Stark.”

Natasha smiled innocently at him. “Of course not.” She stood up fluidly and moved over toward his windows. “I heard you ran into Captain America the other day. Base was buzzing about it.”

“They must have very little of interest to talk about,” Loki said, blandly. Natasha snorted.

“Oh, come on. You put on a show. Maybe not intentionally, but you can’t blame the rookies – and some of the not so rookies – for staring.” Natasha smirked at him. “Anyway, that’s not the point. What did you think of Rogers?”

“Why ask me?”

“I’m curious what you made of him. And he’s not an icon of your childhood, like some people, or that guy your grandfather always talked about, for others.” Loki paused in his chopping and glanced toward her, wondering what Natasha’s interest was.

“Does what I think about him say something about me?”

“You’re distracting me,” Loki pointed out, but he returned to his preparations to consider her question. “I liked him well enough, I suppose. He seemed…uncertain. Uncomfortable. He’s a skilled fighter but I think, outside of combat, he is not sure of where he fits.”

“Mmm.” Loki could feel Natasha’s eyes on the back of his neck. “I’d tend to agree with you. I think he’s figuring it out, though, a little at a time.”

Loki felt his shoulders stiffen. “Are we still talking about the good Captain, Agent Romanov?”

“Who else would that analysis apply to that I’d be talking about?” Romanov said mildly, and Loki felt his fingers tighten on the knife. He made them relax.

“I haven’t the least idea,” Loki said after a moment, with his own air of deliberately casual disregard. “I know of no one else who is…struggling so.”

Natasha exhaled, and murmured something that might have been, “I’m sure you don’t.” Then she raised her voice and said instead, “Thought you might be interested to know that Doom hasn’t shown his face since you got out. Maybe turning his labs into a crater got the message across.”

*I doubt it. “I’m sure he’ll reappear eventually.” And when he does I’ll rip the head from his shoulders. (As soon as SHIELD lets you off your leash, a snide voice in his head added, and Loki pushed it down.) “He doesn’t seem the type to stay quiet for long.”

“No,” Natasha agreed, tone almost a drawl. “He’s not exactly the most subtle, is he.” She hummed under her breath. Loki began slicing the meat she’d brought into narrow strips and dropping them into a pan, listening to the sizzle. “What did Stark want?”

Loki shrugged. “He’s full of questions.” He wondered, suddenly, if Stark had mentioned his…lapse, and if so to whom.

“He is that.” Natasha padded over and leaned against the kitchen counter, watching him work.
“Loki...how are you doing?”

Loki felt himself tense. “Just fine, thank you. Better, if I were not the continual recipient of questions after my state of mind.”

“Oh huh.”

Loki tensed further. The sudden urge to wheel and snarl at her, to frighten her, took him by surprise, and he nearly wavered. These surges of anger, he thought, that was new, and he didn’t like it. “If you have something to observe, Agent Romanov...” he said, keeping his voice deliberately mild.

He heard Natasha exhale through her nose. “Other than the fact that you’re as tense as a trip wire and look about as likely to explode?” Loki focused on cutting the meat. Slowly, methodically. Natasha cocked her head. “Whatever you’re running from, it’s starting to catch up, isn’t it?”

Loki swallowed. “I am not running from...”

“Don’t lie to me, Loki. It’s just going to irritate me.” Natasha sighed, and shifted a little closer. “Look, it’s fine if you don’t want to talk about it. I’m not your therapist – though while you’ve got one on SHIELD’s buck I’d suggest talking to them about it, whatever it is. But word of advice, from someone who spent a long time running from a lot of things?” Loki turned his head fractionally to look at her. “Turn and face it before it catches up to you. That way at least you see it coming and it can’t stab you in the back.” She leaned back against the counter. “That’s all.”

Loki paused in his slicing and looked at her, the anger vanished and replaced by a tangle he didn’t want to examine too closely that made his chest feel almost uncomfortably full. Natasha was frowning at the cabinets opposite, looking displeased.

Loki wondered what she would say if he told her that something was coming, something vast and terrible reaching out from beyond the borders of her universe and the known world. That he wasn’t certain what it was or how to stop it, but he knew the cost of not finding out would be immense. It might ease the weight on his mind to share it with someone else.

But that was...hopelessly selfish.

“Duly noted,” he said, after a moment. Natasha nodded, not quite curtly, and Loki felt peculiarly guilty. “I would hope that you would be there,” he said, after a moment. “Watching my back.”

Natasha raised her eyebrows at him with just a flicker of a smile. “As much as you let me, Silver.” She paused, and then cocked her head again. “Ha. From ‘Silvertongue,’ right? Should’ve picked up on that. I guess I wasn’t looking for Norse myths in SHIELD HQ, though.”

Loki felt a slight tightness in the center of his back. “You’ve been reading,” he said mildly.


“Make yourself useful and set the table,” Loki said, without really thinking about it.

“Watch who you boss around,” Natasha said, but she turned for the silverware drawer, and Loki felt himself relax again, slightly, focusing on the preparation.

“I’m not running from anything,” he told himself, but even in his own head it sounded like a lie.
“So hey,” Darcy Lewis greeted him, as he walked in the door, “is it true that one time you banged a horse?”

Loki closed his eyes briefly and breathed in before saying, “control your servant, please.”

“She’s not my servant,” Foster said, and then added, after a moment, “Darcy…”

“Fun ruiners. You could at least answer my question.”

“No,” Loki said, flatly.

“No, you didn’t, or…”

Loki’s jaw clenched. “Get out.”

“Just so we’re clear, I don’t take orders,” Lewis said. “I just happen to have a paper due tomorrow and this just became a hostile work environment. Hey Jane – movie night on Saturday? Call me.” Foster’s eyes stayed worriedly on Loki, who did not glance in Lewis’s direction. “You two have fun. And Jane, remember what I said about-”

“Darcy.”

“Right, right,” Lewis said, and the door banged loudly closed. Loki let out the breath he was holding, carefully controlling himself and wondering if it had been a mistake to come here. He was already on edge.

“What she said about?” He asked, mildly, and watched Foster flush and turn quickly away.

“Trust me,” she muttered, “you don’t want to know.” She pushed a hand through mussed hair that was only just staying out of her face. “Mind if we take a break from work for a bit? I’ve been going for almost thirty-six hours and I’m not a grad student anymore.”

Loki eyed her for a moment, then inclined his chin. “I can tolerate that.”

“Nice of you.” Jane blew a strand of hair out of her face and crossed the messy room to a refrigerator almost buried under a mound of stuff. “Want anything? I’ve got some beer, Sprite, a bottle of water…some moldy cheese, Darcy…”

Loki stayed standing, not sure what, exactly, he was expected to do in this situation. “I am fine.”

Foster glanced over at him, her expression unreadable, and then shrugged. “Right,” she said, something in her voice Loki declined to interpret. “I bet you are.” She pulled out a can of something called Sprite and popped it open, taking a sip. “So, uh…how’ve you been?”

Loki just barely held back a snort. “Please, Dr. Foster. There is no need to feign interest in my personal life.”

Foster frowned, looking almost offended. “I am interested. If nothing else I’m curious what you do with your time.” Loki raised his eyebrows and her lips turned down at the corners. “Okay, what did I say wrong this time?”

Why would it matter? Loki was tempted to counter, but refrained. “Nothing. I merely find it peculiar that you should be so fascinated by the mundane details of my life.”

Jane pinched the bridge of her nose. “Do you give everyone you talk to a headache, or just me?”
Loki’s mouth quirked. “I haven’t conducted a study.” His smile, if smile it was, faded quickly, and he found himself saying, “if you would like, I can do something about that.”

“Aabout what?” Foster said, sounding irritable. In lieu of answering, Loki took a step forward, only for Jane to scramble back. “What are you-”

“Your headache,” Loki held up his hands. “It’s a simple spell.” Foster’s eyes narrowed, and Loki felt his mouth start to twist. Of course she would refuse. Why not? Why would she let him work a simple piece of magic on her rather than suffer-

“All right,” she said, stepping back forward. “Sure.” She looked tense, but her expression read determination, and after a moment Loki reached out and touched his fingers lightly to her temples, sending a pulse of magic into her to soothe the pain, though he couldn’t truly wipe the source away. Foster blinked, and then blinked again.


Loki looked down at her, trying to puzzle her out. “You are welcome.” Foster’s grin faded and she glanced away.

“What I wouldn’t give to know how that works,” she said, wistfully. “Is that – the kind of stuff you do, can a lot of people on Asgard do it?”

Loki wondered why she asked. Perhaps she wished to know if Thor was capable of healing her headaches. “No,” he said, after a moment. “Some, but not many.”

“Huh.” Foster shook her head a little. “This is all still very weird. What are the limits on stuff you can do? I mean, there are rules, right? Can you bring someone back from the dead?”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “Is there someone you would like to bring back from the dead, Jane Foster?”

“Not necessarily,” she said, though the way she glanced away made Loki wonder who she had lost. “It’s just – in most systems of magic – in fiction, I mean – that’s one of the main rules that can’t be broken. That you can’t resurrect people.”

Loki flexed his fingers and, after a moment, sat down. “It’s not strictly true that it can’t be done. Generally speaking, however, it isn’t. For a number of reasons.”

“Wow.” Jane shook her head, and then hesitated, shooting Loki a sidelong look like she wasn’t sure about asking her next question. “Does your…does Thor have…can he do any of that?”

Loki was tempted to lie. There wasn’t really any point to it, though. “He could, but he never learned much. It was never his greatest talent.”

“Huh.” Jane came over to the table and sat down, perching her chin on her hands. “Loki…can I ask you a question?”

“I dearly hope it is about the Bifrost,” Loki said, not quite able to keep the flatness out of his voice. Foster frowned at the table. “You and Thor…must have been close once. When did that change?”

It was almost an echo of thoughts he had had, too recently. Loki nearly jerked back. “You dismiss the possibility that Thor was deluded all along.”
Jane’s eyes lifted to him. “I don’t buy that.”

“You underestimate my acting abilities. Or Thor’s optimism, perhaps. Why is it you wish to know?”

“Just curious, I guess.”

“Ah yes. And your curiosity licenses you to dig into my personal affairs.”

“Well, no,” Foster started to say, frowning a little. “I just wanted to ask-”

“Hoping to gain some insight as to where my wickedness began?” Loki could hear his voice growing dangerously sharper. “An explanation as to where I could have gone so wrong?”

“If you don’t want to answer a question you can just say ‘I don’t want to answer the question,’” Jane said, raising her voice. “Fine, fine. I take it back. Sheesh.” She sipped at her sprite and eyed Loki sidelong. “You’re so dramatic, you know that?”

Loki felt his hackles rise. “Perhaps I find it necessary given your lack of attention to subtleties.”

“Hey!” Jane looked startled, and a flush touched her cheeks. “I’m plenty subtle. Just because I don’t have the patience for dancing around your delicate pride-”

Loki felt his temper strain. “Disappointed that I’m not indulging your desire to moon over Thor?”

Foster’s lips pressed together. “You know I’ve got more going on in my life than your brother and your mood swings, right?”

“Oh?” Loki feigned startlement. He knew he was being cruel but couldn’t stop, some urge in him to hurt. “Where is it?”

“I don’t sleep here.”

“You don’t sleep at all, by the sound of it.” Loki leaned forward, across the table. “Does Thor haunt your dreams? Does he whisk you away to a magical land where you will be crowned his queen? Do you lie awake thirsting-”

“Shut up!” Jane jerked to her feet, hands balled into fists at her sides. “All I did was ask a question. The way Thor talked about you – but if you were always like this, it’s not hard to see why people liked him so much more than you!”

Loki jerked, feeling as though he’d been slapped. Jane’s eyes widened slightly, as though she had just realized what she’d said, but Loki felt those words cut surprisingly deep, sinking through his skin like a knife into butter and settling somewhere in his chest. He felt his spine straighten, wiping his face clean. “I’m sure you would not find much disagreement with that.”

Jane’s face was flushed, her lips pressed together in a thin line. “Why do you have to be such an asshole all the time?”

Loki smiled thinly. “It’s in my nature, Dr. Foster.”

“Oh,” Jane hissed, “that’s weak. Like you just can’t – can’t help it, or whatever. Can’t stop yourself. Have you ever thought about choosing not to be a jerk? Like most people do, on a daily basis-”

Loki felt his face twist. “Have you ever thought about choosing not to be what you are? A small woman, always scrabbling for recognition and attention, always overlooked and ignored. How refreshing it must have been to be noticed. Except, oh wait – where is your hero now? Has he come
back for you? Poor Jane Foster.”

Foster’s cheeks reddened more and she took a step toward him, full of anger. “At least I have something I care about. At least I’m not just a big sack of hate like you are. At least I’m not stuck feeling sorry for myself cause I had a rough childhood and I can’t get over myself enough to see that I’m not the only one in the world who hasn’t had it easy.”

“Be silent!” Loki said, his voice rising almost to a scream. His magic flared, flashing around his hands, and Jane opened her mouth. Her eyes bulged and her expression went from fury to fear between one moment and the next, and he hadn’t meant to do that but he couldn’t feel sorry. Not with his heart pounding and a mixture of fury and something else pounding through his veins. “You know nothing about me,” he snarled. “Nothing. You think you understand, you think you see me but all you are is a prattling, pathetic mortal reaching for things beyond her grasp.” His magic seethed under his skin.

Jane, he realized, no longer looked angry. She looked scared, her fingers clutching at her throat, backing away from him.

Do you feel victorious? A small voice murmured at the back of Loki’s mind. Are you pleased with yourself, for managing to affright a mortal woman, unarmed, defenseless? What a feat. Your mother would be so proud.

Loki felt suddenly ill. His magic evaporated and Jane let out a gasp, grabbing on to one of the desks to steady herself. Her eyes moved toward Loki as she pushed herself upright, and for a moment they stared at each other, Jane’s eyes wide, Loki’s wild.

He fled before she could order him out, and stood shaking in the middle of nowhere, his fists clenched.

He should not have done that. (He hadn’t meant to.)

He never should have talked to her at all.

Loki hesitated for some time before answering the phone call from Steve Rogers. Ultimately, however, it seemed as good a way to deal with the tension that had only been growing since he’d spoken with (argued with) Foster as any, and probably better than some. Besides, he was ever so slightly curious about the man. He’d done a bit of reading since their last meeting and since talking with Natasha, but there was a vast difference between reading about someone and speaking with them.

Not to mention much of what Loki found was colored by Rogers’ role as a superhero. One of the first, it seemed, to distinguish himself as such in the public eye. Loki wondered how many others before him had gone unnoticed, or been deemed unfit to stand for their people.

Ultimately, however, it seemed to be a good choice. The sparring was vigorous and challenging enough to make him work up a sweat. The room the Captain engaged did not have windows, so they were spared an audience, and by the time Rogers called a halt he was nearly tired enough to be relaxed.

Steve Rogers stretched and gave Loki a small grin. “I could almost be a little insulted. You hardly look out of breath.”

Loki gave him a smirk. “Well, not out of. But you managed to make me breathe a little harder.” He realized the moment after he’d said it that might well be taken differently, and tensed for anger or
“Yeah, well. Guess I’ll just have to work harder next time.” Rogers glanced at him, sidelong, and added, “if you want to, I mean.”

“Never fear. I’m not tired of you yet.” Loki cocked his head, examining the Captain as he scrubbed a towel over his face. “Besides, you offer more of a challenge than most others.” He hadn’t asked to spar with Natasha, though he wondered suddenly what would happen if he did.

“Thanks,” the Captain said, just a little dryly.

Loki considered his back a moment longer, then asked, “Would you care to go out for a coffee?”

The way Rogers’ face lit up was almost embarrassing. “Yeah – sure? I mean, I’ve got to hit the showers, but afterwards…”

A lonely man, Loki thought. Likely he would take any company he was offered. Nonetheless, Loki was pleased. He flipped a hand carelessly. “By all means. I’m in no rush.”

“I know a place a few blocks from here,” Rogers said, smiling a little. “They’ve got pastries, too, and some great soups…”

Loki’s smile felt a little crooked, but he let it be so. “Go take your shower, Captain, and then you can show me.”

Loki waited out on the sidewalk, his hands in his pockets and feeling a little odd, though he could not pin down why. His thoughts drifted back to Jane Foster and he felt a small twinge. Likely he had burned that bridge for good. There would be no way of knowing now what she was doing or how far she had gotten with her work on reconstructing the Bifrost.

She would never succeed without him, Loki reminded himself. There was nothing to worry about, and this way he would no longer have to deal with her invasive personal questions. He pushed the thought hard away and took a deep breath, trying to calm himself again, but there was a heaviness in the air that spoke of an encroaching thunderstorm, and it was fast undoing any relaxation Loki had gained.

He dragged his mind back to Rogers just as the man reappeared, his hair damp and bag slung over his shoulder. “It’s this way,” he said, indicating with his chin. “Maybe five or six blocks.”

“Lead on,” Loki said with a small smile, and fell into step with the Captain, easily matching his strides. Rogers looked more relaxed than he had in the SHIELD basement, Loki noticed, his posture less rigid. He wondered if it had occurred to the man that Loki could easily be Fury’s spy, and decided that it probably had. Perhaps it simply didn’t matter to Rogers; he might well be that desperate for company in a place he likely hardly recognized.

(Who else could you be describing?)

“Can I ask you a question?” he said, after perhaps a half a block. Loki felt himself tense involuntarily and kept his face calm.

“Of course. Whether I will answer it, though…”

Rogers’ expression was one of earnest curiosity. “I hope it’s not – the…stuff you did, last time. With your clothes, and making the windows dark…that wasn’t just…” Rogers cleared his throat. “It looked like some kind of…”
Loki felt his lips curl. “I have to wonder what the aversion is to calling something what it is. I have access to certain…unusual skills, yes, that can be broadly referred to as magic.”

Rogers’ eyes went almost childishly wide. “Wow,” he said, and then shook his head and said again, “wow. So you can just…” he made a peculiar gesture with one hand, and then flushed, cheeks going endearingly bright pink. “Sorry, I must sound like a complete idiot.”

Loki was almost charmed. “You don’t seem insulted by the idea that there might be such a thing,” he said dryly, “which is a step ahead of some.”

“Insulted? No! It’s-” Steve laughed. “It’s incredible. I thought it might be some sort of trick, but it’s really…have you always been able to – do magic? Is that the right phrasing? What kind of things can you do?” He looked embarrassed again. “If I’m being obnoxious…”

“No,” Loki said, faintly amused. “You are not. If I do become annoyed, you will know. As for what I can do…that is a long and complicated conversation.”

“Amazing,” Rogers murmured, and then shook his head. “Every time I think I can’t be surprised anymore…”

Loki hummed in tacit agreement. Something was distracting him, though, prickling at the edge of his thoughts. He paused, turning his head to scan the street. The heavy dampness in the air had grown more intense, and a small corner of Loki’s thoughts whispered *Thor is here* but it wasn’t quite right for that.

“Mr. Silver?” The Captain had paused as well, and was looking at him with furrowed brows. “Is something wrong?”

“Can you not feel it?” he asked, taking a deep breath, but he could not smell anything out of the ordinary. A faint scent of ozone and perhaps something burning, but that did not seem unusual for this city.

“It feels like it’s going to rain,” Rogers said, after a moment. “Maybe a thunderstorm…”

That was when the screaming started.

The Captain whirled around at once, immediately alert. “What’s,” he started to say. Loki reached out with other senses, casting a wide net-

*It yawned in front of him, gaping and awful and wrong-*

He bent over and retched violently, almost dropping to his knees on the sidewalk. The Captain was beside him in moments, his eyes worried. “Luke! What’s going on, are you okay-”

“Brace yourself,” Loki rasped, and grabbed the Captain’s wrist to pull them both through space.

Seeing it in person made Loki feel sick. A ragged tear in the stuff of reality, gaping into somewhere/when else that did not belong here. His instincts screamed at him to flee even as he could feel the power it vomited, focused and raw. Intoxicating.

And something had come through.

It didn’t hold its shape well in this dimension. It shifted constantly, a mass of dizzying colors and textures and shapes, vast and awful and crawling along the street, smashing through metal and concrete and tearing through flesh alike. Loki could hear it in his bones, a horrid shrieking howl.
“Oh my god,” Rogers said, his voice shaking. “What is that?”

“An extra-dimensional being,” Loki said. His ears were ringing with the high, shrill song of the rift itself coupled with the horrible dissonance of one dimension intruding on another. “Captain, get everyone who can out of this area—”

“Are you going to fight that thing?” Rogers sounded incredulous.

“No,” Loki said. “I’m going to banish it. Some fool must have summoned it and it needs to go back where it came from.” He reached for his magic and called up the words.

“Silver!” Rogers said, and Loki felt the man slam into him and they both went flying just as something like a tentacle lashed out at where they had been standing. The wind exploded out of his lungs but even as he gasped for air Rogers was shoving himself to his feet and running—

Running towards the creature, the idiot. Unarmed, utterly magicless, what did he think he was going to do? Loki struggled to push himself up and nearly dropped again as he felt the creature roar in his mind, rage and—

Pain, Loki realized. Pain and fear. Not anger. And there were splashes of…something, flesh or blood or matter of some kind, on the ruined street between the creature and the rift.

Nothing in this realm could do that kind of damage, not to something like this.

Loki shoved himself to his feet and threw a shielding spell around the Captain, relieved to see that he was not trying to attack, merely waving his arms and yelling, making himself a visible target. It was a valiant intent, but this was not an animal of Midgard or even Asgard, and Loki doubted it ‘saw’ Rogers at all. “Captain!” he yelled, using just a touch of magic to augment his voice. “Get back! Focus on getting people out of the way! It’s already dying!”

Rogers started to turn, and the creature lashed out again, one of its tentacle-like extensions slashing through the air and catching the Captain in his side. He went flying, slammed into concrete and did not rise. Loki’s heart leapt into his throat and he spoke the words of banishing, clear and precise.

Nothing happened. The beast stayed, though it seemed to be slowing, folding in on itself. Shrinking.

Loki opened his mouth to speak the words again and it slammed into him so hard that he dropped to one knee, gasping.

Emptiness. Darkness. Total destruction and utter desolation. A feeling of aloneness so profound that Loki couldn’t breathe.

Then it was gone. The creature seemed to sway, almost a solid shape now, like it was struggling to keep itself separate. Loki felt a sound like a soft, keening moan echo in his bones.

Then it melted.

The rift hung in the air, and Loki made his eyes focus to look through it, but he could feel nothing, and a moment later it collapsed. The magical shockwave would have made Loki stagger if he hadn’t already been kneeling, and then the street was a mass of steam and smoke and rubble.

The Captain, Loki thought, and shoved himself to his feet, staggering over to where he’d seen his body land. He heard coughing as he got there and found Rogers still breathing, to his relief, though he looked dazed. Loki dropped to a crouch beside him and Rogers cracked a grin.

“Hell of a coffee date,” he rasped. Loki snorted and stood up, offering a hand. Rogers took it, and
only winced a little as Loki pulled him to his feet. “You got rid of it?”

“No,” Loki said. “It was wounded badly. Dying.”

Rogers blinked. “Wounded by what? You said someone summoned it…?”

“I may have been wrong.” Loki looked toward the middle of the street, where the rift had been. Devastating loneliness and complete destruction. “It may have been… a refugee. Or perhaps a soldier fleeing a battle already lost.”

“A refugee?” Rogers sounded confused. “From another dimension? From what?”

Loki thought of Yggdrasil screaming, something trying to get through. Of the creature from deep space that had claimed it and its people were only seeking a new home after theirs had been annihilated. Something was moving and he didn’t know what it was.

It might not just be Midgard, or even the Nine Realms.

This could, Loki thought, be a great deal worse.

“That is the question, isn’t it?” He said, and hoped desperately that he was wrong.

Interlude (XXIV)

Loki set himself up in a midsize city called Vancouver that was apparently outside the boundaries of the country called the United States where he had landed. He stole or crafted the money he needed to keep a small, shabby apartment and kept to himself, avoiding his neighbors and everyone else.

His trouble lately had come, after all, from being too involved, too visible. He’d always done better on his own. Or so he told himself with determination, because he refused to acknowledge the hole in his chest that felt a little too much like longing.

He dreamed too often of Thor, and they were not always nightmares. He missed having a home. He’d always been a wanderer, but he’d always had a place to go back to, too. And now…

It grew harder and harder to pull himself out of his melancholia, to make himself get up and make food. He lay awake for hours, sleeping irregularly, and when he woke more often than not turned over and went back to sleep, unable to think of much else to do. He knew he was sinking and wasn’t sure how to stop it.

It might have gone on that way, were it not for the fact that Loki realized he was being followed. That woke him up. Jarred him. And then made him angry. He had done nothing, touched nothing, disturbed no one. And yet they could not leave him alone.

They were good. Better than the one who had followed him from the bookstore and then to Megan’s home, and if he had not been… himself perhaps he might have been fooled. But he had spent a long time aware of watchers, and he knew when people were pursuing him – or preparing to pursue him.

Of course there was the expedient solution. But that would not tell him who these people were following, and likely would just result in more being sent. And there was the fact that dead bodies could easily become conspicuous, as could disappearances. It occurred to him briefly to do nothing, but he was not so far gone as that yet. He had no attachments, no one to risk.

So he waited, and pretended he had noticed nothing, and kept his actions limited and careful. It
started to chafe quickly, but he refused to give up the game first.

Whatever they wanted, he was not going to make it easy for them to get it.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Yeah, I remember way back when when I said this was going to have a consistent updating schedule, hahaha, nope. I should know better than to claim "consistent" anything, really. It's just not what I do best.

But anyway - I mapped out the broad plot outline of the rest of this fic, finally, and while that leaves a lot of smaller loose ends still that I haven't quite figured out how to tie up, well, so be it. As always, talk to me on my tumblr (or don't), and many, many thank yous to the real life Steve Rogers sometimes known as ameliarating. Bless.

“Can you explain to me what this thing is?” Fury asked, pausing the grainy, homemade video and gesticulating at the screen. The Limbo-spawn did not seem to take well to film, judging by the blurry distortion that was its form. Loki kept his hands folded on the table.

“A creature from the place in between dimensions,” Loki said, a little flatly. “As I think you were told already.”

“In between dimensions. Right. That’s what Captain Rogers said you told him. Can you give me a little more than that, Agent Silver?” Fury was…more displeased than usual. Loki kept his face bland, as his lack of response seemed to irritate the man more.

“If you want a full explanation of dimensional theory, I could try, but it would require some background in both astrophysics and thaumaturgy that I don’t believe you possess.” Perhaps not so bland as that, then. Fury narrowed his one eye at Loki.

“Don’t be a smartass,” he said. “I have enough of those. This is supposed to be your area of expertise, isn’t it?”

“Not precisely. I have only done a limited amount of study on conjuration and Limbo. I never found it particularly useful.” He looked at the screen again. “If your concern is a duplication of this event… I doubt it. This particular creature is unlikely to be followed.”

“Oh?” Fury crossed his arms. “Why do you say that?”

Because everything else in its former home is dead. Loki shrugged. “Call it an instinct. Of course it is possible for certain magic users to force similar events, but if this is the first time you have seen such a thing I doubt any of yours have worked it out.”

Fury’s lips thinned. “What about you, Agent Silver?” Out of the corner of his eye, Loki saw Coulson shift. He raised his eyebrows.

“What about me, what?”

“Could you – force such an event?”

Loki felt his expression relax into one of boredom. Ah, so that was what the Director was cutting toward. “You suspect that this was my idea.”
“You seem to end up at the center of a fair amount of trouble. And that you just happened to be within range of this – thing, when it attacked…”

Loki felt himself stiffen. “Of course – naturally, it must have been my doing.” His voice sounded cold, the accusation like ice water in his face. “I must ask – what would I hypothetically gain from such a performance?”

“Maybe you’re bored. Restless. Sick of being benched. Maybe you thought making some trouble and then fixing it…” Fury’s eyes were hard. “Or maybe you just felt like causing a little mayhem. I’m just guessing here.”

Loki stood up sharply, his chair scraping across the floor. “I see. Well, Director, as I doubt you will take my word for it…am I permitted to go? Or do you intend to put me in chains? Though I must admit attempting the latter would not go very well for you.” He flashed his teeth, the expression meant to be unpleasant. Fury seemed unaffected.

“You’re not leaving.”

Loki turned to him, slowly. “Oh? Would you like to test that?” He could feel himself almost vibrating within his skin. Fury did not look impressed.

“Romanoff put your name forward as a candidate for the Avengers Initiative. Have you heard of it?”

Loki jerked like he’d been slapped. If that wasn’t a non-sequitur, he couldn’t figure out how, and if it was…had Fury been baiting him? Why? “Briefly,” he said, which wasn’t quite true. He’d heard the name, and a few jokes tossed around by other agents about Fury’s project, but no more than that.

“She seems to think that you might be a good option. I have to admit that frankly, I don’t see it. You’re unstable at best and you can’t follow orders worth a damn.” Loki felt himself tense, his jaw tighten. “But you are powerful – more than you led us to believe, it seems – good in a fight, and you know things most of the rest of us don’t.” Fury eyed him, and now Loki wasn’t sure whether to be complimented or insulted. “Well, Silver? Could you work with a team?”

Loki blinked, and then let out a stuttering laugh. “No,” he said, with certainty. “Absolutely not.”

Fury nodded, and cast a glance in Coulson’s direction that Loki wasn’t certain he could read. “That’s about what I thought.” He gestured at the screen. “I buy that you weren’t involved in this…thing. But next time something like this happens, we’d appreciate a call. Even better, if you know a way of predicting this kind of event…”

“I do not.”

Fury grunted. “Dismissed, then. And try to keep your head down. For an agent, you’re making yourself awfully visible. Had at least six eyewitnesses give garbled accounts of what you did. You already put a target on yourself pulling that stunt with Osborn and Doom; don’t make it any bigger.”

Loki sketched a mocking bow, a little stung. “I will do my best.”

“Do that,” Fury said flatly, and turned his back.

Loki resented letting him have the last word, but stalked out, aware that any response would only sound petulant.

His apartment felt quiet and empty when he returned to it, and if he was exhausted in body and spirit
his mind was still buzzing in a way he knew meant he wouldn’t sleep. He sank down onto his couch, thoughts circling back to the more pressing concern than his own vague loneliness. Something was moving across the cosmos, towards Midgard, and he didn’t know what it was.

All the books that might have told him something useful were in Asgard, and while he might be able to find his way back there, Loki shied away from even considering the thought. What bare knowledge he might glean was not worth the chance of discovery and what would undoubtedly follow. Though if he told the All-Father that Midgard was in danger…

Loki shut down that line of thought. Odin would not believe him, nor would anyone else. If they even gave him a chance to speak before sending for the headsman – if Thor didn’t see to parting his head from his shoulders himself, Loki added, bitterly, something in him shriveling a little at the thought. No, Asgard was not an option.

Midgardians in general had so little knowledge of the rest of their universe and the world around them…he could not count on the technicians with SHIELD. They were clever, to be sure, but lacked understanding of the wider principles beyond what they could touch and see. If he wanted someone to speak with about this possible threat, he needed someone with at least rudimentary knowledge of Yggdrasil and the Nine.

Jane Foster’s face bloomed in his mind’s eye, and Loki wanted to wince. Yes, he thought, Jane’s knowledge and intelligence might be valuable, but he was unlikely to get any help from her, not after…what he’d done.

Loki remembered the fear on her face as her mouth opened and closed soundlessly and his stomach twisted with shame that he tried to push away. She had provoked him, she should not have dared to speak to him like she had – but none of it felt right. He was making excuses and he knew it.

What do you expect of yourself? Loki thought bitterly. Is that not what you do, misbegotten creature that you are?

There was nothing for it now. That relationship was finished. He did not expect he would see Foster again.

Loki’s manufactured irritation ebbed away, fading into tired melancholy. He stood up and paced jerkily over to the kitchen, splashing some of an already open bottle of wine into a glass and not bothering to try to push it away. He took a large swallow and stared at nothing in particular, wishing…he wasn’t certain.

His thoughts drifted from Jane Foster to Thor, again. Wondering what he was doing now. If he ever thought of Loki with anything more than a curse.

He is nothing to you, Loki reminded himself savagely, and downed the rest of his glass, almost wishing it would have some effect on him.

Loki pulled his thoughts back to the matter at hand. Without the books in Asgard, identifying, let alone dealing, with whatever this threat was became a great deal harder. He wracked his brain, trying to remember anything useful about what lay outside the realms, but all he could think of were legends and vague allusions, nothing concrete. Without that…

He thought of Fury’s question, and wondered suddenly if he ought to have taken him up on it, but pushed the thought aside. Teamwork was…not his strong suit, and he doubted any of Fury’s other candidates would be able to offer any help with this.
Loki pushed that thought aside. He would just have to not fail.

Which left one option if he wanted to know more – going back between realms. His stomach twisted at the thought, remembering the way it had felt, and he reminded himself flatly that now was hardly the time to be a coward. As long as he prepared carefully and kept his guard up…he doubted it would kill him, and as long as he survived the rest was repairable.

The thought crossed his mind briefly that Natasha would doubtless not approve of what he was considering. Dr. Fisher would perhaps call it suicidal. It was necessary, he informed the echoes of them both. Surely that made a difference?

You should just tell them. Why are you keeping this a secret? Is it truly because you believe they cannot help or because you seek to prove something to yourself – or perhaps to Odin?

Loki’s stomach turned. Odin had rejected him utterly, if he had ever cared at all. There was nothing he needed to prove to himself. It was simply a matter of practicality.

Not a desire to be seen as a hero, to bask in praise and glory and know that for once he had managed something good.

Loki refilled his glass of wine and fetched one of the books Barton had lent him, trying to empty all thought from his mind but those of Harry Potter and this Rowling woman’s ludicrous but entertaining notions of how magic worked.

“I feel as though our last two sessions didn’t go very well,” Dr. Fisher said. “Today I wanted to ask what you think would help you.”

Loki snorted. “I do not feel the need for help, Doctor. Or at least not the sort that you can give.”

Dr. Fisher leaned forward. “What kind of help do you feel you need, then?” She asked. Loki snorted.

“Perhaps something to rid me of my boredom. I grow weary of sitting idly about.” He raised his eyebrows. “Perhaps there is something you might help me with. Are you capable of urging them to lift my suspension prematurely?”

“No, I’m afraid not.” She did sound apologetic, though of course that meant little. “What do you do outside of work, generally?”

Loki fidgeted. He felt restless, itchy, like there was something embedded under his skin. “I read. Go for walks. Other than that…” he shrugged. Dr. Fisher frowned.

“What about hobbies? Social activities?”

“I am not precisely the most personable individual, as you may have noticed,” Loki said dryly. “I manage. I have a few individuals whose company I enjoy, and that is sufficient.” Natasha’s teaching me how to play chess, he almost added, but held it back. That was – private. Laid out, however, it suddenly sounded…sad. Empty. Loki shook himself a little. “Unless you wish to volunteer as an entertainer, however…”

“No,” Dr. Fisher said, smiling a little, “but you might think about picking up something to do with your free time. Something you like, that relaxes you. That can have a big impact on your mental well
Loki did not resist the urge to roll his eyes. “Ah, yes. Because you are so certain that my mental well-being is precarious, no?”

“I didn’t say that,” Dr. Fisher said. “And I want you to recognize that you just put words in my mouth. It helps everybody, regardless of who they are, to have something to do that lets them unwind. That’s science.”

Loki let his lips curve in what he knew was a faintly condescending smile. “Of course. But you read too much into an idle remark. I feel perfectly fine.” He met Dr. Fisher’s skeptical gaze levelly.

“Luke,” she said, mildly. “I don’t want to push you—”

“Then don’t,” Loki cut in, smoothly.

Dr. Fisher’s pleasant expression faded a little toward a frown. “Can I ask you a question? Do you think if you need help that makes you weak?” She asked. Loki’s lips quirked.

“Isn’t that exactly what it would make anyone? To be unable to cope with one’s own thoughts seems the very definition of weakness.”

“I don’t think so at all.” Dr. Fisher leaned forward, hands clasped in her lap. “I think asking for help when you need it is one of the strongest things anyone can do.”

Loki arched his eyebrows. “So, conversely, I am weak for not asking for help when you believe I need it.”

She frowned at him. “You’re twisting my words and I think you know it. I’m just offering you my perspective.” She was quiet for a moment, and then sighed. “Therapy can be a lot of things, Luke. It can be as simple as just…talking things through with someone who isn’t involved in them. And I really would like you to think about the fact that it is okay to need help from others. You don’t have to do everything on your own.”

The laugh, harsh and a little strangled, burst half unwillingly from Loki’s throat. “Oh?” He said, feeling his eyes widen, knowing he should remain silent or—“and who do you suggest I do it with? Who is there other than myself? I hardly expect that anyone else would be interested in helping with my sordid troubles – if I even wanted them to.” The way Dr. Fisher was looking at him made Loki’s fists clench. “Which I do not. Can you understand that?”

“Of course,” Dr. Fisher said, her voice gentle. “I can understand feeling alone, and I can understand not wanting other people to see you when you’re feeling vulnerable. But can I ask why you’re so sure that no one would want to help you?”

Why would they, Loki thought, but he was able to keep from speaking it. He could feel himself almost quivering, and forced himself to hold still. “What purpose would it serve them?” he asked, instead. “Humans – people – are self-interested creatures.” Barton and Natasha and Stark rescued you, a small voice at the back of his mind murmured. What did that serve them? He pushed the thought away.

“Okay,” Dr. Fisher said slowly. “In…in your file, Luke, it says that you were captured as a result of pursuing Norman Osborn because you believed Agent Natasha Romanoff was at risk. Can you tell me why you did that?”

Loki blinked, adjusting to the apparent change in subject before he realized the direction of this
questioning. “She had been helpful to me,” he said, flatly. A small part of him turned over guiltily, murmuring that he was a liar.

“And that’s all?” Dr. Fisher pressed. Loki pressed his lips together. “Do you think you’re a particularly selfless person, Luke?”

“No,” Loki said, resisting the urge to laugh again, knowing there would be something hysterical in it. “I know I am not.”

“But your instinct, before your personal safety, was to do what you thought would help Agent Romanoff. Is that correct?”

Loki felt trapped, as though he’d been cornered. “It was the return of a favor, nothing more.”

Fisher’s eyes were intent on him. “Could other people, maybe, feel like they might want to return a favor for you?” Loki’s chest felt tight, thinking of Roslyn, staying up day and night searching for him, Barton, who didn’t even like him yet had seemed concerned for his well-being, Rogers, who had put himself in danger to keep Loki from harm when the Limbo beast attacked. “What is it you’re afraid will happen if you reach out?” Dr. Fisher asked. Loki felt himself wind tight, and she added quickly, “you don’t have to tell me, or even answer aloud. I just want you to think about it.”

Loki’s hands knotted together in his lap and he couldn’t stay still. He stood up, unable to look at Dr. Fisher, and then he was pacing, words spilling from his lips. “You do not understand. I do not – have friends. I cannot. It isn’t – they don’t know me and I can’t trust them.” He wanted to snarl at her for making him speak like this. He wanted to snarl at himself for speaking at all.

“What do you mean,” Dr. Fisher said slowly, “when you say that others don’t know you?”

“I should think the meaning clear enough,” Loki said. His voice was harsh, and he tried to control it, control himself.

“Can you try to explain it to me anyway?”

Loki’s fists clenched and he felt a sudden urge to lash out, with magic or hands, he wasn’t sure. He remembered having control of himself, once, but it felt like all he’d done recently was lose it. Perhaps all he’d done since landing on this forsaken realm. Perhaps all he’d done since Jotunheim-

I am a monstrosity. An aberration that even the frost giants could not accept. Cast out of two realms, twice I should have died yet here I am. Everything I am is wrong and sooner or later all of you will see it. He clamped his lips together, breathing shallowly through his nose, clinging to silence.

“Luke?” Dr. Fisher said, gentle and worried. Loki hated her.

“I don’t deserve them,” he said, finally, flatly. What did it matter, telling her that much? He could almost hear Dr. Fisher’s brows furrow, as though she was concerned.

“Don’t deserve who?” She asked. Loki scoffed.

“These…the people you offer so casually. Friends. That is what you want to know, isn’t it? Why I will not, as you put it, reach out? I am not so lacking in pride that I will accept what I have not earned.” He turned around, arranging his expression carefully, eyebrows raised. “Does that answer your question?”

Dr. Fisher looked at him for a long moment. “So, to you,” she said, “friendship…support, that’s something that has to be earned?”
“Isn’t everything?” Loki did not bother to mask the bitterness in his voice.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’ve never thought of it that way. But I want to focus on the first thing you said – that you don’t deserve friends. Why do you think that?”

That cut too close to things he didn’t want to say – and wanted to say, part of him hoping she would disagree (though what would it mean if she did, knowing nothing) and part of him hoping she would simply accept his judgment and give up. “I told you.”

“You said that you hadn’t ‘earned’ them. What is it you feel you should’ve done that would change that?”

*I am not certain. Thor would know.* He thought of Jane again, and wanted to laugh bitterly. *Not be what I am, perhaps.* “If I knew, perhaps I would have done it by now.”

“I don’t know that deserving something and earning it are the same thing,” Dr. Fisher said slowly. “One of them suggests a state of being, and the other some kind of action. If someone doesn’t deserve something, can they earn it?”

The urge to laugh bubbled up again, and this time he let it go, hating how it sounded, fractured and ugly. “That is the question, isn’t it?”

He could not look at Dr. Fisher. “Luke,” she began, and then stopped a moment before continuing. “Do you believe that you can earn these friends you think you don’t deserve?”

Loki closed his eyes and felt the corner of his mouth tug upwards. He thought of Natasha, how easily she had called him friend, the way it had felt when she did. Thought of Asgard and years of trying to be what he was not and only belatedly learning that it had always been pointless. “No,” he said, and it was almost a relief to admit.

“Luke,” Dr. Fisher said, and then was quiet, for a moment. “I know it doesn’t do any good for me to say that I don’t agree with you. I want you to think about someone you respect and care about. You don’t need to tell me anything about them, just…picture them in your mind.”

Thor’s face popped into Loki’s head, unbidden. He tried to push it away, but then accepted it, because it hurt and that felt right. “And?”

“And imagine them telling you that they don’t deserve you or your friendship.”

Loki tried. Tried to picture Thor saying that – *I don’t deserve you, Loki.* Even trying made him feel vaguely ill and he couldn’t make himself do it. He shook his head. “I cannot. He would never…”

*Brother, however I have wronged you, whatever I have done that has led you to do this, I am truly sorry.*

Loki flinched. His breath felt short. Dr. Fisher was implacable. “How does it make you feel to imagine it, though?”

Loki clamped his lips together, refusing to answer. He rocked forward on the balls of his feet, feeling on the edge of fleeing. “He wouldn’t say it. He would never believe it.”

“Everyone has doubts about themselves sometimes.” He heard Dr. Fisher stand up. “Now can you imagine telling that person that you agree with them? That they *don’t* deserve you?”

Loki’s stomach twisted. “It wouldn’t be true.”
“If you wouldn’t say it to someone you care about, Luke,” Dr. Fisher said, “why is it okay to say it to yourself?”

Loki felt like his shell was crumpling, closing in on him, stifling him. “It’s not the same,” he tried to protest, voice tight. “I’m not the same.”

“What if you were?” Dr. Fisher asked, still so hatefully gentle. “What if I told you that you were just the same, that you’re no worse than anyone else?”

Loki laughed, harshly. “You’d be wrong. You know nothing about me.”

“Maybe not,” she said, “but I know a few things about people. And if you were really that bad, I don’t think you would have so much trouble thinking good things about yourself, or get so upset about the idea of listening to someone you care about denigrate themselves.” Loki turned, on the tip of his tongue the urge to snap at her, to – something, but it faded away looking at her standing there, small and calm and unfazed by the venom of his thoughts. “I’m going to ask you to try an exercise, just for the next couple days. When you think something negative about yourself, I want you to imagine saying it to someone else – a friend, or maybe yourself as a child. And if it doesn’t sound right saying it to them, remind yourself that maybe it doesn’t sound right saying it to you, either.”

Brother, however I have wronged you...

““You don’t know what I’ve done,” he said, and his voice sounded hollow.

“No, maybe not,” she acknowledged. “But I know a little about what you’re doing now. Maybe that matters more?”

Interlude (XXV)

After a week of careful observation of his followers, Loki decided it was time to find out for sure who they belonged to.

It was a pair of two mortals, a man and a woman. They seemed inclined to think they were being terribly subtle as Loki watched them observing a simulacrum of himself drinking at a bar. Dressed in unremarkable clothing and speaking in low voices, however, in this neighborhood they stood out almost garishly. Wearing the face of a woman he’d passed in the street five minutes before, Loki sipped at his drink and waited to see what they would do.

It seemed the answer was nothing, and Loki bored quickly. He rose, shedding his disguise, and wandered over with his hands in the pockets of his coat.

“A fine evening,” he murmured, next to the leftmost mortal’s shoulder, and she wheeled even as her partner looked toward the counter. Loki let the simulacrum stay.

“You’re over,” he started to say, and the woman made a small motion that Loki recognized easily enough as a reach for a weapon.

“Oh, come,” Loki said, infusing his voice with a touch of power, “There’s no need for that, is there?” He sat down. “If you have questions you really may as well ask me.” He made his voice low, calm, and reasonable. The kind of voice anyone would be inclined to agree with.

They nearly jumped over each other to answer. “Not questions, sir, strictly reconnaissance,” said the woman, just as her companion hastened to add, “You’re a designated party of interest, sir.”

Loki frowned, very slightly. “Designated by who?”
That question they seemed considerably less cheerful about answering. Glanced at each other. Loki waited. The lighter the touch, the more chance they would notice nothing odd later. Finally, the man said, seeming to struggle with the words, “Sorry, sir, but I’d rather not say.”

“Individual or organization?”

“Organization,” the man said, and then looked troubled at himself. These were not so easily bent; likely trained in some fashion. The woman looked uneasy as well, and seemed to be struggling to come to some decision. Likely she wanted to call for assistance and was finding it difficult to want to, despite ingrained habits telling her she should want to.

An organization, then. That told him little enough of what they might want from him, though he doubted it was anything he was interested in. “Thank you,” he said, standing, “You have been most informative.”

“Sir,” said the woman, “If you would please wait-”

“Of course,” said Loki easily. “I’ll wait right here. Why don’t you get another drink and we can talk?”

Once their backs were safely turned, he left the bar and headed back to the apartment he’d set himself up in.

The streets were quiet.

And now…now they knew he knew they were watching.

For a moment – if only a moment – he felt nearly like his old self again.
From what Loki could tell, this ‘therapy’ he had been conscripted into was meant to help. A kind of healing, perhaps. Loki did not feel healed; he felt raw and flayed and fragile, like there were insects crawling through his blood, and just now his heart was pounding slightly too rapidly. He didn’t want to be still, but he didn’t know what he did want, either. Run, some part of him urged. Run away from here and do not come back, you’re not safe here, you’ll never be safe. She’ll keep pushing at you, opening your wounds-

But it was his fault, wasn’t it? Dr. Fisher had not forced him to say anything. He had chosen, again and again, to peel back his own skin.

His stomach rolled and his nails dug into his palms. He wanted to go home and hide, but then again he didn’t want to be alone. It was the sort of mood where once upon a time he would have gone to find Thor and hoped he would be alone.

That thought scraped like more sandpaper on already raw nerves, and Loki twitched it away.

Natasha, he remembered. He could go to Natasha. She was – they were something, at least; she had called them friends, and he had promised to pay her back for her surprise visit to his house. He could pretend it was nothing but that, a friendly social call and a small jest…

She would see through that, he realized, and almost changed his mind, but in the end steeled himself. Natasha had already seen him at his worst, or nearly, and she would not say anything if he did not speak first.

It took no small amount of digging for him to track down the address she had on file, and then more to find the real information. He had hoped to manage it without the use of magic, but impatience ruled that out more than anything. He memorized the address and then re-buried the information, adding a spell of misdirection to the more mundane shields lest anyone else go looking. A few minutes with the mapping function on his phone and Loki teleported himself to the front door of what he hoped was her home – though it occurred to him belatedly that this might be a misdirection as well.

He let himself inside and took the stairs to the fifth floor. The building itself was rather shabby, Loki noted. He would have expected nicer, though considering it Loki wasn’t sure he could have said why. It offended his sensibilities a little, though, that she should not live in more comfortable surroundings. He wondered if Natasha would take it amiss if he mentioned the feeling.

Loki knocked smartly on the door of 15D and stepped back a half-step. It wasn’t until then that he thought, again belatedly, that Natasha might be otherwise occupied. After all, she almost certainly had a life of her own outside of SHIELD. It was presumptuous in the extreme for him to be here, to show up on her doorstep as though his discomfort merited interrupting whatever other affairs she might wish to occupy herself with. Loki’s stomach clenched as he realized how badly he might have erred, and he was on the verge of stepping back and removing himself from the premises entirely when the door opened. Natasha blinked at him, looking slightly disheveled and wearing grey stretchy pants and a loose shirt.

“Huh,” she said. Loki drew himself up, fighting the urge to cringe.
“Is it a bad time?”

“Who is it, Nat?” He heard called from inside, and tensed. Barton was here too, then. Undoubtedly a bad time. Natasha did not precisely looked thrilled – though neither did she look much of anything else. Loki kept his back straight and made himself smile faintly.

“It’s Silver,” Natasha called over her shoulder. Loki heard a loud groan from inside and tried not to let his mouth twist downward.

“I did tell you I would return the favor of a surprise visit,” he said mildly.

“So you did,” Natasha said. “I guess I shouldn’t really be surprised.”

“If you are…otherwise occupied, however,” he said, glancing past her briefly before returning his gaze to hers, “with my point made I can return home satisfied.”

“Huh,” Natasha said again, scrutinizing his face in a way that made Loki want to tense, wondering what she was reading from him. He didn’t like the feeling of it, and tried to keep himself closed off and inscrutable, though based on the way her expression shifted a little toward a frown he wasn’t certain he succeeded. She stepped back and opened the door more fully. “Come in.”

It was Loki’s turn to blink, and then he narrowed his eyes. “I do not require-”

“I’m sure you don’t,” she interrupted. “But now you’re here and Scrabble’s better with more people. So come in.” She stayed where she was, door held open.

“It did not sound as though Barton felt the same way,” he said slowly. Natasha scoffed.

“Barton can shove it,” she said, louder than necessary.

“Hey!” He heard the sound of footsteps and Barton emerged into the hallway, similarly casually dressed and scowling at Natasha before looking at Loki. “It’s fine. As long as you agree to call Natasha on it when she tries to play Russian words.”

“Just because you don’t recognize a word doesn’t mean it’s Russian,” Natasha said over her shoulder. Barton made a face.

“It has nothing to do with whether I recognize it or not and everything to do with me recognizing it as Russian so stop trying to pull that one on me.” He glanced at Loki. “You see? I shouldn’t agree to play word games with her at all. Natasha, shut the door, you’re letting all the warmth out.”

Natasha raised her eyebrows at him. Loki looked back and forth from her to Barton and back. He was plainly just following her lead, whatever the truth of his desires, and Loki knew he ought to step back and let them…Scrabble…alone.

He had never been very good at selflessness.

Loki stepped inside and Natasha shut the door behind him. Barton gave him a crooked little smile. “So, have you read any of the Harry Potter books yet?”

“Yes,” Loki said, a touch stiffly, still feeling decidedly unsure of himself. “I have just finished the fifth one. The presentation of magic is positively laughable. Of course one may use a wand for focus or direction, but generally it is considered only necessary for the most rank of beginners.”

Barton looked like he was trying not to make some sort of expression, but Loki wasn’t sure what it
was. “Guess Rowling didn’t research that part so well.”

He recognized mockery when he heard it, and narrowed his eyes in Barton’s direction, but the man acknowledged nothing. “What about the characters?” He asked. Loki considered.

“I do not know,” he said slowly. “Harry is…admirable. His loyalty to those he cares for is certainly commendable.” The death of Sirius Black had…upset Loki. It seemed so pointless, and his murderer still lived. “Perhaps Hermione. She is clever, and enjoys the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.”

Barton nodded. “Respect,” he said. Natasha was watching the two of them, Loki realized, her expression faintly amused.

“Have you read these books?” Loki asked. Natasha shrugged.

“Only the first one,” she said. “Too busy, I guess.”

“No respect for the classics,” Barton said. “I keep trying, but…” He threw up his hands, illustrating futility. Natasha rolled her eyes at Loki and he had to try not to smile. This still felt…odd, but not ill. He could almost be comfortable, the raw feeling receding a little with the distraction if nothing else.

“What is this ‘Scrabble’ game?” He asked, before the conversation could die down and he could remember too much why he was here. Natasha blinked and then waved a hand.

“Oh, right. It’s a word game – you try to form words off of other peoples’ words on a board and…it’s probably easier to show you.”

“By all means,” Loki said, smiling faintly. Internally, though, he was relieved. Learning a new game with…company sounded like the perfect way to keep his mind on lingering on his last conversation with Dr. Fisher, and soon enough this raw feeling would pass and things would be fine once more.

Some part of his mind reminded him of what Natasha had said, about turning to face it before it catches up to you, but he pushed it aside.

Loki decided he preferred chess to Scrabble. Barton won their first game – and proceeded to crow gleefully for what Loki deemed an excessively long time – and Natasha the second. Even if he found it difficult to keep track of both making the words and strategic use of the board – longer, he learned, was not always better – Loki still enjoyed it, and it wasn’t until Barton sat up and asked, “so what are we doing for dinner?” that Loki realized how long it had been. He felt suddenly awkward, certain that he’d overstayed his welcome.

“I did not mean to stay so long,” he said, half starting to rise. Natasha made a sort of “pff” noise.

“If I wanted you to leave I would’ve said so,” she said. “Dinner’s cheaper with three. How do you guys feel about Vietnamese?”

Barton considered it, squinting. “Bánh mi?” He asked, and Natasha nodded. “I can work with that.” They both looked at Loki.

“I would be willing to try it at the very least,” he said, after a moment. Natasha pushed herself to her feet.

“I’ll call in the order if Clint picks it up,” she said.

“What,” Barton protested. “You can’t send the new kid to do it?”
“’The new kid’ doesn’t know where the place is,” Natasha said easily. Loki opened his mouth to protest, but shut it again at a surprisingly sharp quelling look. “Loki, do you have cash?”

“Yes,” Loki said. SHIELD had given him a plastic card he had been told could be used to make monetary transactions, but Loki preferred to deal in the more solid form of paper bills – even if it still felt less trustworthy than coinage.

“Good, good,” Natasha said. “I think I’ve got a menu around here somewhere, if you all tell me what you want…” She ducked into the kitchen and rummaged through a few cupboards, emerging triumphantly with a folded piece of paper. He and Barton peered over her shoulders, examining the options. Loki, unfamiliar with any of them, chose one mostly at random, hoping he would not regret it. Natasha retreated back into the kitchen with her phone, leaving him and Barton standing alone.

“So,” Barton said after a few moments of silence. “Are you still on suspension?”

Loki felt himself tense, wondering what currents ran under that question. “Yes,” he said shortly. Barton slipped his hands into his pockets and looked at Loki sidelong.

“Sucks,” he said, a response it took Loki a moment to parse. “I thought I hadn’t seen much of you around lately.”

Loki gave him a thin, ironic smile. “No doubt you felt the loss of my august presence.”

Barton made a face. “If I thought you had an august presence maybe I would miss it.”

“I could be offended,” Loki said mildly. Barton smirked at him.

“Aw, come on. You find me charming. Admit it.”

“I admit nothing,” Loki drawled. Barton’s smirk only widened, and then Natasha reappeared, smacking him lightly on the shoulder.

“Look alive, Agent Barton,” she said, dropping sprawling on one of the comfortable, if battered looking chairs. “Twenty minutes to pickup.” Barton threw a mock salute in her direction.

“Aye aye, Agent Romanoff.” They grinned at each other, and for a bare moment Loki was aware of the familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. Watching others but not being a part of their circle. Before it could grow, though, or he could withdraw behind his own high walls, Natasha looked back at him.

“I hope you’re not getting too comfortable on leave, Loki,” she said, half smiling. “From what I hear, Phil’s itching to have you back.”

It took Loki a moment to connect Phil to Agent Coulson. “Is he?”

“Hmm-mm. Something about weird energy readings – and that was before you closed an interdimensional rift or whatever it was you got up to with Captain America.”

Barton leaned forward. “Seriously, I don’t know which part of that I want to hear about more, the interdimensional rift part or the Captain America part. No, I am sure – it’s the Captain America part. How did that happen?”

“What do you know about the – strange readings?” Loki asked, carefully. “He mentioned as much to me, but only briefly.”
Natasha shrugged. “Not much. It’s not really my specialty – more of a tech thing. Just happened to come up in conversation and apparently no one really knows what to think of it, so – he figured maybe it was your kind of thing.”

_My kind of thing._ Loki thought of the world tree screaming and his stomach clenched.

Barton shuddered. “Can we not talk about this? Magic gives me the creeps.”

Natasha’s eyes narrowed. “Loki? Is something wrong?”

_You can’t just leave this alone,_ a voice whispered at the back of his mind. It sounded faintly like Frigga. _You can’t keep waiting and watching. It may already be too late for that. They don’t understand what they’re facing and you do. And another, quieter. Asgard is the protector of the Nine Realms. If you can save Midgard maybe…_

“No,” he said, summoning a smile. “Nothing. I was merely…thinking.” He knew what he had to do. It made his stomach want to turn nervous flips, but…_Thor would be brave._ He could be brave, too. They deserved that: Natasha and Barton and Rogers, Margaret Fairbanks and her granddaughter Angela. Perhaps even Coulson and Fury and Stark.

He could feel both Barton and Natasha eyeing him with doubt, and he smiled at them, he hoped reassuringly. It didn’t really matter, though. Where he was going, they couldn’t follow.

Loki stayed for the meal – delicious meat-filled sandwiches, though a little more spicy than he was really fond of. He excused himself after, noting the way Natasha’s eyes followed him warily to the door. Just for that, he did not wait until he exited to teleport away, knowing it would startle both her and Barton.

His apartment was cool and dark. Loki left the lights out as he moved over to the living room and cleared a space for the casting. His nerves were humming with anticipation and anxiety, but his head felt clear and his hands were steady. He used a pen to draw runes of protection and warding on his arms, at the nape of his neck and over his sternum. He’d done without before, but he expected this journey to be longer and more perilous.

When he felt ready, Loki gathered his magic and stepped sideways into the space between worlds.

The feeling of wrongness was stronger, he noticed almost immediately. There was nearly a metallic tang to the air, like blood on his tongue or in his nostrils, but Yggdrasil still stood. He did not shift his senses to listen to the sound it was no doubt making, but instead started walking along the branches, seeking one of the weak places where he could slip through. It was dangerous, doing this, but no more dangerous than many experiments he’d done when he was younger, when he’d first found the little pockets and divots in the fabric of reality and explored them, the corners of space and time forgotten by most. He found one of the thin places and wrapped himself in another layer of shielding magic, not sure what he would find on the other side.

Then he stepped through.

He was standing on rock floating in empty space, great fragments of something – but not drifting as they should, held in some kind of stasis. Loki’s skin crawled at the sense of cold emptiness he could feel pressing down around him. He called his magic and held it, merely its presence soothing him. He could see nothing but cloaked himself from sight nonetheless. Whatever being he had felt, he would have expected it to notice his magic, but nothing stirred.

Loki moved forward slowly, stepping lightly. Looking around at the shattered pieces of rock, he had
the sudden conviction that they had once been a planet, broken by some unimaginable force, cracked like an egg and scattered in pieces. A recent disaster, Loki wondered, or one so long ago it had left all memory? The fragments were oriented in a circle, Loki realized, he at the edge of it, and a greater stone than the rest at the center. He moved toward it, leaping between chunks of stone. Whatever he was looking for, perhaps it was there.

The air felt stale and dead in his mouth. Unpleasant. Loki pushed the feeling down.

“Who comes?”

The voice vibrated through Loki, and he felt the cloak that kept him invisible being swept away. He froze at the sudden sound in too-still air, but forced himself to straighten and hold his ground as he stepped onto that large, central piece of rock. He turned his head, looking for the speaker, and realized that what he had taken for a spire of rock was not in fact attached, but floating – and had a distinct shape, like a chair – or a throne. Loki swallowed hard, suddenly feeling exposed, vulnerable, but he said nothing.

The throne began to turn. Loki planted his feet and readied his magic, though he strove to keep his bearing relaxed and confident. He would not let this creature see his fear. He kept his chin up and his eyes fixed as the being came into view and Loki looked upon his face.

The figure sitting before him was huge, monstrously so. Greater than a frost giant, perhaps. Man-shaped, or nearly, though his body was heavy, his jaw square, skin a deep purple and his eyes…Loki nearly quailed.

“Well now,” it – he? – said, voice deep and sonorous in this place where there should be no sound. “What little creature has come to find me?”

Loki’s heart hammered, rabbit-like, against his ribs. He held his ground. “What are you,” he demanded. “And why do you seek to enter the Nine Realms?”

It laughed, and something about the sound made Loki want to quiver and quail. “The Nine Realms, is it?” Loki felt something immense reach out for him, and braced himself and his defenses, raising his hands to lash out.

“Do not touch me,” he said, and his voice sounded high, almost shrill. “I have come to warn you, whatever you are-”

“Be silent,” it said, and Loki’s mouth snapped closed. That presence was pressing down on him, and he felt his wards burn, flaring on his skin, searing him. “Ah,” it murmured. “Aesir magic. Do you think that will stop me? Do you think you can stop me?”

Loki felt the push and the wards flared branding hot. His mouth opened to scream but no sound escaped his throat as the being on the throne forced its way into his mind.

(He should never, Loki thought for the fraction of a second while he was still capable, have tried to do this Thor’s way.)

He remembered when Doom had tried, what that had felt like, the violation of it, but this was worse. It was overwhelming, the power bearing down on him, crushing his wards and protections as though they were not even there, cracking his mind open and turning it inside out. He felt something hot burst behind his eyes. Something hot and metallic dripped onto his tongue but he was scarcely aware of his body, not with his mind thrashing and screaming like an animal in a snare-

And then it was over and he collapsed, unable to hold himself up. He could hear himself retching
and sobbing but it was almost lost under the ragged, torn feeling that was deeper than flesh. He had a name, though.

“Thanos,” he choked, wetly. “Thanos.” He had to warn them. Had to warn everyone. He had been a fool, to think he could do this, could fight this kind of evil alone. To think that he could be like Thor. But Thanos would kill him and no one would know what was coming-

“Interesting,” the Titan said, and Loki shuddered with the sound of his voice, echoing in his shattered mind. “Very interesting.”

He wanted to move, to stand, to face his death bravely. Loki could not. His mind and body throbbed like he was one great wound.

“What a curious creature you are,” he went on. “And stronger than I would have expected. How…intriguing. I may yet have use for you.” No, Loki thought, but his tongue wouldn’t work properly. No, please. “Yes,” Thanos mused, and then Loki felt him reaching out again, his power grasping Loki’s mind and squeezing-

He blacked out, mercifully. He could only hope that this time it would be forever, because if not…if not…

“What the hell did you do?”

His ears were ringing. He couldn’t move and he was choking on blood. Hands turned him to his side and he tasted it as it ran back up his throat and over his tongue. Someone was checking his spine, his pulse, and he had a feeling he ought to respond but could not quite figure out how.

“Loki. Loki. Come on…shit, shit, knew you were thinking of something stupid but what…”

Something wet trickled down his neck, curving under his jaw. It felt warm. The back of his neck and down his arms throbbed with pain. His thoughts wouldn’t quite assemble. There was carpet underneath him and he couldn’t remember-

“Loki?” Someone gave his head a small jostle. “Give me something, here.”

He blinked, vision clarifying. Natasha. She hadn’t been there before…he’d gone worldwalking. There had been Scrabble and he’d come back and gone worldwalking. “N’tasha,” he tried to say, and it sort of worked. Her shoulders slumped and Loki thought she looked relieved.

“What did you – never mind. I need to get you to SHIELD’s infirmary since I’m guessing a hospital is a bad idea. Can you stand?”

Loki blinked at her. Something felt…torn, in him. He wasn’t certain what, only that it felt as though someone had reached inside him and rearranged his guts, but not physically. It was just – wrong and made something in him panicky to think about it.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Natasha said. “I – fuck. I’m going to call SHIELD, all right? They’re going to come and they’re going to take you somewhere you can get treated for…whatever this is. Is that a burn?”

SHIELD, Loki thought. There was something he needed to tell them. And Natasha. He tried to make his hand move and managed to grab her sleeve, but he couldn’t remember what it was. His heart was pounding too fast and making him feel dizzy and sick – or maybe it was pounding because he was dizzy and sick.
“I’ll stay with you,” Natasha said, her voice softening, apparently misunderstanding his reaction. “All right? Don’t blow anyone up. Jesus Christ, Loki, you don’t do anything by halves, do you…”

What had happened? Worldwalking shouldn’t do this to him. Something had – he needed to remember. He tried, casting his mind back, but nothing came but the panic and the dread, overpoweringly strong so for a moment he couldn’t breathe.


He tried. He tried, but he couldn’t make himself and everything hurt and he just – shut it out. Shut everything out.

Things were blessedly quiet for a while.

When he came back, someone was talking, low and rapidly, nearby. He was lying on his side on an uncomfortably stiff bed, surrounded by white. Medical facilities, he thought. His nose felt stuffed with something. He reached up and found it was cotton.

He must have been bleeding from the nose, Loki thought, and then, at the same feeling in his ears, from there too. It had been a long time since he’d exerted himself badly enough for that to happen. He still felt weak and shaky, though the pain on his neck and arms had faded. He looked at the bandages and remembered the runes he’d drawn burning, searing into his skin as-

His heart started pounding and Loki closed his eyes, trying to force himself to calm even as dread rose up to choke him. He remembered preparing to leave his apartment, remembered Natasha talking to him, but between…sensations. Pain. And fear. The wrong feeling inside of him hadn’t ebbed, like there was a wound somewhere vital he couldn’t see, but thinking about trying to fix it made his whole body clench.

Something had gone wrong. Horribly, horribly wrong, and he didn’t know what.

The door opened and Loki jerked, but it was only Natasha, followed by Director Fury. Loki felt a twang of shame at the sight of him, and could not prevent an accusatory look in Natasha’s direction.

“Sorry,” she said, “but I think it’s important he know what happened.” She did not look apologetic so much as worried, strained.

Loki closed his eyes and let his head fall back. “I don’t know,” he said flatly. He could almost hear Fury’s eye narrow.

“I am sincere,” Loki repeated. His voice rasped over his throat and it sounded horribly nasal with his nose plugged. “I do not remember. I know what I meant to do, and I remember…returning. But between that – I am not certain.” There was just the dread and the feeling that it was terribly important he remember. He needed to know.

“Don’t try keeping secrets from me, Agent Silver. I’ve been charitable, but-”

“I am sincere;” Loki repeated. His voice rasped over his throat and it sounded horribly nasal with his nose plugged. “I do not remember. I know what I meant to do, and I remember…returning. But between that – I am not certain.” There was just the dread and the feeling that it was terribly important he remember. He needed to know.

“And what was it you meant to do?” Fury asked.

“The energy spikes Agent Coulson was concerned about,” Loki said, after a pause. “They are from…something outside, trying to get in.”

“Something outside?” Natasha was frowning. “Outside what?”
“Outside the Realms,” Loki said. He tried again to remember, but there were just flashes, nothing concrete. Fear and a sense of terrible foreboding. “Beyond the World Tree. Something is trying to – tear through reality, and I went to see what it was. To…fight it.”

“Alone,” Natasha said, her voice flat.

“I would not risk anyone else,” Loki said. “If it…whatever it is…did this to me…” He trailed off. The room was very quiet for a long moment. Whatever it is. Had he found it at all? Perhaps this was some other kind of backlash. But the fear, the dread.

“Do you remember anything else?” Fury asked. The anger had gone out of his voice. Loki tried, he did, but even as he groped after his memories he felt like he was choking on thick, bitter terror, his heart rate picking up and his ribs tightening around his lungs. Something started beeping and he squeezed his eyes closed. “Hey,” Fury said. “Stay with me, Agent.”

“No,” he said, voice a little ragged. “Nothing else.”

Fury’s frown deepened. Natasha looked from Loki to him. “Director,” she said quietly, after a long silence.

“Agent Romanoff,” he said, and then made a sort of ‘hmm’ noise, his eye moving back to Loki. “I think it may be time to move the Avengers Initiative forward.”

Interlude (XXVI)

To Loki’s surprise, whoever was having him followed did not react immediately to his opening salvo. He had almost hoped otherwise – it would give him something to do, something to distract from his current state (drifting, lonely, lost). But they did not. In fact, his tails vanished almost conspicuously abruptly.

Loki did so hope he hadn’t alarmed whoever was employing them too much.

The brief glow of satisfaction faded quickly, however, and left him with the same sense of aimless uncertainty as before. He considered finding a new place of employment – but that pressed too close to what he had sworn not to do. He was keeping his distance from the mortals – and now, with someone on his trail, was all the more reason to avoid getting close to anyone. Connections were weakness.

(He could picture the horrified look on Megan’s face when he’d killed the men in her apartment. He wondered how she was doing – and Carl and Andrea, what of them? Loki pushed both thoughts ruthlessly away.)

He did, however, purchase a tablet – a Midgardian device which seemed antiquated to Loki’s eyes, but somewhat less cumbersome than their computers – and spent most of his time reading about Midgard, jumping from page to page on a website called Wikipedia. It was a small thing, but nonetheless enjoyable.

He was sitting in the sun with his eyes closed and his head tilted back, savoring an early spring day and the warmth on his face, when his tails reappeared.

He first noticed because the park had gone quiet. Loki opened his eyes. The park hadn’t emptied entirely – there was a man and woman walking arm in arm not far away, and another, older man talking animatedly on his phone. It was nothing obvious that gave them away, just a twinge of instinct and long, long experience with subterfuge.
Loki stayed where he was, considering his options. He could tip his hand, give away that he had noticed them. He could attempt to slip away without notice— a few simple spells of misdirection would probably do the trick. Or he could play along and see where this led. The first two options, after all, would likely only lead to them coming back with more reinforcements. If he played the third carefully, however... he might get some concrete answers and find a way to keep them from following him again.

So he stayed where he was, watching them play out their little game and close in on him, toying idly with his tablet as though he was unaware of their approach.

Then one of them shot him.

It felt like little more than a bee’s sting, and Loki felt a wave of dizziness, jerking to his feet and pulling out the small dart. He hadn’t considered how they intended to capture him— he supposed ruefully that perhaps they’d learned their lesson about attempting conversation. He turned in the direction the dart had come from to see a young woman looking thoroughly startled that he hadn’t keeled over at once. Perhaps he should have pretended.

“How very rude of you,” he said.

“Shoot him again,” Loki heard in a tinny voice communicating from a distance. The second sting hit him in the shoulder, and this time Loki let his knees buckle and his eyes close, casting a quick working to adjust his vital signs to read as unconscious, at least to the casual observer. No point in letting them know the strength of his resistance, and he did not truly want this to turn ugly. Not yet.

It was still a struggle not to react when one of them prodded him with a boot, and even more of one not to react when they cuffed his hands and a heavy cloth bag was shoved over his head. The indignities I suffer for knowledge, Loki thought dryly.

He closed his eyes and tried to relax, though he kept his ears open. “Keep an eye on his vital signs,” one of them was saying. “Two doses is a lot. We don’t want him dead. Tell HQ that we’ve got the package ready for transport.”

Loki waited while they lifted him into what felt like some kind of vehicle, listening idly to their chatter. He waited until he heard the door close and the engine start to free his hands and pull the bag off his head. There were two of them in the back with him, and in an instant their weapons were pointed at his face. Loki held his hands up and gave them a genial smile.

“Tell your driver to stop the car,” he said, not bothering to lace his words with command. “I would like to speak with your superior officer.”

Chapter End Notes

Sooo. Congratulations to those of you who called it.

There is still a lot of plot to go in this fic. My tentative outline is still massive, and every time I think I’ve covered all my bases I think of something else that I need to remember to address. I feel like a broken record saying this, but: sorry about the slow updates and thank you for your patience, and to everyone who reads and says nice things about this fic. If for some reason you want to hear me talk more (about life, fandom, writing, etc.), I’m often on my tumblr when I should be doing something else.
Love always to ameliarating, my ever patient beta.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

A timely update, what the hell is this. Call it a celebration for turning in my thesis and being on the cusp of finishing college, woo. (Currently deluding myself into thinking this will mean more time to write - shhh, don't bust my bubble yet.)

With much gratitude to my ever patient and marvelous beta. And also viewers like you.

The healer-physician who was charged with Loki’s care informed him sternly that he was to stay another two nights “for observation.” Loki did not object, though a part of him wanted to; the rest of him was too tired and sick-feeling to fight it. Fury and Natasha had retreated into the hallway to talk animatedly until Natasha noticed him watching and then they both moved out of his sight, leaving Loki alone and staring at the ceiling, his head starting to throb. He tried to remember more of what had happened, but beyond stepping onto the branches of Yggdrasil it was all a blur of vague unpleasantness. Loki balled his hands into fists and pounded one weakly on the mattress in frustration.

Natasha did not return, and eventually Loki drifted into fitful sleep full of vague nightmares. When he awoke again, Agent Coulson was there to inform him that his suspension had been lifted because “you seemed to get into more trouble without work to keep you busy.” He paused, and Loki suspected he had been about to say something other than what he did, which was “welcome back, Agent.”

With his departure, Loki was alone again.

He could recognize, objectively, that he had been very foolish. He ought to have told someone of his suspicions, at the very least. Or informed them before he’d gone journeying. If things had gone even more poorly, if he had died – they would not even have the warning that his injury was giving them. It would have simply looked as though he had vanished. Likely they would have assumed it part of his plan all along.

What had he expected? To return in glorious victory?

Loki put an arm over his eyes and groaned quietly at his own stupidity, only feeling more wretched for the circles of his thoughts.

“Oh – sorry, is it a bad time?”

Loki dropped his arm and looked toward the doorway, not quite staring. It was the Captain, standing awkwardly in the doorway with, oddly enough, a bouquet of flowers. “I knocked,” he went on in Loki’s silence. “And I thought I heard…but if you were resting I can go.”

“No,” Loki made himself say, through his confusion. “No, in truth I would welcome the distraction.”

The Captain looked relieved, stepping into the room and holding out the flowers. “I brought…just grabbed something on the way. I hope you like carnations – it was all the bodega had.” Loki didn’t know what the expression on his face was, but Rogers’ cheeks pinked and his voice was faintly
defensive. “That’s still usual, isn’t it? Bringing someone flowers if they’re sick or injured?”

“I do not mean to seem ungrateful,” Loki said, trying to sit up. “I am merely surprised.”

“No, wait, you probably shouldn’t-” Rogers hastened over, setting the flowers down. He pushed a button. “Lie back,” he said firmly, and after a moment Loki surrendered, admitting he couldn’t stay upright on his own, and found that the bed had lifted so that he was at least no longer flat on his back. “Surprised? You mean about how I knew you were here?”

That’s not all, thought Loki, but he simply nodded. “SHIELD agents gossip,” Rogers said with a rueful smile. “Apparently there was a lot of fuss when you were brought in here. So I guess – heard through the grapevine, though I’m not sure what happened.” Loki looked away.

“I do not know,” he said, hearing the flat note in his own voice. “I do not remember.”

“You don’t-? Oh.” The Captain sounded sympathetic. “I’m sorry.”

“That doesn’t make it any better, does it? Then you just don’t know why you’re hurt.” Rogers paused. “How are you doing? You still look…” He seemed to be searching for a delicate way to phrase it. “…a little under the weather.”

“You are kind,” Loki said dryly. Rogers frowned a little more.

“It’s an honest question,” he said, sounding a little offended. Loki felt a twinge of regret at his own snappishness and sighed out through his nose.

“I am tired,” he said honestly, “and sore, and annoyed. And sick of being here.” And I do not understand why you are here, either. “I did not think you wished to listen to me complain.”

Rogers relaxed, oddly enough. “Sometimes I think as long as someone can complain they’ll probably be fine, so it can be reassuring, in a way.” His lopsided smile faded. “I’m sorry you’re stuck here, though. Hospitals aren’t one of the most comfortable places to be.”

“No indeed,” Loki agreed. He looked toward the flowers on the bedside table. “Thank you,” he pushed out, even if both words and sentiment felt awkward. “For…coming by.”

“You’re welcome.” Rogers gave him a quick smile, then looked away, rubbing his hands on his pants. “You did save my life not so long ago. Stopping by for a visit seems like the least I can do in thanks.” Loki felt the urge to twitch and suppressed it. “So I’m guessing this means you won’t be up for sparring this week?” Rogers added, a tone in his voice like he was trying to tease.

“If I am not amply recovered within three days I am probably dead,” Loki said. “Do not expect you can escape that easily.”

Rogers looked surprised, and then concerned. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Just because you can… maybe you should take it easy.”

“I do not believe I know how,” Loki said. He meant it to be a jest, but it came out sounding more rueful than anything else. Based on the flicker of Rogers expression, Loki thought he heard the same.

At least he was saved from the trouble of a response by the arrival of one of the healers herding Rogers out because the physician wished to speak with Loki about some of his test results. “Take
care, Luke,” Rogers said, and for a moment Loki thought he would clap him on the shoulder before being chased out, but then he simply tucked his hands in his pockets and left.

Natasha did not come. Loki soothed himself by telling himself that she was no doubt simply busy with Fury’s Avenger project, but that excuse rang a little hollow. To his surprise it was Barton who greeted him when he was discharged.

“If you’re not careful you’re going to start challenging me on the ‘pulling stupid stunts’ record,” Barton said, half smiling, though when he actually looked at Loki’s face he grimaced. “You sure you should be walking out? You still look a little…”

“I am sure that is unfair,” Loki interrupted, while Barton was still searching for an appropriate word. “That seems a high bar to set.”

“Hey,” Barton said, though he didn’t sound truly indignant. “I’m not the one who’s in Nat’s doghouse right now.”

The faint smile Loki had managed faded, and he felt his stomach drop. “Agent Romanoff is… displeased with me?”

Barton cast him a sidelong look. “Little bit, yeah.” Loki tried to control his face, but whatever his expression was made Barton glance away. “It’s just – she doesn’t like being helpless, yeah? And it feels like we just bailed you out of Doom’s torture basement. Nat…” Clint shrugged. “It’ll be fine. You just might have to grovel a little.”

“I am not very good at groveling,” Loki said.

“I got that impression,” Barton said dryly. “Might have to learn, though.” He gestured toward a car. “So, your majesty. Want a ride anywhere?”

“To my house,” Loki said, “which I don’t think is driving distance from here, and if I recall you do not like my method of travel.” Barton grimaced.

“No, not really. So is that a ‘leave me alone, Clint’ or…?”

Loki thought he’d been alone too much, lately. “Not necessarily,” he said, keeping his voice casual. Barton looked at him for a long moment and then shook his head, muttering something under his breath.

“Right, fine,” he said. “I’ll put the car in the parking garage and we can do this your way. Should I just throw up and get it over with?”

Loki’s eyebrows shot up. “I would hardly force you to endure a method of travel you find so repellant,” he said. Barton shrugged.

“Yeah, I noticed you didn’t even ask, but it was that kind of not asking that’s always actually asking, you know? And I’m not about to send the invalid off on his lonesome to go do…whatever you did, again.”

Loki pressed his lips together. “How charitable of you.”

“Nah,” Barton said. “Not really.” He flipped the keys in his hand. “All right, I’ll be right back.”

“No,” Loki said, reaching out and catching his arm, though he let go quickly. “Let us…go
somewhere nearby. We can use your car.” The relief that swept over Barton’s face was almost laughable.

“Not my car,” Barton said. “I don’t have anything this nice.” The car he led Loki to did not look terribly impressive, but Loki chose not to comment. For whatever reason, Barton appeared to be doing him a kindness and Loki was going to try not to be rude. As they climbed in, Clint asked, finally: “what did you do? Nat wasn’t clear on the details, just said it put you flat out and you were barely responding when she got to your place.”

“Why did she come looking?” Loki asked. He had not wondered before, but considering it…he couldn’t have been gone more than a few hours. Barton pulled out of the parking lot, sliding a pair of reflective sunglasses on as he steered with one hand.

“A hunch, she said,” Barton said after a moment. “She gets those, sometimes. You were acting kind of squirrelly before you left.” Barton half turned his head, suddenly suspicious. “Did something set you off or were you planning to do your whatever before you even got there?”

Did something set you off. Loki was not certain that he could have articulated what it was that had made him decide to take what was, in retrospect, a foolish and reckless action. He had thought…it had seemed necessary. He was the only one who could do it, after all: prevent whatever was coming for Midgard from attacking or at least slow it down. But what had he done? Perhaps nothing. At worst, perhaps harm. He couldn’t know because he didn’t remember.

“Loki?” Barton’s voice broke into his thoughts, sounding…worried. “You’re not going to blow up the car, are you?” Loki realized that he’d gone tense and rigid, and forced himself to relax.

“No,” he made himself say. “I am not.”

“Good call. Appreciate it.” Barton’s tone was flippant, but Loki could feel his gaze, watching closely. The man was canner than Loki had first appreciated, and far too observant. Loki wondered what he was seeing. “Are you sure you’re good?” Barton asked, after a moment. “Whatever happened to you…”

“I am fine,” Loki interrupted. “I did not take you for the type to fret.”

“I’m not fretting,” Barton said, sounding indignant. “I’m just not interested in being at the bottom of a big, magical crater.” Loki felt his mouth twist in a wry smile.

“You will not be, I assure you.” Especially not when he was still all too aware of the state of his magic, wounded like someone had torn a hole in it. He wished there was someone he could ask who would know what had been done to him, and how, and thought abruptly of Chandra’s scientists. Perhaps, little though they knew, they might have some ideas.

“Good to know.” He thought Barton might be looking at him, through his sunglasses, even if his gaze appeared to be on the road. The man held his silence for several moments before speaking again. “So. Did you have an idea of where you wanted to go?”

“Why not to a restaurant,” Loki said, after a moment. “One’s palate tires rapidly of the food offered by healers.”

“Sure does,” Barton said, with a half a laugh. “All right, restaurant it is. Though I’m not sure how much you’ll like my kind of place.”

“As long as it serves something better than broth and meal, I think I shall manage,” Loki assured him.
Barton’s ‘kind of place’ appeared to be small and a few steps above a dive. The food was good, though – if fried within an inch of its life. Loki downed three of the weak beers Midgardians served and ate two servings of fried fish with gusto. He could feel Barton watching him, but managed to ignore it – or to pretend he did not notice. He did appreciate that Barton did not ask further questions while they ate; it let Loki sort through his thoughts about what he needed to do next.

“Romanoff,” he said eventually. “How would I find her, for this…groveling?”

“You don’t,” Barton said matter of factly. Loki just looked at him, and he shrugged, taking a swallow of his beer. “I’m serious. If she doesn’t want to talk to you, she won’t. It’s better to give her time and a little space. And even if that weren’t the case – pretty sure Fury’s put her on trying to talk Stark around to participating in the Avengers Initiative. Guy might be a jackass, but he’s got bank.”

Loki felt his mouth quirk. “The Avengers Initiative,” he echoed. “It was mentioned to me. Romanoff is involved in it?”

“Only in terms of figuring out who should be on Fury’s dream team,” Barton said, propping his elbows on the table.

“What about you?” Loki asked.

Barton snorted. “Me? Nah. Not my thing. I generally work alone – or with Nat.” He rolled his shoulders back. “Big people with big egos…that’s not really my thing. And working with Iron Man sounds like a nightmare.” Loki chuckled back in his throat. “I’m just fine with letting Nat handle that kind of stuff.”

Loki cocked his head to the side. “Fury asked if I was interested.”

“And you said?”

“That it was an absurd idea,” Loki said. “I am not…” *A hero,* was what he thought, but speaking it would have sounded maudlin. “As you say. It does not seem the sort of thing in which I would be interested.”

Barton looked thoughtful. “You have the power set for it. In terms of heavy hitters…you can match Captain America for brawn, and having your magical voodoo whatever would be useful, probably. You might make a better superhero than a spy, actually.”

Loki frowned. “You think I should have agreed?”

“Nah,” Barton said, quickly. “Just thinking out loud.” He took another swallow of his beer and lifted it in Loki’s direction. “You on a team does kind of seem like a weird prospect. Though I guess you’re not as bad as I thought at first.” Loki was about to snap when he caught the lopsided smile on Barton’s face that meant he was not being sincere. He felt an odd pang in his heart, wondering if that was an expression of near affection.

“If I agreed I would insist on bringing you along,” Loki said dryly, after a moment. “Just to see you scowl the whole way through.” Barton did scowl at that, and Loki felt his lips twitch, ducking his head quickly to hide it.

“Very funny,” Barton said, and knocked back the rest of his beer. “You’re hilarious, Silver. So, are you going to tell me what happened to you? Nat wasn’t exactly transparent on the phone, and no one else gave me any explanation.”
Loki gave Barton a sharp look. “Agent Romanoff called you?”

“When did she go back to being Agent Romanoff?” Barton asked. Loki pressed his lips together, and the other man shrugged. “Yeah, she did. After she found you passed out and apparently bleeding from every orifice in your apartment.” Loki tried to keep his face still, though he felt a current of shame run through him. “And then called me again to update me once you were stable. I asked.” Loki’s head jerked up at that, but now Barton wasn’t looking at him. “The question still stands.”

Loki considered Barton and half closed his eyes. “I do not know. My intent was to go walking the World Tree and discover the presence outside that was trying to get in—”

“Wait,” Barton interrupted. “Hold up. You’re going to have to go a little slower there. What presence trying to get in where?”

Loki took a deep breath and explained for what felt like the umpteenth time in recent days about the feeling he’d had, Coulson’s energy spikes, the screaming of the World Tree itself. Barton looked more and more unnerved as he went on, and whistled lowly when Loki finished.

“I liked my life before I met you,” Barton said. “It was nice and normal and only involved normal people trying to kill me, and not – screaming trees.”

“It is not a literal tree,” Loki said. “Yggdrasil is – the universe. The fabric that ties the Nine Realms together. And the strangeness was always already there; you merely did not know about it.”

“And I liked not knowing about it,” Barton said flatly. ‘So that’s why Fury’s stepping up the Avengers Initiative. Because something big and bad is lurking out there in space and it’s coming for us. And it messed you up something good when you went looking for it. Which…I’m not saying I would’ve volunteered to come with, because I wouldn’t have, but really?”

Loki set his jaw. “I did what I believed best.”

“Yeah, well,” Barton said, “you might want to check on your perception of ‘best.’ On this planet at least, you only die once.” He propped his elbows on the table. Loki could feel his stare turn into a glower and did not bother to restrain it. “And if you’re not careful someone’s going to put a leash on you hoping to keep you safe.”

“I do not do well with leashes,” Loki said.

“So seems like you don’t do so well without them, either.” Barton half smiled. “But never mind that. What’s your next move?”

Loki blinked, taken aback by the sudden change in subject. “My next move?” Barton nodded. “On what path?”

“Figuring out what’s going on, obviously,” Barton said. “Who attacked you, and who’s attacking this Yggdrasil thing.” His pronunciation was surprisingly good, for only having heard the word once. “You’re not just going to leave that one alone, are you?”

“No,” Loki said slowly. “I do not…intend to.”

“Though,” Barton added, “I’d stay on this side of the veil, if you know what I mean.”

“The – no, never mind.” Loki might not know the source of the metaphor, and was tempted to dispute its inaccuracy, but it did not truly matter. “I do not intend on tempting the Norns again that way. But there are…few in this realm who would be able to answer my questions. Almost none that
know anything of the power involved in attempting to rip open the barriers between worlds…” Loki trailed off.

He did know one person who knew something of opening paths between worlds. Who understood a few fractions of what Yggdrasil was and how its energies could be manipulated.

“What?” Barton demanded. “What’s that expression for?”

“Foster,” Loki said, feeling his nose wrinkle. “Doctor Foster…might be useful.”

Barton sat up a little straighter. “Well, yeah, obviously. What’s the problem with th—” He broke off. Loki almost heard the connections click in his brain. “Have you been talking with her? Does she know who you are?” Loki exhaled through his nose and inclined his chin. Barton’s eyebrows shot up. “How did that go over?”

His mouth spasmed. “About as well as you might expect.”

“Yeah, especially considering she seemed sweet on—” Barton stopped, glanced at Loki, and took a quick swallow of his beer. Loki stared at his own and tried not to picture Thor’s face. The photograph he’d seen, Thor with Foster and another man, popped into his head.

“You were there,” he said, with sudden realization. Barton considered him for a moment and then nodded.

“In New Mexico? Yeah, I was.”

*Then you saw everything,* Loki thought. *You saw what I did with the Destroyer. How I – attacked Thor. You saw Thor. And yet you have not…you would act friendly to me.* His jaw worked and he swallowed, his stomach clenching. “You did not mention that.”

Barton shrugged. “Didn’t seem relevant.”

“Didn’t seem—” Loki laughed, though it sounded strange. “How could it not be relevant?”

Barton sat back. “You knew I knew who you were, and what you did. What does the fact that I was there change, except that I was a little closer in proximity?”


“I wouldn’t say met, exactly. I pointed an arrow at him from a distance.” Barton gave him an odd look. “Wasn’t much more than that. You and Thor—”

Loki thought he was going to choke. “Do not ask.”

Barton looked at him for a long moment, but finally nodded. “All right. I won’t, then.” Loki jerked, surprised at the simple acquiescence. He had expected argument, or perhaps simply to be ignored. He was almost violently grateful that wasn’t the case. Loki chewed on the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood.

“What was your impression of him,” he asked, finally. Barton was quiet for a long moment before answering.

“I’m not Nat,” he said. “I don’t do the personality assessment thing. That said…stubborn, good fighter, confidence bordering on arrogance – totally *earned* arrogance, mind you, he took out a
whole squad of guys - right up until he got to the hammer and it wouldn’t budge.” Loki’s mouth felt dry and he nodded, a fraction. “That bit never did make much sense to me.”

“It was Mjolnir,” Loki said. His voice sounded strange in his own ears. “Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy... he was not worthy.” He looked past Clint, at the wall. “Until that moment, he did not understand that. He believed he simply had to battle his way to his weapon and regain it, and that would be the end of his exile.”

“But it wasn’t,” Barton said. Loki inclined his chin, just a fraction. Barton made a sort of “hmm” noise and then shook his head. “Seems stupid to me.”

Loki blinked. “What?”

“Pinning that much of your – I don’t know, self-worth on a weapon telling you you’re good. How does the hammer know?”

“It is spelled,” Loki said, frowning.

“Yeah – but by who? And what are the parameters of it? I’m just saying…” Barton shrugged. “One hammer as the arbiter of worth? Weird idea. I know I couldn’t budge it. Does that mean I’m unworthy? And unworthy of what?”

Loki opened his mouth to argue, then shut it. “Unworthy of the power of Thor,” he said, after a moment. Barton snorted.

“I wouldn’t know what to do with lightning power if I had it. Sounds like magic to me, and I don’t like magic much.” Barton pressed his hands into his thighs and rolled his shoulders back. “Just thinking.”

There was something jarring about Barton’s words, but Loki did not know how to express it. He tucked them away to consider later. He realized it was the first time he had discussed the events on Midgard with anyone. He realized it was the first time he had discussed events with anyone, other than brief overtures by Jane Foster. And that brought him back to the thought he’d had before. “And Doctor Foster? Did you meet her?”

“Right,” Barton said, apparently jarred out of a train of thought. “Foster. No, not personally. I don’t know much about her, to be honest, except what’s in her file. You think she might have some ideas about this threat of yours?”

“It is...possible. And until recently she might have been willing to discuss them. But recently...we argued.”

Barton’s eyebrows went up. “Why do I think that might be an understatement?” He shook his head. “Huh. Do you think you can still...”

Loki closed his eyes and breathed in and out through his nose. “Still convince her to work with me?” He pictured the look on Foster’s face, mouth open, staring at him in silent, startled fear. He had not contacted her since. If he might have to grovel for Romanoff...what would Foster want from him?

Loki reminded himself of the sound of Yggdrasil’s screaming. The awful feeling of his mangled magic, still distorted. Whatever had done that to him – how much worse would they do to Romanoff, or Rogers, or Chandra and Roslyn? There were greater things at stake than his pride.

“Well?” Barton pressed. “You’re supposed to be good at persuasion. Can you convince her?”
Loki took Barton’s mostly empty bottle and swallowed down the rest of it. “I think I will have to find a way.”

Interlude (XXVII)

The supervisor of his kidnappers was a solidly built woman with short brown hair. She took one look at him and her expression set, clearly bracing herself for pain. “Where are my operatives,” she asked. Loki waved a hand idly.

“Sleeping,” he said. “Quite unharmed – aside from the one who attempted unwisely to attack me again, who will need his arm put back in the socket.” He summoned his sharpest charming smile. “I would prefer to keep this cordial. Difficult though you have made that. What is your name?” The woman said nothing, lips pressed together. Loki was half tempted to push, but decided against it. “Very well. Can you tell me why you attempted to kidnap me?”

The woman lifted her chin. “Are you willing to return with me to a secure facility?”

“No,” Loki said. “I am not.” The image flashed into his mind of Thor in a room with glass walls, questioned by mortals. He pushed it aside. “I suppose that answers my first question. Is your organization the same that has been following me these past weeks?” More silence, and Loki felt a twinge of annoyance. “Answer me,” he said, adding just a touch of magic to his voice.

“We have been surveilling you for some time,” she said, though slowly. Struggling against the suggestion just like the others. These were trained, then; not some ragtag band but organized. Loki pushed down the touch of alarm that stirred in his belly that whispered they will never leave you alone. They will keep hunting you.

“Because you believe I am a threat,” he said, not a question. The woman’s chin lifted again. “We are not going to hurt you,” she said. Lie, Loki thought. You would if you believed it necessary. “You have demonstrated certain – gifts. Many people would like to take advantage of you. It is our goal to ensure the safety not just of others but you as well, Mr…”

Loki felt himself relax. They didn’t know him – or at least, this woman and her followers did not. They thought he was human – ‘gifted,’ perhaps, but nothing more than that. They did not recognize who or what he was. “Am I to give you my name, then? That would put me at a distinct disadvantage.” Loki cocked his head. “So if I were to come with you…”

“We would do our best to ensure that you were comfortable and safe.”

Lie, Loki thought again. Or half of one. Perhaps it had been true, but now they were wary. This attempt made clear that he had been re-evaluated as a potential threat, and now they sought to see if that assessment would be confirmed – but in a controlled environment, perhaps one where he could be eliminated if they deemed it necessary. “How gracious of you,” he said aloud. He watched the woman’s eyes flick toward a panel, a barely noticeable movement, and decided not to mention that he had shorted out her communications. “And may I ask how you found me?” He laced those words with suggestion as well, a little heavier than the last.

She fought it, visibly. “Facial recognition software,” she said, after a moment. Loki did not recognize the exact phrasing, but it was clear enough what it meant. “Picked you up with some grocery store security camera.”

Loki rocked back on his heels. “I see.” He felt a chill settle in his stomach. So they had ways of finding his face. He would have to be more careful. Maintaining a glamor at all times would be
exhausting, but if he could find a way to set a spell just to trick machines made to capture images…

“You are very brave,” he murmured. “Speaking to me alone like this.”

The flicker of her expression told him she expected that backup would be here soon. Whether that was the case or not, he needed to end this conversation. “You’ve been very reasonable,” she said. He could almost see the gears turning in her head, *keep him calm and docile, occupied.* “I am sorry about the…inconvenience.” *Sorry it didn’t work.* “I would like to check in with my team, though, confirm what you said about their status, and then we can continue to talk if you’d like-”

“No,” Loki said. “I think I am finished.” He kept his tone polite, but she was clever enough to see through that. She moved – quick, for a mortal, but he was still faster.

Loki slipped out of the building a few moments later, cloaked from sight. It might not have been a kind working, but he could have been crueler, too. As it was, he had only ensured that she would not be able to repeat their conversation to her superiors in any language they could understand.

That left the larger problem, though. Once again, he couldn’t stay here. Once again, he was being driven from another place by the interference of mortals. Once again-

Loki pushed down the rising anger. It did not matter. This was not his home. Nowhere on this forsaken realm was his home. He was going to be a wanderer on it forever. Somehow, he needed to find a way to accept that.
Chapter 28

I'd say "look, I'm back!" but lord knows if the pace of updates will increase at all. At any rate, I have a tentative plan for the rest of this fic, though knowing me it will probably end up expanding wildly because Loki's interpersonal skills are shiiiiit and the main point of this fic tbh is Loki's interpersonal skills (sort of, or at least Loki dealing with his feelings). But you know, plot is important and we're getting there.

Anyway. Thank you all for being patient with me. You're all lovely, and I treasure every single one of your wonderful comments.

As always, I'm available for yelling and/or questions on my Tumblr.

Loki braced himself and swallowed his pride, rehearsing his words carefully for the twelfth time, and teleported himself to Foster’s lab.

It was empty. Deserted. No more stacks of papers, no more half eaten sandwiches, no hum of computers. Loki turned slowly, examining the space, but there was simply nothing there. Loki’s heart sunk.

Had he scared her that badly? That she would feel the need to run, to hide herself somewhere he did not know?

This might be more difficult than he had bargained for.

He could probably find her with a little bit of magic, but he had a feeling that if she had indeed moved to avoid him, barging in uninvited would not help Foster feel more charitably disposed towards him. No, he was going to need an intermediary.

Roslyn knew Foster, he remembered. That was probably his best bet – if Foster hadn’t turned her against him already. Loki had hoped this would be quick. He should have known better.

A moment’s thought took him from Foster’s now former lab to the hallway outside of Chandra’s. He let himself in, scanning the room for Roslyn’s hair. He found her in one of the corners, bent over some machine or another, and weaved his way through the others, avoiding conversation by the simple expedient of making himself unnoticeable.

“Has Dr. Foster moved her lab?” He asked, dropping the working as he reached Roslyn. She jumped with a shriek, knocking something that looked delicate off the table. Loki caught it. “My apologies,” he said as she turned. “I did not mean to startle-”

“Luke!” Roslyn said. “I mean – Agent Silver – you’re all right!”

Loki blinked, entirely taken aback. “Beg pardon?” He said, carefully. Roslyn flushed.

“Oh, just – we heard there was an incident and you’d been taken to medical but no one was saying what had happened. But you’re – okay? It wasn’t – serious, was it?” Loki wanted to wince, wondering how far the news of his…infirmity had spread. He did not like the idea of people
discussing him, discussing his weakness and speculating on its source.

“No,” he said, a little shortly. “It was not serious. Did you hear my question?”

“Question? Oh, right.” Roslyn tucked her hair behind her ears. “I, hm. If she did she didn’t tell me. She didn’t tell you? I thought you were working together on something.”

Loki sighed out through his nose and debated brief how much to say. “No,” he said after a moment. “We had a…disagreement.”

Roslyn looked like she was trying not to be curious. Loki could sense the others pretending not to listen with an utter lack of subtlety. “Oh,” she said, after a few moments in which she was probably hoping Loki would say more. “Well…sorry I can’t tell you more.” Loki grimaced.

“Do you have a means of contacting her?” Roslyn looked startled, and Loki realized that if he were mortal, and had been working with Foster normally, no doubt he would have such things. “I’m afraid I’ve lost track of the phone number she gave me,” he added, with a rueful smile.

“Oh – well, sure,” Roslyn said. “I can give you…” She fumbled for a piece of paper and scrawled down a series of numbers. Loki took it, slowly, reading it a few times to memorize it as well.

“Thank you,” he said. He wanted to simply leave it at that, but he knew it would be rude, and he had been…neglecting Chandra and Roslyn and the rest, of late. “How has your work been going?” He inquired politely. “Anything of note?”

Roslyn looked embarrassed. “Nothing too exciting. It’s actually…things seem kind of quiet around here, now, since you’ve been busy. I don’t mean you should be here all the time,” she added quickly. “It’s just…contrast, you know?”

Loki was oddly touched. “Mmm. Perhaps apologies for my neglect are in order.”

“Oh-!” Roslyn’s slight flush deepened. “That’s not…necessary. I was just commenting…”

“Roslyn just misses taking readings off you, Agent Silver,” someone called, to some laughter.

Roslyn looked mortified, so Loki favored her with a smile.

“I shall have to remember to return so you can satisfy your craving for my…readings, then,” he said, and Roslyn mumbled something indistinct, looking down at his shoes. Loki laughed, quietly. “But come,” he said, turning toward the rest of the lab. “It can’t have been as dull as all that, down here.”

“Oh, well,” Roslyn said, brightening quickly and obviously relieved at the change in subject. “We’ve been doing a few things…nothing big, though, at least for me. Jun’s made some progress furthering Dr. Banner’s research in some interesting directions, but I don’t know how to explain that…”

“Cop out,” a man Loki only vaguely recognized accused. “You could if you’d read the monograph I sent you.”

Roslyn made a face at him. “Why don’t you explain it?” Loki offered. “I am curious.”

Loki let Jun’s words wash over him, half listening. From what he could tell, it had something to do with some form of energy or another, and the possible applications thereof. Loki’s mind turned back to Foster, rubbing his thumb over the piece of paper with her number. She did not know his number, so she would not know to ignore him. However, the moment she recognized his voice…he needed something that would catch her attention.
The truth, perhaps. Enough of it, at any rate. Perhaps she would even believe it.

“—so that’s where I am at the moment. I could do more if I could talk to Dr. Banner about his work, but…” Jun shrugged. Loki nodded as though he understood, caring little.

“I am sure you will manage the challenges ably,” he said, almost absently. He glanced back at Roslyn. “I’m afraid I really must be going.”

“Of course,” Roslyn said quickly. “I won’t keep you.”

Loki gave her a slender smile and a slight bow, stepping back – and then paused, remembering what had happened. “Actually,” he said slowly. “Perhaps… your measurements. Would you mind retaking some of them?”

Roslyn blinked. “I… no. Actually the additional data could be very useful, I just assumed….” She frowned. “Does this have something to do with – your accident?”

Loki shrugged one shoulder. “Perhaps. Call it idle curiosity.” He slipped Jane’s phone number into his pants pocket. “I am at your disposal.”

He let Roslyn put him through his paces, though once or twice he caught himself tensing, something in him reacting to her closeness, or perhaps the situation. He remembered what had happened with Stark with a nauseous feeling in the pit of his stomach. A weakness he needed to find a way to redress.

She informed him that she would have results by the following day and Loki excused himself, trying to tamp down a faint feeling of anxiety. Like as not there would be nothing. Whatever had happened… he did not think it would be the kind of thing that could be traced on the level of the physical.

Whatever had happened – and that led him back to Jane Foster. Loki returned to his apartment, pacing back and forth with her number in one hand and his phone in the other, planning and replanning. He needed Foster, there was little way around that. So he would need to win her back, find a way to reconcile with her. With the exception of Thor, Loki could not remember successfully reconciling with anyone.

It was fine if she did not like or trust him, Loki reminded himself. Of course it was fine: she never had. All he needed was her willingness to work with him to address a threat to her realm. Simple. Surely she would not balk with that on the line.

Would she?

Loki squeezed his eyes closed and dialed the number, listening to it ring once, twice…

“Hello?” When Dr. Foster answered Loki felt a well of relief and realized that he’d half expected her to know, somehow.

“Doctor Foster,” he said, speaking quickly. “I need to speak with you about an urgent matter. A threat to Midgard. Earth.”

Silence. Loki held his breath.

“How did you get this number?” She said, finally. Loki tried to keep his exhale quiet.

“Roslyn,” he said, and had to take a moment to remember her last name. “Agent Carrolly. Do not
fault her for it.” Foster made a sort of ‘hm’ noise and was silent again. “Did you hear me?” Loki said eventually, impatient. “Your realm-”

“I heard you,” Foster said flatly. “Whether I believe you – that’s another question.” Loki felt momentarily as though he’d been slapped and nearly gaped.

“Why would I lie about this?”

“So you can get back in good with me and murder me in my sleep? How would I know?” Foster’s voice went a little shrill, and he heard her take a breath of her own. “You almost killed me. You haven’t mentioned that.”

“I did not,” Loki said, almost affronted. “All I did was take your voice.”

“All you – I couldn’t breathe!”

Loki…had not intended that to be the case. He remembered the look on Foster’s face, though, her mouth opening and closing, and supposed he might have, accidentally, gone too far. His stomach sank. “I – hm. I did not wish you to hang up immediately,” Loki said after a moment. “It seemed the best way to ensure you would listen.” Put so bluntly…he hoped Foster would see it as honesty rather than manipulation. More silence, and Loki tried not to fidget.

“Well?” She said eventually. Loki blinked.

“What…are you asking for more information? I would prefer to meet in person if-”

“No,” Foster interrupted. “That wasn’t what I was talking about. Are you – are you serious? I tell you you almost killed me and you just-” She sputtered, clearly incoherent. “I should just-”

“Do not hang up,” Loki said quickly, urgently. “Please. If we could just meet, speak…”

“So you can tell me about this threat,” Foster said, her voice powerfully skeptical. “Why don’t you tell SHIELD? They’re the big guns people, I’m just a scientist – a highly theoretical scientist, as a rule-”

“I need your help,” Loki managed to say, almost choking on the words, even knowing they would likely not be the worst he would need to say. “I am…I apologize for my behavior. It was – most unseemly.” There. That was probably what she wanted.

“Unseemly,” Foster echoed. She sounded as though she was going to choke. “Is that what – okay. Okay. You’re sorry. Are you actually sorry or are you just saying that because now you need me for something?”

Loki almost choked on his tongue. “I-” He knew there was a right answer to that question, but for some reason he stumbled on it. “I…am, truly,” he said slowly. He should have cut off the conversation sooner, or else not lost control. With the clarity of time, he could see that. “I…regret…having harmed you.”

Silence, once more. He heard a whisper on the other end, and then Foster’s poorly muffled, “he just said he’s sorry.” More silence. Finally, Foster said, “All right. You have thirty seconds to explain what you think is going on and maybe I’ll think about meeting you. Somewhere public, with lots of people.”

Loki took a deep breath. “I have reason to believe that there is an – unknown entity from outside the Realms, attempting to break through. I do not believe its intentions are benign and I suspect it has
magical ability greater than my own.” Silence. Loki licked his lips and pressed onward. “If you wish to test my truthfulness, ask Agent Coulson about his energy spikes. They are – I would call them tremblings in Yggdrasil. Reactions to something trying to tear through the barrier between Realms without care for the damage such an act would cause to them. The potential ramifications of such an act–"

“Time’s up,” Foster interrupted. She did not sound any less hostile. Loki felt his heart sink. Perhaps he could go to her anyway? Attempt to press her to understand the danger…

“Please,” Loki made himself say, trying not to choke. “I would not ask if… I did not believe it truly necessary.”

“Yeah, I bet it pains you,” Foster said. There was a hint of dryness to her voice, and Loki felt a small flame of anger flare, but he quickly smothered it. He heard her sigh. “All right. Fine.”

Loki heard a squawk of “what?” on the other end. He himself blinked, utterly startled. “What?” He echoed Ms. Lewis.

“Fine, I’ll meet you. Bring some notes, something concrete. I’m going to need a little more to work with than “tremblings of Yggdrasil” if you want me to do anything.” He heard her breathe out through her nose. “And. Before we discuss any of this, we’re going to have a serious conversation, and you’re going to answer all of my questions, and you’re going to be honest. Got it? And if you ever raise a hand to me again, to do anything like you did last time, that’s it. I’ll use Darcy’s Taser and get you charged with assault, I don’t care what SHIELD says. Got it?”

Loki felt suddenly that perhaps he had underestimated this woman, again. He wondered if Thor had ever caught the bad side of her temper. Likely not: Thor did not tend to catch the bad side of women’s tempers. “I… understand.”

“Good,” Jane said, flatly. “All right. Let’s meet at that coffee place we first talked. I have some time next Tuesday–”

“Tomorrow,” Loki interrupted. “Next Tuesday is too long. Anything could happen in a week. Where are you, I can come to you–”

“No.” Foster’s voice was vehement. “That’s not in the cards. I’m not even agreeing to work with you. As far as I’m concerned you can give me the information and I’ll deal with it on my own.” Loki felt oddly, unfairly, stung, but he didn’t argue, managing to keep his mouth shut. “Fine. I can make it the day after tomorrow around 3:00. Is that soon enough for you?”

It will do, Loki almost said, but swallowed it. Gracious. Humble. “Yes, thank you. I appreciate your… willingness… to meet swiftly.”

“If you’re telling the truth, there’s something big going on. I live on this planet. It’s not about you; not everything is, all right?” Loki closed his eyes, very briefly, and he heard Foster sigh. “Sorry. That was snotty of me.”

“It is fine,” Loki made himself say. This was not going to be easy at all. Somehow he had thought she would be…easy. Forgiving. Foolishness. “I have… probably earned it.”

Foster made a strangled noise that it took Loki a moment to identify as a laugh. “Yeah, you probably have. Still, though. I don’t want to be snotty.” She took another breath. “Day after tomorrow. And I’m not promising anything, all right? This is just… I’ll listen. That’s all I can say for sure.”

“That is all I can ask,” Loki said. He felt small, and the feeling made him resentful. “As I said. I
appreciate it.”

“We’ll see,” Foster said, after a pause. “I told you, I’m a physicist. Not a superhero. Anyway, I have to go.”

“Of course,” Loki said. “Farewell, Doctor Foster.”

“Yeah,” Foster said, after a moment, something strange in her voice. “Bye, Loki.” The sound cut off and his phone beeped twice, letting him know that the call had been terminated. Loki let out a long, slow breath.

It was not, he told himself, as bad as it could be. She could have refused outright, or set more stringent conditions. She could have been hysterical, screamed insults he would have had to bear. She could have called him what he was (monster) and he would not have been able to argue.

That she had not only made him feel small and ugly, with something hard like a stone at his core. He thought it might have been guilt.

Nonetheless, she had agreed to meet. That was all he required: in person he was certain he could convince her of the need to work together. It might not be pleasant for either of them, but Foster was – it pained him to admit it – an intelligent woman. She would not refuse with her world at stake, just out of petty dislike.

He did not feel particularly victorious.

About to set down his phone and make himself some dinner, Loki paused, realizing something Jane had said. A serious conversation. You’re going to answer all of my questions. Loki felt his stomach knot. Whatever that meant, he was not looking forward to it.

Loki spent the day between his call to Foster and their meeting recording everything he knew, or guessed, about the events that were happening – and had happened – beyond the bounds of the Nine. He carefully omitted any mention of his own misadventure, which involved some careful stepping around, and…borrowed…some of the notes SHIELD’s scientists had made on the phenomena they were observing. Their way of recording Yggdrasil’s behavior made little sense to him, but he imagined Foster might appreciate it more.

In truth, however, there was too little to do to occupy his time, and so Loki spent most of the day pacing uneasily back and forth. Around midday it occurred to him that he had still not heard from Romanoff, and he considered attempting to contact her, but decided it might be best to wait a little longer for her anger to cool. Despite what Barton had said about her anger being driven by worry, Loki did not think he could tolerate her outright rejection. He felt too brittle, too aware of his own fault lines, for that.

It was not an ideal state in which to face Dr. Foster, who if not an enemy was certainly not a friend. Loki did not expect her questions to be easy, or painless. And she had asked for honesty that he would need to give in order to ensure she stayed. Loki hoped she would be able to stomach it.

He arrived at the diner an hour before three and claimed a table where he could have his back to the wall. He considered attempting to order food, as a kind of peace offering, and dismissed the idea: he had no idea what Foster liked, and it would be just his luck to order something she loathed and have her take it as a mockery. Instead he ordered a coffee black and drank it, the sharp, bitter taste keeping him alert.

Foster arrived at a quarter to three. When she saw him, she checked her step, her expression
flickering between dismay and alarm, and Loki realized that she had hoped to arrive early, before him, so that she would have time to prepare. By coming first, he had put her at a disadvantage, and that would put her on guard. Loki felt his heart sink, and indeed as the hostess moved toward her and Jane pointed in his direction with a strained smile, he could see the wariness in her in the way her shoulders rose as she approached.

Loki stood, keeping his face blank. “Doctor Foster,” he said, formal and polite. She stared at him like he’d sprouted an extra head and then nodded, jerkily, sitting down heavily. “Would you like anything?”

She stared at him a moment longer, and then made an odd noise in the back of her throat that might have been a laugh. “Sure, why not. I’ll have a banana split.” Loki blinked, but moved to signal the waiter before Jane jerked. “Wait, you’re – never mind. I was joking.” Now it was Loki’s turn to stare at her, and Foster cleared her throat and looked away. “Just coffee is fine. With room for cream.”

Loki ordered and then sat back, trying to give her some space, though it was difficult in the cramped booth, and cast a quick spell around them to keep them unnoticed and unheard. He kept his hands visible on the table, trying to think of the best way to set her at ease when Foster shook her head, biting her lower lip, and giggled. “I’m sorry,” she said when he glanced at her. “Just – this is weird. Am I wrong? Is this normal for you?”

“Which part,” Loki asked blandly. “Polite conversations with people who hate me? That is familiar, yes.”

Foster gave him a quick, hard look. “I don’t hate you.” Loki tried not to scoff, and apparently did not succeed as well as he might have hoped, because Foster flushed and said defiantly, “I don’t like you, but I don’t know you enough to hate you.”

Loki tried to mask his skepticism. “As you say. Regardless, such is beside the point. The matter we are actually here to discuss—”

“Hold on,” Foster interrupted. “This is my conversation. And I told you, I have questions.”

Questions, Loki thought, you and your questions, what more can you possibly have to ask, but he swallowed it back and simply inclined his chin. “So you said.”

“Right,” Foster said, seeming a little surprised, but sticking her chin out in a stubborn and defiant manner. “So…” She trailed off. Loki waited, and after an interval she huffed out a breath. “You said Thor was alive. He’s still in Asgard? Tell me the truth.”

You would have no way of knowing if I told you the truth, Loki thought, but he bit down on that as well. “Yes.”

“And he can’t come here because he broke the Einstein-Rosen bridge – the Bifrost. Is that right?” Loki inclined his head, very slightly. “Because you were using it as a weapon against another world.” Loki inclined his head again. “Which one?”

Loki stilled, blinked. “What does it matter? What do you even know of the Nine?”

“Thor told me,” Jane said. Loki felt his mouth spasm and tried to blank his face. “So I know the names, and...I know at least a little about a few of them.”

Loki felt a sudden rush of dizzy, almost sick curiosity. “Did he speak of Jotunheim?”

“Was that the one?” Foster asked, frowning.
“Answer my question first,” Loki fired back, but Foster pressed her lips together and shook her head. “No, oh no. You don’t get to demand anything from me. Not now, if you ever did. Was that the one you were attacking? Jotunheim?” She pronounced the word slowly, carefully mimicking his pronunciation, and Loki felt a surge of mingled nausea and anger.

“Yes,” Loki said finally, flatly. “Now tell me. What did Thor say?”

“Why?” Foster asked, persistently.

Loki laughed, gratingly. “When Thor was so kindly educating you on the Realms, he did not happen to mention that Asgard was at war?” He could hear the snap in his tone, and Foster’s chin lifted.

“Don’t take that tone with me,” she said. “If you yell at me I’m leaving and you won’t be able to talk to me again.” Loki took a deep breath and tried to shove his anger down. “I don’t remember him saying anything about war, no.”

Of course not. He would not want to mention the uglier side of himself, the side of bloodlust and recklessness, not when he was so eager to forget the hatred he nursed all his life.

“At the time,” Loki said, when he was certain he could control his voice, “we – Asgard was at war with Jotunheim. A recent development, though hostilities had been simmering for…centuries. A recent development instigated by Thor’s actions.” At your urging, reminded a voice in the back of his mind, but he ignored it. “My attack was a part of that war. An attempt to eliminate the threat as efficiently as possible, with minimal loss of Aesir life.” (Liar. That wasn’t why.) “Thor felt…he claimed it was wrong. Though I confess I do not truly see much difference between killing a people at one stroke at a distance and killing them one at a time up close.” He made himself shrug.

Foster looked nauseous. “You were – trying to kill an entire species?”

Loki gave her a bland stare, refusing to respond to her shock. “I am given to understand that mortals have managed to slaughter a number of species on your own realm, most of whom have done you no harm. There is little difference, except in my case it was intentional.”

“And – and you called them people,” Foster said. Loki felt his mouth twitch.

“A term used loosely, in this case,” he said, hearing the ugliness lurking in his own voice, he hoped too quietly for Foster to hear. “The inhabitants of Jotunheim are truly little better than speaking animals. I did not feel it would be unfortunate if they were erased from existence.”

“Oh my god,” Foster said, after a moment, nearly gaping at him. “Oh my god. You sound – I can’t do this.” She started to stand up, and Loki frowned, startled.

“Wait – you are leaving? How have I offended you now?”

“How have you–” Foster shook her head, looking incredulous. “You just told me you tried to – commit genocide! And then you excused it by saying that these, these people on Jotunheim aren’t even really people-”

Loki felt a surge of anger, almost rage, and drew on his magic. A frost giant abruptly loomed over Jane, bending down and reaching for her. She yelped and recoiled, and Loki froze the illusion.

“That,” he said, gesturing at it, “is the people on Jotunheim. One of the jotnar. Frost giants. Monsters.” He heard his voice shiver, and let the illusion go, realizing that the hideous face had started to take on his own features. “You know nothing, Doctor Foster. You understand neither war nor the universe you live in. I doubt you would be so eager to defend them if you had to face them.” He could feel himself shaking, and Foster was staring, an odd look on her face. Loki pushed himself
back and laid his hands flat on the table, trying to settle himself. Why did she have to get to him like this? “Do not be so quick to judge.”

“I…why do you hate them so much?” Foster’s voice sounded small, and she still looked sick. Loki looked away.

“They attacked my home.” (Because you showed them the way.) “They are – monsters. Nothing but brutish, cruel creatures.” (Like you. If you told her that you are one of them perhaps she would understand.)

Foster frowned. “Thor never said:”

“Yes, well,” Loki said, trying not to sneer, his heart racing strangely, “Thor clearly does not tell you everything.”

“All right,” Foster said, leaning forward. “Then why don’t you? Tell me. Tell me what you seem to think I don’t know that would make all of this make sense. Not a cliché with a bunch of holes in it that you think I want to hear. Tell me what happened.”

Loki felt himself go rigid, between one breath and the next, anger moving fully into panic. He’d been close to the edge without realizing it, and Foster’s question – her demand – pushed him over. “You don’t want to know,” he said, the strain audible in his voice. “Anything that doesn’t suit your ends you will only deem a lie.”

“Try me. How about that? How about you actually – talk to me, instead of assuming what I’m going to say and going from there?”

“You will recall that last time we spoke went rather poorly.” For you, Loki didn’t add. His expression felt tight, on the verge of snarling like a stray dog backed into an alley. An animal, fearful and trapped. “You seem to think you know all there is to know.”

“And you don’t,” Foster cut in. “So go ahead. Now’s your chance. Tell me all about how I’m wrong and Thor’s wrong and everyone’s wrong other than you. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

Loki’s temper flared and he pressed his hands harder into the table, taking a deep breath to hold himself together until it passed. He needed her. He needed to stay calm. “I told you the truth. Everything you need to know.”

“And what about what I don’t need to know?” Foster’s eyes seemed to bore into him. “You keep saying I don’t know anything, I don’t understand anything. So explain it to me.”

Loki wanted to laugh. He wanted to scream. He wanted to run away from Foster and never see her again, but he needed her, he needed her or this pathetic backwater realm would be swallowed whole, and all of its people would die.

The anger drained away, all at once, and with it the fear. He was left with only a dull, hollow feeling in his chest. He pushed his half full mug of coffee away and looked out the window. “Very well. You want to know – what do you want to know?”

“I want to know.” He heard Foster exhale, loudly. “I want to know a lot of things. I want to know why you hate Thor so much. I want to know why you’re really here and where Asgard thinks you are now. I want to know how you can not see the problem with killing an entire species of people?”

“They are not people,” Loki said, but this time the words came out dully.
“You keep saying that. How are you so sure?”

“I know it,” Loki said, not looking at her. “The same way you know that – an ape is not a human being. It could pretend, perhaps. Maybe even be convincing for a time. But eventually…” He shrugged one shoulder, a mirthless smile twisting his lips. “If you had spoken to Thor of them at all, he would have told you as much.”

“But he stopped you,” Foster insisted. Loki shrugged one shoulder.

“You changed him, somehow.” All my years of trying did nothing, meant nothing. And you and this Realm in a few days managed to remake Thor into something else, someone who did not rejoice in the slaughter of those he was so delighted to kill but days earlier. “Or perhaps it was merely that it was my action, as opposed to another’s. I do not know.” He looked down at his hands, imagined them turning blue and ridged, and felt his stomach roll.

Foster was silent for a long moment. “The way you talk about Thor…it’s like he was a completely different person.”

“He was,” Loki said without thinking, only…he remembered Thor as a child, remembered his compassion and warmth and care. Only that had changed as he grew older, grew quicker to anger and quicker to act recklessly, careless with his words and eager for blood. Less gentle. Perhaps Thor had not transformed so much as gone back to how he should have been. “Arrogant, thoughtless, quick to anger and thirsty for battle. He thought little of others, particularly those different from himself. Less of those he considered enemies, except as a potential for glory.” Loki felt a sudden sharp pang of loss, and stifled it. Whatever they had been was dead and gone, and there was no use mourning it when it had only ever been a lie. If Thor saw him now-

Loki stifled that thought as well. Foster was frowning.

“He wasn’t – that bad. I mean – sure, overconfident and a little bit of a jerk, but not…” She seemed to be groping for words. Loki smiled thinly.

“You met him when he’d lost everything and knew him for a few days, Doctor Foster. I would not base your judgment of his whole on that time.” Loki realized he was picking at his left hand and made himself stop. Foster’s frown deepened.

“So…you said you tried to get him banished. Because…”

“I was not,” Loki said, before he could catch himself. Foster blinked, and Loki grimaced. “I was not trying to get him banished,” he said. The words spilled from him with surprising ease. Had he not been better at keeping secrets, once? “I merely meant to…it does not matter. I was…surprised but I did not mourn overmuch.”

“And that’s when you were crowned,” Foster said slowly. “But…where was your father?”

“Not my father,” Loki said, without thinking, and when Foster frowned, hurried on, hoping she would not ask. “The All-Father…fell into the Odinsleep. A – deep rest required to replenish his strength,” he clarified. “Then…that is when I was crowned. And took…steps to ensure Thor did not return.”

“Steps,” Foster said. “Like trying to kill him.”

“I did not think he would die,” Loki burst out, and a moment later clamped his lips together. Foster stared at him, incredulous.
“You attacked him with a giant metal monster,” she said, voice rising sharply. “And you didn’t think he would die?” Loki pressed his lips together. I did not know how weak mortal bodies are. How fragile. I thought that – I was angry. I wanted... but he had not known, even then, what he wanted. Foster stared at him and started shaking her head again. “This still doesn’t make any sense. You say – you say you didn’t want him banished, didn’t want him dead, so why would you attack him in the first place?”

I don’t know, Loki thought miserably. I do not know what I thought would happen. I only didn’t want him to come back. I was afraid. I needed him to stay away. And his friends, his friends betrayed me- but it was nothing, excuses, childish foolishness. As all of it had been, from the beginning. The only choice he’d made with any sense in it had been letting go, and even that-

“I don’t know, Loki thought miserably. I do not know what I thought would happen. I only didn’t want him to come back. I was afraid. I needed him to stay away. And his friends, his friends betrayed me- but it was nothing, excuses, childish foolishness. As all of it had been, from the beginning. The only choice he’d made with any sense in it had been letting go, and even that-

“Loki?” Foster sounded nervous, and Loki jerked, slightly, and realized that there was ice on the table under his hands. He stared at it, almost uncomprehending. That had never happened before.

“Doctor Foster,” he said, and his voice sounded strangely bland, neutral. “Do you…want to know why I attacked Jotunheim?”

“I…yes?” Foster sounded wary, uncertain. “Are you…you look…"

Look what, Loki thought, the urge to laugh bubbling hysterically up in his chest. He held it in and focused. He had never tried to change consciously before, but he remembered how it had felt, like his skin peeling back. He closed his eyes so he did not see his hands change and felt the wash of cold over his body, and then a feeling like the entire room was suddenly too warm. Foster made a small squeaking noise. Loki did not open his eyes, feeling his mouth twist into a bitter smile.

“I had to prove that I was not one of them, you see,” Loki said. His voice sounded strangely serene. His heart wasn’t even pounding. “Of course, as soon as I knew, it all made sense. And yet I, fool that I was, believed that there was still something to be done. If all the others were dead, I thought, what would it matter? But I had to keep Thor away – after all, if he knew he would kill me on sight. I should not have…I did not expect him to die. But of course it all went wrong. Thor survived, he came back, he broke the Bifrost and I-

“Wait,” said Foster, “wait, wait wait, what do you mean as soon as you knew, are you – you’re not-”

“Not Aesir?” Loki opened his eyes, finally. The diner looked different, through these eyes. “Is that not obvious?” Foster was gaping at him, and Loki drank in the look on her face: horror, confusion. It hurt, it made him feel sick, it was right.

“It seems Odin found a whelp on the ice at the end of the last war. Took it home, brought it up to believe it was – a person.” Loki smiled mirthlessly. It stretched his face. “As I said, however – the truth will out.” The horror on Foster’s face was only growing.

“All it took was one touch from one Jotun and the game was over.”

Foster gripped the edge of the table and leaned back like she could push herself further away from him. “Oh,” she said, in a strange, small voice. Loki almost relaxed, perversely. He summoned back his skin – his false skin – and leaned back. She was the first one he’d told, Loki realized. The first one on this realm to know what he was, truly.

“Does it make more sense now?” He asked, almost gently. Foster squeezed her eyes closed and opened them again.

“Does Thor…did Thor…”

“Know? By now I suspect so. Before…I think not. He would have killed me, else. He did, after all, once promise to hunt down the monsters and slay them all.” The words, etched in his memory, tasted
bitter even now. Foster looked like she wanted to sway. “Have you had enough of truth, now, Doctor Foster?”

Foster shook her head, slightly, but Loki didn’t think it was disagreement. “I…um. I…” She trailed off again, shook her head again. “Where does…where does Asgard think you are now?” She asked faintly, like she remembered the question being important but her mind was still elsewhere.

“Does it matter?” Loki asked. She said nothing, still staring at him, and Loki glanced away with a shrug. “As far as they know I am dead. Or at least, I assume they are still under that impression.” Foster flinched, and Loki almost, briefly, felt guilty. Mostly, however, he just felt cold. And tired. He wished, oddly enough, that he could speak to Dr. Fisher, but he did not know what he would say.

“Dead,” Foster echoed. “They…oh.” Her voice was faint, still, but she took a deep, wobbly breath and her eyes refocused on him, slowly. “You’re…”

Sick, Loki thought. Wrong. A monster. But the way Foster was looking at him…she still looked nauseous, but she didn’t look scared. Just pale. She shook her head and stood up. “I have to go.”

Loki narrowed his eyes and tensed. “What? You agreed to – we have not spoken at all of the serious matter-”

“I can’t,” Foster said, running a hand through her hair and looking everywhere but at him. “All right? I didn’t expect – I can’t.”

Loki did not expect that to hit him as hard as it did, like she’d stabbed him in the gut and twisted the knife. It was…fair, he supposed. He should not have…should not have shown her his true self. In any of the ways that might be meant. It was not surprising that she would run. But… “Doctor Foster,” he said carefully, trying to make his voice calm, steady. “I can appreciate that this has not been…but whatever I am or am not, the fact remains that there is something aiming to attack your realm, and it needs to be dealt with. You have the necessary skills to-”

“I know,” Foster burst out, and she looked at him, finally, a little wild-eyed. “I know, the world needs me, but can you – give me a minute? I’m still processing – I can’t do this right now. I thought I could, but I can’t, and I just need to – take a little bit to figure out-” She gestured in his direction, and Loki felt as though he’d swallowed ice. It should not sting, he told himself. She had already hated him. That she felt disgust now was little change.

“We do not have an abundance of time,” he said, making himself stay still.

“Twenty four hours,” Foster said, looking away again. “Give me twenty four hours. You just – you kind of dumped a lot on me, and I wasn’t exactly prepared-”

And whose fault is that, Loki wanted to say, but he bit it back, feeling his mouth twist in a wry and mirthless sort of way. He spread his fingers out on the table and looked at them, imagining them blue again, and then imagining stabbing a knife through that blue hand, through and into the table. The thought, perversely, grounded him. “I am sorry to have shocked you,” he said, his voice oddly steady in light of how his stomach still churned. “I lost control, I suppose. I seem to do that a great deal around you.”

He could feel Foster staring at him. “I can’t even tell what you’re apologizing for,” she said, at length. Loki tilted his head to look at her out of the corner of his eye.

“My behavior just now,” he said. “You did not, I imagine, expect to find yourself sitting at table with…well. That.” He gestured at where the illusion of the frost giant had been, near the beginning
of this hideous conversation. Foster goggled at him, and then made a strange, breathless, giggling sound.

“Is that what you think I’m-” She sat down. “All right. Let’s get one thing straight: I’m surprised, sure, and I wasn’t expecting you to – change color mid-conversation, but I don’t know anything about these Jotuns-”


“—and I’m not particularly bothered by the fact that you are one. All right? That’s not the problem.”

Loki blinked, the ice in his gut shifting if not melting. “It is not?” That is only her ignorance speaking, Loki’s thoughts reminded him.

“No,” Foster said firmly. “It isn’t.”

“Then what is?” He felt as though he were stumbling in the dark. It reminded him, sourly, of being a child, when someone would tell him no, Loki, that is wrong and never explain why. Foster was looking at him again, her expression strange. She did not look…angry, exactly, but Loki was not certain how to untangle the rest.

“If you honestly don’t get it I’m not sure I can explain,” she said, after several moments of silence. Loki felt his face twist and Foster grimaced. “I know how that sounds, but…” She trailed off and sighed, covering her face briefly with her hands and rubbing her temples. “I…really need the time. Okay? Just twenty-four hours. And then I’ll – I’ll call you, and we can actually talk. About this…thing, whatever it is.” She glanced at him, but only briefly before her eyes skated away again.

“Okay?”

Loki wanted to laugh, but he knew it would have come out bitter. “I cannot exactly refuse, can I?” Foster winced, and Loki made himself shrug. “Very well. If that is what…you require, I suppose it shall have to wait.” He resisted the urge to tell her I told you, you should have accepted the first story, what have you gained by knowing this. He did not, however. The hollow, cold feeling had not left him, and he felt suddenly very tired. What possessed you, fool? What did you think would happen?

“I’m sorry,” Foster said. She even sounded like she meant it. Loki inclined his head a fraction.

“No need to apologize, Doctor Foster,” he said, keeping his voice smooth. “I can appreciate that you have had a…shock.” In the future perhaps you will respect my privacy.

Foster opened her mouth like she was going to say something, eyebrows pulled together, and then closed it. “I’ll call,” she said lamely. “I…guess I have your phone number now.” She stood up, running her fingers through mussed hair. “I’ll see you later, then,” she said, and headed for the door, looking a little unsteady.

Loki let her go. He had mishandled nearly everything about this meeting, he thought, but even that did not summon so much frustration as a sad, empty disappointment. He reached out for his half-finished coffee and took a sip, but it was cold.

Around him, the diner continued its motion, undisturbed.

Interlude (XXVIII)

Loki went (ran) as far away as he could, or nearly. He knew it would not last. He doubted very much that his pursuers were the sort to be deterred by distance.
But that did not mean he needed to make it easy for them.

Loki trekked out into the wilderness after a brief stop to buy a few necessities (warm clothes, a few portable dishes, blankets. Just like packing for one of Thor’s innumerable quests – he cut all memories off before they could sting). He only had to go a few days before finding something like a cabin, neglected and half reclaimed by the wild. The floor inside was covered in mouse and bird droppings, and the roof gaped open to the sky.

Loki moved in.

He had the advantage of his magic, in cleaning. There was no wood to patch the roof so he simply ignored it and determined to make his home in a corner where rain would not fall directly on his head, at least. Come winter perhaps it would not be so easy, but by then he might well be gone.

It was time to stop thinking of permanent solutions. Of homes and roots and making a life. There was no such thing. Not for him.

The anger came fast and was gone quickly. So be it. He’d always known he did not belong. He would live lightly and keep moving. Even this was only temporary.

He slept lightly and woke shivering to the sound of a thunderstorm, what sounded like directly overhead. His heart was galloping in his chest and for a dizzy, nauseous, moment, he thought that Thor had found him and this was the harbinger of his anger, that in a few breaths Thor would come bursting through the door, Mjolnir flashing with sparks of lightning, eyes glowing with rage.

The moment passed and it was just a thunderstorm again. Loki moved under the hole in the roof and looked up. The fat, heavy raindrops splashed on his face, and Loki opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue to taste them. There was a faint tang, an acid bitterness: the pollution of mortals, sunk into the cycle of their water. Loki closed his mouth and slunk back into the shadow of his makeshift shelter, but he didn’t go back to sleep. He sat propped against the wall and jumped at every vast rumble of thunder, feeling them in his bones. After a while he pulled his knees into his chest.

“I want to go home,” Loki said, quietly enough that it could be covered by the sound of thunder, so he could pretend he hadn’t said it at all.
Chapter Notes

These chapter notes could get really repetitive if I let them do that.

We continue to move carefully in the direction of the plot! I continue to be surprised by how long it takes me to get Loki to the places I need him to be in! Everything continues to really be about the emotional conversations with a thin veneer of plot over it! This is what I am, what can I say.

Also I've now been writing this fic for almost four years, which...either terrifies or impresses me, I'm not sure which.

One final note on content for this chapter that it contains specific thoughts of self-harm and suicidal ideation on a level that...it has been a while since that was there? So be warned if that is an issue for you. If it is and you still want to read the chapter, you should be fine if you skip about halfway down in the first section.

Thanks to ameliarating, who does the editing for every chapter of this thing and a whole bunch of other stuff for me in between.

Blah blah blah, interested parties can find me rambling about literally everything on my trash blog.

Loki went home, eventually – once his coffee was well and truly cold, and he had begun to feel the sidelong looks the wait staff was giving him for taking up space. He felt hollow, empty, as though his insides had been scooped out of him and replaced with lead.

Twenty-four hours. Foster had requested twenty-four hours. All he could do was wait.

He picked up a book and tried to read, but he could not focus on the words. Attempting to play chess on his laptop was even less productive. His thoughts, so often overwhelming in their intensity, were slow and sluggish when they were not blank.

He should not have changed. Should not have shown Doctor Foster what he was. She had said – I'm not particularly bothered that you are one. A lie, it had to be. Or if it wasn’t, then...

Loki found himself in the bathroom, looking at the mirror. He summoned the change, let it sweep over him, forced himself to meet his own (red, red) eyes. His stomach turned and Loki summoned one of his knives, holding it. He could slash open his arm and see Jotun blood (purple-blue, he knew). He could do worse. Loki could feel himself breathing, shallow and harsh.

He dropped the knife in the sink and changed back, retreating from the bathroom. He found the card on the countertop and dialed without thinking, not letting himself stop.

“Hello?”

“Doctor Fisher?” Loki said, almost in a rush.
“Yes; who is this?”

“Luke Silver,” Loki said, remembering not to say Loki just in time. “From SHIELD. You are – we have been speaking together. You gave me a card with this number. I hope I have not disturbed you-”


“Yes,” Loki said automatically, and then felt himself twitch, and bit back the urge to laugh. “No, perhaps not. I am not – certain. I have had a – somewhat trying day.”


“Yes,” Loki said, and then realized with his most recent response that might not be sufficient. “In my – my home. I am perfectly safe.”

“Are you going to hurt yourself? Or anyone else?”

_I do not think so. But would I know if I were? I did not intend to kill Thor, and yet I did, I did not decide that I wanted to die until a moment before I let go._ “I was considering it,” he said, after a moment. “But I – do not think that I will. If only out of cowardice.”

“It’s not cowardly to step back from self-harm,” Dr. Fisher said seriously. “Far from it. You did the right thing calling me instead. Are you breathing? Full breaths, into your stomach.”

Loki had been about to snap that of course he was breathing or he would not be able to speak, but when he checked himself – he inhaled, forcing himself to breathe deeply, down into his abdomen. It hurt. Frigga had taught him this, he remembered. Helped guide him through the first times he had found himself struggling to breathe.

“That’s good. Take three of those,” she said. Her voice was sure and soothing. Reassuring. “And sit down.” Loki felt a pang of shame, wanted to protest that he was fine, but forced himself to do as she said. He could still feel – he was not quite shaking. But he thought he might, if he did not feel so removed from his body. He moved to dig his nails into his arm and forced himself to stop.

He sat down.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” Dr. Fisher asked gently, after a moment.

Loki closed his eyes. “I would not know how to explain.”

“You could try.”

Loki pressed his lips together. He wanted to strangle the words, push them back down, shut everything away, but – what good had that done him? “I feel – raw,” he said. “Vulnerable. I should be able to control myself, but I cannot. I do not want to be this – this thing, weak and pathetic, sniveling at shadows-”

“Luke,” Dr. Fisher interrupted. “I want you to think about the language you’re using. You equated vulnerability with weakness. Is that what it seems like to you?”

“Of course,” Loki said. “How can it be otherwise?”

“Everyone is vulnerable sometimes. Does that mean that everyone is weak?”

Loki swallowed hard. “I cannot be weak. I cannot-.”
“It’s all right,” Dr. Fisher said, soothing. “Take another deep breath for me. We don’t have to talk about this now. If you want, I can check my schedule and see if you can come in sooner. It’s true that – sometimes therapy can have that effect. But it’s not a bad thing. It’s like an infection: things can fester in your mind the same way they can in your body.”

Loki’s eyes burned. No, he thought savagely. No, I will not weep. I should have died. I should have... “I hate it,” he said, knowing he sounded like a child. “I hate this. I want it gone. If I could cut it out of me—”


Loki felt himself shudder. I don’t know. I don’t know. “No,” he said finally. “No. I am...I am fine.”

There was quiet for a long moment on the other end of the line. “Luke,” she said at length, “is there someone you can call? Someone you trust, who can come and be with you?”

“No,” Loki said without thinking, but then Romanov’s face popped into his mind, and Barton’s – and, oddly enough, the Captain’s. “—maybe.”

“Would you text one of them? Right now? I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be alone right now.”

“A moment,” Loki said. His brain felt as though it were struggling to work, but he lowered the phone from his ear and went to the messaging capability. He hesitated a moment: Romanoff was angry with him, but she could reach him more easily and he knew her better – and she him. She knew the truth of what he was.

If you are able, he wrote, please come to my apartment. He hesitated, and then added, I need your help. I am sorry. I would not ask lightly. He hit send and waited. It seemed to take only a moment before she responded.

See you soon.

Loki hadn’t realized his fear until he felt himself slump. He returned to the call and brought it back to his ear. “A...friend is coming,” he said. “She will...stay with me.”

“Good,” Dr. Fisher said. “That’s good. Thank you for doing that, Luke.” Exhaustion swept over Loki in a wave, and suddenly all he wanted to do was sleep. “Do you want me to stay on the phone until she gets there?”

“No,” Loki said, after a moment. “No, that is...all right.”

“If you’re sure.” He heard her hesitate. “I’ll call you tomorrow about setting up an appointment before next week. All right?”

Loki closed his eyes. “Very well.”

“Thank you for calling me, Luke,” she said. Her voice was so very, hatefully, gentle. It made something in him ache. “It was very brave of you. If you need anything...I’ll keep my phone on.”

Brave. Ha. “Thank you,” Loki mumbled. He should feel ashamed. He did feel ashamed, but it was distant, covered over by the weariness.

“Take care, Luke,” he heard her say, before he ended the call. He checked to see if Romanov had sent any further messages, but she had not.
He set the phone down on the table and lay down on the couch, closing his eyes.

He must have slept, because he woke with a start later to a knock on the door.

Loki waded through a moment of disorientation to remember that he was expecting Natasha – Romanov, he reminded himself – and pulled himself off the couch, collecting himself before going to open the door. It was, indeed, her – standing on the other side, though her face was a blank that made Loki’s stomach tighten.

“Hey,” she said. “Well, you look in better shape than last time I dropped by.”

It took Loki a moment to understand, but then he remembered her voice while he was lying on the floor with his mouth full of blood, head ringing like a rung bell. He winced. “Yes,” he said after a moment. “I…have not thanked you for that. For your aid.”

“Nope,” she agreed. “Can I come in?”

Loki stepped back. He could almost feel the anger rolling off of her and almost regretting asking her to come. He did not know if he could manage that right now, not when he felt so…raw. Still, she stepped inside and closed the door, and then examined him. The blank mask slipped a little, her eyebrows pulling together.

“You said you needed help,” she prompted. Loki turned away.

“Yes,” he said after a moment. “I…do not think it is wise for me to be alone right now.” For a moment he feared she would ask why, and he would have to tell her, but she just examined him and then nodded.

“Okay,” she said. “I can stay.”

Loki blinked. He’d expected to have to negotiate. To offer recompense. “Thank you,” he said slowly. “Do you…may I offer you anything?”

“I’ll help myself if I want it.” Romanov went over to a chair and dropped into it, putting her feet on the coffee table. Loki just looked at her, feeling sluggish and confused. She was not acting as he would have expected. He could sense her anger but also that she was holding it back, not trying to punish him. It made him uneasy. He shifted.

“How are – are you well?”

“All right,” she said. “Fury’s keeping me busy, but nothing that dangerous. Or hard. You want to sit down so I don’t have to crane my neck to look at you?”

After a long moment Loki walked over to the couch and sat down. He wondered vaguely if this was how Thor had felt, when Loki had been angry at him but refusing to acknowledge it for one reason or another. It was not…comfortable. Rubbed against the raw places his conversation with Foster had left. “If you have other things to do,” he offered.

“No,” Romanov interrupted. “I’m good.”

Loki twitched. “You are not. You are angry.” The words burst out of him before he could hold them back. Romanov looked at him, face settling back into that blank mask. Studying him. Weighing him.

“You sure you want to do this now?” She said eventually. There was something almost gentle in her
voice. Loki jerked his head.

“I cannot ignore it.”

“All right.” She exhaled. “Yes. I’m angry. Do you know why?”

Loki faltered. “I was reckless. Foolish.”

The mask dropped. “You’re damn right you were. You knew something was wrong. You knew you were walking into dangerous territory. And you still waltzed in without any kind of protection or backup, even though you knew next to nothing about what you might be facing. I can’t decide if that’s arrogance of stupidity.” Loki flinched and hunched his shoulders, but didn’t try to argue.

“How hard would it have been to tell me? Or Clint? Hey, guys, going to go for an extradimensional walkabout to tangle with unknown dangers. See you later!”

Loki swallowed hard. “I told Barton…neither of you could have accompanied me.”

“Maybe not,” Romanov shot back. “But we could’ve made sure you were more prepared, or persuaded you to wait until we had better intel, or at least had me ready for you to come back bleeding from your eyes and unresponsive—”

Loki heard it, then. The fear, underneath the anger. Oh, he realized, feeling suddenly small. “I am sorry,” he said weakly. Romanov let out an explosive breath.

“I get it,” she said. “I do. You get used to being on your own. Having to do everything on your own, only being able to rely on yourself. But I’d hoped you’d figured out by now that that’s not the case anymore. That maybe there are some people you could go to.”

Loki hunched his shoulders. “I frightened you,” he said quietly.

“Oh,” Romanov – Natasha – said after a moment. “You did. I don’t know if you have any idea what it was like to come in here and see you lying on the ground covered in blood and think I could’ve stopped this, I knew he was going to do something stupid. This is the second time in six months you’ve almost gotten yourself killed. I don’t have a lot of friends, Loki. I’m not in a huge hurry to lose the ones I’ve got.”

Loki bowed his head. Selfish failure, his mind sniped at him.

He said nothing.

“You know what else?” Natasha’s voice was quieter, and Loki tried to brace himself. “It’s not just you I’m mad at. I saw it, you know. I could tell you were going to do something, and that it was probably something stupid, and I didn’t say anything. What if I hadn’t come here at all? You could’ve bled to death, no one the wiser.”

“I would not have bled to death,” Loki mumbled, though he was not entirely certain of that. Whatever had happened – and he felt a stab of panic just thinking of that hollow place in his memory – it was not like anything he had experienced before.

“You know what I mean. And that rankles. Just a little.”

“You are not my minder,” Loki said. His voice sounded rough.

“No,” Natasha agreed. “But I’m your friend. I look after my friends, or I’m supposed to. Especially when my friends don’t know how to look after themselves.”
Loki felt a touch of temper flare. “I am not a child.”

“Neither is Clint, but he still forgets to buy groceries sometimes,” Natasha said blandly. “Just… I’d like to know if you’re trying to get yourself killed or just really bad at thinking things through.”

“The latter,” Loki said, trying to make his voice firm. When Natasha continued to eye him skeptically, he added, “I am fairly sure.”

“You’d know, wouldn’t you?” Natasha said, but he saw something in her relax. She’d been worried, he realized. The idea felt strange to him – the thought that someone on this realm was concerned for his safety. He told himself it was likely because of his usefulness to her organization, but the explanation rang hollow and he was not quite sure why he tried to hold onto it anyway.

He shrugged a little. “It is complicated.”

“I bet,” Natasha said, something dry in her voice. She shook her head. “I can’t decide if you’re the luckiest or the unluckiest guy I’ve ever met.”

Loki felt a knot in his chest ease, though he still felt shaky, strung tight. Still, he could feel the shift, her anger no longer blazing. “I would lean towards the latter.”

“You would,” Natasha said, a statement Loki decided not to question. She eyed him. “Relax. I got my yelling out.”

Loki made himself lean back, casting her a sidelong look. “Is that it? Am I still…” What was the phrase Barton had used? “In the doghouse?”

Natasha’s mouth twitched. “You don’t know how funny it is to hear you say that.” She sighed, and made a face. “All right. I should make you grovel more, but I’m feeling merciful. Just…try not to get yourself almost-killed for a few months, all right?”

“I shall do my best,” Loki said solemnly, and the corner of her mouth twitched up toward a smile, very brief.

“You okay?” She asked, expression sobering. Loki felt a brief sting of shame.

“Yes. Of course.”

Loki could see her thinking about pushing. Trying to decide if she should. That he could see it meant she probably wanted him to, and was giving him a chance to make the choice for himself. He stayed silent, even if something in his chest ached with the desire to confess…something. A childish need to seek comfort. After a moment Natasha just nodded.

“Good.” She paused. “And you…haven’t remembered anything? About what you saw?”

The place that still felt like a hole in him throbbled, as if in reminder of what – whatever was there had done. “No,” he said. “Nothing. If I do… I will tell you. I swear it.” He might regret that promise, but she deserved it.

“You do that.” Natasha stretched her arms over her head. “Do you have a game in you? Bobbi’s great to work with but she hates chess.”

Loki was far from certain he would be able to play anything requiring that much focus, but going through the motions might be soothing on its own. “Remind me to teach you tafli sometime,” he murmured.
“So I can beat you at that one too?” Natasha said, but with a smile. The rawness edged a little further away, and Loki managed a crooked smile of his own.

“We shall see.”

“Whenever you want, big talker,” she said, removing her feet from the table and rising smoothly to her feet. “Where do you keep your board again?”

Of course, Natasha could not stay forever. She got a call after a few hours, listened for a few moments, and hung up, turning to look at Loki with a grimace. “They want me to come in. I can tell them to find someone else if I need to…”

The fact that she offered made Loki’s chest feel warm. “No,” he said. “No, go ahead. I shall be fine.”

“You’d better be,” she said. “And if you call and my phone’s not on…don’t panic, all right? I’m not that easy to kidnap.” Loki winced, even if there was a faint mischievous glitter in her eyes.

“Yes, my lady,” he said with a courtly bow, to make her wrinkle her nose. Moments later she was gone, and Loki took a deep breath. He could feel the dark right there, and himself hovering over it, teetering like he was balanced on a narrow ledge, but he held himself steady. He would not fall.

Without thinking about it, he picked up his phone and glanced at the screen, only to see that he had missed a call from Roslyn Carrolly. It took him a moment to connect Carrolly with Roslyn and then he felt a touch of surprise. He wondered when she had managed that.

There was a message, but he ignored it in favor of simply dialing her phone directly.

“Agent Carrolly speaking,” said Roslyn’s voice when the connection went through, sounding slightly distracted in a way that made Loki want to smile. He kept it out of his voice, however.

“I gathered,” he said. “This is Agent Silver. You called?”


“I have not listened to it,” Loki interrupted.

“That’s fine, that’s fine. Are you busy right now? Do you think you could come in?” There was something thrumming in her voice, even distorted over the phone lines. Loki frowned, trying to identify it. Excitement or something more concerning?

“What for?” He asked carefully.

“The tests we were running turned up some…” She trailed off. “I think it would be better if you came and we could talk about it in person.”

Loki felt himself tense. Something to do with whatever had happened out beyond Yggdrasil? Something wrong with him? “Very well,” he said, after a moment of warring whether he should push to find out more. “I am not busy. I will be there shortly.”

“Right,” Roslyn said. “Right, good. The usual lab should be fine, I’ll call Jun and make sure he can get there…are you feeling all right?”

Loki felt himself stiffen further. “Do I sound otherwise?”
“No,” Roslyn said. “No, you sound fine, just…we'll talk about it when you get here.” She paused. “It's probably nothing. It could just be an equipment error or…”

“I will be there in a moment,” Loki interrupted, before she could start rambling. “And then you can tell me what this probably nothing is.”

He hung up and went to the bathroom to investigate himself in the mirror, only to grimace at his face – pale, slightly red around the eyes. He took a swift shower in lieu of the effort of a glamour and changed clothes in the hopes that it would give him some distance from his unfortunate morning with Dr. Foster. When Loki felt more or less composed, he took a deep breath and transported himself to Chandra’s lab. It was not quite empty, but Roslyn was not there. Still, he slipped inside and found a chair to sit on while he waited. Loki could feel curious eyes on him, but to his relief (and faint surprise) no one approached with questions. He did, however, catch at least one pair whispering to each other, their eyes on him.

Roslyn hurried in perhaps five minutes later, a young man with her Loki identified as Jun – the one who had been discussing radiation, whom Loki had largely ignored. Roslyn’s eyes caught on him almost immediately and she hurried toward him.

“Luke! Thank you for coming so quickly. You remember Jun – I had him looking at your results with me, because I thought something looked a little weird and I wanted a second opinion and-”

“Roslyn,” Loki cut in, keeping his voice mild in spite of the prickling down his spine. “What exactly is going on?”

Roslyn bit her lower lip and glanced at Jun, who looked back at her with a small shrug. “It’s just…when we were first taking measurements, someone suggested gamma radiation levels, because they thought it might be…but there was nothing irregular about yours. But this time-” She paused. “Your levels were…very high. Abnormally high.”

Loki frowned. “And that is…bad,” he said carefully.

“Not necessarily,” Jun cut in. “Just by existing there’s always some level of gamma radiation. But – when it builds up like what Roslyn showed me on the readout…there’s always a risk. Furthermore, it’s – I don’t know how you would get that kind of level of radiation unless you were trying, or working with a lot of radioactive materials…” He cast a glance at Loki. He shook his head.

“As far as I know, I have not been in contact with any such thing,” he said. As far as I know. The gap in his memory… “What other things would…give off this radiation?”

“Mostly astronomical processes and a byproduct of cosmic rays,” Jun said. Roslyn and Loki both looked at him blankly, and he said, “space. But not usually just…cosmic rays are from outside of the Solar System. Banner’s research used radioactive materials, and lightning strikes sometimes show small amounts…”

“But none of that accounts for what you are seeing,” Loki guessed. His spine was prickling again. Something had happened. Something had happened and it had…done what? “This…radiation in me. Is it likely to harm others?”

“I’m not sure,” Roslyn said, after a moment. “That was…I wanted to check. If you’re not showing any adverse symptoms – that’s good! Weird, but good. But just in case, I wanted to ask if we could…do another reading. Specifically looking for gamma radiation, this time. Like I said, maybe there was an error, or…”
“Do it,” Loki said, without hesitation. Roslyn looked taken aback.

“Are you sure?”

“I am certain,” Loki said. “If there is something peculiar…I would like to know. Then we can begin working out why.”

Roslyn nodded, after a moment. “All right,” she said. “We’re going to use Jun’s equipment, this time, since this is kind of his area of expertise.” Jun saluted, and Loki gave him a thin smile. “So…” she gestured toward the other man. Loki raised his eyebrows.

“Command me,” he said simply. Jun gave him a small, half-uncertain smile.

“Right,” he said. “So…just this way. It’d be best if I could take a blood sample…” He trailed off, looking uncertain. Loki wondered if Chandra had mentioned his dislike of offering such things, but…this might be important.

“Very well,” he said after a moment. “Do whatever you must.”

Jun’s shoulders slumped. Apparently he had been worried about asking. “I’ll destroy it as soon as I finish the tests,” he said hurriedly. “I promise. Anyway – I’d also like to do a surface scan, so we can see if you’re actually giving off the radiation in significant quantities or if it’s just present.” Loki nodded, jerkily, and took the seat Jun offered him, Roslyn trailing behind. “All right,” Jun said, picking up a small, innocuous looking device. “Just really quickly…”

Loki tensed, but all the thing did was beep at him. Roslyn hovered near the computer, her expression tense and worried enough that Loki could feel himself responding to it. He forced himself to let out the breath he was nearly holding.

“Readouts match,” Roslyn said simply. Jun blew out a breath and tugged at his coat, a brief look of unease crossing over his face.

“Right,” he said. “Agent Silver – if you would hold this-” He held out a small, curious looking device. Loki extended his hand and Jun dropped it into his palm.

“What is,” he started to ask, and then something shuddered through him. He jerked, eyes widening in alarm, and then choked on a cry as something seemed to – stab through his left eye, deep into his brain, sharp, throbbing pain that silenced his voice. He could taste copper in his mouth and there was something wet on his upper lip, the spike seeming to broaden, spreading-

He made his hand tip so the thing fell on the floor, jerking back and to his feet. “What in all the Nine,” he said, voice thick and shaking. Roslyn’s hands were over her mouth and Jun was staring, poleaxed.

“That…you’re bleeding,” he said. Loki swiped an arm across under his nose and looked at the smear of red. His head was still throbbing, though it was ebbing quickly. He could feel anger rising, tangled with fear, and tried to keep it restrained.

“What was that,” he said, trying to keep it from being a snarl. By the way they both flinched, he did not quite succeed.

“Nothing!” Jun said hastily. “Or, well – just an experimental device, meant to help shield people from radiation, it doesn’t…” He trailed off, swallowed. Loki pulled the reins on his anger in tighter. Not intentional. It hadn’t been… (he said). Loki pushed the suspicion away. He could not…could not think that SHIELD was trying to kill him now.
“Suppress radiation,” he said. He found a sink and paced over, spitting into it in an attempt to get the 
taste of blood, trickling from his nosebleed, out of his mouth. “Such as this…gamma radiation that I 
have in excess.”

“Like that,” Jun said, his voice small. “I thought it might…help. I’m really sorry, I had no idea it 
would…why would it do that?” He sounded scared, and frustrated, and confused. Loki’s paranoia 
eased, somewhat.

Loki felt himself fall still, some quiet suspicion lurking in the back of his mind. *If something was 
done to me…whatever reason it is there…* “You said you thought my magic might have aught to do 
with this radiation,” he said.

“But it doesn’t,” Roslyn said, sounding confused. “We established that a while ago…”

*Might someone else’s?* Loki kept the question to himself. If someone had laid a working on him and 
they did not want it removed…did not want it discovered…

Easy enough, to tie something to the subject’s life. To make tearing it away, or suppressing it, too 
great a cost to pay. Loki’s heart thudded, panic rising up in his stomach. He shoved it down.

“Who would know more of what this might mean,” he demanded. Something was wrong, that much 
was clear. Whatever he had found…it had not been content to rip away his memory and leave him 
wounded. Jun and Roslyn both hesitated, looking at one another.

“Jemma Simmons might,” Roslyn said hesitantly.

“Doctor Banner definitely would, but he’s…hard to track down these days,” Jun added. “I heard 
something about Eric Selvig doing some work, but radiation isn’t really his field…”

“Find one of them,” Loki said roughly. They both stared at him, almost owlish, and Loki barely kept 
himself from snapping. “It may be – very important.”


*Someone is meddling with me. I do not yet know how badly.* He would need to tell someone. 
Coulson, perhaps. But he did not want to be removed from the field yet again, shuttled off and kept 
in a safe cage. He needed to be working. This was his now, if it had not been before – his 
responsibility. He had made it so.

“I am not sure yet,” he said flatly, not quite grim. He rubbed his left eye as though that would ease 
the lingering pain. “But it may be very important.”

“I’ll…do some asking around,” Jun said, still looking unnerved. “Do we…” He glanced at Roslyn. 
“Quarantine?” Loki felt a chill down his spine, but Roslyn shook her head, slowly.

“The levels are high, but…it doesn’t seem like it’s affecting anything else? I mean, there’s a lot of 
sensitive equipment in here…”

*Do not put me in a cage,* Loki thought, but he held his tongue. If he was dangerous – if whatever 
had been done to him was a threat to those around him…he could leave. That would be better, if it 
was necessary, than being shut up and locked away. A moment later Jun nodded.

“All right,” he said. “I think we’ll leave it for now, then. But – keep a monitor on it. I’m going to 
give you a Geiger counter and I want you to keep it on you. I’ll adjust the settings a little, and if it 
starts beeping at you, you should call me, or Roslyn, or…someone. Also if you start feeling nausea,
headaches, fatigue…”

All things, Loki noticed, that he experienced in some measure relatively frequently. “I understand,” he said, some relief easing into him. “So you do not think there is an…immediate danger of my infecting others.”

“It’s not really infecting,” Roslyn said, at the same time Jun said, “no.” They glanced at each other. Loki raised an eyebrow.

“It should be fine,” Jun said. “For now. We’ll just keep a close eye on it, I think. It’s not…this isn’t something I’m familiar with, like I said.”

“Very well.” Loki rolled his shoulders back. “And if you notice anything else strange,” he added after a moment, “you will inform me.” He returned to the chair where he had been sitting and extended his arm. “You wanted blood?”

Roslyn looked vaguely concerned. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Yes,” Loki said. “In fact, now I think it is an even better one.” He doubted there would be anything visible to mortal science, but if it was a magic different from his own, that he could not sense in himself…well. He was willing to try.

To dig out whatever foreign magic might be lurking in his mind…he would be willing to try a great deal. Suddenly, ensuring that Dr. Foster would work with him became even more important. He doubted this was going to be solved simply.

That was just not, in his experience, the way his life worked.

Loki went home, once they had taken every useful measurement that they could, feeling irritable and strained. The throbbing in his skull lingered stubbornly. He could feel his mood twisting toward melancholy and went to bed instead.

He struggled for a long while to find sleep, and when he did his dreams were sour and strange. He remembered little of them when he woke, groggy, to the buzzing of his phone on the bedside table. He picked it up, trying not to growl.

“Hello?”

“Hi, um – Loki?” Dr. Foster. Loki tried not to clench his jaw; he had wanted to be more alert for this. He pulled the phone away to check the time and found it was late morning already. How had he slept so long? “Hello?” Foster said again, sounding less sure.

“Yes,” Loki said, trying to keep his voice from being short. He needed to be polite. Calm and polite, and not let…whatever gift she had for scraping him raw reach him. “I am here.”

He heard a sigh, curiously enough, that sounded like relief. “Okay. All right, good.” A pause. “I guess…thank you for giving me time. To think. I appreciate it.”

“If I recall, it was more a demand than a request.” Loki said, sitting up. The ache in his head was gone, but he felt curiously disoriented and out of sorts, more than normal upon waking. He had slept for an unusually long time.

“Still,” Foster said after a moment. “I needed to…think.” Loki waited, saying nothing, and he heard her mumble something that might’ve been just go ahead, Jane. “I’ll do it,” she said, voice resolute.
Loki frowned.

“Do…”

“I’ll work with you. On figuring out whatever it is that’s going on. You said something is trying to… get through, to attack us. Earth. If I can help…I’ll do whatever I can.”

So brave, whispered something at the back of Loki’s brain. She knows nothing about what she is walking into. She knows nothing about what she could face, and knows too much about you, and yet still she will throw herself into it to save her realm.

Dr. Jane Foster is more hero than you have ever been. That was snide, and Loki pushed it away, trying not to flinch. “That is all?” He said warily. “You have no…request to make in return?”

“…no?” Foster sounded surprised. “I mean – obviously don’t…do anything magic to me without my permission, and I’d rather you tried to at least be civil, but…I’m not going to ask for something to help keep my planet safe if it really is in danger.” She blew out a breath. “You…answered my questions, basically. And I…” She trailed off, and the line went silent.

“Dr. Foster?” Loki said, wondering if the connection had been broken.

“I wanted to…apologize,” she said. Loki jerked involuntarily.

“You – what?” Loki shook his head like that might clear away cobwebs that had caused him to mishear. “You are apologizing. To me.”

“Yeah,” Foster said, though she did not sound terribly certain. “I mean – obviously you haven’t exactly been…but that doesn’t matter. I, um…clearly upset you. And you’re right, there is a lot I don’t know: about you, and Asgard, and…Thor. And I should know better than to…make assumptions.” Silence. Loki stared blankly ahead, still rather stuck on the fact that Foster was apologizing. “And…sorry for running out like that,” Foster added, sounding even more awkward. “That was rude too. And probably looked really, really bad. But I meant it, that it wasn’t about you being…Jotun? I was just a little overwhelmed, and I needed to get my head clear, and-”

“It is fine,” Loki interrupted. His voice sounded strange and somewhat distant. Foster cut off.

“It…uh. Is?”

“Yes,” Loki said. “Whatever happened…it is immaterial. I did not expect anything else, and I do not require your apology. Provided that you are willing to work with me-”

“Hold on,” Foster said. “All right, you didn’t expect me to do anything but freak out, that doesn’t mean it was fine that I did it. Just because you expect someone to do something – bad - doesn’t mean they get a free pass to go right ahead.”

Loki frowned. “Why does it matter? I am telling you that you do not owe me anything.”

“That’s not-!” Foster exhaled. “It’s not about owing you something. Look, just…” He could almost see the frustrated grimace on her face. “Never mind. Don’t people apologize on Asgard?”

Not usually to me, was the first thought that popped into Loki’s head, but he pushed it away. “Is it not sufficient to know that I will not hold your reaction against you?”

“Apparently you were expecting me to react like that anyway,” Foster muttered. “But – all right, fine. It’s sufficient. I was just hoping…” She trailed off. Loki sat up further, frowning.
“Hoping what?”

“Never mind,” Foster said after a moment, with a heavy sigh. “It’ll keep. I’ll…send you the new address where I’m working, I guess? And you can meet me there…tomorrow? Is that soon enough?”

A part of Loki was tempted to say no, today, but that was just the part of him humming with restless unease. Better to give her…give them both…a little time. “That will do,” he said.

“Right. I’ll…see you then.” Another hesitation. “If you felt like bringing donuts it would go a long way toward making Darcy feel better about this too, just so you know.”

“Why would I want to make Ms. Lewis feel better,” Loki said, keeping his voice flat.

“Because working with me means you’re going to be seeing a lot of her and she’s still pretty mad at you for almost strangling me?” Foster said, a little bit of bite in her voice, though a moment later she sighed. “Look…everything will just go more smoothly if we all try not to be awful to each other. And Darcy’s a little…protective of me. So just…make a little bit of an effort? Please?”

Loki grimaced. He needed her, he reminded himself. He needed Foster, and she was not being unreasonable, all things considered. “I will make an effort,” he said, trying not to sound grudging. He heard Foster’s loud, relieved exhale.

“Thank you,” she said, audible gratitude making Loki want to twitch. “I appreciate it.”

Loki shook himself. “And I appreciate your willingness to collaborate,” he said, and if it was a little stiff, a little formal…she had asked for civil. He could manage civil.

“Well,” Foster said. “If you’re telling the truth…this is something that’s kind of important.”

Loki tasted a brief burst of sourness in his mouth. “If I am telling the truth.”

“Yeah,” Foster said. “Well…”

“No,” Loki said. “Your doubt is…reasonable. Hopefully I can assuage it swiftly.”

“Hopefully.” Foster cleared her throat. “So…tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” Loki affirmed. “Send me the location.” He hesitated, and grimaced. “What sort of pastries would your Ms. Lewis prefer?”

He thought he could hear a smile in Foster’s voice, for some reason. “Anything chocolate is good. Jelly filled is also good. But honestly, as long as it’s sweet she’ll probably like it.” She paused. “Thanks, Loki. I know this is weird. But it…seems like you might actually be trying.”

Loki was not certain how to respond. “Farewell, Doctor Foster,” he said finally, and hung up.

Even when she was trying to be kind – if that was what she was doing – it seemed she tugged him all out of sorts. He wondered if she had done the same to Thor, and then pushed that thought away. Thinking about Thor still hurt too much.

He wondered if it would ever be otherwise.

Interlude (XXIX)

Loki slept. He hunted. He dreamed. (He dreamed of Thor coming to find him; sometimes he embraced Loki and wept, ah, brother, I have missed you; sometimes he came in thunder and
lightning to strike Loki down, disgust and hatred blazing in his eyes, *I cannot believe I ever called you brother.*

He was so tired, and it felt like there was very little left – in him, in the world. If he lay down in the snow to sleep he wondered if he could stay there long enough that he would not rise again, but the Norns had rejected his attempt at dying once. He did not want to know if they would again. *Pathetic,* he thought, scornful of himself, but was not moved to change.

The first time voices intruded on his solitude, Loki froze, for a half second certain that he had been found, but a moment later he recognized the sound as the normal chatter of mortals not expecting to be heard – not tracking quarry. He could have cloaked himself from sight easily and kept his distance until they passed, but some curiosity drove him to move toward the sound of their voices. He stood watching them – a group of six, he judged a group of friends rather than a family - set up camp by a little stream. One of the two women, her hair touched with grey, noticed him first and startled.

“There’s somebody here,” she said sharply to her companions, and then they were all looking at him. Loki thought belatedly to wonder what he looked like. He had kept washing, but his hair had to be unkempt and his clothing even more so.

“Hello, stranger,” said one of them, after a pause in which Loki realized he was meant to introduce himself. “Are you hiking out here on your own?”

“No,” Loki said. His voice sounded rusty, and he cleared his throat. “No.” After a moment, he added, “I live here,” gesturing vaguely back into the thin woods.

“Live? Out here?” One of the younger men, little more than a boy to Loki’s eyes, sounded startled, and Loki caught a glance exchanged between the woman who had first noted him and the man who had greeted him. Alarm, perhaps, or suspicion. “Where?”

He could hardly show them the cabin, Loki thought. They would find the state of it alarming. They already thought he might be mad, perhaps dangerous. He shrugged. “There is a small cottage. I am repairing it,” he added, in case they might ask. Another one of those cautious exchanged glances.

“I hope we’re not intruding,” said the woman, standing up. “We didn’t know there was anyone else out there. I’m very sorry if we disturbed you.” Loki shook his head and summoned a faint smile.

“I do not mind. Mostly I was…surprised to hear the voices of others.” He hesitated to step forward, in case they thought it was threatening. “I was curious. But I can leave you to your ease.”

This time the glance was less cautious. He caught the silent communication, this time between five of the party, excluding the boy who had exclaimed and was now wrestling with his pack. “You can feel free to join us for a bit if you like,” she said. “Warm up a little.” Loki realized that his clothes were inappropriately light for a human in this weather. Too late to change now. “I’m Selby. This is Earl, Arkady, Sofia, and Per. We don’t have enough supplies to feed you, but we’d be happy to offer conversation.”

Why had he come over here, Loki wondered faintly. He should go. Even if it was not a trap – and he did not think it was – to grow reliant on company, to break his isolation before he was fully accustomed to it…

He took a cautious step forward. “For a short time, perhaps,” he said slowly. This was better, he told himself. These people were simply passing through. In a couple of days they would be gone. He could satisfy any need for conversation without danger of getting attached. Perfectly safe.
Nothing is ever safe, he reminded himself. But it might be safe enough.
Okay, first of all, a small annoyed note. Again for the people in the back: *please don't bug me about when I'm going to update*. Letting me know you're excited is one thing; demanding that I update and talking about how the wait is making you miserable is something else, which tends to make me grumpy and not inclined to work on the thing. I'm a busy gal trying to have a life who isn't getting paid to write fanfiction. Please keep that in mind. It takes time for me to write.

Cranky Lise out.

Okay! New chapter, moving things forward. This is a bit of a breather, filling out some details, getting things into place - you know the drill. Have fun, folks. :D Blah blah blah I'm on my Tumblr where you can find me being my own delightful self. And as always, a huge thank you to my ever-patient, ever-wonderful beta.

Loki woke with a dull headache throbbing at the front of his skull, which put him in a foul mood that he fought to set aside. He was meant to meet with Foster today, which meant he needed to be on his best behavior, which meant there was little room for his discontent. The thought of that meeting made him tense and uncomfortable, and he tried to push that aside as well. He would simply remain strictly focused on business matters and hope Foster was polite enough to do the same.

His phone buzzed with a text from Natasha: *you okay? just checking in* and Loki felt a peculiar little tug in his chest. The more so when it was followed shortly by another from Barton that read *if you feel like magic-ing your way to NYC im making spaghetti w meatballs tonight*. Loki grimaced, wondering how much Natasha had told him.

He responded to Natasha with *I am fine. No need for concern*. For Barton, he sent a simple *perhaps*. He did not know how good of company he would be after an afternoon with Foster, after all. Of late, talking to her seemed to result in a feeling analogous to having someone rub sandpaper over his skin for prolonged periods of time.

Loki looked at his phone again. Still no message from Foster. Had she changed her mind? He checked the time: still fairly early. She might still be asleep.

He called Dr. Fisher and made an appointment for the next day, though he wondered if he ought to have scheduled it for the afternoon. But no, he did not think he could handle two inevitably trying encounters in one day. Dr. Fisher might be trying to help, but that did not mean her methods did not…hurt.

After some consideration, Loki took a swift shower and made himself some toast, pressing his fingers into his temples as he waited for it to finish, wishing he could dispel his own headache as easily as he had banished Foster’s. He checked his phone again while waiting, mostly out of habit, and saw an address from a number it took him a moment to recognize. When he did, he felt his heart thud, nerves making his stomach clench. *Don’t be foolish*, he thought harshly. *You have nothing to fear from her.*
His toast popped up and Loki stared at it, appetite gone. He forced himself to eat it anyway, inhaling through his nose and exhaling through his mouth.

Loki looked up the address, stopped at the bakery down the street to pick up the suggested sweets Foster had requested as a peace offering, and teleported himself to the new location of Foster’s lab – not five miles from the old one. He paced back and forth in front of the door for perhaps a minute, listening to the murmurs on the other side, before making himself knock.

The murmurs fell silent and Loki set his feet, tucking his free hand in his pocket and wiping his face clean of emotion. “Just a sec!” He heard, and a moment later the door opened. Foster did not look any more relaxed than he felt, but she tried valiantly for a smile. “Um – hey. Good morning.”

“Early afternoon, I think,” Loki said, carefully. Foster glanced at her bare wrist, frowned, and checked her phone.

“Huh,” she said. “How about that.” She stepped back. “Come in. Are you…how are you doing?”

Loki blinked at her. Almost, he told her that she did not have to play nice with him, he did not expect her to pretend that this was anything more than business for the sake of her Realm, but he remembered in time what she had said on the phone. Everything will go more smoothly if we all try not to be awful to each other.” Fine, thank you,” he said politely, though in fact his headache still pulsed behind his eyes. “And yourself?”

“All right, yeah,” Foster said, scratching at the back of her neck. “Not having a very productive morning, but that happens.”

“Indeed,” Loki said. “I am sure you will find your footing again soon.”

Foster did a strange double-take. “Thanks,” she said slowly, after a moment. Loki examined his words, wondering what had been strange about them, but could not find any reason they should have upset her. “Um…want to come in?” She said again, and Loki realized that he had not, and stepped inside. This lab, he noticed, looked even more of a mess than the other. Probably because they had moved in a hurry, Loki realized, and felt a little twist of guilt.

Sitting at one of the tables, mostly hidden behind her laptop screen, Darcy Lewis eyed him with decided hostility. Loki nodded in her direction, and she stood up. “Look who’s back,” she said, crossing her arms. “Jane’s nicer than I am. I told her she should taser you and lock the door, but she said no.”

Loki kept his expression blank. “Doctor Foster is gracious,” he said coolly. Lewis’s eyes narrowed. “She sure is.”

“Guys,” Foster said, sounding nervous. He was not here for Lewis, Loki reminded himself, glanced at the bag he was carrying, and flicked his wrist, sending it to drop on the table in front of her. She jerked back, looking profoundly suspicious.

“For you,” Loki said, tucking both hands in his pockets. “Consider it a peace offering.”

Lewis looked at him, past him to, he assumed, Foster, and then at the bag. She pulled it towards herself and opened it, peering inside at the two dozen assorted cookies Loki had selected, along with a tin of what had looked like fine chocolate. She looked up, eyes a little round. “Oh, geez. Are you serious?” Loki shrugged, and the woman narrowed her eyes in his direction. “This totally does not mean we’re friends. Or even that I like you. And definitely I don’t trust you. And I still think Jane should get to punch you in the face at least once.”
Loki felt his expression stiffen. “Is she staying,” he asked Foster, his voice flat.

“She is right here and yes, she is,” Lewis said loudly. “Nice try, like I’m leaving you alone with Jane, Mr. Psychopath. Like I said: no trust. All trust is gone.” Loki felt his jaw tighten. Was it ever there? He thought, with some bitterness, but pushed both it and the swell of anger down. Foster, however, was frowning.

“Darcy,” she said, sounding reproachful. They exchanged a look that clearly meant something, and Lewis scowled.

“Okay, okay, fine. Thanks for the cookies, Lokester. I don’t actually take back anything I said—”

“Darcy,” Foster hissed, throwing a nervous glance in Loki’s direction. He kept his face impassive.

“I might be troubled,” he said coolly, “if I were interested in either your affection or trust.”

“Sounds good,” Ms. Lewis said, almost savagely. She pointed two fingers at her eyes and then stabbed them in Loki’s direction. “I’m watching you.”

I am sure you are, Loki thought, and wasn’t sure if it was angry or just bitter. He turned his back on her pointedly and looked at Foster. “I brought you some documentation of what SHIELD has assembled to corroborate what I have to tell you.” He summoned the folder he had meant to give her at their last meeting, dropping it on the table nearest her. “You are welcome to cross-check the data if you require confirmation.”

Foster looked at him and then picked up the folder, flipping slowly through it, lines between her eyebrows deepening as she started to frown. “This doesn’t make any sense,” she said.

“No,” Loki agreed grimly. “It would not, because it should not be happening if all was working correctly.” He caught himself fiddling with his hands and made himself stop. “But something is wrong, and that something originates outside of Yggdrasil. Something trying to break through.”

“Break…” Foster frowned more deeply. “What does that even mean?”

Loki rubbed his temples as if that would ease his headache. “There are – boundaries. Between.” He grimaced, and called up an illusion of Yggdrasil. “Each Realm is – separated. Yggdrasil connects them. And Yggdrasil itself is separated from other universes by its own boundary.”

“Wait, wait,” Foster said. “I’d just like to confirm – these other universes. It’s not theoretical, they actually exist? Like, you know that?”

Loki frowned at her. “You did not? I assumed from your work…”

“Theoretically,” Foster said, “I mean, for years people’ve been saying…but that was just based on probability and quantum physics work and not…” She sat down, looking a little dazed, and Loki paused, frowning at her. She waved a hand. “No, go ahead, I’m just…huh.”

Loki hesitated a moment longer before forging ahead. “At any rate. Between universes, off the branches of Yggdrasil, is the Void.” For a moment he felt it, there, the dark all around him as he fell, but he pushed the memory away. “The Void is…nothing. Emptiness. Or it should be.” He tried to remember what he had done. Stepped onto Yggdrasil and then through, into the outside, and there had been something, or someone…

He felt a sharp, stabbing pain in his eye and hissed, jerking his head to the side. Foster started up. “What?” she said. “Are you okay?”
Loki pressed the heel of his hand into his eye. “Fine,” he said shortly. “It is nothing.” He wished Frigga were here, with her cool, soothing touch. A moment later he hated himself for wishing.

“That didn’t look like nothing,” Lewis piped up, sounding dubious. “You went a little green there, and I’m warning you I have a thing about vomit, so if you throw up I’m probably going to throw up with you.”

“I am not going to-” Loki cut off and inhaled through his nose, forcing himself to stop pressing at his eye like it would ease the pain behind it. “It is fine. I was saying-” Foster was looking at him strangely, and Loki ignored it. “There should be nothing there. But that is not the case. Something, someone, is attempting to break down the barrier separating Yggdrasil from the Void, in order to reach the Nine Realms.”

“And what does that mean, if that happens?” For once, Ms. Lewis sounded serious. Loki did not look at her, remaining focused on Foster as he shrugged.

“I have no idea,” he said. “But I doubt it would be anything good. Let alone the destruction a being could cause that is willing to wreak such havoc on the fabric of reality itself.”

Foster looked down. She fanned out the papers he had brought and shuffled them together, tucked her hair behind her ears and looked up. “How do you know all this?” she asked. Loki tried not to stiffen, though he was not entirely certain why he suddenly felt so tense.

“I can sense it,” he said. “The effects on Yggdrasil.”

“Sense it,” Jane said, her expression twitching like she wanted to object, but then she shook her head. “All right, sure. That’s what the SHIELD readings say, too, in…less metaphorical language. That there’s some kind of big disturbance happening. But couldn’t that be…I don’t know, something natural?”

“It is not,” Loki said flatly.

“You’re very sure of that,” Foster said. “So – how do you know? That this is deliberate, I mean.”

Loki twitched. “Does that matter?”

“It matters,” Foster said. “You’re asking me to take a lot on faith, and you don’t exactly have the best reputation for truth telling. So I’d like to have as much information as possible before I make up my mind about what to do here.”

Loki clenched his fists. “Since I…arrived here, there have been two different instances – that I know of, there may have been others - of races that should not have been on Midgard coming here. Both…spoke of an annihilation behind them, something that destroyed their homes.”

Foster shook her head. “That could still be natural causes. Some kind of cosmic disaster.” Loki’s jaw tightened.

“I know because I looked,” he snapped. “I stepped between worlds to investigate these disturbances. I went to the in-between and I-” His eye throbbed and Loki squeezed his eyes closed for a second. “I found something. There.”

Foster’s stare was intent, laser focused. “Something?”

“If I knew more than that I would tell you,” Loki snapped. “But I do not. Yes? Whatever was there ripped away my wards and burned my protective markings into my arms before casting me back. I
do not remember who or what it was. But you are welcome to examine the marks it left if you desire further proof.”

“Wow,” Ms. Lewis said, voice a little hushed.

Foster leaned back, and her expression looked…both satisfied and horrified. She had been waiting for that, Loki realized. But perhaps had not realized what she was waiting for. Loki considered rolling up his sleeves and shoving the lingering brand marks in front of her, is this what you want to see, but refrained.

“Is that what the headaches are about?” She asked, after a moment’s silence. Loki stared at her, and Jane shrugged, looking very slightly sheepish. “My mom gets migraines. And I get headaches a fair amount. The temple rubbing, the thing with your eye…” She fidgeted with the papers. “Anyway.”

Loki had not considered that. He tried to think if his head ached more often since…since. Perhaps. He paced over to the table and sat down. “So you believe me,” he said.

“Well, yeah,” Foster said, as though the answer were obvious. “Are you…okay? When was this whole…”

Loki counted back, considering. “Perhaps five days before our meeting at the diner,” he said, delicately. Foster blinked, and Loki could see her adjusting something in her mind, an odd look settling on her face.

“Five days?” She said. Loki could not quite place the tone of her voice. “So that’s…what, a week ago?” Loki inclined his head, slowly, and Foster just stared at him, and then muttered something to herself that sounded like no wonder and looked down. “Sounds like it was…bad.”

I do not want your false sympathy, Loki thought sharply, but said only, “nothing I could not endure.”

“That’s not-” Foster pressed her lips together. “Just…I’m sorry. That happened. I didn’t know.”

“I did not tell you,” Loki said, keeping his voice flat. “You hardly need apologize. My health is not a relevant topic of conversation.”

Foster looked back at him. “Isn’t it, though? You’re the only one with any kind of clue about what’s going on. So do you want an Advil or something? Because you do look a little peaky.” Loki stared at her until Foster fidgeted. “Advil’s a painkiller. People take it for headaches-”

“I know what Advil is,” Loki interrupted. Foster looked confused.

“You are acting as though you give a damn about me, Loki thought, and was not certain if there was more anger or bewilderment in the thought. You can stop. I am not fooled. But it was better than hostility, wasn’t it? Ms. Lewis snorted.

“Oh, man. Jane, you’ve got him all wrong footed because you’re being nice and polite like a normal person. I can’t decide if that’s sad or hilarious.”

Loki’s fingernails bit into his palms and the urge to wheel around and cast some vicious remark in Ms. Lewis’ direction surged up like vomit, and along with it a wave of violent rage. Both subsided quickly, or at least the latter did. The other he controlled. “Perhaps I am a touch surprised by your solicitousness, all things considered,” he said tightly.
“Not everyone’s an asshole, asshole,” Ms. Lewis said blithely.

“Darcy,” Foster hissed, and then to Loki, “I’m just…trying to be helpful. It’s just Advil.”

Loki shook himself. “I…of course. It is just…” Everything I said in the diner. Everything you know now what I did, what I am. And you express concern, sympathy.

Jane’s expression shifted, very slightly, and she stopped fidgeting with the papers. “Look,” she said. “We don’t know each other very much? Or at all. And we, um…got off on the wrong foot. Which is partly my fault-”

“Is not,” Lewis muttered, but Loki didn’t think he was meant to hear it.

“—and I’d like to. I don’t know. Not start over, exactly, but sort of. Try again.” Foster looked almost hopeful, looking at him with wide eyes.

“How does that work,” Loki asked flatly, after a moment. “You cannot…unknow what you know. I doubt you will simply forget the events in Puente Antiguo – or more recently.”

“That’s true,” Foster said, more steadily than he expected. “But I can change how I react, and what I say.”

Loki just stared at her. For a moment it was all he could do to keep himself from asking if she’d run mad, and then he just felt…ashamed. It seemed all he had done since meeting Dr. Foster was live up to her worst expectations. And here she was, despite the fact that he had choked her out of a petty burst of temper, offering help and collaboration and a fresh start.

The last of the anger vanished and he was left feeling small and shriveled and despicable. A nothing. He remembered thinking that no mortal could be worthy of Thor, but he knew now that it was he who was not worthy. As he had always known.

He looked away. “If you are willing to make such a gracious offer, I could hardly refuse.”

Loki could feel Jane giving him an odd look. “Right,” she said after a long moment. “Okay. So…Advil?”

“No, thank you,” he said, carefully polite but not cold. “It would not do much for me.” He cleared his throat. “If we could perhaps…”

“Right,” Foster said. “Of course. Stuff to do.” She looked down at the materials he’d brought, again. “So where do we start?”

This would be fine, Loki told himself. It would be. (It had to be.)

Loki left Foster behind when Ms. Lewis began yawning ostentatiously loudly and complaining that it was time for dinner. Foster opened her mouth like she was about to propose that he join them, and Loki quickly stood and said that he should really be going, thank you, meet again soon.

They had not precisely gotten far – mostly going over what Loki already knew, and ensuring that Foster understood what they were dealing with, more or less – but it was a start.

His phone buzzed at him in his pocket and he pulled it out to discover two missed calls, both from Captain Rogers, and a voicemail, also from Captain Rogers.

“Hey,” it said, after a moment’s pause. “It’s Steve. Rogers. Thought I’d call to check in, see how you
were doing. Heard you were out of the infirmary, so that’s good. Guessing you probably don’t want
to do any sparring, but maybe we could try coffee again? Hopefully without an alien attack this time,
huh? Anyway. No pressure. Feel better.”

Loki frowned, pulling his phone slowly away from his ear. The man was either very lonely, Loki
thought, or…no, probably no ‘or.’ And Loki had known that. He wavered, but ultimately…

Rogers was not the only one who was lonely. Though, Loki reflected, he owed Stark a visit as well.
He was surprised the man had not turned up outside Loki’s home again; perhaps Loki’s…reaction
had frightened him off. Remembering made shame bite in Loki’s stomach.

He called Rogers instead, but only reached the man’s voicemail and did not leave a message. A small
part of him wished, very briefly, that he had stayed to see if Foster did invite him to dinner.

But of course, Loki thought, he did have an outstanding invitation.

*Does that offer of dinner still stand?* Loki wrote to Barton, and shortly received back a *sure*,
accompanied by an address. Loki swallowed back the brief lurch of nervousness and did the quick
research he needed to teleport his way there. Though he stopped briefly to pick up a bottle of wine,
only to realize belatedly that he had no idea what sort Barton liked, or if he liked wine at all.

Too late now, he thought, buzzing the door for what looked like an extraordinarily dingy apartment
building. Loki remembered Natasha’s quarters and wondered if this was preference or lack of means.

“Buzzing you in,” Barton’s voice came from the intercom, and Loki heard the lock click. He let
himself in, climbed the stairs, and knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Barton called. “I already started, have raw meat all over my hands…”

Loki let himself in and padded over to the kitchen. Barton grinned at him over his shoulder, and
waved a ball of raw meat in Loki’s direction. “Hey. Would you check the sauce, make sure it’s not
burning?”

“Certainly,” Loki said, a little taken aback, but he went to check on it, giving the red mixture an
experimental stir. “It seems fine. I brought…” He held up the bottle of wine. “A merlot. Though I
have no idea if you even enjoy wine.”

Barton’s eyebrows went up. “Don’t usually drink it,” he said, “but still, thanks. Tasha likes it and
sometimes a dinner’s just not right for beer, right?” He seemed in a chipper mood, and Loki
wondered if there was any particular reason. Perhaps not, he realized after a moment. It was just that
this was the first time he’d seen Barton with no reason to be otherwise.

“I suppose,” Loki said slowly. “Next time, I suppose I shall remember to bring ale.” *Next time,* he
thought. How odd to voice that, and to genuinely hope it might be true.

“Don’t worry about making it any of that fancy craft stuff,” Barton said, setting down the ball of
meat. “Budweiser is good enough for me.” Loki nodded as though what Barton was saying made
sense, and Barton glanced over his shoulder. “You have no idea what that means, do you?”

Loki considered lying. “No,” he said. Barton shook his head and clicked his tongue.

“Aliens. No culture,” he said, and then eyed Loki. “Wait. Do you people have beer?”

Loki held back a sharp urge to laugh. “Yes,” he said. “We do. Aplenty. I would not encourage you
to drink it, however.”
Barton’s eyebrows rose. “Why? If I drink from the gods’ table am I stuck there forever?” Loki could tell there was a joke there, though he was not certain of its source. “Or do I just die or something?”

“Possibly,” he said, and at Barton’s stare, “it is very potent stuff.”

“Ahh,” Barton said with apparent understanding. “Gotcha.” He turned back to the meat. “So, seems like you and Nat mended fences.”


“I like to keep track of that kind of thing. S’good news, means she’ll stop snapping at me for random shit.” Loki tried not to wince.

“Ought I to apologize?” He asked delicately. Barton shook his head.

“Nah. I’ve gotten worse on my own behalf; I’m used to it.” He turned around and washed his hands in the sink before turning off the burner under the sauce. “Okay. You’re a little early - I’ve still got to cook the actual meatballs and the pasta,” he said. “If you want to sit down and, I don’t know, watch TV or read a book or whatever, feel free. This kitchen doesn’t have much space for more than one body.”

Loki frowned. “I would not be a very good guest if I simply left you to slave away in the kitchen while I sat idle.”

Barton gave him an odd look. “Weren’t you some kind of prince on your planet?”

“Weren’t. Loki knew the past tense likely was not meant to be significant, but he still felt it sting, somewhere deep he refused to acknowledge. “Unless you are volunteering to be my servant, the rules are somewhat different,” he said, maybe a little flatly. Barton’s eyebrows shot up.

“Hell no I’m not,” he said. “What do you mean, ‘the rules’? I didn’t think you were the kind of guy to pay a lot of attention to those.”

“Not all,” Loki said. “But proper hospitality is important.”

Barton eyed him for a long second and said, “okay, sure. Here on this planet the guest usually doesn’t have to do the work. You offered, I’m good, so…though if you’re really feeling deprived I guess you can clean my bathroom.” Loki stiffened, but then Barton grinned and it occurred to Loki that he was being teased.

“Not quite that deprived, I do not think,” he said dryly.

“Glad to hear it,” Barton said. “Living room’s right there.” It wasn’t much of a room, Loki observed. Just separated from the kitchen by a countertop.

“If I stayed out of your way might I watch you cook?” Loki asked, almost cautiously. Barton turned his head and gave Loki a long, considering look before shrugging.

“Sure,” he said. “Don’t think it’ll be very interesting, but…”

“Even your conversation would be more interesting than some of the drivel that passes for entertainment among your people,” Loki said, mostly for form. Barton pointed a finger at him.

“You take that back. Golden Girls is quality television. That…isn’t showing anymore, but still.” He paused. “Desperate Housewives. That’s a good one. So.”
Loki’s lips twitched. “I am afraid I have not had the pleasure.”

“First Harry Potter, now Desperate Housewives,” Barton said. “Does this mean I’m in charge of exposing the alien to pop culture?” Loki raised his eyebrows, and Barton grinned. “Oh, man. That’s so much responsibility.” He did not sound terribly displeased.

“Should I be nervous?” Loki asked.

“Nah,” Barton said. “I’ve got impeccable taste.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Loki murmured. Clint made a face at him.

“Hey. Who’s feeding you dinner, huh?”

“You are,” Loki murmured, adopting an expression of perfect contrition. “My most sincere apologies for casting aspersions.”

“Yeah, you sure sound sincere,” Barton muttered, but he did not look all that displeased. Loki felt a faint bloom of warmth in his chest. This is friendship, murmured a very quiet voice at the back of his mind. See how you’ve stumbled into it, unlooked for, undeserving. And yet here it is given to you anyway.

How strange, isn’t it?

Loki did not know what to make of that, so he pushed it aside. Something to be considered later, perhaps. Or not at all.

Still, whatever its truth, it was…a pleasing thought.

Interlude (XXX)

Loki sat with the little group of travelers, listening to their conversation and volunteering little of his own – which seemed to be fine, overall, as they were quite talkative and eager to tell him about their expedition, their occasional polite attempts to ask about him easily deferred. He had not realized that he had missed company until he had it.

He had, though. But that was the price of safety, it seemed. The necessary trade.

The group broke apart a little once their meal was finished, splitting off into small sections, sequestering themselves into tents. Loki stayed sitting where he was, for a moment, preparing himself to take his leave. He feared how deafening the silence would be after this brief break.

Feeling eyes on him, Loki turned his head and found the leader, Selby, watching him. She met his eyes and nodded away from the camp. “Want to take a little walk with me? I like to move after eating, helps settle my stomach.”

“Why not,” Loki said after a moment.

She nodded, and stood up, brushing her hands on her pants. “Taking a walk,” she announced, “I’ll be back in a bit.” Earl poked his head out of a tent and gave her a thumbs up. Loki followed Selby as she strode out into the brush, her gait confident and assured. They walked in silence, crossing the small stream Loki had attempted to fish in at one point to no avail.

“This country,” Selby said after a while. “It’s stunning, isn’t it? Stark, and harsh, but that just makes it more beautiful in some ways.” She glanced at him. “I guess you think the same thing.”
“There is an appeal,” Loki said carefully. “You have come here many times before?”

“Not this exact route, but similar. First when I was twenty or so, fell in love.” She cocked her head at him. “How did you end up all the way out here?”

Loki knew his expression closed, but he summoned a smile. “Circumstance, mostly.”

“Must have been some circumstance.” She was looking at him expectantly, wanting a story. Loki was half tempted to tell her, in all its sordid detail: see how much she would believe, how long it would take her to look at him with fear or disgust instead of curiosity. He shrugged, looking away. Selby was quiet, and for a moment he thought she’d let the subject drop, but then she said, “is it helping?”

Loki twitched. “Beg pardon?”

“Whatever being a hermit was supposed to help you figure out,” she said, looking at the horizon now rather than him. “Is it?”

Loki felt his spine stiffen. “Ah, is that the reason I am here?”

“Is it?” Selby sounded genuinely curious. Loki blinked, taken off guard and not sure how to answer that question.

“I do not know,” Loki said finally. There was a lump in his throat he had to swallow hard to dislodge. “Perhaps it is.”

He could feel Selby regarding him, and determinedly did not react. “Well,” she said finally. “Not such a bad place to do it, I suppose. Seems pretty lonely, but maybe I’m just not cut out to be a hermit.”

Loki tried not to think of his own aching loneliness. “That is rather a requirement of the trade,” he said dryly, and she laughed.

“You’re an odd one, that’s for sure,” she said. “If someone asked me to picture a hermit…well. Whatever it is you’re sorting out, I hope it sorts out. I wouldn’t fancy living out here on your own when the weather turns.”

“If this is stark beauty,” Loki said, “how much more so when it is covered in snow?”

Selby shook her head. “Not worth freezing to death over, I can tell you that much.”

Loki felt his lips twitch. “I won’t freeze.” Her eyebrows rose, but Loki did not acknowledge her silent request for an explanation.

“I’d best head back,” she said eventually. “Earl’ll start worrying.”

“I should go as well,” Loki said. He considered saying home but the word did not seem appropriate. He offered a hand. “Thank you for your company.”

Selby’s grip was firm. “You’re welcome. Take care of yourself.”

Loki smiled faintly. “Safe journeys.”

He walked all the way back to his cabin instead of taking any shortcuts, even as the sun fell and the light faded. He wondered if he was looking for something here, trying to sort things out. He knew that was not really it, though: he’d come here running, and he hadn’t really stopped, even if he
wasn’t moving. The thought was not a cheering one. And how would he survive the winter? Even if he was not at risk of freezing, finding food would be next to impossible. He could not stay here. Cutting himself off from the world was not a solution – and sooner or later, someone would find him, even here.

He could not keep reacting. Running and hiding and responding to enemies when they found him. He needed to do better than to be a scurrying rat fleeing from hidey-hole to hidey-hole.

Loki stayed up long into the night, thinking. Until the end of summer, he told himself. He would give himself until the end of summer.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Not sure what to say about this chapter except that the conversation at the beginning is one I've been meaning to write for a long time and I'm so glad I finally got to do it. Oh yeah, and the usual nonsense about sorry slow update speeds, I am writing a lot of things and also living my life, telling me I'm going to go to hell if I don't update does not encourage me to write more, etc. etc.

Thanks to the beta for all her hard work, and my wonderful, patient friends in general who make soothing noises when I collapse into "why do I even try, everything is awful forever" mode.

I don't have much more than that? A movie came out recently (it was good) but that doesn't have a lot of bearing on what's going on in this fic.

Onward and upward.

“First of all,” Dr. Fisher said, “I want to talk about what happened the other day.”

Loki swallowed. “Must we?” She just looked at him, and Loki looked away. “What do you think there is to say?”

“Why don’t you tell me?” She sounded – gentle. It made Loki’s teeth itch. He hunched his shoulders.

“I do not know what you want.”

Dr. Fisher sighed. “It isn’t about what I want, Luke. It’s about you. Trying to help you. You called me, and I’m really, really glad you did. Thank you for that. You reached out and got help when you needed it.” Loki could not look at her. Looked at anything but her, suddenly regretting making this appointment. “Maybe we can start with what happened leading up to your calling me,” she said after a moment. “Tell me about that day.”

Loki licked his lips, fixing his eyes on the corner of the room. “I had a. A conversation – more of an interrogation, really.” He let out a stuttering laugh. “It was – difficult.”

“A conversation with who?” Dr. Fisher asked.

“A woman. She was friends with – ah…knew my brother.” Not your brother, he remembered too late.

“Your brother,” Dr. Fisher said. “You don’t talk about him much. Last time you brought him up – when we were speaking about your family – it was clear it was a hard subject for you.”


“Is that part of why this conversation was hard, do you think?” She asked. Loki realized he was
picking at his left hand and made himself stop. “Because of this woman’s relationship with your brother?”

Loki cleared his throat, which suddenly felt tight. “Maybe. Partly. I do not know.”

“Can we talk about him some?” Dr. Fisher’s voice sounded very gentle, as she had on the phone. Loki thought it should irritate him, but he could only be grateful. Loki swallowed several times, hard.

“I do not know what I would say,” he said after a long silence. “It is – you have never met him. I do not know that you would understand.”

“Why don’t you try to tell me and I’ll stop you if I need you to explain anything,” she said. Loki nodded after a moment, a jerk of his head. Turn and face it, Natasha had said. Maybe he should try to face this. Thor was not even here. But he did not know how to say…

“He was everything,” Loki said in a rush. “He was – my mother used to say that we were two stars orbiting each other, but that implies equality, and I was never – I will never be… But he, he is like a sun, radiating light and life, drawing people close. People love him who have met him once. Would give their lives for him, pledge undying loyalty. And he was my brother.”

“It sounds like that would be hard,” Dr. Fisher said. Loki glanced at her, just briefly. “Feeling like you didn’t measure up to someone, especially someone that close to you.”

Loki had not expected that. He had expected…some comment on Thor’s extraordinariness, or perhaps disbelief. That she seemed to understand so easily what no one on Asgard seemed to appreciate – why are you always so jealous, Loki, why can’t you be happy for your brother’s success, Loki – made it easier to keep speaking.

“Not just felt,” he said. “I – was. Second in every way. When I was young – I cared less. Because he was my brother, and I believed… I do not know. That I would be like him, someday. Or else that it didn’t matter because of all his admirers, he would always turn to me first. His shadow.” Loki looked down at his hands, twisting together. “But I did not become like him. And the latter became less and less true. He no longer had time for a shadow.” Loki could hear the bitterness creeping into his voice. “I loved him. I hated him. And it turns out he was never my brother at all.” He took a ragged breath, his eyes burning.


“You asked me that before,” Loki said. “He is – he is still alive. Far away. It is I that-” He choked, cut off. “But he may as well be, I will not – I cannot see him again.” Most likely he would kill me if I did. He feared she would ask where, or for more details, but she did not.

“You said you didn’t feel you were equal to your brother,” she said. “Do you remember when you started to think that?”

Loki shook his head, still not able to look at her. “I do not think, I know,” he said. “And I have always – known. I fought it, sometimes, but I knew.”

“Really?” She challenged. “Always? So you were born and right away you could just tell.”

Loki felt a chill go down his spine. He wondered if some part of him had known. If he had been meant to be abandoned, if he had changed in Odin’s hands because he was meant to be Thor’s changeling, shadow brother. If the entire reason he had been born was to be set against Thor, his enemy but never his equal. “I cannot remember a time when I did not know it,” he said. “It is just – a truth.”
“If I’ve learned anything over the years it’s that there aren’t a lot of things that are objective truths,” Dr. Fisher said. “And almost never truths about one person being better than another one. It depends on who’s looking. And what they’re looking for.”

Loki shook his head. “That is not true. There are – measures. Ways of knowing.”

“What kind of measures?” Dr. Fisher asked. She sounded genuinely curious, but of course he could not tell her about Mjolnir; he’d been a fool to say as much as he had.

“It would be difficult to explain,” he said, after struggling for a moment. “Suffice to say…have you never just known something? And you could not say why, but every fiber of your being could sense it was true? It is – like that.”

Dr. Fisher leaned forward. “Do you know it, or do you feel it?”

Loki frowned. “Beg pardon?”

“Sometimes,” she said, “we think we know things, but it might be an emotional reaction, that might not be tied to something necessarily true. For instance – I’ve had people who said they were certain, every time they went out in the field, that they were going to die. But they didn’t. They felt they were going to die.”

Loki felt his nostrils flare. “So you are saying I am delusional.”

“No,” Dr. Fisher said firmly. “That’s not what I’m saying at all. The feeling is very real, and perfectly legitimate. But it doesn’t mean those people are going to die.” Loki stared at her blankly. “So. Do you know you’re not your brother’s equal? Or is it that you feel you’re not?”

I know it, Loki wanted to snap, but something held him back. It was Barton’s words that popped into Loki’s head, suddenly: seems stupid to me. Pinning that much of your self-worth on a weapon telling you you’re good. “What difference does it make,” he said, instead of answering.

“A pretty big one,” Dr. Fisher said. “Something you know – that’s a fact. But a feeling can change. Starting to acknowledge the difference between the two is absolutely important.” Loki looked down at his hands, fidgeting.

“I hurt him,” Loki said suddenly. He couldn’t sit still, jerked to his feet and paced across her office. “I was – so angry. And he did not even understand what he’d done. I just wanted – I wanted him to go away, just for a little while, because as long as he was there no one was ever going to see me-”

(I needed him to stay away because I was afraid he would kill me once he knew what I was.)

“Luke?” Dr. Fisher said, sounding concerned. He realized he was rocking slightly and made himself stop.

“Even now,” he said, quieter. “Even now, thinking of him makes my throat close. And I am afraid – I am afraid he will come here and ruin everything I have managed to build.”

“I’m a little confused,” Dr. Fisher said, after a moment. “Can I ask you some questions?” Loki jerked his head in a nod. “You said you hurt your brother. When was this?”

“The last time I saw him,” Loki said.

“In the last five years?” She asked, and he jerked his head in a nod. She made a note. “And then you said that you were afraid if he came here – I assume you mean, to SHIELD – he would ruin
everything. What do you mean?”

Loki let out a harsh, bitter laugh. “Everything I am, he is as well. But better. More.” His lips twisted. “These people. My – friends. They would forget me in a heartbeat.”

“Do you really think that?”

“I do.” There was a raw note in Loki’s voice that he hated, but that did not drive it away. “Why accept me when there is a – better option?”

“Is that how you see it?” She propped her chin on her hands. “Why do you think people are friends with you?”

Loki shrugged. “My charming personality, undoubtedly.”

“I’m serious,” Dr. Fisher said. “Give me…five reasons why someone might want to be around you. That’s all, just five.”

“It is advantageous to them, perhaps,” Loki said, knowing it was not the answer she was looking for. “I have something they want.”

“What else?” She pressed. Loki fidgeted, his lips twisting. He hated this. He felt trapped, cornered, something like panic fluttering in his chest.

“This is pointless,” he snapped.

“Why do you say that?” Dr. Fisher asked, so gentle, so reasonable. Loki hated her, suddenly, anger almost choking him.

“Because – it does not matter. It is irrelevant.”

“I’d say it’s very relevant,” she said. “I’ve heard you devalue yourself a lot today. Talking about being less than your brother, describing yourself as a shadow, saying that the only reason people might be drawn to you is for lack of a ‘better option.’” She sat back. “I’m trying to get you to think about the ways in which that might be the way you see yourself, but not how other people see you.”

Loki’s stomach lurched uneasily. He shook his head, closing his eyes for a moment. “I am simply – realistic,” he said.

“It sounds a lot like pessimism to me. What do you think one of your friends would think, if they heard you say what you told me? Would they agree with you?”

Loki opened and closed his fist. He could almost see Natasha’s face. “They don’t know…”

“Don’t know what?” Dr. Fisher pressed. “Don’t know you? Don’t know your brother?” Loki shook his head, mutely. “I want you to think about that,” she said. “And maybe about the fact that you might have things to offer that he doesn’t, and that people aren’t replaceable or interchangeable.” She
paused. “We’re almost out of time. But…your brother. What happened when you hurt him?”

So take mine, and end this. I killed him, Loki thought. I killed him, but he rose again, and then it was over, or it was meant to be. Asgard’s golden son striking down its monster. He heard himself make a faint noise.

“I left,” he said. “I…ran.” He wrapped his arms around himself. “He hates me now. He wants – he wants me dead, I am sure of it.”

“Do you know that?” She asked. “Did he say that?”

“He didn’t need to. I know him.” Loki shuddered. Hunt down the monsters.

Luke…” Dr. Fisher paused. “If your brother were here right now, what would you want to say?”

I am sorry. Please do not hurt me. I don’t want you dead, I never truly did, the moments when you were it was like I was weightless, anchorless. I hate you, I hate how easily everything has always been yours, how you were worthy without trying and I could never catch up. Don’t take this from me. For the first time in my life I have something that is mine. I do not want to lose that now.

I miss you.

Please forgive me.

Loki said nothing. At length, Dr. Fisher sighed. “You know,” she said gently. “You’ve finished your mandatory sessions. You’re back on active duty, from what Agent Coulson says. You’re not required to come see me anymore.” She paused. “I still think I might be able to help you, though. If you wanted to keep talking.”

Loki swallowed hard. “I do not know,” he said, in a voice that didn’t sound like his own.

Dr. Fisher nodded. He looked away, unable to bear the sympathy in her eyes. “I’ll keep this time open next week,” she said, after a brief silence. “Just in case.”

Loki fled before his fragile shell could shatter.

Loki went out to the desert and paced back and forth, feeling as though he might crawl out of his skin. He settled slowly, the pounding of his heart gradually easing to something more normal, though the ache was slower to release. He had kept all thoughts of Thor at arm’s length, all this time, and now it all felt – too close. On the verge of crushing him. He half expected to turn and see Thor there, Mjolnir in hand and eyes blazing with fury.

His phone rang in his pocket and Loki jumped before he realized what it was and answered. “Luke Silver speaking,” he said, hoping his voice sounded passably smooth.

“Oh – hello.” The voice on the other end of the line sounded surprised. “It’s Steve. Steve Rogers,” he added, as though Loki might know more than one, or mistake him for a different one. “Just calling to check in, and I saw I’d missed you.”

Loki tried to still himself. “Hmm-m. I got your message.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, sounding a little embarrassed. “It was just a thought.”

Loki shifted. He needed to do something. The idea of going back to his apartment like this, alone… his thoughts would only turn inward and downward, darkening. He felt a brief touch of guilt at using
the Captain as a distraction, but he hoped at least Rogers would not find it unpleasant. “Are you available this afternoon?”

“This – wait, really?”

“Is it a bad time?” Loki asked, tensing. Perhaps he had only offered out of politeness, not expecting Loki to take him up on the offer.

“No, not really,” Rogers said after a beat. “Just caught me off guard. But I could do coffee, or something else, if you had something in mind.”

Loki fidgeted. “I had not thought of anything in particular. Name a time and a place and I am at your disposal.”

“Great,” Rogers said, still sounding a touch off kilter. “Great, uh – you can get to New York? There’s a place called Tinto pretty near me. Say meet there around three?”

“I shall expect you,” Loki said, and remembered to add, “I look forward to it,” before hanging up. A frivolous waste of time, a scolding part of his brain informed him. You ought to be planning. Working on finding out what is going on, with you, with Yggdrasil. Untangling whatever was done to your memories. Not…gallivanting about with Midgardian heroes. Loki pushed it aside. He knew himself, and if he were to go home now he would only end up with his thoughts circling like sea serpents, coiling around him and squeezing until he strangled.

He caught himself scratching at his left hand and forced himself to stop. Settling himself instead before locating the shop Rogers had mentioned and teleporting himself nearby. There were a few hours yet before the time Rogers had given, but better, Loki thought, to spend those exploring a relatively unfamiliar place than in picking at his own mind until he bled.

There was a park fairly nearby, it seemed, so Loki went there and tried to clear his mind. Roslyn and Jun wanted to see him again, no doubt to conduct more tests that hopefully would provide some sort of answer. He should sit down and see what he could excavate from his memory about threats from outside the Nine – unless this was something that the Nine had never encountered before. And if that was the case-

If there is danger to the Nine, Asgard should know. Loki fell still, looking out over the wide field in front of him. Asgard was the protector of the Nine. That was what he had been told, throughout childhood, over and over: Asgard was the guardian of those who could not guard themselves. Odin might recognize this threat, or would be able to command a search of the archives to find a record that mentioned something like. They could muster an army – one that would not be able to reach Midgard without the Bifrost, true, but at least it would be ready, and perhaps there was something that could be done. Or help sent to assist Foster in her project.

Loki closed his eyes. He could do it. Drop the magic keeping him from Heimdall’s sight and call his attention, tell him that Asgard’s strength was needed here. And then…and then what? Would he stay, and wait for Thor to come (and kill him, or worse, simply turn his back in disgust), or fly, somewhere far away where he could hide for the rest of his miserable and lonely existence, where he might eventually be hunted to ground but at least might not have to face Thor again.

It would be the right thing to do, according to his position as Asgard’s prince. But he was not Asgard’s prince anymore, was he (had never been), and there was a distinct possibility that if he did reveal himself his warning would be disregarded and they would simply hunt him instead. And without the Bifrost, likely any meaningful force would be beyond Odin’s power. So what point in sacrificing himself?
Selfish, whispered a soft voice at the back of his mind, but he quashed it. Another two weeks, he told himself. Then, if nothing had changed, he would do it, and accept the consequences.

(You will swear that? The same voice, now mocking. You will not change your mind and run at the first sign of danger, or simply keep pushing it off, insisting you can be a hero, alone, when you are anything but? Loki silenced that line of thought. When it came to that – if it came to that – he would face it then.)

Loki was punctual, but when he arrived at the café Rogers was already there, looking ever so slightly fidgety and anxious. Loki kept himself from smiling – or at least the kind of smile that would suggest amusement, though he was relieved by the fact that he felt it. If he was going to be fit company, he could not let himself linger on his own unsettled mind.

“Good afternoon,” Loki said as Rogers’ eyes lit on him with evident relief. “Shall we?” He gestured inside.

They took a seat at one of the small tables. Loki claimed the one facing the door – selfish, since he suspected Rogers would prefer the same position, but he did not think he would take Loki to task for it. It was quiet, one other young woman on her computer, headphones in. Loki ordered an herbal tea and a blueberry muffin, and paid little mind to Rogers’ request.

Once they had both settled, Loki gave the Captain a faint smile. “Let us hope for no interruptions this time, hm?”

Rogers winced. “Now that you’ve said that, there’s almost guaranteed to be an emergency,” he said, but he sounded as though he was probably joking. He sobered a little, scrutinizing Loki’s face. “You’re all right, though? You look better than you did.”

Shame stung at Loki that he had been seen so weak at all. “Quite recovered,” he said, voice perhaps a little clipped. “I heal swiftly.” He could only hope no word of his concerns had spread beyond Jun and Roslyn. By the way Rogers relaxed – as though it mattered to him, but of course it did, if only in the abstract – there were still no rumors. Or at least none that had reached Rogers’ ears.

“Good,” he said. “That’s good.”

“Indeed.” Loki cupped his hands around his steaming mug. “And yourself? You have been well?”

“Can’t complain,” Rogers said, but his smile looked a little tight. “Seems like they’ve decided it’s time to figure out what they want to use me for.” Loki could hear the bitterness in his voice, and cocked his head.

“I take it you do not expect a purpose you will approve of,” he murmured. Rogers shook his head.

“Can’t think of one. Seems like either they’ll want me to do something in support of the mess overseas in Iraq or just...some kind of propaganda press circuit.” Rogers exhaled through his nose, eyes moving away from Loki. “I guess I could always retire.” It sounded like there was black humor there that made Loki frown, faintly, in the moment before he shook it off. “Sorry. I don’t mean to be a wet blanket.”

That was an evocative expression. “Never fear,” Loki said. “I do not mind.” You could learn a great deal about someone from what they complained about, after all. Rogers shook his head, though, apparently determined to drop the subject.

“Still. What about you? What’ve you been doing? I heard you’re back in the field.”
“Apparently SHIELD decided I might be less trouble that way,” Loki said lightly, which made Rogers smile. “I have not done much of anything yet, however, so perhaps that was mere words.”

“And what about other stuff?” Rogers asked. “You know – I realized we sparred twice, and fought an alien, and I still hardly know anything about you.”

“I could say the same of you,” Loki deflected. Rogers shook his head.

“Not much to tell, other than what I figure you already know from my file.” His lips twisted a little. “Everyone knows my story.”

“Or thinks they do,” Loki said. Rogers gave him a quick look like he wanted to say something and decided against it.

“But you – you’re interesting. You have magic powers, for god’s sake. You appeared out of nowhere and know all kinds of wild things – but all I know is your name and that you’re a damn good fighter.” Steve shook his head. “Can you blame me for being curious?”

It was so very direct Loki was almost surprised. He just looked at Steve for a long moment, and then thought a little recklessly why not. I’ve already bared my soul once today. “What would you want to know?”

Rogers blinked, and it occurred to Loki that perhaps he hadn’t really expected an answer. He recovered, a little. “Uh – what about where your family’s from?” He grimaced. “That’s a stupid question, isn’t it.”

Loki shrugged. “No more nor less than many. I am not certain. The people who raised me were not…” He searched for the terminology he had learned. “My birth parents. I know little of them.” Or rather, too much of one and nothing of the other.

“Oh.” Rogers looked a little awkward, but he didn’t apologize. “What about…what do you do for fun?”


“Doesn’t sound bad, though,” Rogers said.

“I suppose it is not.”

“Who do you play chess with?” Rogers asked, sounding genuinely curious. Loki glanced at him briefly, but decided that was hardly a dangerous piece of information.

“Agent Romanov,” he said. “She is very good. I haven’t managed to defeat her yet.”

“I don’t think we’ve met,” Rogers said. Loki studied his expression.

“Perhaps I should introduce you,” he said, deliberately casual. “She is good company. Her and Agent Barton.”

Rogers did not quite glance down at his hands. “Might be nice,” he said, sounding like he was trying to be carefully casual. “Meet some more people that aren’t just therapists.”

“Might be,” Loki agreed. He caught a very small smile at the corner of Rogers’ lips and felt a small, gratified glow. It was a risk, sure – Natasha and Barton might decide they liked Rogers more, the
three of them banding together and leaving him outside. But perhaps not.

And some part of him, quieter, thought *and it would be good to have a group of warriors gathered together for the defense of this realm.*

*My very own Warriors Three,* Loki thought with some irony, but it also brought a strange warmth to his chest.

He left coffee with Rogers with his mood marginally lifted, and managed to hang onto that through the night, all the way until the next morning, in spite of his strange dreams. Then Roslyn called to inform him that they had results of the testing.

“The good news is that there’s no radiation in your blood,” Jun said right away. Loki blinked, a little surprised.

“And the bad?”

“Not so much *bad* as – *weird.*” Roslyn fidgeted. “With the readings we got, the same day, there should’ve been something.”

“*Unless,*” Jun said, in a tone that made Loki think this was the continuation of an argument he’d missed, “those were a fluke, based on brief exposure. Which is why we wanted you back today, to see if there’s been any change. And if there hasn’t…well, we can try to go from there.”

“Very well,” Loki said. He tensed as Jun came near, remembering what the last test had done, but there was no pain this time. Which meant – what? He had no idea. He had no sense of what *gamma radiation* would mean in the language of science that he knew, and he could not sense anything wrong with himself. Which might simply mean his senses were being deceived, but that would take…more power and skill than any living sorcerer Loki knew of possessed.

It was a disquieting thought. Loki’s head started to ache and he pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. Roslyn paused, her brows furrowing. “Headache?”

“Mm,” Loki said

“Have you been getting them a lot?” Definitely concerned. Loki pulled his hand down and looked at her, frowning.

“Perhaps somewhat more frequently than usual, but it has always been an issue to some degree.”

“MRI?” Roslyn asked, but that was directed at Jun, who shook his head.

“Would we even know what we were looking for?” He looked down at the instrument he was holding. “Same numbers. Or just about. Where are you *finding* this stuff?”

Loki shrugged. “That is the question.”

“And have you had any more – uh. Episodes? Like you did when I tried…”

“No,” Loki said. Jun’s eyebrows knitted.

“Huh.” He exhaled. “I’m…not actually sure what to do next. I think we *should* call in someone who knows more about gamma radiation – and, to be perfectly honest, about biology. I have Jemma’s number, she’d be delighted to meet you.”
Loki did not like the idea of involving someone else. Of showing this vulnerability to someone else, and a stranger at that. At least even when he had not known Jun, he was part of Chandra's coterie, which meant something. “Mm,” he said noncommittally. On the other hand…there was something dangerous here. The secret of whatever he’d encountered between worlds that did not want him to know its name.

And the creeping awareness that if whatever it was could alter his thoughts – erase memory – it could probably have killed him. And hadn’t. It was possible, of course, that he’d simply managed to slip away somehow, but not, Loki thought, likely. His head throbbed, bright spots starting to flare at the edges of his vision.

“Luke?” He could see Roslyn hovering, not sure if she was allowed to touch. “Are you…should I dim the lights? Is it a migraine?”

“No,” he said, closing his eyes tightly like he could blink the headache away. “No…augh. Just – irritating.” He made himself straighten and open his eyes just as Agent Coulson stepped through the door. Roslyn froze like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar – a metaphor, Loki supposed, that made him the cookie jar. Jun hastily turned to some of the equipment.

“You,” Agent Coulson said to Loki. “Glad you were already on site. We’ve got a mission for you.”

Loki raised his eyebrows, and Coulson looked pointedly at their companions. “You,” he said, “not Agents Carrolly and Fukayama.”

“Sir,” Roslyn mumbled. Loki waved a hand at them both.

“After you,” he said to Coulson, and to the others, “we can speak further about this later.”

Coulson started speaking almost as soon as the door was closed. “There’s a man we need you to bring in.” Loki felt his eyebrows jump.

“That sounds simple enough,” he said. “Why specifically me?”

“He might need a little persuading.” Coulson’s eyebrows were furrowed, but his voice was calm as ever. “His name’s Bruce Banner. He’s one of the foremost experts on gamma radiation.”

Loki recognized the name, vaguely, but the mention of radiation brought his head jerking around. “Is that important?” He asked carefully.

“Might be.” Coulson glanced at him like he was thinking about something. “One of our research facilities has an…object that we’d like Dr. Banner to take a look at.” Loki studied Coulson’s face. Clearly there was something he wasn’t being told, but he decided to dig for it later, noting only research facility and object. He suspected it must be not of Midgard, and that he had not been consulted about such a thing… it rankled.

“So I am simply to find this man, persuade him to come back with me, and drop him off at this research facility of yours?”

“Oh, we know where he is,” Coulson said. Loki frowned.

“Then what, if you will pardon my asking, do you need me for? You have other persuasive agents.”

“Has anyone mentioned the Hulk to you?” Coulson asked, after a moment. Loki blinked.

“Not that I can recall.”
Coulson nodded. “When Dr. Banner gets angry, he turns into an eight-foot-tall green thing with enough strength to crush cars like tin cans. I don’t anticipate that he’s going to be very happy to have guests. Obviously, we’d prefer if that wasn’t an issue, but…”

“Ah,” Loki said dryly. “I see. You want someone who might actually be able to stand up to such a thing.”

“Just about.”

Loki inhaled through his nose and let it out slowly. “Delightful.” He paused, and stopped. “This mission sounds likely to either be risky and unpleasant or intolerably dull.”

Coulson stopped, too, and turned to look at him. “Dull would be better.” Loki said nothing, and after a moment he very nearly rolled his eyes. “What do you want, Loki?”

“Why now?” Loki pressed. “Something has happened that has suddenly made the study of this object of yours more pressing.”

Coulson looked like he was considering again. Loki kept his gaze even. “We were going to loop you in on this eventually anyway,” he said after a long moment. “The object we’re studying is…we don’t know much about what it does, but it’s incredibly powerful. And last night there was a break-in at the facility where it’s housed.”

“Unsurprising,” Loki said. “If it is a powerful object, someone will try to steal it.”

“The facility is locked down, guarded 24/7, and buried forty feet underground in an undisclosed location,” Coulson said flatly. “But someone got in. Whoever it was left in a hurry when a guard raised the alarm, but they…did something to the artifact. And now the artifact is doing something.”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “That is a lot of ‘somethings.’”

Coulson spread his hands. “I’m not a physicist. That’s why we want Dr. Banner there.”

“And you would have no interest in keeping this eight foot tall monster nearby, I suppose,” Loki said coolly. Coulson did not deny it. “I will do this thing for you,” Loki said. “But after…you might consider showing me this ‘object’ of yours.”

“I’ll consider it,” Coulson said. “Just get us Dr. Banner, first.”

**Interlude (XXXI)**

He did not have until the end of the summer.

Loki was in the middle of checking his snares when he heard the sound of a vehicle, still at some distance but coming closer. Frowning, well aware that there were no roads nearby and little reason for anyone to come this way, he cloaked himself from sight and returned to his cabin, listening to the sound come closer, closer – and stop.

Loki still waited, and indeed a moment later he could just hear the sound of voices, kept low but still there. Not a coincidence, he thought, but he still waited, slipping out into the woods. The group – eight people, guns drawn – approached his cabin in silence.

If they were simply looking for directions, Loki thought, they would not be keeping quiet. He waited while they scanned around the building, jaw tightening when they broke down the door.
“Empty,” one of them called out. “Still stuff here, though.”

“Fan out,” another said. “And remember that we’re not shooting to kill.”

Well, Loki thought with a touch of bitterness. That’s a relief. He could have just left then: there wasn’t much in the cabin he needed to bring with him. Very little tying him to this place. Instead, he waited until they had dispersed in pairs, snuck back down to the cabin and grabbed the one guarding the door from behind, hand clamping over his mouth and a knife to his belly, dragging him down and out of sight of his partner ransacking Loki’s few belongings.

“Make a sound and I will slice you open and leave you to die slowly,” Loki said, barely above a whisper. His captive held very still, and after a moment nodded. Loki pulled his hand away. “Are you the same that were pursuing me before?” Silence. Loki gritted his teeth. “I suggest you answer before I lose patience.”

“I don’t know anything,” the man said after another second. “I just do what I’m told.”

“And who told you?” Loki hissed. Another second. He could almost hear his captive’s thoughts grinding away.

The loud crack of a gunshot and the man Loki was holding went limp, followed a moment later by a hot, sharp pain in his side. He jerked, and the second bullet skimmed his arm, leaving a hot line in its wake. He cast a shield a moment too late, surging to his feet. The man’s former partner had emerged from the house, weapon leveled at Loki. “All units converge on my position,” he said. “Target sighted.”

Sloppy, Loki thought viciously. He summoned one of his knives. “What do you want,” he snarled.

“Thought that’d be obvious,” the man said. He didn’t so much as glance at his dead comrade.

“And who are you working for?” Loki asked, keeping half an eye on the forest. He could move quickly, if he needed to, but it would be better to be gone before the remaining six returned.

“You honestly think I’m going to tell you?” The man asked. Loki said nothing, and the man nearly sneered. “Come quietly and this won’t have to get ugly.”

“From where I stand,” Loki said grimly, “it already is.”

He killed three of them getting away. It might have been less, but he wanted to retrieve at least some of his supplies, and that took time. The last four should consider themselves lucky they were late.

The lesson was clear, though. It did not matter how far he ran, or how remote it was. People would come looking, and he had known that – this simply drove it home. Either he left this realm for another entirely (which one? Any of the others were too closely aligned with Asgard, or would simply kill him on sight) or he found a place to stand and fight those who tried to take him.

It was time to change strategies. He’d been drifting over the surface of this realm. If he wanted to stop running, he was going to need to do better than that.
I'm not sure I have an explanation for why this chapter took so long. "Overpowering anxiety about all of my longform WIPs" is the closest thing I've got, tbh. But I think I've gotten back into my stride a bit, and my plot is rapidly catching up to me, and oh boy am I excited for things that are probably going to happen next chapter, unless my outline explodes again, which might happen.

At any rate! Many thanks to the beta and the numerous other folks who make this dumb hobby fun and satisfying even when I whine.

Oh, yeah, and you people too. :D

It seemed SHIELD knew with an unsettling degree of accuracy exactly where his target was to be found. It made Loki wonder, just a little, about how long they might have known where he was, and watched him, monitoring his behavior. He flattered himself that he would have noticed, but it they had learned their lesson from previous error, there was a possibility they would have been smart enough to avoid his catching them.

He did a search of Bruce Banner’s name on the flight over (to his resentment, apparently it was required that he take a plane rather than using his own methods) and watched footage of what was apparently the green creature to which Coulson had been referring battling another monster in New York. He could understand why SHIELD had chosen to keep their distance. Perhaps if he had only looked so intimidating he would have had less trouble.

A pity his jotun skin was not just a bit more grotesque.

He picked up the folder he’d been given, paging through the information he’d been given.

*Doctor Robert Bruce Banner,* Loki read. *Born December 18, 1969 in Dayton, Ohio. Mother: deceased. Father: deceased. No other known relatives. Affiliations: Harvard University, Culver University.* It went on, but Loki skimmed over it, not particularly interested in the dissection of the man’s personal life. Finally, he found what he was looking for.

*In 2005 as part of the [REDACTED] Project, Banner developed a serum he believed would mimic the effects of the unknown formula used in Project Rebirth (see: Rogers, Steven Grant). Banner proceeded to test the serum, combined with high levels of gamma radiation exposure, on himself. The experiment resulted in the emergence for unknown reasons of the entity known as the Hulk (official designation: AZ-962-05) and severe damage to the laboratory and premises.*

Loki sat back. *Foolish,* he thought. To test something like that on oneself without absolute certainty...very foolish. Arrogant, perhaps. If that was still the case, that was good to know. He read on.

*Banner disappeared shortly thereafter and has remained, officially, a fugitive in possession of United States Armed Forces property. However, pursuit has largely stopped since 2008 (see: Harlem Incident). Known Associates: Ross, Elizabeth; Ross, Thaddeus.*
Loki frowned slightly. It didn’t give him much to work with. After a moment he reached out for the tablet that had been left with him and searched “Harlem Incident”. He clicked on the first video he found and watched through it twice before setting the tablet back down.

Well, he thought dryly, they certainly hadn’t overstated the potential danger of his task. From what he had seen, this...creature at least equaled the strength of the most powerful Aesir, perhaps exceeded. And was incapable of reason, or at least incapable of speech. The file in his hands indicated that this state was possibly triggered by extreme emotion, particularly anger. So all Loki had to manage was convincing a suspicious fugitive to return to the very government that was hunting him, without making him angry.

What disquieted him more than that prospect was the fact that nowhere in the file did it tell him anything about the object SHIELD apparently wanted Banner to investigate. That not only crippled his ability to offer persuasive argument, it also suggested that someone did not want him, specifically, to know.

A part of Loki’s brain reminded him that likely any other agent would have received the same information, but the feeling nagged at him nonetheless. They had risked sending him out with incomplete information in order to keep this secret.

He had never liked knowing secrets were being kept from him.

Pushing that thought away, Loki focused on the information he did have. The man was working as a doctor in a decidedly less than prosperous neighborhood, so there was some altruistic feeling - or else too much of an ego to hide, but Loki leaned a hair toward altruism. There was a woman - Elizabeth Ross? - who might be a lover or just a friend. Too little to go on. He had been in hiding for years, so the edge of paranoia had probably worn off, but intruding on his territory would put him immediately on his guard, make him tense and uneasy. He toyed with the idea of shapeshifting - likely a woman would seem less threatening, a perception that seemed to be common between the Aesir and humans - but sooner or later the truth would out and it seemed better to give the appearance of honesty if he did not want to meet the green beast.

Which, despite his durability, he did not. Besides, whether he could manage the creature or no, that kind of chaos would draw attention Loki did not want to draw, and suspected SHIELD would rather avoid as well. Perhaps he ought to be working on sleeping spells, though without knowing any of Banner’s resistance…

Loki closed the files and leaned his head back. The flight wasn’t short. He had plenty of time to consider.

Loki found Banner easily enough, but then held back and watched. He moved strangely, something cautious and hunched about his bearing like he feared to take up too much space or move too quickly. Scared of what could happen, Loki judged. He did not want to unleash the monster, which ought to be a good sign - but Loki was far from certain how much control Banner might have over that. He did indeed seem to be acting as a healer. Loki followed Banner back to his dwelling, just to know where he lived; once or twice he thought he caught Banner looking over his shoulder, as though he sensed someone following. Or perhaps his beast did.

In the end, Loki kept it simple. He left the monitor he’d been given on the table of the safe house and walked into Banner’s clinic. He could almost hear Natasha’s voice at the back of his mind, reckless, but unless he had misjudged...better somewhere crowded than isolated. More motivation for Banner to hold his control, and Loki did not plan to threaten.
He climbed the stairs, trying not to inhale too deeply. The woman nearest, bent over a sick child, looked up and frowned. “This place is for sick people,” she said pointedly, in accented English. “Are you sick?”

“I need to speak to the doctor,” Loki said, replying to her in the All-Tongue, slanted so she would hear it as her own language. He gave her his best rueful smile. “I’m in a bit of trouble.”

The man in question turned, looked at Loki, and immediately tensed. Loki met his eyes evenly, letting his hands slip out of his pockets and fall to his sides, palms out. Banner’s eyes darted toward the stairs. “What kind of trouble,” he said, and for all his shy caution Loki could hear a hint of steel in his voice. “Maybe you should speak to the authorities.”

“The kind of trouble that requires some explanation,” Loki said. “Will you walk with me?”

“I have patients to see to here,” Banner said pointedly.

“And the matter I need to discuss requires some privacy,” Loki countered, keeping his smile. “I shall not claim too much of your time. Less than an hour.” Or at least, in less than an hour he would know if he needed to revise his strategy.

Banner glanced at the female healer like he was asking her a question, looked at Loki again. Clearly doing the math in his head. Loki waited.

“Forty-five minutes,” Banner said. Loki inclined his chin.

“No more. After you?” He gestured at the stairs.

“No, please,” Banner said, his smile strained, more like a baring of teeth. “After you.”

Loki didn’t let himself hesitate. It was a smart call. Not letting himself be pinned, if someone was waiting on the other side of the door. Still, turning his back as he descended made the hair on the back of Loki’s neck prickle uneasily. He exited out onto the street and held the door for Banner, who stepped through and closed it behind him.

“Something gives me the feeling you didn’t pick up an unexpected STD,” Banner said, his voice too carefully neutral.

“Walk with me,” Loki repeated, gesturing. Banner didn’t move, and Loki cocked his head to the side. “We can stay here, but it is easier to avoid too many curious ears if one keeps moving.”

Banner narrowed his eyes, but he let go of the doorknob and followed Loki. He walked a few steps before saying, still neutrally, “you know who I am.”

“Mm.” Loki glanced at him sidelong. “I do, yes.”

“Then you know that making me antsy isn’t a great idea,” Banner said, and Loki could hear the deliberately held calm. He did have good control. If not, Loki suspected he would have changed already. Perhaps the moment Loki announced his presence. “I’d rather not, um…”

“Trust me, neither would I,” Loki said honestly. “This is just talking. No more.”


“No.”

“How long have you been watching me?”
“Two days,” Loki said. More like three, but that didn’t need mentioning. Banner muttered I knew it under his breath. “You must have extraordinarily keen senses to have noticed me,” Loki added in response. Banner twitched.

“You could say that.”

“Hmm.” Loki waited a few beats, but when Banner did not continue he offered another line. “It is my understanding that you are somewhat of an expert on gamma radiation.”

“That’s one way of putting it.” Banner looked at him, and Loki felt himself tense. “Who sent you?”

“SHIELD,” Loki said, after a moment’s pause. “And as for putting it, I actually did mean your scientific acumen. The…” He searched for a tactful way to say beast, but the best thing he could come up with was berserker form, which was a problem for different reasons.

“Other guy?” Banner said, dryly.


“SHIELD,” Banner said, sounding faintly disgusted. “And you’re saying they want me to come in to...study something. Gamma radiation.”

“That is so,” Loki said. Banner grunted.

“What kind of idiot do you think I am,” he said, after a long interval.

“I don’t,” Loki said. “I think you are a very canny man who justifiably fears what his people might do to him, either out of fear or curiosity. You have managed to successfully hide for several years: not a mark of stupidity.” Banner said nothing, either to agree or contradict. “If I thought that the intention was to make you an object of experimentation, I would not have agreed to approach you.”

“You’re a spy,” Banner said. “How am I supposed to believe anything you say?” Loki slid his hands into his pockets and considered. He had a card to play, but it wasn’t one he wanted to use. He would almost rather try to face the beating.

But. Yggdrasil trembling. Something out there, moving in the shadows, unknown and immensely powerful. Coulson was afraid and SHIELD was hiding something from him. If the man was clever, his beast was strong. Loki could use both.

“Because I was where you are, not so long ago,” Loki said. He unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up the sleeve of his linen shirt, flexing his fingers. His stomach turned but he pushed through it, and it was even easier this time, like peeling the skin off an onion. He couldn’t look at it too closely, but he could feel it. It means nothing, he tried to tell himself. You are Loki, whatever your skin.

(But this is the truth of you.)

He heard Banner start, inhaling sharply. He half reached out (so human, the urge to always touch the unknown) but stopped himself, either realizing what he was doing or perhaps feeling the cold that would burn his pink skin. Loki let the change fade away. “I was offered employment,” he said, trying to keep his voice from shaking. “And while they have been frequently infuriating and presumptuous, no one has tried to cut me apart.”

Banner was still staring at his arm, and Loki rolled down his sleeve, stomach still squirming. “Does that soothe any of your worries?”
Letting out an explosive breath, Banner shook his head. “Mostly it raises a lot of questions,” he said. “What - no, sorry. Can I have a little more explanation? Did you-? Is the Army still trying to--?”

Loki barked a laugh. “Oh, no. They didn’t have anything to do with me. I was...born so.” He finished buttoning his sleeve, and met Banner’s eyes. He could mention anything else later, or not at all. Let him assume it was merely an oddity of some kind. The man looked like he wanted to ask more questions, eyes burning with curiosity, but he visibly restrained himself. “That…” He ran his fingers through his hair. “What exactly do they want me for?”

And this was the question he could not answer very well. “Some of that information is secret even to me,” he said. “But what I do know...it is a very powerful object, possibly not earthly in origin. They seek to...understand it.” A whisper at the back of his mind - if that is all they are doing wouldn’t they want you to help? You know more about magic and artifacts of power than any of them. He paused, and then added, “as far as I know, they only want Bruce Banner. Not...the other guy. And after...go wherever you want, do what you like. They can ensure you are not hunted.”

Banner studied him for a long moment, and then nodded, slowly. “All right,” he said. “I’ll go. I need to clean up some things here first. Give me a day.”

Absurd, a voice murmured. A day in which he can run and leave you looking the fool. Loki considered Banner and eventually made himself nod. He did not think that Banner was a man on whom insincerity would sit well, and perhaps he was even relieved. This would mean, after all, that at least for a little while he did not have to look over his shoulder, and Loki knew well how tiring that could be. “One day,” he said. “I will come find you at your home.”

Banner gave him a sharp look, and then seemed almost rueful. “Right,” he said. “You followed me home.”

Loki gave him a smile, not quite apologetic. “Part of the job,” he said lightly. Banner eyed him, then shook his head.

“What’s your name? You know mine.”

“Luke Silver,” he said, though he was beginning to feel that name fit poorly on his shoulders. He offered his hand. “A pleasure.”

Banner huffed a laugh, but took the offered hand. “Sure.”

“And we are still well under the forty-five minutes,” Loki said lightly. “That means I have time to try lassi. I am very curious.”

And that is done, Loki thought with relief. And he entirely unbattered.

He suspected he was going to receive an earful for not bringing equipment along for communicating with Coulson, though.

An earful was exactly what he got.

“Want to explain what you were thinking going incommunicado mid-mission?” Coulson asked mildly, almost as soon as Loki picked up his phone.

“I was thinking I would seem more trustworthy if I did not bring any listening devices with me for my conversation with Doctor Banner,” Loki said.
Coulson snorted. “Because you couldn’t hide them from him if you wanted to. Nice try.”

Loki sat down, keeping one eye toward the door. He wondered if the suspicion was new or if he was just more alert to it now. “I was not certain you would approve of my methods and did not want to bother with ignoring any objections,” he said, more honestly. “And it worked, did it not? I will be bringing Banner back to you in twenty-four hours.”

“And glad as I am to hear that – and without any news of explosions in Calcutta – that doesn’t change the fact that you’re starting to accumulate a disconcerting record.”

Loki’s hackles rose. “We agreed at the beginning-“

“That you could have a certain amount of discretion in how you perform your duties, I remember.” Coulson’s voice sharpened. “That doesn’t mean you can ignore orders entirely, or go radio silent when it suits you. What if something had gone wrong?”

“What if it had? It is not as though you were going to provide me with any assistance.” Loki heard the trace of bitterness in his voice too late. “You sent me knowing that I could handle Banner, but also knowing that I could handle his creature if necessary. So forgive me if I did exactly the task that was given to me and handled him on my own.”

There was silence down the line for a few seconds. “You didn’t sound like that bothered you.”

“It doesn’t,” Loki said flatly. “But it does mean that your expressing concern about something going wrong while I was out of reach rings a little false.” He rolled his shoulders back. “Are you concerned about my loyalty, Agent Coulson?”

“No. Is something else bothering you, Agent Silver?”

Loki exhaled sharply through his nose. “No,” he said, after a moment.

“Hm,” Coulson said, sounding dubious. “Sure. But just so you know: being aware of my agents’ skills and endurance doesn’t preclude awareness that something can always go wrong.” Loki grimaced and said nothing. “If this was you being reckless to prove a point-”

Loki scoffed. “Hardly,” he said.

“You have to admit it’s not exactly an unwarranted question.”

“It is a frustrating one to keep receiving, though,” Loki said, a little sharply. Coulson did not seem to take the hint.

“Doctor Fisher handed in your evaluation. Marked you high risk.” Loki felt a brief stab of betrayal that surprised him. He had known she was assessing him for his employers, after all.

“Are you going to try to remove me from the field again?” Loki said dryly. “You saw how well that went.”

“Mmm. No, it’s been decided that you’re too useful to bench.”

“I’m flattered,” Loki said dryly. “And if that is the case, uncertain why we are having this conversation.”

A sigh. “Don’t go off comms again, Silver,” Coulson said, and hung up. Loki frowned at his phone, a little irritated at not having the last word.
Something was still crawling uneasily under his skin, but he suspected it didn’t really have that much to do with SHIELD’s dishonesty or withholding of information. He glanced down at his arm and flexed his fingers, imagining changing shape again. Maybe not just his arm this time, looking at himself in the mirror and meeting his own red eyes. His stomach turned and he put the thought out of his mind, though not entirely easily.

But that only let his thoughts drift toward Thor, and the awareness that he’d had since his talk with Dr. Fisher that he could not longer keep them at bay. *Turn and face it,* he remembered Natasha advising. It sounded so simple. It was anything but.

*If your brother were here right now, what would you want to say?*

Loki closed his eyes and tried to picture Thor’s face, what he had looked like at the end, as he let go. It had been Thor he was looking at, not Odin, at the last, and his memory conjured an expression of grief and confusion. *He didn’t know,* Loki reminded himself. *Didn’t know the nature of the creature he took into his heart.*

Thor was a constant. Had always been a constant, for him, one of the immutable facts of the world like the fact that Odin was the Allfather and there were Nine Realms. For a time in his youth, Loki had tried to become that constant; later on he had rebelled against it. *Two stars,* Frigga said, and even then Loki had thought *but we both know who is the greater.*

*What would you want to say?*

He tried to imagine introducing Thor to Natasha and felt a wave of panic. He pushed through it. *But what if…*

He imagined her cordial, polite, but rolling her eyes when Thor wasn’t looking, sharing an aggrieved look with Loki at his lack of subtlety. The image fell apart even as he formed it, though. Thor was… everything. Loki was reckless, dangerous, *high risk.*

But the anger he looked for, Loki realized, wasn’t there. He remembered how it had felt, the white-hot rage, the incandescent fury as Thor apologized without even knowing what he apologized for. He’d lashed out and the next he knew Thor was still on the ground; Thor, mortal, weak, fragile. The rage had still burned, though – kept burning, until the Bifrost shattered and he was looking up at the man who had never been his father. And suddenly it was gone, and there was nothing. Only hollowness and a yawning abyss inside him even greater than the one he dangled above.

He would have expected it to flare to life again, thinking of Thor now, but all he felt was a deep ache in his chest and a sense of exhaustion. He had loved Thor. He did love Thor. Maybe would always.

But love was such a small thing, in the face of hatred. *When I am king, I will hunt down the monsters and slay them all.* And yet: *you can’t kill an entire race.* What was the difference? Foster thought his actions made him monstrous, not his species. Foster understood nothing.

Loki understood nothing.

It was probably the muggy heat, Loki thought. He’d never dealt with it well, and there was no air conditioning to speak of in this house. He retreated into the bedroom and curled up on top of the sheets, trying to sink toward sleep.

Thor hunted him through his dreams, shouting his name in a voice full of hatred and anger. Loki scuttled from shadow to shadow, hiding, until he fell exhausted before a throne. He looked up, and-
his alarm jarred Loki out of sleep and into awareness. He opened his eyes only to slam them shut again with a groan, a vicious headache stabbing like an ice pick into his brain. A pulse of nausea turned his stomach and he breathed through it until it passed, rolling over slowly and pulling the bottle of the stuff Foster had recommended out of his pack. He took four, hoping it would at least make a dent, and pressed his fingers into his eyes.

The worst of it ebbed after a few minutes, though. Loki packed his things as quickly as felt safe with the lingering urge to be sick still clinging on, swept the safe house for anything he might have forgotten, and slipped out.

He made his way to Banner’s cramped dwelling-place and waited outside, sending a brief message to inform his escort to be ready and waiting for them in ten minutes. He watched the street idly, observing with more casual interest than anything, until the hair on the back of his neck prickled and he realized that he was being watched.

With that knowledge, Loki scanned the crowd more carefully. His fingers twitched a little against his leg as he picked out one across the street pretending to examine some fruit, and another lurking a few doorways down. They were fairly good. He wondered if there was a sniper hiding somewhere.

The door opened before Loki could decide on a course of action and Banner stepped out. He looked a little startled to see Loki, then smiled, an awkward half thing. “Punctual, aren’t you?”

“I do my best,” Loki murmured. “Do not react, but there are at least two people watching us.”

He saw Banner’s throat bob and his jaw tense, but to his credit he didn’t glance around or react more than that. “Huh.”

“Would you have noticed if you were being watched before?” Loki asked, keeping half an eye on the nearest. He could whisk them away if necessary, but that would draw a great deal of attention and give away far more than he wanted to, both to Banner and to their observers.

“I’m pretty careful to look out for that sort of thing, yeah.” Banner sounded tense, and Loki glanced at him again, wondering if he ought to be concerned about imminent transformation. “Do they look military?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Loki said. “It is possible they are not here for you.” Banner gave him an odd look, and Loki raised his eyebrows. “My work does tend to create enemies. And if they were not here before…awfully coincidental they should find you at the same time that I do.”

“Unless you were followed,” Banner said, eyes narrowing.

“I wasn’t followed,” Loki said flatly. He was certain of that much. The nearest watcher scratched his chin; Loki saw his lips move. “We shouldn’t stay here,” he said, glancing across the street again. “I am not certain what they are waiting for, but I shouldn’t like to find out. This way.” He turned, still remaining casual, and started down the street. After a moment, Banner walked with him.

“Do you have any weapons? Or – if this turns into a fight…”

“I can mind myself,” Loki said mildly. “Do not fret about me, Doctor Banner.”

“If you say so,” he muttered, sounding dubious, but Loki did not offer more. Keeping his ears tuned to their surroundings and his magic held close. He could feel the prickling on the back of his neck, awareness that they were still being followed, but as they moved through a denser group he took a small risk and wove them out of sight. “Here,” he said, pulling Banner into a small alcove, and stopped.
“What are we,” Banner started to ask. Loki shushed him, scanning the people passing by; it was only a few moments before he saw one of them, looking about and frowning. Confused at how he’d lost his quarry, no doubt.

Loki narrowed his eyes. He should let him go. Let them keep looking while he and Banner slipped away. But the need to know who had tracked him, or them, nagged at the back of his mind. Reckless, more than one person had now accused, and he let out a slow breath through his nose, relaxing back off his toes.

Which of course was when someone shot at them.

Loki didn’t hear the shot, but he felt it – a hot, sharp line that zinged the side of his neck. Loki hissed and threw up a shield too late, but he could see three men shoving through the now panicking crowd, heading toward them.

“What the – you’re bleeding,” Banner said, and then put it together. Loki saw a warning flicker of green in his eyes and pushed him toward a narrowing gap between two of their pursuers.

“Go,” he said. “The west side of the city – someone is waiting for you. Wait ten minutes and if I haven’t caught up to you, leave. I have my own way to get out” Banner’s eyebrows knitted together and Loki growled at him. “Get out before someone shoots you.”

Banner ran. The illusion Loki had cast on him as he left wouldn’t last long, but hopefully it would last long enough. Though that they were closing in on him even with it in place…he could still easily bolt, but there was a chance that would just send them after Banner. And Loki did want to know who was shooting at him.

He planted his feet and waited for them to get a bit closer. Two of the three carried normal weapons, but the third…it was recognizably a gun, but not one Loki had seen before. He reached for it with his magic but it seemed to repel him, pushing back, and Loki’s stomach turned with sudden certainty.

It wasn’t Banner they wanted. And he thought he knew their employer.

Loki flung an illusion at them of himself, attacking, and they reacted — swinging toward it. Loki moved like its shadow, sweeping his knife across one man’s neck as he flung a hex at another that boiled the blood in his veins. He spun toward the third and barked out a sharp cry of pain as something hammered through his shield and transfixed his shoulder. The sniper, he thought. Idiot, and then, they have something that can get through your magic.

For a moment two impulses warred in him: stay and finish the fight and get out now, don’t risk being taken. The wound through his shoulder burned.

Loki gritted his teeth. Coward, a voice in the back of his mind whispered, but he gathered his magic and teleported away.

He landed a ways away from the landing sight and walked the rest of the distance, where he found Banner on the ground fidgeting. To Loki’s surprise, he looked relieved to see him. “You got out,” he said. “I wasn’t sure…”

“Give me some credit for being a little bit good at my job,” Loki said shortly, striding up to the plane. “Get on. I want to be away from here before they figure out where we went.”

Doom. It was Doom, Loki was certain of it even if he did not have proof, and it made his skin crawl, trying not to rub uneasily at his chest. Banner sat down across from him, though he hesitated before buckling himself in.
“They weren’t there for me, were they,” Banner said.

“No,” Loki said after a moment, as the plane lifted into the air. “I do not think they were.”

Banner frowned. “Are you hurt?” He asked abruptly. “There’s blood…”

Loki looked down at his shoulder. He’d almost forgotten, though it did ache. The initial graze had already faded to a scratch. The other throbbed oddly, but he wasn’t going to worry about it yet. “Not badly,” he said after a moment. “I do not require your tending.”

Banner frowned. Loki could almost hear all the questions he wanted to ask, but then he glanced toward the cockpit, and the SHIELD agent in it, and said nothing. Loki wondered if he thought SHIELD didn’t know.

But then, of course, they didn’t. Not wholly.

He wondered what would change if they did.

Interlude (XXXII)

If he wanted to fend off attacks from (at least) two quarters, Loki knew he needed solid ground from which to do it. And for that he would need something better than the cobbled together scraps of a mortal identity that he’d managed to scrape up. Mortals did it with some frequency, he was given to understand. How hard could it be?

Harder than he’d expected. It was a little like the labor of building a different skin, but in some ways more complicated even than that – constructing an entirely new self, and he rapidly realized how little he still knew about mortals and mortal lives. A thousand small decisions – where was he from, where and when he had been born. He left his medical history thin as he doubted it would be relevant, and moved on.

A part of Loki almost enjoyed the work. It was meticulous, detailed, occupied his thoughts and kept them from straying to dangerous places. And for the first time since he’d run from Megan and the bookstore, he felt like he was doing something.

(He noticed a new spy, but since all he was doing was watching, Loki settled for convincing him that spycraft was a poor choice of career and he should dedicate himself to his true passion of horticulture. That would be his standard, Loki decided: if they attacked he would not hesitate to kill them, but otherwise incapacitation would be sufficient.)

There was a fleeting sense of satisfaction when his new identity was finally complete: Luke Silver, student of architecture, studying overseas. Family: estranged. Means: meager but sufficient. Most likely he should have chosen another name, more distant from his own, but it would be easier to ensure he responded to one that was similar, and he doubted more than ten people knew him by name.

The only thing that remained, then, in building his fortress against those who thought to leash him, was the fortress itself. He could acquire himself almost anything – probably even a castle, if he wanted. But wealth and ostentation drew attention, and more than that felt somehow…wrong. Like pretending to be something he was not.

Someone worth that kind of luxury. A poisonous whisper, but not an altogether inaccurate one.

So he scanned the classified ads, casting a wide net. He couldn’t have said why the advert caught his eye, later: it was simple enough.
1 BR to let. Inquiries call, and a phone number. Loki dialed it almost on a whim.

“Hello?” The female voice on the other end was warm and friendly.

“Greetings,” Loki said. “I saw your ad. Is the place still available?”

“It is, yes,” she said. “Are you interested in taking a look, Mr…”

“Luke Silver,” he said. “And yes, I would be interested.”

“I’m happy to show you around,” she said. “My name’s Margaret Fairfax. I look forward to meeting you.”
Chapter Notes

This is kind of a long chapter because there's a lot going on in it - there is also no Interlude (and will be no Interludes from this point forward, as we have entered the act two part of this fic and thus gears are changing, things are changing, the wind's a'blowin, etc. etc. As I said recently on my blog, it's not that the end is in sight - it isn't - but the point where the end is in sight is in sight. I know the outline of everything that needs to happen from here on out - it's just a matter of how long it takes me to cover the ground that needs to be covered.

But none of that is probably very interesting to anyone else.

Thanks, of course, to my wonderful beta ameliarating, who helps me hammer things into shape that need hammering. This past month has been a little nuts (and may continue to be nuts for a couple of weeks) so those of you waiting for fic - just know I might be a bit slower while I settle into, among other things, a new job. Until recently NYCC was eating up all my time, too.

Though I still think this might be one of the shorter update breaks.

Without further ado.

He and Banner stepped off the plane onto SHIELD tarmac to find Hill waiting for him. She wasn’t on her own. “Well, look who it is! My favorite agent of SHIELD. Long time no see.” Loki stopped, hard pressed not to close his eyes in pained resignation. “Said he’d come on a date with me to look at mathematical modeling and then stood me up, can you believe that, Agent Hill?”

“I can believe a lot of things,” she said blandly. Banner, who had been moving toward the exit, had stopped. Loki dropped to the tarmac without glancing back.

“Busy times,” Loki said. “You know how it is, I am sure.”

“I always have time for mathemagicians,” Stark said. Loki stared at him, and he grinned a little too widely. “Seriously. I might start to think you don’t like me, or something.”

“Or something,” Loki said, and looked at Hill. “At a guess - this was not planned?”

“If by ‘this’ you mean ‘him,’ then you’re right,” Hill said. “He’s good at inviting himself along.”

“He has a name,” Stark said. “And you know it, Maria, I know you do.” He was still looking at Loki, though. “So! Good trip? Fun secret spy stuff?”

“Nothing that is any of your business.” Loki moved forward. “Now, if you would excuse me, I do have a report to make…”

“Yeah? You’re not going to introduce me to Dr. Banner?”

Loki stilled, and so did Hill. Neither of them looked toward the plane. “Pardon?” Loki said, not
letting his voice hitch even slightly.

“Come on,” Stark said. “How do you think I knew when you’d be coming back. I swear to god, it’s like you people want me to hack your system or something. You did a little better this time, maybe ten minutes—”

“Stark, shut up,” Hill said. “And clear out.”

“Hey, hey,” Stark said. “I just want to meet the guy. Say hello, welcome him back to the States - huge fan, sure was pumped to see his name popping up again, and you too, Luke, two birds one stone—”

“Hill asks more politely than I will,” Loki said coolly.

“It’s fine, guys. I’m not gonna…it’s fine,” Loki heard Banner say from behind him. Nonetheless, when Loki looked at him he seemed to be moving carefully, like he expected something to explode under his feet at any second.

“See? He’s fine,” Stark said, gesturing triumphantly. He strode past Loki and over to Banner, sticking his hand out. “Tony Stark. Like I said, huge fan of your work. The stuff with the giant green fellow is pretty cool too.”

Banner looked a little taken aback, but he took the offered hand. “Thanks?” He said, the question mark audible. Loki stepped toward them both.

“If you would like him to leave,” he said to Banner as though Stark was not there, “I can see to it he does.” Banner blinked at him, and Stark reached out and patted Loki’s shoulder.

“Don’t mind Luke,” Stark said. “He likes to pretend to be a lot meaner than he is. Right?”

Loki detached Stark’s hand. “I am exactly as mean as I pretend to be. And that is Agent Silver, to you.”

“Sure, sure,” Stark said, giving him a grin that simultaneously made Loki want to snort and grind his teeth. “Anyway, Bruce doesn’t want me to leave, does he?”

“Uh—” Banner glanced at Loki, of all things. “I think there are probably some things I should do, paperwork and…”

“Eh, paperwork,” Stark said. “Make Maria do it, I bet she loves paperwork.”

“I don’t,” Hill said.

“You sure I can’t poach you for Stark Industries?” Stark asked. “You’d love it. No paperwork. Well, some paperwork, but not—”

“Stark,” Hill said, a little more sharply this time. Banner looked like he was trying not to smile.

“I think they need me right now,” Banner said. “And, uh. I’m trying to keep a low profile.”

“What would you do that for?” Stark asked, seeming genuinely startled. Banner looked at Loki again, a little helplessly.

“I think that most likely has something to do with the fact that at least some of your government considers him a fugitive,” Loki said. “Are you quite finished prattling, Stark?”
“Almost never,” Stark said. “You like it. Uh uh, don’t deny it.” He pointed a finger at Loki. “I’m a very good prattler.” Loki just looked at him, and Stark shrugged, grin dropping a little. “You know, you should really call and cancel if you’re going to stand a guy up. When you didn’t come by I thought you’d been Doomnapped again, or something.”

“Doomnapped?” Banner said. Loki twitched.

“As you can see, I was not.”

“Can’t assume anything.” Stark swung his arms. He turned to Banner and slung an arm over his shoulders, not seeming to notice Banner’s twitch. “Yeah, Doomnapped,” he said conspiratorially. “You know, kidnapped by-”

“Enough,” Loki said, more sharply. Stark looked at him, and perhaps something showed on his face, because he actually shut his mouth. He turned to Banner. “In truth, here is where I leave you. Others will see to your...settling in.”

“You’re leaving already?” Stark said. “At least you could say it’s not you, it’s me.”

“It is you,” Loki said, without looking away from Banner. “My apologies.”

“Are you apologizing for him or for leaving,” Banner asked, with a very faint flicker of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

“For leaving,” Loki said, then added, “mostly.”

“Excuse you,” Stark said.

“And you’re...” Banner gestured at his shoulder. “Okay? I mean, shouldn’t a doctor...”

“There wouldn’t be much point,” Loki said. He’d almost forgotten about the shot that had gone through his shoulder. The ache had faded on the long flight. He saw Stark watching him, eyes narrowed, and took a step back. “I am well, Doctor Banner.”

“Sure.” He paused. “And...thank you. For everything. Things could’ve gone a lot worse, and they didn’t.”

Loki looked at Stark, who was still watching him, and relented. Slightly. “Perhaps we might reschedule,” he said.

“You’ll pencil me in?” Stark said dryly. Loki half smiled.

“Something like that.”

“I’ll win you over yet,” Stark said. “Just watch.”

“Mm,” Loki said, and turned to walk out of the hangar. Behind him, before the door closed, he heard Banner say, “wait, mathemagician?”

There went that attempt at keeping a secret. Loki wondered if that was intentional. Hopefully Banner would be better at keeping his mouth shut.

It would be hard, Loki thought, to be worse.

He filled out a very brief and cursory report that he knew he would most likely just have to redo later, and went home. By rights he should have been exhausted. Instead Loki’s brain almost buzzed
with activity; he felt restless, unsettled for reasons he could not pin down. He wasted some time
tidying up nothing in particular in his apartment, then checked those messages he had ignored while
on mission. There was an invitation from Stark to add “party at Stark R&D” to his calendar next
week. Loki felt his lips twitch and shook his head slightly, but accepted it, at least provisionally.
There was also an email from Dr. Fisher with the subject Further Sessions that he ignored for the
moment, and on his phone a text that must have arrived sometime during the flight that simply said
CALL ME WHEN YOU GET THIS from Jane Foster. He called her, a little alarmed by the entirely
capitalized words.

“ There you are,” she said, picking up on the second ring. “Are you this bad at keeping plans with
everyone or just me?”

Loki frowned. “Plans?”

“You said you’d be here yesterday but you weren’t, obviously, and you weren’t picking up your
phone.” A twinge of exasperation almost made Loki snap, but he controlled himself.

“I was out on business,”

“And you couldn’t call?”

Loki exhaled through his nose. “I had…forgotten.” Saying as much made him want to wince. And
also made a part of him uneasy. He was not usually prone to losing track of such things. “I had not
realized I need to account for my whereabouts to you.”

Foster huffed. “It’s not – just common courtesy. Letting someone know if you’re not going to be able
to make it.” He could almost picture her aggrieved expression, and his thoughts drifted briefly to
Stark’s similar comment, though that at least had been somewhat intentional.

Several potential sharp answers suggested themselves to Loki, but he pushed them away. “My
apologies,” he said stiffly. “Are you occupied tomorrow? Or would you rather set a different time?”

“Oh,” Foster said, sounding faintly surprised. “Um…I guess I’m not busy. I’ll be at the lab.”

“It sounded as though there was something important you wished to discuss,” Loki prompted.

“Well…sort of.” Foster paused. “Mostly I was…annoyed about you standing me up. But, um…sure,
you can come by. I do have a few things I’d like you to take a look at.”

“Expect me tomorrow, then,” Loki said, and then added, “I don’t think I will forget anything that
quickly.”

“Heh,” Foster said after a moment, a weak laugh that was still more or less a laugh. Loki found he
was very slightly gratified. “What time?”

“Just before noon?” Loki suggested.

“Good call,” Foster said. “I might even be halfway human by then.” Perhaps his frown was audible,
because she added, “I’m not really a morning person.”

“I see,” Loki said. “Perhaps I’ll bring my armor just in case.”

Foster laughed again after a brief pause, though it sounded even more anemic than before. Perhaps it
hadn’t been clear that that was a joke.
After hanging up, Loki retreated to the bathroom to wash. He paused, glancing in the mirror and looking at his shoulder. It felt...odd, but the wound seemed to have closed, and the joint moved smoothly when he rolled it forward and back. Loki shook his head slightly.

It was...disconcernting that Doom might have the means to counteract his defenses. At least the injury itself had not been serious, however, and Doom's henchman had been relatively easily handled. It did make Loki itch to have words with the man, but he remembered Natasha's warning. Sooner or later Doom would overstep himself, and when he did Loki would be waiting.

The hot shower he took seemed to settle his mind, somewhat; the calm let the weariness of his busy few days catch up with him. He crawled into bed and curled up under the covers, slowing his breathing a little at a time.

Morning seemed to come quickly – even more quickly than it should have, considering it was hardly morning anymore when Loki stirred. Even once he did pry his eyes open, there was lingering fuzziness in his brain that he struggled to shake off. At least for the first time in several days he did not wake with a headache, which was a marked improvement, and the fogginess did fade, if slowly.

He waited until late morning to go to meet Foster, knocking lightly on her door. Lewis opened it. “No baked good this time?” She said. “Shaking my head. You’re really letting me down here.”

Loki didn’t bother to respond to her, stepping past and looking for Foster. She stood up hurriedly, her chair scraping loudly across the floor. “Hi,” she said. “How are you doing?”

“Well enough,” Loki said, which was the only answer he would probably ever give her. “Yourself?”

“Pretty good,” she said, though in fact she looked tired. Loki thought about remarking on it and decided against it. “So, uh. Sorry for snapping at you on the phone yesterday. Dealing with grant boards gives me fits.” She smiled, a little sheepish seeming. Loki felt his eyebrows twitch and shrugged.

“If you wanted any persuasive assistance,” he offered, half joking. Foster laughed a bit nervously. “No, I think I’m...I think I’m okay. For now, anyway. Ask me again in three months.”

“No one’s going to ask me how I am?” Lewis chimed in. “Typical.”

Loki just looked at Foster, who said, a little too loudly, “so I’ve been working on looking at some of the stuff we were talking about and I had some things I wanted you to look at- I know I put them down around here somewhere.” She began rummaging through stacks of paper. Loki walked slowly over to examine the seemingly random mess of them.

“How do you find anything in this?” He asked. Foster’s ears turned slightly pink.

“I manage,” she said tartly. “I have my own system of organization-“

“It must be quite a system,” Loki said. She scowled in his direction, and Loki only barely muffled the urge to laugh.

“It works for me,” Foster said. “Oh – here it is.” She shoved a stack of papers into his hands. “And I was just about to go on a coffee run. So if you can look at that and tell me what you think, I shouldn’t be longer than about five minutes. If I don’t get some caffeine soon I’m going to be impossible to deal with.”
“Is that the problem?” Slipped out of Loki’s mouth without thinking. He nearly winced. Civil. He was supposed to be civil and while it had not been meant cruelly…

Foster gave him a sharp look. “Guess I should get you some too,” she said after a moment, and headed for the door. Why, that was almost banter, Loki thought.

After she left, he fanned out the papers she’d given him, though between her atrocious handwriting and the general incomprehensibility of her terminology it was hard to make out much of anything. He grimaced, determined to try nonetheless. He did not want to admit defeat so quickly.

“So,” Lewis asked at length. “When you said you were on business, what does that mean? What do you actually do for the scary secret government people?”

Loki ignored her, continuing to peruse the documents Jane had shoved into his hands before scurrying off. If Lewis was not going to leave him alone, he would just have to ignore her. He set the papers down on the table and spread them out, standing back to look at them all at once.

“What,” Lewis said, “you’re not even going to let me hear you say ‘it’s classified’?” Loki breathed through his nose and exhaled. “Because you know, bastard or not, that would be really fun for me. You could really work the whole sexy villain angle if you tried, you know, it’d probably be better than the ornery asshole one you’ve got going on right now.”

Loki pressed his hands flat on the table for a moment, smoothed his expression, and turned. He summoned a faint shadow of the smile that Sif said made him look like a wolf, dropped the register of his voice a hair, and said, “do you really think you want that?”

Lewis’s jaw dropped, and she just blinked at him for a second. Loki turned back around, pulling out a graph and inspecting the data on it. “Huh,” Lewis said after a moment. “Okay. That’s…okay.”

“You asked,” Loki said dryly, without looking at her.

“I wasn’t wrong,” Lewis said after a moment. “You can work it. I think you missed your calling of Shakespearean villainy.”

Loki didn’t respond, and to his relief Foster returned a moment later, carrying a tray with three paper cups. “All right, Darcy, your cappuccino, sorry Loki, I didn’t know what you drank so I got you, um, earl grey tea, and - what happened?” She stopped dead, looking back and forth between Loki and her friend.

“Nothing,” Loki said.

“Loki did a sexy villain voice,” Lewis informed Foster. “It was hot, and also a little scary. You should make him do it again.”

“No,” Loki said, before Foster could say anything.

“Rude,” Lewis said.

Loki ignored her and turned to Foster. “I am sure the tea will be fine. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome?”

She gave him a nervous look. Loki tapped on the graph he’d pulled out. “Can you explain this to me?” He said, as though Lewis hadn’t spoken.
“Oh – sure,” she said, still looking uncertain. Loki tried to ignore it. “It’s comparing readings. The green – that’s the Einstein-Rosen bridge - the Bifrost readings, from Puente Antiguo. The red is the data you brought me from SHIELD, the stuff that shows what’s happening to Yggdrasil. The blue is-” She paused, glanced at him. “It’s the data from when you…came to Earth.”

_Fell_, Loki thought, but didn’t correct her. “And you are looking for points of congruence between the three?”

“That was the thought,” Foster said. “But I’m not seeing much. It did give me an idea of scale. Do you _know_ of anything that could…do something like this? How would it even _work_?”

Loki tried to think of the library on Asgard, the sections he wasn’t supposed to have gone looking, the darker histories and older records. It would have to be old, whatever it was – or else very new, for no one to have noticed its rise or to have forgotten its existence. Stabbing pain shot through his eye again and he sucked in a breath. Even trying to think _around_ the question, then, was grounds for – punishment? Or just a reaction of whatever binding was being used, that had stolen his memory and might be the source of the radiation that so concerned Roslyn and Jun?

“Loki?” Foster sounded concerned. He held in the urge to snarl with frustration that was no truly directed at her.

“It is fine,” he said curtly. “Nothing I can think of. Regardless of what it _is_, the more important matter is preventing it from reaching the Nine at all.”

Foster looked like she wanted to question, but decided against it. “Right. Which you think I can help with.”

“I do not know if I _think_ you can,” he said, “but you have better resources for doing so than anyone else on this Realm.”

“On _this_ Realm,” Foster said. “You mean, on Earth. But there are other Realms, right?”

“No,” Loki said flatly, turning away from Foster. His stomach churned uneasily.

“No, what?” Foster asked. “That wasn’t really a question-”

“I know the question you were going to ask, and the answer is no,” Loki said, “Asgard is not an option. You cannot communicate with them anyway.”

“Not _yet, _” Foster insisted. “But if you helped me figure it out, couldn’t we find a way?”

“ _No, _” Loki repeated more harshly.

“Why not?” Foster’s voice rose slightly. “Whatever the problem was with you and Thor, isn’t this more important? If you really want to save the world, why not use the resources we have? If you – if Asgard is so much more advanced than us, then it stands to reason-”

Loki pressed the heel of his hand into his throbbing eye. “Because I do not want to _die_ , Jane Foster, at least not at the _moment_,” he snapped. The image swam into his mind of Thor, Mjolnir in hand, battle-fury in his eyes as he crushed Loki’s skull. He pushed it away. “It would take too much time. And there is no small likelihood that they would kill me and ignore any warning you tried to offer.”

Foster sounded dubious. “I don’t believe that.”

“You do not know Asgard,” Loki said flatly. The ache did not seem to be diminishing, but rather
sinking deeper, like something was trying to burrow into his brain. His guts knotted, twisting. “I do.
And even if they did believe you, most like it would simply be to dedicate their efforts to holding
Asgard and accept Midgard as an unfortunate casualty.”

“Thor wouldn’t,” Foster said, after a brief pause.

A wave of dizziness went through him, and Loki sank down into one of the chairs without
responding. He felt too hot, very suddenly, and it was hard to swallow. He bent forward a little,
trying to keep his breathing slow even as fear swam into his thoughts. He felt sick – not just
nauseous, but ill. What is wrong with me?

“Loki?” Foster had approached and was hovering like she wasn’t sure if she should get closer or not.
He licked his lips, which felt very dry. “Are you…”

“I need to go,” Loki said. His voice sounded strange. He made no move to rise, not sure that his legs
would hold him.

“I’m…sorry?” Foster sounded uncertain. “I just thought we should talk about options.”

Options, Loki thought, and then realized what she was saying. He shook his head. “It is not because
of you.”

“Then what’s going on?” She paused. “You look kind of sick.”

Loki swallowed hard, trying to quell the nausea writhing in his gut. He jerked to his feet with a bit of
a lurch, not answering. To his surprise, Foster grabbed his arm like she thought she could steady him.
“Hey,” she said, sounding a little worried. “Maybe you should sit down and, um, drink some water
or something…”

“Jane,” Lewis said, her voice sounding strangely tinny. “He’s gonna puke on you, I swear to god.”

“I am not,” Loki said, though he wasn’t entirely certain of it.

Foster still hadn’t let go of his arm. “I really think you should sit down.”

“Are you bleeding?” Lewis sounded both horrified and fascinated. Loki blinked, pressing his hand
to his shoulder. He could feel dampness on his fingers.

“Oh – oh god,” Foster said, sounding alarmed. “Is that – when did-”

“Not here,” Loki said. That wasn’t right. It should have been healed by now. It had been healed.
Hadn’t it? Or at least closed though it had ached, oddly, for longer than he would have expected-

“Should we call someone?” Foster sounded alarmed. He blinked at her, frowning a little.

“I was leaving,” he said. “This is not any of your concern.”

Foster made a sort of choking sound. “You’re bleeding,” she repeated.

Yes, and? Loki wanted to say, but he had a feeling that was the wrong response. His focus was
sliding and he was mildly concerned about losing the ability to travel. “I will be fine,” he said,
detaching Foster’s hand from his arm. “We will speak – soon. Most likely.”

She opened her mouth to say something, but Loki twisted himself out of the lab before another wave
of dizziness could hit and knock him off balance.
He nearly stumbled when he stepped out into his apartment, catching himself on the counter and taking several panting breaths. He felt an uneasy pulse, thinking poison? His heart pounded too quickly and he waited for the dizziness to pass before he straightened, slowly.

_Bleeding. Wound should have been healed._ His thoughts cohered reluctantly as Loki made his way to the bathroom, fumbling at the buttons on his shirt, inhaling sharply at the flare of pain when he touched his shoulder.

He turned on the light in the bathroom and closed his eyes, focusing on breathing, trying to slow his racing heart. If he wasn't ill, if this was some kind of infection…

Loki took a deep breath and looked at his shoulder. The wound was small, but it had broken open, and the skin around was red and tender. He probed at it carefully, hissing through his teeth, and sent a careful thread of diagnostic magic into his body, assessing.

His stomach turned at what he could feel. A...residue, of some kind. Like a film of oil on water. Whatever had passed through his shoulder must have left it, and what was Doom playing with? Loki extended his senses, trying to identify-

The oil slick solidified, all at once, and along with the sudden stabbing pain it seemed to grab hold of his magic and pull. Loki jerked back, releasing the working at once, but the stabbing pain did not subside, and he could feel something wrong, deeper than the sickness feeling of his body trying to reject an intruder. The _thing_, because it was a thing, was not anything from this planet or this galaxy, latched into his flesh. Loki summoned a knife and held it, braced to cut it out, and stopped.

He put the knife down and, one hand pressed to his aching shoulder, used the other to pick up his phone and call Natasha.

“Are you busy?” He asked the moment the line opened, somewhat proud of how steady his voice sounded.

“Loki?” She sounded surprised. “No, I’m not busy.” Worry, ever so slight, touched her voice. “Is everything all right?”

“Not exactly.” Loki pulled his hand away. It was not bleeding severely, just a slow trickle, but that was less concerning than the deeper throbbing pain of whatever it was digging into muscle and the fever feeling throughout. “I have...a small situation.”

“A small situation. Why do I have a feeling your ‘small situation’ is probably a little more than just that?”

“I have no idea,” Loki said blandly. “But can you make it here? I need an extra pair of hands.”

“I really hope you just have a burst pipe or something,” Natasha said, and hung up. Loki supposed that was probably a yes.

Natasha came fairly promptly. Loki opened the door with his shirt unbuttoned and hanging off one shoulder. Her eyebrows twitched a little but she stepped quickly inside and closed the door, and Loki saw the moment when she noticed the wound.

“What’s that,” she said, something dangerous in her voice.

“Something that shouldn’t be a problem,” Loki said. He made his way back over to the couch and sat back down. “If it were an ordinary wound, which I thought it was. Banner and I were pursued in Calcutta-”
“I saw the report,” Natasha interrupted. “I did not see anything about any injuries.”

“It wasn’t serious,” Loki said. She looked pointedly at his shoulder, and Loki winced and corrected, “I did not think it was serious. Though it did...they were in possession of a weapon that could counteract my magic.”

“You did mention that, at least,” Natasha said. Her arms were crossed and she did not look impressed. Loki closed his eyes and leaned back, the dizziness returning. “So one of them shot you,” she said, voice a little softer. “You thought it was fine-”

“It was,” Loki insisted. “It was clean, and it healed normally, but today…”

Natasha walked over to him. “It looks infected.”

“Something has certainly gone wrong,” Loki agreed.

“You know I’m not medically trained, right?” Natasha said. “I can do field dressings, but if you need more than that-”

Loki shook his head. “That isn’t what I need.” He grimaced, a little. “There is...I think there is a fragment of something. Left. That is what I need some assistance dealing with.” He swallowed down another wave of nausea, wishing he hadn’t moved his head quite so much.

“That still sounds like something a doctor could do better than me,” Natasha said.

“I don’t need surgery,” Loki said. “I can force it to the surface. I think. From there, it should be easy. Like pulling a splinter.” He opened his eyes at the silence, and found Natasha looking at him with extreme skepticism. “I would rather have you than a stranger,” he said, feeling his face warm.

Natasha grimaced. “If I say no you’re just going to try to pull this...fragment out on your own and end up making things worse for yourself, aren’t you?” Loki said nothing, not deeming that question worth answering, and she shook her head. “All right, fine. Do you have any tweezers?”

"Tweezers?” Loki said, frowning a little. Natasha gave him an odd look.

"What were you planning to use?"

Loki held back from saying probably a knife and my magic, figuring that would not be an answer of which Natasha would approve. "In the bathroom," he said. "First drawer under the sink."

She nodded and went. "Don't suppose you have any plastic gloves," she called over her shoulder. "Because if you don't...I should get some. What about rubbing alcohol?"

"I have some rubber gloves for cleaning," Loki said, making a bit of a face. "Will that do?"

Natasha rummaged through his drawers, shaking her head. "Not exactly. I'll run out and grab some. Is this going to turn into an emergency in the next five minutes?"

"No," Loki said. "I do not believe so."

"Better not," Natasha said. "Come on and sit down in here, rinse it out and disinfect it. I'll be right back."

Loki stumbled into the bathroom, stepping aside to let her out. "Natasha,” he said a little awkwardly. "Thank you. For all your help.”
"I'm starting to think I just have to get used to having friends who get themselves beat up once a week," Natasha said, after a brief pause, but he caught a crooked half smile that seemed pleased, and she added, "you're welcome, Loki."

He did as she had said, hissing as alcohol splashed into the wound. He felt the shard, or creature, or whatever it was, twist like the alcohol stung it. Loki certainly hoped so. Natasha knocked before letting herself in, and Loki looked up at her, sweaty and sick. He thought he must look a sight.

She opened the box of gloves briefly and pulled on a pair, twitched a strand of hair out of her face, and bent down to crouch in front of him where he was seated on the bathtub. "Any idea what this thing is? At all?"

"No," Loki said. "Only that it is...not natural, and not like anything else on this realm. It feels...wrong."

"So, something from outer space, then," Natasha said. She shifted, and Loki realized as he felt metal brush his skin that she'd moved to keep him from seeing what she was doing. There was a kindness to that, maybe, but he could certainly still feel it and hissed in a breath. "Tell me if you need me to stop," Natasha said, quieter. "Try to focus on the questions."

"Ah - yes." Loki held deliberately still, closing his eyes. "From...outer space, yes. Likely. I do not know where, not for certain - it reacted strangely to my magic."

"If your shoulder was healed, why reopen the wound? Seems like it'd be better if you kept not noticing something was up."

Loki shook his head slightly. "I doubt this is...was its doing. This is more likely my body reacting as it would to poison, by trying to eject it. But whatever it is, this thing is tenacious - ah. " He cut off as something jarring through his shoulder, pain singing up the side of his neck.

"There," Natasha said grimly. He glanced at her face and found her jaw set, too carefully neutral. "Found it. Just have to..." Loki took a few shallow, panting breaths, feeling metal shift, grasp, pull.

It didn't come easily. Whatever it had dug into his flesh, it clung like barbs and Loki sucked in a breath and bit the inside of his cheek so he didn't shout. "Ah, Natasha, Natasha it's not-"

"I'm sorry," she said, sounding genuinely apologetic. "I think it's, uh. Dug in. I don't know how to make it release. Fire, maybe, but it's too deep for that - Jesus. You really get the special stuff, don't you?"

Loki licked his lips and closed his eyes. "Just do it," he said, voice thin. "Pull it out. Use - use whatever force you need."

Natasha hesitated. "Do you need something to bite down on," she said after a moment. Loki jerked his head to the left.

"Just do it."

"On three," Natasha said. "One-"

She pulled. Loki expected one sharp yank, but it didn't come easily. Whatever it was embedded in his shoulder resisted and resisted - and finally ripped free. He managed to choke down his yelp, breathing raggedly through his nose as Natasha pulled it out of him. Almost immediately she reached for the rubbing alcohol, poured some onto a towel, and pressed it to his shoulder. "Hold that," she said brusquely, turning with the black object covered in his blood and dropping it into a cup that she
turned quickly upside down. It didn't move, though - out of him now dull and still. Like it had only been animated by his blood.

Loki shuddered, pressing the towel to his shoulder as the bleeding began to slow, palpable relief sweeping through his body at the source of the infection purged. He slumped forward, shivering.

"Loki?" Natasha's hand lighted on his back. "You okay?"

"Hmm-mm," he said, not quite trusting his voice yet.

"Where do you keep your bandages?"

"It'll heal," Loki murmured. Natasha pulled her hand away.

"I know that," she said. "That's not the point. It can't hurt."

Loki opened one eye to look at her. She didn't look pale, but there was some strain around her mouth. He nodded, dropping his head back forward. "Under the sink," he said. "There should be some of what you are looking for there."

He listened to her rummaging about, breathing deeply before turning his head to look at the overturned cup and the thing like a sliver of obsidian underneath. It continued to look dead, inert, but when he reached out with his magic he still felt it trying to grab hold.

Natasha bandaged his shoulder efficiently and neatly. "You sure you don't need any...attention?" She asked. "Felt like that thing was doing some...nasty damage, coming out."

"I am sure." Loki shifted his shoulder, and if it hurt it did not feel like the kind of hurt that would not heal on its own.

Natasha looked at the object in disgust. "It had little - legs. Barbs, I guess. Sticking out. Withdrew them the second it was out of you, but..."

"Delightful," Loki murmured, feeling a little nauseated. His body was slowly returning to equilibrium.

“So,” Natasha said after a few moments. “Any ideas about what this is about?”

“It is a short list of people on this Realm who have any ability to hinder my magic,” Loki said, still breathing hard.

“A short list, or two names that we know of?”

“Two? I assumed three. Doom, Osborn, and SHIELD.”

He expected her to deny it, but after a moment she said, “all right, three. But SHIELD doesn’t have anything to gain by sending attackers after you while you were on mission to retrieve Banner. They wouldn’t want to take the risk of setting him off, and I don’t think you’ve done anything to make them turn on you, either.”

“And I do not think Osborn truly has the ability,” Loki said, watching her out of the corner of his eye. “He partnered with Doom to receive it, and I suspect Doom does not share his knowledge readily.”

“No,” Natasha said. “Probably not.” She looked at the oddly gleaming black thing that had come out of his shoulder. “And you don’t recognize this?”
“No,” Loki said. “It is not...as I said, I do not think it comes from here.”

Natasha frowned. “So, from where?” she asked.

Loki shook his head. “I am not certain. Perhaps from...outside.”

Natasha gave him a sharp look. “Like-”

“I wonder,” Loki said, and then felt a sudden, unpleasant lurch, a memory surfacing. At Doom’s castle, the first time, when the robot wearing his face had said-

*My mind has reached beyond this world, and I have heard word of you.*

Loki’s blood turned to ice. That long ago, he thought. This thing, whatever it was, had been working even then, and not only that but it had *known* of him - *how?* And *why,* had he been manipulated into seeking it out, had he been *used...* For what?

“Loki?” Natasha sounded concerned. He shook himself.

“Have you heard anything from von Doom of late?” He asked. Natasha shook her head.

“No. It’s been pretty quiet from Latveria for a while now.” She pressed her lips together. “Maybe too quiet. I’ll put out some feelers, see if anyone can get more information. That’s not all you thought of, though.”

“No,” Loki said. “But I am not sure of anything, and I would rather not speak until I am. Only that I wonder if there is not...some long standing connection between von Doom and - whatever it is causing the disturbances in Yggdrasil. He said something I had forgotten until just now that might suggest as much.”

Natasha’s frown deepened. “This sounds like something Fury should know.”

“Most like,” Loki said, leaning back. He felt suddenly weary, and still vaguely ill. “Would you...”

“I can tell him,” she said. “Since you look like you need a break. But he’ll have questions for you.”

“I am sure.” Loki massaged his shoulder absently, hissing as his fingers rubbed over the still tender spot. “Natasha...I appreciate your help.”

“Are you going to be all right? Now that the...whatever it was, that thing, is out.”

“I should be,” Loki said, opening his eyes and giving her a weary smile. “I should need only a brief rest before I am back on my feet.” He raised one eyebrow. “You know, this just shows that you should have let me rip von Doom’s head off his shoulders when I had the chance.”

“I thought it was his arms,” Natasha said, but she huffed a quiet laugh. “Maybe. We’ll see. This is still a suspicion. *You’re* not from here and you got here without any extra help.”

“Maybe I am wrong,” Loki said, “but I am fairly certain in this I am not.”

“We’ll see,” Natasha said again, and then narrowed his eyes. “You won’t do anything until I get back to you. Right?” There was a bit of an undertone of threat in her voice.

“Nothing but take a short nap,” Loki assured her, holding up his hands. “Fear not, Agent Romanov.
No reckless attacks on state leaders today.”

“Glad to hear it,” she said. “Go get in bed. Make that short nap a long one; you look like you haven’t slept in a week.”

Loki yawned and nodded, but after she slipped out he just curled up on the couch, too tired to get up. She’d taken the fragment, whatever it had been, with her. Loki found that he was oddly relieved: something about it had made his stomach churn. Not just the fact that it had been inside him, but something else, some sense of...wrongness.

*My mind has reached beyond this world*... with whom had Doom been speaking? And why had Loki’s name come into it? He tried to think again of that blank space in his memory, but a dull ache in his eye warned against it. He was certain now that something had been done to him. And von Doom fit into it, somewhere…

His eyes dragged closed and he drifted into restless, unhappy dreams.

He woke up to the shrill ringing of his phone. He groaned, tempted to throw it across the room; probably Fury demanding answers he did not have. His brain felt like it had been ground to pulp. When he picked up the device nonetheless though, and squinted at the screen, it was not Fury’s name but Roslyn’s.

Loki sighed, but picked up. “Yes?” His voice sounded blurry. A glance at the clock on his stove showed that he’d slept nearly ten hours, so it was now early morning. He wondered idly if Roslyn had slept.

“Luke?” She certainly sounded jittery, and Loki sat up, frowning. “Hi, um, sorry to wake you up. I was working late on the...stuff we were talking about, trying some new tests, and, um. Are you busy?”

Loki turned on the light, squinting against it. *Norn* but his head hurt. It seemed to have gotten worse. “No,” he said. “Not as such. Why?”

“I found something and I think it’d be easier to explain in person,” she said in a rush. Loki pressed his fingers to his temples and then stood up, looking for some of the medicine that was supposed to ease pain. It seemed to have worked adequately before.

“Can it wait?” He asked.

“I’m...I’m really sorry. I don’t think so.” The jitteriness increased, and Loki exhaled through his nose. Something was frightening her. What could she have found that would cause such alarm?

The possibilities he thought of (some kind of parasite in his bloodstream, direct interference with the fabric of his body, distortion of his magic) made his blood chill. Loki squeezed his eyes closed and opened them.

“All right,” he said. “Very well. If it is necessary. In the usual location?”

“Yeah, that’d - that’d be good, thanks.”

Loki grimaced. “You sound rather shaky, Roslyn. How much coffee have you had?”

She laughed, though that sounded shaky too. “Probably more than I should’ve. Just. You’ll get here soon?”
“Shortly,” Loki assured her. He hung up, digging his fingers into his eyes and groaning. He did not relish the idea of trying to do much of anything with this headache. All he really wanted to do was lie down in the dark and hope it diminished with time.

But if Doom was working with whatever he’d found outside Yggdrasil, and if that being had done something to him and Roslyn could tell him what…”

He gathered his magic with what felt like too much effort (and he felt drained, too, like he’d hardly rested at all) and spun himself through space. Roslyn lurched to her feet from where she was sitting on a stool. The bright lights of the lab stabbed into his eyes.

“Luke,” she said, smiling, but it looked strained and tense. “Hey, thanks for coming. I’m really sorry to call you so early, I know you must’ve just woken up—”

The hair on the back of Loki’s neck pricked and he thought something is wrong. Not jitters of sleep deprivation or excess caffeine. The sound of a poor liar, unaccustomed to the task, and not finding it to her liking.

Loki took a step back, very suddenly. “Who threatened you,” he said, calling his magic, checking the corners. Roslyn froze.

“What? Threatened—threatened me?”

“Yes,” Loki said. “To get me here.” There were limited points of entry. He should just take her and get out, but there might be some spell on her, if Doom had chosen another target, another friend, but this one more vulnerable-.

Roslyn licked her lips. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she lied, her eyes flickering toward one of the corners. “I was just—there was something—”

He turned, frowning, and took a step toward her. “You’re lying,” he said sharply. “You were lying then and you still are now. Tell me—” Roslyn’s eyes widened and then darted past him. She mouthed something Loki realized too late was no, don’t.

He understood for a fraction of a second before the trap slammed closed. It was what Loki imagined it would be like to be a rabbit in a snare when it tightened around its neck, struggles only drawing it tighter—like a noose or a snake, something hummed to life and Loki’s power strangled. He choked, a full body shudder thrumming through him as he forgot how to breathe, the air being squeezed out of his lungs, the pain of something ripped out of every cell-

Loki doubled over, gasping. Natasha’s voice: I don’t think you’ve done anything to make SHIELD turn on you, she’d said. Oh, you liar, he thought, cold and vicious, anger and betrayal squeezing even tighter than their trap.

He looked for Roslyn and found agents ushering her back. She was looking at him, looked like she was trying to say something, but he turned his head away. There were perhaps fifteen SHIELD agents flooding into the lab, none of whom he recognized. Generous, Loki thought, still gasping for air. I do not think I could stand.

“You said it wouldn’t hurt him,” he heard Roslyn say, sounding indignant, and was torn between some small gratitude that at least the theft of his magic wasn’t her doing. She’d just been the bait. Why her and not Natasha, he wondered; perhaps they thought he would suspect her more?

He kept his eyes on the door until Coulson entered. The expression on his face was impossible to read. Loki looked back at him and did not mask his rage. “What do you know about the Joint Dark
Energy Mission Facility?” Coulson asked, after several seconds of silence. Loki said nothing. Coulson looked, of all things, disappointed.

_Such pretty words, Loki wanted to snarl. This is your concern? This is your payment for my loyalty?_

“Agent,” Coulson said. “We’re taking you into custody for the theft of SHIELD property.”

Loki’s mind went utterly blank. “What?” Of all the accusations to make - why _lie_?

“Last night at 1:36 am there was an incursion at the JDEM base,” Coulson said. His eyes were fixed on Loki, like he was looking for something. “Like the one I mentioned to you before. This time, something was taken. One agent was killed.” Loki stared, still reeling, and shook his head.

“I have never _heard_ of this place before. I was not-” He stopped. They would never believe him. Not the liar. “What evidence do you have?” He demanded, breathless. His lungs squeezed in his chest, straining for air.

Coulson stared at him for several long seconds, expressionless. Then he pulled out a small, handheld device and held it out. It was a seemingly empty room; there was a date and time stamp in the bottom right corner.

A shadow detached from one wall and moved forward. Loki stared at it, that one point of movement, watching it move forward toward the camera, striding with purpose, single-minded certainty.

As the shadow drew closer to the camera, it paused, and glanced up. Coulson paused the video and zoomed in.

It was his face, Loki thought, with dull confusion. Clear, even in the dark. His face.

Coulson resumed the video, and Loki watched himself raise a hand, magic coalescing around his fingers. The feed cut off. Loki blinked. It was false. Somehow, it had to be false. It…

His throat felt dry and his thoughts stumbled, vision starting to tunnel as his magic slowly strangled. “What was stolen,” he asked hoarsely. “Tell me - _tell me_ what was stolen.”

Coulson shut off the video. “We’ve been calling it the Tesseract,” he said. “Maybe you can tell us more. Starting with why you took it.”

The Tesseract. He _knew_ that name, why did it sound so _familiar_-?

Loki’s breath caught. Gamma radiation - the stuff of the cosmos. Banner brought in to study something powerful, but they wanted him kept away from it. Dark energy and Yggdrasil and _the Tesseract_.

( _But why leave something so dangerous on Midgard, father?_)

_Because where would be a less likely place to look? Who seeks pearls in a pigsty?_  

_But would it not be safer here?_  

_Better to keep some objects of power separated, Loki._)

His head. His _head_. Loki fought through it, though, reached-

“Loki?” Coulson sounded, for the first time, slightly uncertain.
What a curious creature you are. Loki shuddered. His skull felt like it was going to split open, to rip in half. I may yet have use for you, a voice said, and then something in him did fracture, and he was gone.

Oh, he thought, in the last seconds. You fools. You utter, perfect fools.
When he woke it was in a cell.

That was not surprising. The fact that he was lying on a bed and that his hands were free was more so. He no longer felt so much like he was being strangled a little at a time – so whatever they were using to bind his magic, they had adjusted its strength. Loki reached out experimentally, and he could feel it there but drawing on its power was beyond him.

His head still throbbed, but he could think more clearly now, and he still remembered what he’d realized in those last painful seconds. So he had managed to break that portion of what had been done to him, at least. He could remember more than he wanted to. Power squeezing his mind like a ripe orange, raking through his thoughts and memories and soul. And the name.

Thinking too much about it still felt like an ice pick was being used to pry out his eyeballs, so Loki pushed it away, nausea a thick knot in his gut. All those nights he’d slept overlong, the headaches – his face on the cameras. It was clear enough what Thanos had done. I may yet have use for you. Thanos and Doom and-

And SHIELD thought he had betrayed them, that he had the Tesseract. He doubted they would find his story credible. There was no reason for them to. Fool, he thought harshly. He’d grown careless, trusting, walked into their trap like a lamb for the slaughter.

He wanted to be angrier than he was. It wasn’t as though they were wrong, though Loki could remember nothing of his midnight jaunt. He wondered if the memory was simply buried or if when it happened he was truly not there, if it was simply Thanos or one of his lackeys riding Loki’s body like a spirit possessing a corpse.

Loki took several deep breaths through his nose so he didn’t vomit at that particular mental image.

There was a loud buzzing sound overhead and Loki heard a door open. He closed his eyes and listened to the footsteps, wondering what would happen now. Would they attempt to interrogate him for information he did not have? What means might they have to convince you, a dark voice whispered grimly.

“Loki,” said Coulson’s voice. He left his eyes closed and did not respond. “We know you’re conscious,” he went on after a pause.
“Did you know what it would do to me?” Loki asked, instead of the thousand things he should say. His voice sounded strange, distant. “Your…whatever means you have crafted of binding my seiðr.”

Coulson hesitated. “What did it do?” He asked, which was answer enough. He remembered Roslyn saying you said it wouldn’t hurt him. Perhaps that should not be a relief, but it was at least a slight one.

“It feels like suffocating,” he said. “I suppose I should thank you for adjusting it. Now it merely feels like trying to breathe through cloth.”

“Is that what caused the nosebleed, too?” Coulson’s voice was carefully neutral. But of course. He would not want to offer an emotion for Loki to latch onto.

He coughed a weak laugh. “No,” he said. “Not exactly.”

“Then what?”

Loki sat up and turned, swinging his legs off the bed and looking squarely at Coulson. “I did not steal the Tesseract. At least, not as you think I did.” Coulson’s expression flickered.

“We have your face on video,” he said blandly. “Using magic. Even if you’re talking about a shapeshifter of some kind – and we don’t have any confirmed instances of those, other than – again – you, between the magic and the rather unique energy signature you leave behind…you’re a good liar, but you’re not that good.”

It stung, more than it should. A part of Loki thought what does it matter, they already believe you a traitor, nothing you say will convince them otherwise. Do not demean yourself by begging. “I am trying to tell you that – yes, it was my body. But not – my mind.” Loki swallowed hard. Coulson’s expression did not change.

“Not your mind.”

“I think.” He exhaled. “You remember…when I returned from worldwalking, damaged. And I could not remember…I suspect that the entity I encountered there – meddled with me. Cast some…working on my mind, and more to – block my knowing.”

Coulson just looked at him, impassive. He did not look convinced, and Loki felt a sudden flash of anger. I am telling the truth, he wanted to snap. If I were lying I would choose a better lie.

“What is it for?” Coulson asked abruptly. “The Tesseract. What’s its purpose?”

“It is an artifact of great power that predates even the Aesir,” Loki said. “I do not…know the full range of its abilities, but it is unlike almost anything else in the universe. The All-Father…hid it here, centuries ago. I did not – I had no idea it was here.” The words bubbled up. “You should not have meddled with it. Its power is beyond you, and its like shines like a beacon through the universe. And you must have known that it was unwise, else why hide it from me-”

He realized too late what he sounded like. Coulson’s expression was hard again. “Is that why you took it?” He asked. “For our protection?”

“I did not even know it was here until you told me,” Loki said, his voice rising. His breath felt short and a wave of dizziness went through him. “Why did you keep it secret, knowing that I more than any of yours would be equipped to deal with such things? All your pretty words about trust and loyalty and you were foolish enough to toy with forces beyond your comprehension, and now it has drawn ancient evil to you.”
“The ‘ancient evil’ that you say brainwashed you,” Coulson said. Loki gritted his teeth at the tone of his voice. “The one no one has seen but you. That you conveniently just remembered.” He sighed. “Loki. This doesn’t need to become a situation.”

“Isn’t it already?” Loki asked bitterly.

“Just tell us where the Tesseract is and return it. Whatever Asgard’s claim on it was, it isn’t yours to confiscate.”

“You aren’t listening to me,” Loki said, anger welling up in him. “Think! The Tesseract can transport people through space. Across dimensions. Between worlds. You know there is something coming-“

“We only know about some vague threat that only you can identify and some weird readings we don’t understand,” Coulson interrupted. One of his eyes twitched.

“Talk to Roslyn – Agent Carrolly,” Loki said. He could hear the desperation in his voice and hated it. “Or Agent Fukayama. I have been experiencing – irregularities, for weeks.”

Coulson shook his head and turned. “I am sorry about the discomfort,” he said. He sounded sincere, which just made it worse. “I’m sure you understand the necessity.” He left. Loki barely held back the desire to slam his fist into the walls of his cell and scream.

They left him alone.

Loki had no doubt there were cameras, but no visible guards, and the quiet monotony began quickly to gnaw at him. He paced, made the narrow bed, checked the healed mark on his shoulder. Paused and stared at it. What had it been meant to do? If Doom was working with – Thanos (and why did that name sound so familiar) and Loki had been his unwitting agent, why act to paralyze him?

Unless there had been another purpose that the black alien thing had not been able to execute. Perhaps delivering him more fully under Thanos’s control, or reinforcing the magic he’d cast. Or something else.

A tray of food was brought by a stranger, delivered through a slot that allowed no direct contact. He said nothing to Loki’s inquiries, simply watching him with wary caution like a wild animal. Loki considered ignoring the food but decided there was no point, and an hour later the same man returned to remove the tray.

At some point, he slept, though restlessly. He woke biting his tongue so he didn’t scream, but couldn’t remember the nightmare.

Natasha was his next visitor, four meals and he thought perhaps a day and a half later. He sat up the moment he heard the door open, half hoping it would be the news that he had been cleared, that he was free – but it was not. Just Natasha, alone. Wearing casual clothing rather than her uniform, but Loki still felt his expression spasm, something ugly and bitter flaring up.

“An admirable performance,” he said. Natasha stood there and stared at him for a long moment, then pulled up the lone chair and sat down.

“What do you mean?”

“You must have known SHIELD suspected me,” he said, because it was clear that they had. Thinking back to Coulson’s questions, his casual mention of the first break-in…they simply hadn’t
had proof, then. “And yet you never showed the slightest sign of suspicion. You are truly gifted.”

Something flashed across Natasha’s face that looked a great deal like hurt. “As a matter of fact, I didn’t know,” she said flatly. “I didn’t know they’d arrested you until about an hour ago, when I dropped by your apartment to check on you and you weren’t there.”

Loki’s lip curled. “Pretty words.”

Natasha’s jaw shifted. “True ones.” Her voice had gone even flatter. “I appreciate your assessment of my knowledge, but I don’t actually know everything.”

Loki wanted to believe her. He wasn’t certain that he did. “And you are here now to…what? Demand how I could turn traitor when SHIELD so kindly took me in?”

Natasha leaned forward, her elbows on her knees. “You said you didn’t do it.”

Loki sneered. “I would, wouldn’t I.”

“Don’t,” Natasha said, her voice suddenly harsh. “Don’t try to play games with me or piss me off. I’m already pissed off enough. I can see what you’re doing and I’m not going to take it.”

“Oh?” Loki said. “What am I doing?”

“Playing a role,” Natasha said. “You think everyone’s already decided that you’re a treacherous villain, so that’s what you’re going to be, because there’s no point when everyone’s going to see what they expect anyway.” Loki’s expression slipped and he flinched. She smiled humorlessly. “I play roles for a living every day, Loki. I know what it looks like. And I know you.”

Loki looked away. After a moment, Natasha went on, her voice quieter.

“Agent Carrolly said you seemed completely surprised. That you didn’t seem to know what had been stolen, and when you heard you went white as a sheet.”

Loki twitched one shoulder. “Anyone will tell you I am a good liar.”

Natasha narrowed her eyes. “I watched the video.”

“Then that disproves your argument right there, does it not?”

“Not if someone brainwashed you.” Loki blinked, wondering if she’d spoken to Coulson. Natasha raised a hand and ticked off marks on her fingers. “We know you ran afoul of something in space. Your memories of that time are missing or damaged, which suggests some kind of tampering. And like I said, I watched the video. I saw you when I left you – you were pale, shaky, sick. In the video – your body language is different, and you don’t look like someone who just got something pulled out of an infected wound a few hours before.”

Loki felt a very, very small spark of hope. “I heal quickly,” he said. Natasha just looked at him, and Loki glanced away. “It is all – speculation. You have no proof.”

“I can ask you what happened,” Natasha said.

Loki looked down at his hands. “My word is worthless.”

“Not to me.” Loki glanced at her through hooded eyes and she lifted one shoulder and let it fall. “I’m a liar too, Loki. That doesn’t mean everything I say is a lie. I can offer a friend a little trust.”
Loki stared at her, an odd feeling in his chest, but even as he tried to process it it curdled. He stepped back. “This is an interrogation,” he said. “You are – meant to be the kindness. The listening ear. You are not here as a friend.”

Natasha’s eyes sharpened. “You’re half right,” she said. “Coulson did call me in. But that doesn’t mean I’m not here as a friend.”

A bitter laugh bubbled up in Loki’s throat as he looked at her. “Very good, Agent Romanova.”

“Loki.” Natasha’s voice was tight. He whirled away.

“You want to know what happened?” He asked. “I remember. I put together the pieces, or at least some of them, and I remember. I went between worlds to try to save you and something was waiting there. Something that has known of me, known my name, for a long time. He crushed my defenses and turned my mind inside out. And when he knew me, when he had despoiled my thoughts with all the violence of someone plundering a city, he took my will and warped it, I know not how, and used me to seek out the object of his desire. Your Tesseract.”

Loki took a breath through his nose. His headache was back and he dug his fingertips into his eyes as though he could relieve the pressure that way. “And then he covered over my memories of him and what he had done and threw me back, his unwitting pawn.” He laughed, brutally. “I have to appreciate the elegance of it. After all, as Coulson pointed out, I am the only one who can confirm his existence at all. Presumably SHIELD simply assumes I am mad enough to maim myself for the sake of a gambit where I was not even careful enough to mask myself from a camera.”

Natasha was silent. After a long pause Loki turned to look at her, and found an odd expression on her face, like she was trying to keep it blank and not quite managing. “When did you remember,” she said, at length.

“When Coulson told me what had been taken,” Loki said. The brief, fierce storm of emotion had left him, very suddenly, and he just felt numb. “I realized – the connections. And broke through the block on my memory.”

“It hurts,” she said suddenly. Loki did not respond. “Does he still have a hold on you?” She asked. Loki shrugged.

“I do not know. Perhaps. It seems likely.”

“Why let you get caught?” She asked. “Seen? Or was that just simple carelessness?”

Loki jerked. “You believe me?”

“Say I do,” Natasha said. “Let’s think through this. Why let your double agent get imprisoned?”

“That’s easy,” Loki said. Natasha raised her eyebrows and he went on dully. “I have served my purpose by retrieving the Tesseract. Now I am a distraction.”

“A red herring for SHIELD,” she said. “To keep us busy while whoever has the Tesseract now secrets it away.” Loki dropped his chin an inch in a nod. Natasha closed her eyes.

“Do you believe me,” burst out of Loki’s lips, though the moment it was out he hated himself for asking. Natasha opened her eyes and regarded him steadily. Thinking through her answer, Loki thought.

“I do,” she said, finally, and Loki blinked at her, dazed. Almost swaying. He sat down and bent
over, relief washing through him more strongly than he had anticipated.

“Oh,” he said faintly.

“But,” Natasha said. “There’s no evidence yet. And even if there is…even if we can prove that it’s true. That you were controlled. Brainwashed.”

Loki felt suddenly cold, realizing. “SHIELD can’t let me out,” he said. “Not without being certain that my will is wholly my own. And you can only detect…the echoes of his spellwork.” The urge bubbled up to laugh and Loki just held it in. “It doesn’t matter. Of course.” They would leave him here to rot. Unable to breathe fully, hobbled and caged and he would go mad.

He could try to break free. Even without his magic he was still stronger than any human, and if he took weapons from those he felled…

No. There were too many, and he would inevitably have to kill some of them. Loki…did not particularly want that. And besides, he was sure they had a more permanent answer to his threat somewhere, in case this one failed.

After a moment he raised his eyes, feeling a bitter pang. “You cannot leave me here. You need me.”

Natasha’s lips twisted. “You can still help. Tell us what you know about the Tesseract. Or about the person who might be controlling you.”

“And then what?” Loki demanded. “How long am I to stay here?” Natasha’s face stayed blank, and Loki scoffed. “Indefinitely. Of course.” Anger welled up in him, the desire to lash out, to hurt, to kill. He tried to be a hero, he tried to help and this was what it gained him. An oubliette.

Loki felt suddenly, inexpressibly weary. “Tell Jane Foster I am going to have to cancel,” he said, feeling Natasha’s eyes on him.

“Loki,” she began.

He turned his back. “Get out,” he said flatly. "I have nothing more to say.”

Loki did not turn back until he heard the doors close behind her. He sat down and bowed his head, breathing slow and evenly.

The tray from his last meal was still sitting on the floor, uncollected. Loki picked it up and snapped it in half, but it did nothing to ease the rage boiling in his heart.

You perfect, utter fools, he thought savagely. And I, the greatest of all.

He was tired, but Loki elected not to sleep. He was no longer certain he trusted it, especially when the restraints on his magic might hamper his usual defenses and leave him even more open than usual. The idea of closing his eyes and having someone else open them made his skin crawl.

Natasha did not come back, and he almost regretted sending her away. She was likely the closest thing to a friend he would see for some time. If ever. He wondered idly who knew. Barton, probably. But would Rogers be told? Banner had been brought here for the Tesseract – would he be told who had stolen it or just that it had been stolen?

How long would it take for him to be forgotten?

The sound of raised voices outside his door jarred Loki out of his contemplation. He cocked his
head, straining his ears, but he could only make out a few words. A few moments later the argument seemed to settle and the door opened once again; Loki sat up and placed his hands on his knees, wiping his face of feeling – though it got harder to do that once he saw who it was.

“Hi,” Roslyn said. Loki felt his expression turn stony and said nothing. She looked down. “I’m here to…take a blood sample.” Loki stared at her and waited until she fidgeted. “They wanted me to bring a guard but I said that wasn’t necessary,” she said.

Loki raised one eyebrow. “Isn’t it?” He said coldly, something in his voice an echo of what he’d used with Lewis. Roslyn flinched, but the pang of guilt Loki felt for it was very slight.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a small voice. “They ordered me to…I had to.”

“You had to,” Loki said without sympathy. She looked down.

“I didn’t know it was going to hurt you.”

Loki barked a laugh. “I might be less displeased if you had,” he said. “At least it would mean you had the guts to betray me in whole, instead of pretending to maintain some sort of care.”

“I do!” Now Roslyn sounded hurt, and maybe a little angry. “But you stole that thing, the Tesseract—”

“You should congratulate yourself for managing to trick me into a trap,” Loki said over her. “It isn’t an accomplishment many can claim.”

“Stop it,” Roslyn said, her voice rising. “Just – I don’t know what to think! I’m a scientist, not a spy. Agent Coulson said you’d been compromised – I didn’t think he’d lie about that.”

Loki stopped, taking a step back. Agent Coulson said you’d been compromised. That sounded different from Agent Coulson said you were a traitor. He brushed that thought aside and just looked at Roslyn, stony. She dropped her gaze first.

“I’m just here on orders to draw blood,” she said. “That’s all. Then I’ll go.”

“What for,” he said after a moment. “And what happens if I refuse?”

“For analysis,” Roslyn said. “And – I don’t know.”

Analysis. What kind of analysis? If she hadn’t said, though, she probably wouldn’t. Or didn’t know. Loki didn’t like the idea of giving up more of his blood, especially not now. But at the same time…they already had it. And he had mentioned Roslyn and Jun’s investigations to Coulson. If this was following up on that, maybe…

Don’t get your hopes up. You’d be a fool to think it’d even matter to them, even if they did discover that it wasn’t your doing. Or at least not your intent.

“Fine,” he said eventually. “Do it.”

She did have to call a guard in to open the door to his cage. Loki didn’t try to make a break for it – he wouldn’t have gotten far anyway. The guard locked the door after her, which made him raise his eyebrows slightly.

“They do not fear I might use you as a hostage?”

Roslyn swallowed visibly. “I guess not,” she said, which as good as confirmed Loki’s suspicion that
they did have some method that they at least believed could disable him. Perhaps one they were able to disseminate within this cell. Or else someone was putting a great deal of faith in his affection for Roslyn.

She kept her head down while she set up the syringe and vials. “I didn’t know it would hurt you,” she said again. “What they did to…cut off your magic.”

“Your doing?” Loki asked coldly. Her head jerked up.

“No!” She sounded indignant enough that it might be the truth. “I – I didn’t work on that project at all. I didn’t even know about it until they asked me to – to help.”

“Magic isn’t a weapon like a gun or a knife,” Loki said after a moment, flatly. “It is a part of me. My being, my…biology, I suppose. Perhaps I should count myself fortunate your colleagues were not more zealous.”

Roslyn said nothing. Loki shook his head and rolled up his sleeve, offering her his arm, looking away for the drawing itself.

“I am sorry,” she said. Loki closed his eyes and did not look at her. At least it was over quickly. He pulled away the second it was, standing and moving away from her. Regret, he told himself coldly, undid nothing. She had still chosen to play the bait, and he had fallen for it. This is what trust gets you. It is a knife you give others to stab you with.

“Are you quite finished,” he said eventually, when she did not leave.


Loki rubbed at his temples. There was a dull headache returning and he wondered grimly if it was an ordinary one or a sign of…interference. How much control did this being have over him? And what kind? “Something none of you should ever have touched,” he said.

“What does that mean?” That curiosity again, by which he had been so delighted, so flattered. If she had not been the one to work out how to contain him, then who? Some other of Chandra’s technicians that he had scarcely noticed? Loki resisted the urge to clench his jaw.

“It means that SHIELD is meddling with things it does not understand.” He breathed out through his nose. “Why don’t you answer a couple of my questions?” He heard Roslyn hesitate. “Do you not owe me?” He added.

“I’ll…tell you if I can,” she said finally. Loki turned, still keeping his expression blank.

“What do you know about the Tesseract?”

“Me, personally?” Roslyn fidgeted. “I…not a lot.”

“How did it fall into SHIELD’s possession?”

She glanced toward the door. Nervous of him, or of saying something she should not? “I don’t know. Maybe confiscated from the Nazis sometime after World War II?”

“And what were they doing with it?”

“Making weapons,” she said with more certainty.

Loki didn’t need to ask where it had been found, or how. Objects of power tended to unearth
themselves, even if it took eons for them to do so. He wondered if the All-Father knew it was here. “Making weapons,” he echoed. So very pedestrian. Power fell into their hands and they sought to make bigger guns.

“What is it for?” Roslyn asked. “It’s a massive energy source, I know that much—”

Loki coughed a laugh. “That is something of an understatement.” He glanced up toward where he knew one of the cameras was located. “In truth you are all lucky you did not try to tap it. The resulting shockwave might have annihilated your planet.” Roslyn’s eyes widened, and Loki’s lips twisted. “But you would not know that, would you.” He paced back over to the cot and sat down. “If I am right – and I am fairly certain I am right – the Tesseract is, more or less, a singularity condensed into matter and contained by processes no one, myself included, entirely comprehends.”

“That’s impossible,” Roslyn said blankly. “You can’t…”

“I would think having known me this long you might know better than to assume you know what is and is not possible, Agent Carrolly,” Loki said. “There. Now you know what it is.” He glanced toward the camera again. “I hope you found the lesson edifying.”

“I…see,” she said at length, though she still sounded dubious. Loki stood and moved away from her.

“Was that all?”

“If I can…” Roslyn glanced toward the doors. “Do you want anything? Maybe I could…”

Loki’s right hand clenched at his side and he forced it open again. “I want to not be trapped in a cage,” he said flatly. “I trust you cannot grant me that.” Silence, and Loki exhaled harshly. “Go, Agent Carrolly. If there is nothing further I see no reason for you to linger.”

“All right,” she said after a pause. “I…I really am sorry.”

“I believe that you are,” Loki said after a pause, turning his head just enough that he could see her out of the corner of his eye. “But your sorry changes absolutely nothing.”

Her shoulders hunched as she left, but she said nothing. Loki refused to feel guilty. She had made her choice.

Loki went back to his bed and sat down, frustration welling up in him, choking him. He wanted to rip the bed out of the floor and hurl it at the wall, tear his blankets to shreds and smash his fist into the barriers until either they shattered or his hand did.

He took a deep breath in and let it out, repeating the exercise until the urge ebbed, but that just left him tired and faintly nauseated, and it was hard to get much satisfaction when even his deep breaths didn’t feel like they quite filled his lungs. Loki wondered what Natasha was doing; a vicious part of his brain pictured her with Barton, the two of them laughing at the folly of the alien, so trusting.

He rolled over and put his face to the wall, closing his eyes.

Thanos. He should be trying to make something with that name. Where had he heard it before?

Doom stalked into his dreams when he eventually slipped into sleep, silent and cold. He broke Loki’s chest open and placed the Tesseract inside and Loki writhed as it burned, it burned. “No one will come to save you this time,” he said, but it was in Thor’s voice. “Little Jotun traitor.”
He twisted and was standing on shattered stone in space, brutal power holding his mind like a hand around his throat. Terror seared through him and he tried to shout, but his voice wouldn’t come. “You want this,” that awful voice told him, and Loki wept as he nodded. “A weak instrument,” he murmured, “but an adequate one.”

\textit{I am free,} Loki thought desperately. \textit{I know you now.}

“Do you think that I did not intend that to happen?” He asked, and pushed Loki back and over an edge so he was falling, falling, always-

He was yanked up short like the stop at the end of a gallows rope, kneeling in the dark. No throne, no shattered asteroid, just him and this creature, this Thanos.

“You’ve overplayed your hand,” Loki said. His voice shook, but held.

“I haven’t played a hand yet,” Thanos said, sounding amused. “You, though…I don’t see that you have any left.”

“Haven’t I?” Loki lifted his head. “I am not finished yet.”

“A pity,” Thanos said, as though he hadn’t spoken. “You have been a good…tool.” He spoke the word like it was an endearment, and Loki felt his hackles rise, swallowing the urge to snarl.

“I am not yours,” he said flatly.

“You could be.” Thanos looked down at him, his expression impossible to read. “You have power. Spirit. Let us say you have impressed me. I am willing to offer…mercy.” There was something faintly ironic in that word that Loki could not read.

Loki coughed a laugh. “You think I would want to be anyone’s \textit{servant}?“

“You want to belong somewhere,” Thanos said. There was no plea in his voice, just the idle statement of fact. “You crave…a family. A purpose, and power. You would have them.”

Loki rocked back. Hot shame flooded his chest at hearing it so baldly stated, so \textit{pathetic} laid out in the open in Thanos’ dispassionate voice. Something whispered in him: \textit{why not.} \textit{Take the offer. What do you have to lose? Your supposed friends have turned on you.}

\textit{Or will you stay in this cage for eternity? You could even trick him, later, turn on him and go elsewhere, take the Tesseract and go anywhere you like.}

“No,” he said. His heart pounded. \textit{You fool.} “My loyalties are not – so easily bought and sold. And I have no interest in the poisonous fruit you would offer.”

He expected anger. He expected rage. “Pity,” said Thanos, utterly indifferent. “Then I suppose I needn’t protect you from the consequences of this conversation.” Loki felt something – shift.

The world collapsed in. Pain swallowed everything. Thanos faded as the dark fractured and Loki felt that awful presence \textit{move} in his mind, the damage as thoughtless as a boot crushing an ant.

Between one searing moment and the next he was awake, his heart jack-hammering in his chest, air burning in his lungs. The lights were on and someone was shouting; his muscles spasmed like he’d been struck by lightning and his tongue throbbed.

Loki had an awful feeling he’d just made a terrible mistake.
“Silver. Silver. Luke!” he registered finally through the ringing in his ears that someone was saying his name. He fought to focus. Natasha, again, and there were other agents with her, staring at him. Loki’s stomach rolled.

“What,” he forced out. She looked…afraid.

“You’ve been screaming for the last – seven minutes,” she said. “What the hell is going on?”

Loki shuddered and looked away, closing his eyes. “Nothing you can help with.”

“I don’t care if you don’t think I can help. Answer the question.”

He must be the greatest of fools indeed. Rejecting an alliance with an unfathomably powerful being who already had a hold on him, in exchange for…what? A cage and the illusion of friendship? You want to belong somewhere. You crave a family.

Perhaps this was what family was. Pain and betrayal and love never quite returned in equal measure.

“A dream,” Loki said, his mouth dry. “Nothing more.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I need to talk to Jane Foster.”

“Why,” Natasha said after a brief pause.

“Because I need to help her solve her problem,” he said dully. “I need to help her build a Bifrost.”
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

New update!!! Oh boy Oberto.

On the other hand, at the moment I seem to have hit a bit of a writing stall so...hopefully that won't last long and I'll be back on the writing horse soon. This chapter feels like in some ways it's a lot of "setting up things for the future" but then, I've had a lot of chapters recently that were pretty heavy on the plot so I guess it makes sense that I'd be getting back to the nitty-gritty a bit. (On the other hand, there are a number of things in this chapter I had a lot of fun writing, so you know.)

Many thanks to my beta, ameliarating for all her hard work. Much love also to everyone who says kind and validating things about me on the internet. U r all great.

“You need to see a doctor,” Natasha said.

“Why are you still here?” Loki asked.

“Don’t be like that.”

“I am fine.”

“Liar.” Romanov tried to catch his eyes. “You look awful. Sick, pale. You were unresponsive and screaming for several minutes.”

“Yes, well,” Loki said. “So it goes.”

Romanov’s expression darkened. “That’s not normal and it’s not healthy. I’ve got people getting in touch with Dr. Foster but it’s going to take time. So-”

“A human doctor wouldn’t know what to do with me, anyway,” Loki said, careless of the ears of the guards around them. Romanov winced and gave him a flat look. “What?” Loki said, and he could hear the bitterness in his own voice. “It is not as though I am going to be leaving here anytime soon. There is hardly a point in keeping secrets.”

“Silver-” She closed her eyes for a moment, visibly counting to five. “Maybe they wouldn’t know exactly, but they could at least make sure there’s no bleeding in your brain or, I don’t know, implants we could remove-”

“There aren’t.” Loki turned away from her. “Leave it alone, Romanov. I’ve made my choice.”

“And what does that mean?” She snapped.

Loki shook his head. That in all likelihood my captivity won’t last beyond a minute after Thor rushes to this Realm’s defense, and then I will be in a far more permanent cage. “What I said.”

This time he thought she counted to ten before answering. “You’re planning something stupid, aren’t you. You’re going to help Foster with her research on that bridge thing-”
“I am going to help her build a Bifrost, yes. You are in need of allies. So I will fetch you some.”

“And what, exactly, happens to you in this scenario?” Loki flicked a glance toward her and Natasha smiled a little grimly. “Come on. If this was an option for you all along why wouldn’t you do it before? I’m guessing because you’re not exactly the favorite person of the folks back home.”

Loki didn’t argue. She wasn’t wrong.


“I doubt that will mean much. Besides, that is hardly what you need to worry about.”

“Why don’t you let me decide what I do and don’t need to worry about?” Loki could hear the agitation in her voice but did not know what to do with it. She was angry, upset, and he was not certain if it was with him or for him. She rubbed her forehead and stood, pacing the length of his cell. Loki watched her with his eyes half closed.

“You should go,” he said when she didn’t speak further. “There is no purpose in your remaining.”

“Are you going to agree to see a doctor?” She asked. Loki said nothing, and she dropped her head forward and went quiet. Eventually she asked, more quietly, “what just happened. Did it have anything to do with…this thing that’s targeting us?”

Loki debated telling her again that it was just a dream. There seemed little point, though. “Yes.”

Natasha’s eyebrows furrowed further. “Can you give me a little more than that?”

Loki hesitated. What point was there, he thought dully, in holding back now? “I told you it was a dream,” he said. “That was…not entirely true. The being who…used me. He calls himself Thanos.” Again, that vague tickle of familiarity, but he could not quite chase it down yet. “He…reached out to me.”

“Reached out how?” Loki was almost grateful for the slight shift sideways from friend to agent. It made things easier.

“From his mind to mine.” Loki swallowed. “He asked if I would care to…change masters.” He laughed, a little harshly. “I refused. He was…displeased.”

Natasha shifted slightly. “Displeased. And that’s what…what was happening when I got here.”

Loki felt the corner of his mouth twitch toward a mirthless smile. “Not exactly. That was…what happened when he stopped protecting me from the effects of his touch.” He stared straight ahead, hands folded together between his knees. “Imagine it as…trying to contain an ocean in a fishbowl.”

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Natasha go pale. “You aren’t exactly convincing me that you don’t need a doctor.”

Loki shrugged one shoulder. “If there was damage, to be frank, I would not be speaking to you now.” He half closed his eyes. “You cannot deal with this thing on your own, Agent Romanov. You need help.”

Natasha stood, a little jerkily. “I need to talk to some people about this. Pass on…what you told me.” She hesitated, looking at him. “Do you think he’ll…try again? Is there any way we can, I don’t know, block him?”
“He may. And I doubt it.” Loki gave her a thin smile. “I can go without sleep for some time. But you understand why it is a matter of urgency that I speak to Doctor Foster. You will see to it she comes?”

Natasha looked at him for a long, long moment, and finally nodded once. “I’ll get her here,” she said, voice softening. “Loki… I’m sorry. You deserve better than this.”

_Do I?_ Loki thought, but didn’t speak. He watched her go, waiting until she was gone to slump. There was an ashy taste in his mouth.

More than a year ago he had let himself fall into the Void intending to die, and had not. And now he was facing death again, and did not want it. How cruel the Norns were.

He realized slowly, in the quiet that followed Natasha’s departure, that she had not even blinked at his mention that Thanos had attempted to turn him. No question, no suspicion.

That only made the ache in his chest hurt more.

They did not bring Dr. Foster immediately. Loki waited, trying not to think about the way time dragged by, moments like eons, aware at every moment that they were running out of time. How quickly could Thanos do whatever he meant to do with the Tesseract? What, exactly, was his plan?

He stayed awake, fearful of what he might find if he slept. Meditated, trying to clear his head and focus. Trying to _remember_. Where had he taken the Tesseract, under Thanos’ rule? Were there secrets, some insight into his mind, locked in the empty space where his memory should be? He kept circling Doom, but he knew Natasha was already aware of that particular link, and he had no further proof. He could only hope that SHIELD was looking that way.

The quiet and the solitude began to gnaw at him as meal after meal went by - his only means of marking time with any precision. He guessed it had been, perhaps, two or three days. Natasha didn’t return.

But finally, Foster came.

He was meditating at the time, focusing on his breath as a means of distraction from his whirling thoughts, when he heard the _beep_ that preceded entrance to his small room. Loki opened his eyes, startled by the timing as he had sent a meal away only an hour before.

A SHIELD agent stepped inside, followed by Agent Carrolly, who glanced at him only briefly and then dropped her eyes. Behind her was Foster, asking, “where are you taking me, Roslyn? Where are we, five stories underground-”

(Were they? Loki wondered briefly, and pushed the thought away. It would only make him claustrophobic if he let it.)

Foster had stopped speaking, though. He met her eyes, which widened, her mouth opening in startled shock.

“How she would react. This must be at least a little satisfying for her, he thought bitterly. Seeing him caged like this.
Dr. Foster lurched forward, her eyebrows drawing together. “What is – why are – what happened?”

She reached out for the barrier, only for the SHIELD agent to say sharply, “don’t touch, it’s charged.”

“Charged?” Foster turned to Roslyn, who looked down, and then back to Loki. “Did you – do something?”

“There it is,” Loki said flatly. “The assumption, naturally, that I did something. It doesn’t matter. Suffice to say-”

“It does matter,” Foster interrupted. “You’re – last time I saw you you looked like you were going to faint and then you just disappeared, and you weren’t answering your phone – again – and now you’re – and I’d really like to know what is going on.”

Loki considered, assessing how much he could – or should – tell her. “The danger I spoke of may be more immediate than I initially believed,” he said finally, vaguely. “And somewhat more…pressing.”

“That doesn’t explain what you’re doing in a, a dungeon,” Foster said. Roslyn glanced nervously toward the SHIELD agent, but he remained impassive.

Loki did not want to say it. Did not want to admit it. But it seemed that was what Foster demanded of him, again and again: that he reveal himself to stand naked for her judgment.

He closed his eyes and folded his hands together. “Using his magic, the being I referred to was able to acquire a measure of control over me and the ability to…overtake my mind and direct my actions.

“He used me to steal a very powerful object from SHIELD’s possession, allowing my face to be caught on camera in the process. The object is gone. I, as you can see, am not. I believe Thanos – that is what he calls himself – intends to use it to open a pathway between worlds and enter the Nine. I requested you that I might hasten the Bifrost’s repair that you may summon aid from Asgard.”

It was like telling the story of what had happened with Thor, the first time. Keeping his words simple and bland, the facts at their most basic.

He opened his eyes after a moment when no reply came. Roslyn opened her mouth, then closed it, and Loki realized that she had not known. Or at least, not in specifics. Compromised. Apparently that word could mean a lot of things.

The look on Foster’s face was…Loki blinked, a little startled. She was staring at him like she’d never seen him before. She opened her mouth, then closed it. “How long has this been happening?” She asked in a small voice.

Of course. She wondered if Thanos had used her, as well. “The week I missed meeting with you,” Loki said, still flatly. He dug his nail into the meat at the base of his thumb to keep his focus, trying not to think back to the newly recalled feeling of magic raking through his mind. “That marked the start of it.”

Foster rocked back slightly. “Your headaches,” she said, still quietly. Loki said nothing, and she shook herself, seeming to steady slightly. “Oh. I’m – god. I’m sorry.”

Loki jerked. “Beg pardon?”

“Just-” Foster made a vague gesture. “That’s awful. I can’t imagine – not being able to trust your own brain. It sounds terrible and terrifying and I’m sorry.”
Loki blinked at her. The memory popped into his head of Lewis saying you’ve got him all wrong footed because you’re being nice and polite like a normal person. “Thank you,” he said finally, unsure how else to respond.

“I didn’t know,” Roslyn said. Loki looked at her, expecting a flash of anger, but all that was there was a faint bitterness. She flushed and looked down. “I’ll go.” Roslyn turned toward the door. Loki let her leave without saying anything.

Foster still looked unsteady. Loki sat up straighter, unwilling to stand in case the mild light-headedness that came with the restriction on his magic got worse. “But none of that is important right now,” he said, a little more loudly, forcing firmness into his voice that he did not truly feel. “What is – the Bifrost, your Einstein-Rosen Bridge. I can help you, hasten its repair. The moment it is open I do not doubt Thor will come rushing back to your side, and you must ask him to muster Asgard’s forces—”

“Wait,” Foster said. Loki looked at her impatiently. “You just said…the last time we talked, you said you didn’t want Asgard involved—”

“That has changed, obviously. The situation is more dire than I thought and requires more drastic action.”

“You said,” Foster insisted, “that you didn’t want to call Asgard because they’d kill you on sight. Were you lying? Just trying to get me to back off?”

Loki exhaled through his nose. “That is your question? No, I was not. If we might return to the important matter, I hope you brought materials for taking notes—”

Foster had that look on her face again, like she was just now seeing him for the first time. “You really believe that,” she said.

Yes, and I would rather not think about it too much, in case I talk myself out of doing what needs to be done, Loki might have said. This is my fault for being stupid enough to think I could fix things on my own.

Besides, it was always going to happen eventually. He was only ever deferring the day of reckoning.


Foster bit her lip. “Oh,” she said, something odd in her voice. Still looking at him. Loki tried not to shift uncomfortably. “I’m…sorry, I didn’t bring anything for notes. But I can come back tomorrow. Do you need my notes or—”

Loki relaxed, flicking a hand. “No. I know what you’ve puzzled out on your own already.” He gave her a thin, very faint smile. “Tomorrow, Doctor Foster. Come early. Time is of the essence.”

She nodded, expression sober. Strange. “Jane,” she said eventually. “You can call me Jane. If you want.”

Loki felt his eyebrows twitch. “I could, could I?” Foster lifted her chin and met his eyes, and Loki looked away. “As you prefer. It scarcely matters to me.”

She took a step back toward the door. “I should go. Get all my stuff together. Write down my biggest questions.”

“You probably should.” Loki sat back. “Good afternoon, Doctor Foster. Jane.”
She turned toward the door and the SHIELD agent next to it, only to stop and turn back. “I hope you’re wrong,” she said. “About Asgard, I mean. About what Thor might do.”

Loki blinked. Before he managed to summon any kind of response, Foster was gone, the door locked behind her.

Loki fought the need for a long time, but eventually even he had to surrender to his exhaustion. The quiet - the boredom - did not help his resolve to stay awake. Sleep was shallow and uneasy, but no dreams came - and no visitors, either.

At least, none in his mind. Loki jerked awake very abruptly, and registered why a moment later - he could hear something - a strange clicking sound like the movement of insect’s jaws. Rolling off the bed and to his feet, Loki crouched down, eyes fixed on the one entryway. It could be further interrogation, of course, timed to throw him off balance, but Loki’s instincts prickled a warning at odds with that explanation. And what of the guards?

The noise continued, and then a loud thunk, followed by audible, if muffled, swearing. Finally, something beeped and the door swung open.

“Jesus, it’s dark in here,” a familiar voice said. “How do I turn these on?”

Loki straightened slowly. “Stark?”

“The one, the only,” the man said glibly. “Seriously, what does a guy have to do to get a little light - oh, there we go.”

Loki closed his eyes just in time as the lights flared up, keeping them closed for a moment to let them adjust before he opened them. It was Stark, and he wasn’t alone: Rogers was with him.

“Well, you were right,” the latter said after a moment of silence, an odd expression on his face.

“Of course I was right,” Stark scoffed. “I’m always right. Usually.”

Loki shook himself. “What are you doing here?”

“Breaking you out, obviously,” Stark said breezily. “I was going to invite Bruce but he said it was a bad idea, hence why Captain Star-Spangled came along-”

Loki squeezed his eyes closed and shook his head, half certain he was still dreaming. “You - what?”

Steve Rogers’ expression set, his jaw shifting. “You just vanished,” he said. “All of a sudden. I couldn’t get ahold of your phone. I didn’t want to think - but clearly I was wrong.” The look he shot Stark made Loki think he’d missed some kind of conversation.

“Yeah,” Stark said. “At first I just figured you’d stood me up again, but something smelled funny so I did what I do best and mucked around in SHIELD’s computers and asked a few questions.” He tapped a finger on the barrier only to pull back sharply, shaking his hand. “Yowch. What is this stuff? Some kind of ICP? Okay. Just sit tight, we’ll have you out of there in no time-”

“No,” Loki said sharply. “Wait. You have no idea what’s going on-”

“What’s going on?” Rogers said. “Which part? The part where the government is secretly detaining you in solitary confinement without trial?”

A small part of Loki stubbornly insisted on feeling touched. However misguided, however pointless
it was...he had been missed. They had noticed his absence, and come to - as they saw it - rescue him.

And he deeply resented the next words he spoke. “It is - necessary.”

Both Stark and Rogers stared at him. “Wow,” Stark said after a moment. “I mean, I’ve never heard of Stockholm Syndrome setting in that fast, but I guess there’s always a first.”

“What do you mean?” Rogers asked. “Necessary how?”

Loki took a step back and sat down on the bed, clasping his hands between his knees and looking away. He tried to remember what words Coulson had used, clinical and simple. “I have been...compromised.” Bent and twisted and turned against myself.

“What does that mean,” Stark said. Rogers’ frown deepened.

“Compromised how?”

Clearly they were not going to be satisfied with that answer. Loki’s stomach knotted. “It seems,” he said, keeping his voice emotionless by force of will, “that an entity calling itself Thanos was able to overcome my defenses and...use me for his own ends.” He rolled one shoulder back, feeling tense muscle pop.

“What do you mean, use you,” Stark said, something faintly belligerent to his tone that made Loki think perhaps he understood well enough. Rogers looked like he was having the same problem, and Loki glanced away from the combined horror and pity on his face.

“You’re talking about brainwashing,” he said.

Loki coughed a laugh. “Worse. It seems he is able to take over my mind at will and use my body to do his bidding.”

“That’s…” Rogers trailed off.

“You’re serious,” Stark said. “And that’s not...metaphorical or whatever, you mean this, uh, Thanos can literally…” Loki said nothing, letting his silence confirm. “Oh. Okay. Cool.”

Loki forced his lips to twist in a smile. “And so I am here.” Useless. Helpless.

How bad could it be, if they did release you? You could do more. Act more quickly. Perhaps you wouldn’t need to call Asgard at all. If they let you out…

Loki wondered if that was his own thought or a whisper of another’s.

“No,” Stark said harshly. “That’s not - they can’t just bury you down here. Is anyone trying to fix it? If you know what’s going on, if they do-”

“It isn’t that simple,” Loki said. “This isn’t some - crude Midgardian work. It is subtle. It is magic.”

“Tony’s right,” Rogers said. “This-” gesturing at their surroundings, “is inhumane. And I can’t believe that there’s just nothing to be done-”

“But of course SHIELD’s not going to get off its ass and do it,” Stark said. “And you’re just going to roll over and let them put you in a box in storage-”

Locked away until they have use of me. Loki hissed. “Do you think I want to be here?” He snapped. “I cannot trust my own mind. I cannot be certain from one moment to the next that I will be in
control of myself. I do not want to be locked in a cage but neither do I want to blink and find that I have murdered one of my friends.”

Silence fell. Loki set his teeth and looked away from them both. “You should go,” he said flatly.

“How now hold on,” Stark started to say, but the door opened again.


“Well, look who it is,” Stark said, turning. “Is this a party now? Cause it feels like a party.”

“Mm,” Natasha said, and looked at Loki. “I’m going to guess this wasn’t your idea. Too poorly planned.”

“Why, thank you,” Loki said dryly, on top of Stark’s indignant, “hey.”

There was, Loki realized belatedly, not a cohort of guards accompanying Natasha. He frowned very slightly. “You haven’t alerted anyone,” he said slowly. Rogers looked sharply in her direction.

“You haven’t?”

“Not yet.” Natasha crossed her arms. “How far had you two thought this through? Did you get to where you were going to go after you sprung Silver out of the secure facility, or were you just winging it there?”

“I have a mansion,” Stark said. “And a tower. They’re both very nice. Very secure, too.”

“Oh huh.” Natasha’s eyes narrowed. “Who else knows you’re here?”

“I can promise you that Pepper is definitely going to miss me if I don’t show up for tomorrow’s meeting,” Stark said. “Also, Bruce.”

Natasha looked at Rogers. He shifted a little. “No one else.”

“Oh, come on,” Stark said. “Do you want to get disappeared?”

Loki’s headache was starting to return. He rested his head wearily against his hands. “Could you perhaps bicker elsewhere? I was sleeping.”

“Sleeping?” That caught Natasha’s attention. “Any nighttime visitors?”

“You would know,” Loki said flatly. “Regardless, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“No,” Natasha said, “actually, I do mind.” She settled back on her heels. “Silver. I’m tapping you for the Avengers Initiative.”

Loki twitched. “Your Director’s special team? I already said.”

“Yeah, I know what you said. Did you hear a question?” Natasha rolled her shoulders and Loki realized that she was nervous.

“What are you playing at, Agent Romanov,” he said, narrowing his eyes.

“Getting you out of here.”

Rebellion from Fury’s perfect spy, the plot thickens—"

“Shut up, Stark,” Natasha said, and miraculously, he did. Her eyes stayed on Loki. “You’re no use to anyone in there. Particularly not when you’re our best resource for actually doing something about this Thanos situation.”

“Natasha,” Loki said tightly. “I can’t—”

“That’s where I think you’re wrong,” Natasha interrupted. “I don’t think you are compromised. Not anymore.” Loki stared at her, and she ticked off her fingers as she spoke. “First of all, the minute you got caught you lost most if not all of your value as a double agent. Once a spy gets burned you either cut them loose or ransom them back, and I don’t think this Thanos is the ransoming type. Second, you broke something just remembering what he did in the first place. There’s a good chance that damaged any conditioning that he set up, a hypothesis I think is probably confirmed by the fact that, third, he tried to convince you to work with him. You don’t waste that effort on someone you can control, or take that kind of risk exposing yourself. And you don’t...risk damaging your agent’s brain if you think you’re going to use them later.”

“Risk what?” Rogers said, plainly alarmed. Loki gave Natasha a dirty look. She seemed unrepentant.

He wanted to believe her. He could feel hope trying to creep in, whispering it makes sense. She’s right, why bother trying to persuade you if he could just claim your mind whatever you willed. Loki made himself shake his head. “Guesswork and supposition. You cannot be sure.”

“Everything I do is guesswork and supposition,” Natasha said, meeting his gaze squarely. “I’m pretty damn good at it.”

“What was that about brain damage,” Rogers asked again, looking both concerned and disconcerted. Loki shook his head and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

You are useless here. Thanos said: you were a useful tool but now he has cast you aside. Will you sit and wait for your doom or face it and fight?

“Does Fury know that you are recruiting me?” Loki asked, half distracted. Natasha shrugged, and Loki narrowed his eyes. “What are you trying to do, Agent Romanov?”

“I’m wondering the same thing,” Stark said. Natasha glanced at him very briefly.

“I’m saving my dumbass friend from his own martyr complex,” she said. Loki managed not to wince at that assessment. “Or trying. So?”

He shouldn’t. He should stay safely behind walls. Work with Foster to repair the Bifrost (and hope it could be done in time). If he ran now...he was giving up this semblance of a home. Roslyn, Jun, Chandra, all the rest. Roslyn betrayed you, a cold voice reminded him. But she had saved him once, too.

If he stayed he would lose everything anyway. If he left...likely the same, but at least he would be able to breathe easily. At least he would be able to go down fighting.

Loki nodded, a short, sharp gesture. Natasha’s lips twitched and Loki realized that she was relieved. Had she expected him to refuse?

“All right, Stark,” she said. “Do your thing. I assume you have something ready.”

Loki gave Stark an alarmed look, as he was already on the other side of the cell, but the only thing that happened was that the low humming Loki had scarcely been aware of suddenly ceased. The squeezing of his throat and lungs relaxed and Loki took a deep, full breath, the light-headedness evaporating as his magic returned in one sweet rush. Relief flooded through him, followed a moment later by panic (what if this is what he wants, what if this is part of his plan) but his mind remained his own.

“All right,” Stark said. “Security down, now to override the locking mechanism—”

“No need,” Loki said. He stood, flexing his fingers, and tore down the walls.

Steve’s mouth opened momentarily and then closed. Stark apparently noticed. “Oh, yeah,” he said. “You missed the time where this guy evaporated an entire building.”

“Let’s go,” Natasha said. Loki stepped out slowly, his heart beating hard and fast, half expecting at every moment to feel his thoughts turn, to have his body stolen.

“Right,” Stark said. “Malibu or New York?”

“Neither,” Natasha said. “We’re going to Minnesota.”

“Minnesota?” Steve frowned. “What’s in Minnesota?”

“We need somewhere to regroup and plan. There’s a safe house in lake country,” Natasha said. “One that’s a little less obvious than a mansion or a skyscraper.”

“Probably less tacky, too,” Steve murmured. Loki managed not to snort.

Dangerous, the small, fragile flower of hope trying to bloom in his chest. Very, very dangerous.

And yet he could not quite bring himself to kill it.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Long chapter! There was a lot I needed to do here, but I think I managed to do it. Also a lot of team bonding.

Sometimes I feel like I've hit my stride with this fic, and then I stall out for a while, and then I find my footing again. We're heading into probably the last...oh, third or so of this fic now, I think. Though it's surprised me before, and there's still a lot to get done, including my nemesis, action scenes.

But it's happening, guys. It's happening. Maybe I'll finish this thing before I hit six years of working on it.

Many, many thanks to my beta, as always (her name is Amelia, she's great), and to the many, many lovely people who have sent me encouragement and kind words. You can find me on Tumblr, where I am currently having a deep dive back into an old fandom of mine, but remain, as always, a Loki blogger at heart.

They slipped out, masked by a touch of magic. Made easier by the fact that, whatever distraction had been worked out, the guards were already gone. It wasn’t the same facility Loki knew – they emerged into a garage, where they stopped. Natasha took control almost effortlessly. To Loki’s surprise, no one seemed inclined to argue – not even Stark, which he would have expected.

“You’re not coming with us,” she said. Stark’s eyebrows shot up.

“Why not?”

“Because I need you to talk to Bruce Banner. I don’t think we can move him – yet – but I gather he knows things that we’ll need to know too, and you’re loud and distracting so as long as SHIELD is watching you they’re not watching the rest of us.”

Stark looked like he couldn’t decide if he was pleased or offended. “Fine,” he said after a moment. “I like Bruce. I can talk to Bruce. Where am I going to meet you after?”

“I’ll tell you that when you’re ready to come. The less you know right now, the better – if anyone asks if you know, you can tell the truth.”

“I’m a good liar,” Stark objected. Loki coughed, and Stark glared at him. “I am so.”

“You’re not the worst,” Natasha said. “But you’re not the best either. Just do it, Tony. I’ll be in touch.”

“And us?” Steve asked. He glanced at Loki. “Are we going to go…your way?”

“About that,” Loki said. “My magic. SHIELD can track me.”

“In actuality, no,” Natasha said. “SHIELD can’t. Roslyn can.” She glanced over her shoulder. “I’ll explain when we get there. We need to go.” She looked at Loki. “Can you take both me and Steve,
if I give you the location?"

“I can,” Loki said slowly. “But I do not guarantee that it will be pleasant.”

Surprisingly enough, Natasha looked more unnerved than Steve by that, though Loki supposed
Steve had already experienced it. “I’ll manage,” she said, though, after a pause of only a moment.
“And we should go. Our window’s closing. Loki, here’s the coordinates and the map. Tony…”

“Yeah, I got it,” Tony said. “Act normal, stay in touch.”

“What do you need us to do?” Natasha asked. Loki reached out and took her arm with one hand, and
Steve’s with the other.

“Very little,” he said, still nearly giddy with the restoration of his magic. “But you might want to
close your eyes, and stay close to me.”

He didn’t wait any longer to pull the three of them through space. Loki heard Natasha make a very
small ‘eep’ sound before the song of the universe drowned her out.

They stepped back out onto ground spongy with moss, birds singing raucously overhead and a cabin
squatting in front of them. Loki released Natasha and Steve and turned in a circle, scanning their
surroundings with sudden wariness, but they were alone. Natasha was blinking, looking slightly
dazed.

“Are you all right?” Steve asked her, and she nodded.

“Yeah. Just…never done anything like that before. Not sure how I feel about it.”

Loki heard a door open and turned back to the house to see Clint standing on the porch, leaning
against the doorframe. “So I take it the prison break was successful?” He called. Loki stared at him,
and Clint raised his eyebrows. “What, you thought I didn’t know what was going on? I was just the
backup.”

“Ah,” Loki said. He felt suddenly a little dizzy, and squeezed his eyes closed. “This is all…how long
have you been planning this?”

“Since you told me to get Jane,” Natasha said promptly. “Well, that was me and Clint. I don’t know
about the other guys’ half-assed plan.”

“Hey,” Steve objected, turning a little pink. Loki was a little relieved that he wasn’t the only one who
seemed a little lost, based on the look on Steve’s face.

“Oh, yeah,” Clint said. “I noticed you picked up a friend. Captain Rogers, it’s an honor.”

“Not just him,” Natasha said, starting toward the house. “Stark’s going to be coming too.” Clint
groaned, and Natasha shook her head. “Don’t be like that. He’s a pain in the ass but he’s a useful
pain in the ass. And you have that in common.”

“Um,” Steve said, looking at Clint. “I don’t think we’ve…met.”

“Probably not. I don’t get to hang out with the big important types much.” Loki recognized the self-
deprecation in Clint’s voice; by Steve’s faint frown, he did too. “Agent Clint Barton, call sign
Hawkeye. Well – at this point maybe former agent.” He glanced at Natasha. “What do you think?”

“Don’t let him play it cool, Cap,” Natasha said, patting Clint on the shoulder. “He’s a huge fan.”
“Thanks, Nat,” Clint said, his ears turning a little pink. Steve looked at Loki in evident consternation and Loki just shrugged.

“Do not mind them,” Loki said. “I suspect they are just a touch giddy about pulling this off.”

“Anyway,” Clint said a little too loudly. “Come in, make yourselves at home. There’s coffee, tea, booze if you feel like day drinking…”

Loki walked in slowly, with one last glance over his shoulder, Steve following after. He looked for Natasha first. “Before anything else,” he said plainly, “I would like to know what you meant about the distinction between SHIELD being able to track me and Roslyn being able to do so.”

Natasha looked up from the sandwich she was making. “Simple. Roslyn knows how to do it, but no one else does. She’s the only one who knows how the algorithm works.”

“And that does what for us?” Loki asked. Natasha gave him a look.

“So if she throws up her hands and says ‘nope, sorry, no idea where he is’, they’re shit out of luck for that method of tracking you.”

Loki narrowed his eyes. “Why would she do that?”

“You’re not an idiot, Loki, so quit pretending to be one,” Natasha said. Clint made a coughing noise that sounded suspiciously like a stifled laugh, and the back of Loki’s neck burned, but he didn’t look away. “You’re pissed that she tricked you. I get it – trust me, I do. But she didn’t know the whole story. All she knew was that Phil had said you were compromised and stole the Tesseract, and that they needed her help to make sure you came in without anyone getting hurt. You included.”

Loki realized that Steve was listening intently and wondered how much of this he already knew. “So?” He said, against the slight squirm in his gut that remembered you said you wouldn’t hurt him.

“So,” Natasha said, her voice a little harder, “since she found out the truth, she’s been trying to help. She came to me practically crying and wanting to know what she could do for her friend.” Loki tried not to flinch, but a moment later resentment welled up.

“So I have no right to be angry with her, is that it?”

“No,” Natasha said. “You can be angry at anyone you want. But I think you know she regrets what happened. And she’s willing to stick her neck out to help you. She’s a good kid, Loki. That doesn’t mean you have to forgive her, or forget. But it ought to mean something.”

She turned and strode out of the living room area. Loki looked after her, torn between resentment and embarrassment.

“Don’t mind her,” Clint said quietly. “She’s just…” He grimaced. “I think she’s worried you might see her the same way, a little. As a traitor.”

“I do not,” Loki said shortly. “If you will excuse me, I am going to go check the perimeter and lay some spellwork that will alert us to any approach.” He turned and walked back out, stiff-backed. Pausing on the porch, Loki took a couple of deep breaths, centering himself. Roslyn was a problem he would deal with later.

(If there was a later, the grim thought came to him.)

“Mind if I join you?” Loki looked over his shoulder and Steve gave him a slender smile. “I could use
a walk. This has all...happened pretty fast.”

“Indeed,” Loki said, turning more fully. “Though I suppose you did set out intending to commit an action at least...somewhat treasonous.” Steve flushed, and Loki added, “not...that I am not grateful. I am. I should have thanked you before now, for coming to find me.”

“Something smelled bad about it,” Steve said. “I asked Fury, but he kept stonewalling me...that’s when Tony turned up saying that SHIELD was keeping you in a secret detainment facility somewhere. I didn’t want to believe it, but some of the stuff I’ve seen the government do since I went under...” Steve trailed off.

“They did not hurt me,” Loki said. “In truth, all things considered, they were remarkably civil.”

“Still,” Steve said. “Can I ask...I don’t know that I completely understand what’s going on. Someone, this...Thanos, he...used you to -- to what?”

“To steal an object,” Loki said, stepping down off the porch. “A very powerful magical artifact known as the Tesseract.”

“The what?” Loki turned, as Steve had stopped dead in his tracks and was staring at Loki, his face gone white and angry. “The Tesseract? You’re sure that’s what it was?”

“Quite sure,” Loki said slowly. “It is a...unique object. You are familiar with it?”

“Too familiar,” Steve muttered. He grimaced. “So SHIELD dug it up. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised.” To Loki, he said, “in my time -- in the 40s, Red Skull -- the leader of HYDRA, real bastard -- dug it out of a church in Norway and used it to make weapons. He meant to conquer the whole world. It fell into the Atlantic. I thought it was gone.” Steve’s jaw tightened. “I wish it was.”

“A church in Norway?” Loki almost wanted to laugh. So the old fool did have a sense of humor, of sorts. “No. It would not stay buried for long, once it was removed from the protections that no doubt shielded it in that church. Objects of power never do, and that one is...” Loki shook his head. “To use it to make weapons is a pathetic, small notion of its true purpose.”

“I don’t know that I want to see what it could do,” Steve muttered. Loki decided to leave that alone.

He paused, and then glanced sidelong at Loki. “So...this Thanos made you steal it. Who has it now?”

“I’m not certain,” Loki said. “I have...guesses, first among them Victor von Doom -- but that speculation should wait, I think, until we can all meet together.”

“I guess you wouldn’t want to repeat yourself.” Steve paused again, this time for longer. “How long...how long was he controlling you?”

“It wasn’t...contiguous. There were -- lapses. Some lost time, mostly at night.”

Steve’s brows furrowed. “And it started -- that time I visited you in the infirmary, that was after...?”

“Yes,” Loki said simply. “So it would seem. Though as I have clear memories of our conversations, I daresay it was me you were talking to.” Though...Loki felt a sudden, faint nausea. “Though I have no idea if he was able to eavesdrop on my conversations. Or plunder my memories after the fact.”

Steve looked a little sick as well. “That’s awful,” he said quietly. “That’s really...god.” He reached out, tentatively, and Loki didn’t pull away when Steve laid a hand on his shoulder. “Are you...all right?”
“Do I seem otherwise?” Loki asked with an arched brow, but Steve’s frown did not fade.

“Natasha said something about brain damage.”

Loki grimaced. “She should not have.” He exhaled. “Thanos made contact with me – in dreams, after a fashion. Probably using whatever link remained between us. When I refused his overtures of making an alliance he…withdrew violently. Intending, I suspect, to shatter my mind and leave me little better than a husk, or at least burn out my magic. It was…not pleasant. But as you see, I am neither a husk nor without my magic.”

Steve did not look reassured. “That’s – are you sure you’re all right?” He examined Loki’s face like he might be able to see something there. “I mean, obviously not – but you could still be hurt, did they let you see a doctor?”

“I did not ask for one,” Loki said with a shrug. “Sincerely, Steve. I am fine.”

Steve frowned, still not looking convinced, and shook his head. “It doesn’t sit right with me,” he said after a moment. “You sound so – so casual about all this. I can’t tell if you’re putting on a front or-”

“Please,” Loki said, “I do not need anyone else worried about my ability to take care of myself.”

Steve’s frown deepened. “So other people are worried?”

Damn, Loki thought, and exhaled through his nose. “I am fine,” he repeated, more firmly. “I will swear it to you, if need be.”

“Okay,” Steve said slowly, though he didn’t sound completely convinced. “If you say so.”

“I do,” Loki said tartly, and began laying down the workings – simple spells to alert him if anyone crossed them. After a moment, he added a flash of light that would go off as well, so even if he was indisposed someone would notice.

“Does it take energy?” Steve asked, sounding genuinely curious. “When you do that. Does it tire you out?”

“It can, if I do too much,” Loki said. “Though I am a long way from that, particularly after going for some days without casting at all.” He flexed his fingers. “I am no longer so inexperienced that it is a real risk, most of the time. Overexertion tends to be the peril of amateur mages.”

“And you’re not that,” Steve said, sounding a little amused.

“Certainly not,” Loki said loftily.

He laid three more at each point of the compass and added a quick working to link them, some part of him still savoring the relief at the feeling of his magic once more within his reach. He could feel Steve watching him, but he was quiet – thinking, Loki thought, but he did not ask about what.

“You and Stark,” Loki said when the working was finished. “You did not seem to like each other much.”

Steve pressed his lips together. “I don’t dislike him.” Loki raised his eyebrows, and Steve grimaced. “He just seems determined to rub me the wrong way, for some reason. Or maybe it isn’t on purpose. I don’t know if that’d be better or worse. And he seems to think that I’m some kind of-” Steve huffed, and shook his head. “I just met him. I wasn’t sure about Howard the first time we met, either.”
Loki raised his eyebrows. “Howard?”

“His father,” Steve said, with a little twist of his mouth, something briefly unhappy around his eyes. “I knew him. During the war.”

Ah, Loki thought. One of his friends, lost to the years. “Thank you,” he said, after a moment’s pause. Steve looked at him, seeming surprised.

“Sorry, what?”

“For coming for me,” Loki said, glancing away. “I know I already said it, but it was…you did not have to. We scarcely know each other. And yet you were concerned, and came looking.”

Steve blinked, an odd look on his face. “I’d consider you a friend,” he said. “You disappeared without a trace. I wasn’t going to just shrug and move on.”

Loki remembered what he’d thought, half joking. *My own Warriors Three.* Though if he drew Stark into it – and Stark had come for him, twice now – that made four. And there was Roslyn, though he pushed thought of her away as quickly as it came – whatever Natasha said, the feelings of betrayal were still too close.

“I am not…accustomed to expecting help,” Loki said slowly. Steve’s lips pressed together.

“Well,” he said, sounding almost belligerent, “you’ve got better friends now.”

Loki looked out at the woods, one corner of his lips twitching ever so slightly upwards. “It seems that I do.”

Stark did not arrive until night had nearly fallen. Loki felt someone cross the boundary and jerked upright a moment before he heard the sound of a car engine.

“If he drove one of his fancy sports cars up here I’m going to kill him,” Natasha muttered, but the vehicle that pulled up was utterly unremarkable, even a little battered. When Stark climbed out he looked at it with some distaste before looking at Loki.

“The sacrifices I make for you,” he said, with enough theatricality that Loki felt the brief urge to smile.

“No one followed you?” Natasha asked.

“I ditched the last one in Chicago,” Stark said. “Then drove from Des Moines in this thing. I’m used to dodging paparazzi and they’re more persistent.” His expression sobered. “Now are we going to talk about what all this is about?”

“We were just waiting for you,” Natasha said. “Everyone in the living room. Silver…”

“I know.” This was not going to be enjoyable.

They filed into the living room, which wasn’t really big enough for five people. Loki stayed standing, resisting the urge to pace, and waited until they were all settled, trying to figure out where to begin. How much he should say. How much truth he dared offer.

“First of all,” Steve said quietly, “I’d like to know why Agent Romanov called you Loki.”

Clint started, and then laughed. “Dang, Nat,” he said, and she shot him a dirty look that only lasted a

Loki exhaled slowly. “It is…my right name,” he said, not sure if he should meet Steve’s eyes. “Luke Silver is the name I have been using since I…came here. From another world.”

“Another world,” Steve said, his eyebrows drawn together. “You mean…another planet?”

“Further than that,” Loki said. “And no name that you would recognize.”

Steve sat back and glanced around the room. “No one else seems surprised,” he said. “Am I the only one who didn’t know?”

“I guessed,” Stark said. “Don’t feel too left out, he wouldn’t have told me anything.”

“I am sorry,” Loki said quietly. “For keeping secrets. It was…or it seemed…necessary.”

“It’s fine,” Stark said lightly. “I wouldn’t expect straight talk from anyone out of SHIELD anyway.”

“Hey,” Clint said, mildly indignant. Loki looked at Steve.

The furrow between his eyebrows remained, but he didn’t seem…upset, precisely. After a moment he shook his head and huffed, one corner of his mouth twitching. “Aliens,” he said. “Guess nothing does surprise me anymore.” He paused. “Is that what this has to do with? Some kind of trouble… wherever you come from? You said the Tesseract…”

“The what?” Stark said. “Red Skull’s secret weapon?”

“Not his, originally,” Loki said. “It is a magical artifact – a very powerful magical artifact – that was hidden here centuries ago by my – people.” Not your people, a snide voice reminded him, but that was not important, and it was better than ‘my father,’ which was even more a lie. “SHIELD has been keeping it squirreled away for study.”

“And that’s what you stole when you were brainwashed,” Stark said. “Or – under this Thanos’ control, or whatever.” He shuddered, though Loki was not certain he was aware of it.

“Who is he?” Steve asked, leaning forward. “What does he want?”

“You should probably just start at the beginning,” Natasha said, almost gently.

So he did. Loki told them about the tremors in Yggdrasil, the fear that something was trying to break through, his ill-considered trip outside-

“Hold on,” Stark interrupted. “Outside? Outside where? When you say ‘Yggdrasil’, what does that mean? Is that some kind of metaphor for the structure of this dimension, are you saying you just walked out of this plane of existence-“

“Tony,” Natasha said, “later.”

He subsided, though Loki heard him mutter, “I hate this,” under his breath.

“While I was there,” Loki went on, keeping his voice deliberately steady despite the spike of dread – a lingering aftereffect of the spell that had made him forget, or fear entirely his own? “I found a being of a kind that…I am entirely unfamiliar with. He has – very powerful magic of his own. Such that my defenses were useless, and I am reckoned among the strongest mages living.” It was not a boast.
Loki rubbed one hand up and down his forearm, remembering his own protective runes branded into his skin as Thanos burned them away.

“I know very little beyond that, except the name, which seems familiar to me somehow but I am as yet unable to identify why. He recognized Aesir magic, and either already knew the Tesseract was here or was able to sense it even from outside the Nine. And I suspect – do not know, but suspect – that he has been…busy.” He took a deep breath.

“Do you remember, Natasha and Stark, at the party – the man with the parasite in his brain. I told you that they are normally found on a distant planet living in symbiosis with their own hosts. It claimed right of sanctuary here, claiming that its home was gone and the hosts all dead. I thought it a lie then.” He glanced toward Steve. “And you – the creature that we fought? It was dying when it came here. Before it did it…communicated something. A feeling of total desolation.”

“You called it a refugee,” Steve said quietly. Loki inclined his chin.

“When I saw Thanos it was among what looked like the shattered remnants of a planet,” Loki said. “It may be that there has been a war being waged for some time, out on the fringes beyond the Nine. Only that few, or none, have been left to tell of it.”

The silence was complete for several long moments.

“Well, shit,” Clint said eventually, and laughed weakly. “And now he’s got an extra powerful magical weapon-”

“No,” Loki said. “I do not think he has it. Not yet.” His lips twisted. “He used me, I think, because he cannot yet physically reach the Nine. The Tesseract is capable of breaching the barriers between worlds. Opening portals that allow travel across vast distances. If someone can master it in this Realm, they might be able to open a door that would let Thanos in. From here, he could reach the rest of the Nine.”

“Why target us, though?” Steve asked. “If there are all these other worlds out there-”

“Because the Tesseract is not the only one of its kind,” Loki said. “There are four others, or so legend claims. Scattered throughout Yggdrasil, separated from each other, because bringing them together invites disaster, even as it would bring the wielder unlimited power.”

Natasha’s face was pale, but her voice was clear. “And you think it’s Doom. Who has the Tesseract now and who plans to open the door.”

Stark sat up. “Doom? As in, Victor von?”

“He has some ability with magic,” Loki said, keeping his own voice level. “He has power, but covets more. And he referred before to – having reached beyond Earth. I have no evidence, as I – have no memory of what I might have done while Thanos used me. But it seems the most likely possibility.”

“It’d make sense,” Clint said. “As much as anything else. Doom might just be sure enough of himself to think he could get out unscathed, and he’s certainly ruthless enough to sacrifice most of the planet for his own gain.”

Stark rubbed his eyes. “Jesus,” he said. “Jesus. This is all…terrifying. Megalomaniac warlords from outer space with mind control abilities who destroy planets for fun.” He laughed shakily. “Anyone else want a drink?”
“So we get to Doom,” Steve said. “Stop him from using the Tesseract-”

“We don’t know that it’s there,” Natasha said. “And if it isn’t, we’d only be wasting time. Dr. Banner is tracking the gamma radiation the Tesseract gives off, but that takes time. We need a backup plan in place.”

“You need allies,” Loki said. “Even if Doom can be stopped this time – it will only delay the reckoning.”

“Allies from where?” Stark asked.

Loki glanced only briefly at Natasha before he said, “from Asgard.” When they stared at him, he added, “my…the place I came from.” Not home. Never that.

“Right,” Clint said. “I’m guessing you can’t just…phone home. That’s why you’ve been talking to Doctor Foster.”


“Not now,” Natasha interrupted. She gave Loki a hard look. “I’ll grant we could use the help. Especially if you can make it fast. But like I said, you’re ours now.”

Steve frowned. “Are you in some kind of trouble in…Asgard?” He hesitated oddly over the name. Loki could feel Stark staring at him, and almost hear his brain ticking away. What did he know about the events in New Mexico? How much might he guess? Loki’s shoulders wound tight.

“Something like that,” he said tightly, and added to Natasha, “I understand and appreciate your…protectiveness. But I would urge you not to stand in Asgard’s way.”

“How much time do we have?” Clint asked.

“I don’t know,” Loki said. “It may be that Doom will be unable to master the Tesseract. Or that he will struggle to do so. A week, a month, days? There is little way of knowing. But the sooner we can move, the better.”

“So we need Bruce,” Stark said. “How are we going to get him out? I’m pretty sure SHIELD will notice if he vanishes. They’re treating him like an honored guest but he’s an honored guest with a shitload of cameras on him.” He paused. “I did slip him an encrypted StarkPhone.”

“Then get in touch with him,” Natasha said. “That’s your job, Tony. Unfortunately, right now we can’t move until we have more information, but we need to be ready to move when we do.” She looked at Loki. “If you get in touch with Foster…do you think she’ll tell SHIELD where we are?”

Loki shook his head, though his neck felt stiff. “I think not. She’s clever enough to understand the need. And has never had much fondness for SHIELD.”

“Then call her.” Natasha scanned the room. “Anyone else?”

“I have a lot of questions,” Stark said. “But I guess they can probably wait.” He stood up. “So, uh. How about some whiskey? Or bourbon. Or anything, really.”

Loki caught Natasha’s eye as Clint motioned Stark toward the kitchen. “Is there somewhere quiet I might go to call?”
“Bedroom,” she said. “Down the hall. Here-” She tossed him a phone, and he looked at it. “Burner. So they can’t trace the call.”

He slipped down the hall without looking at Steve, who was still watching him, and closed the door behind him, dialing Foster’s number from memory. He rubbed his thumb over the screen several times before calling.

“Hello?” Foster’s voice said, sounding distracted. “Who is this?”

“Doctor Foster,” Loki said. “I am sorry for contacting you unexpectedly. There has been – a change in circumstances.”

“Loki?” Foster’s voice rose precipitously. “Where are you? What happened? SHIELD said you’d broken out – wait, is this, are you-”

“I am myself, if that is what you are trying to ask,” Loki said dryly. “And yes, I did leave SHIELD’s prison. It…became clear to me that I could be more useful elsewhere. But I – we – are still in need of your assistance.”

“We?” Foster asked, and then immediately after, “I’m…I’m supposed to contact SHIELD if you contact me.”

Loki tensed. “Are you going to?”

Foster hesitated. “Who’s ‘we’?” She asked eventually. Loki pressed his lips together.

“I do not feel I should tell you that unless I know that you do not plan to pass on whatever I tell you to…others.”

Silence. He heard someone say something in the background, and Foster answered, “I know! Just – hold on.” To him, she said, “you’re…you and whoever you’re with. How do I know I can trust you?”

Loki exhaled. “I do not know what to promise you,” he said at length. “I know my word means little, though I would still give it.”

More silence. Loki felt himself slump, keenly aware of his failure, but suddenly Foster said, “yes.”

Loki blinked. “Pardon?”

“I said, ‘yes.’ I’ll help. My loyalty isn’t to SHIELD anyway – they stole my research and I think they’d steal it again if they could.” She took a deep breath. “I’ll help. What can I do?”

“I…thank you,” Loki said carefully. “I appreciate your willingness to…change plans.”

“Maybe I’m crazy,” Foster said, “but I saw…you were willing to give up your freedom to fight this. I believe you, Loki. Just tell me how I can help.”

Loki blinked a couple of times and almost thanked her again before shaking himself. “Yes…yes, of course,” he said, after perhaps a moment too long. “Let me…perhaps you had best speak to Natasha. She is rather in command of this little operation.”

“Okay,” Foster said after a moment, and just before he pulled down the phone from his ear he thought he heard, “take care, Loki.”
Natasha and Clint took the bedroom, when people began settling down for the night. Stark offered the couch to Steve with a slightly snide comment about old men needing the back support. Loki took the floor in the living room, and Stark claimed a place in the small loft.

There were plenty of blankets, but Loki lay awake feeling cold. His mind was spinning too quickly, thinking about how long it had been, how much time they might have – or not have. If he unveiled himself now would Odin muster enough force to send warriors through? Or even one-

(Even one. You know who it would be.)

Or had he already been seen? His veil felt as though it was still in place, despite the severing from his magic, but perhaps his presence was already known and already the All-Father gathered the dark energy to collect his wayward pet.

And at the same time, whatever his words to Natasha…he feared what might wait in dreams. He was defended now, his wards back in place, but Thanos had already shown that those meant nothing to him. If he ripped into Loki’s mind, turned him again – or simply burned out his mind in truth, this time…

He rolled to his side, staring at nothing.

“You awake?” Steve whispered. Loki rolled back toward him, surprised.

“Yes,” he said after a moment. “Did I wake you?”

“No,” Steve said. “Can’t sleep. I’ve got…a lot to think about.” He was quiet for a moment. “Loki, huh?”

Loki pushed himself up and summoned a small magelight to illumine them both. “It is…not terribly important, if you prefer the other,” he said quietly. “The person who belonged to that name is…gone, I think.”

Steve frowned, and rolled from his back to face Loki, pushing himself up on his elbow. “What do you mean? Does that have something to do with why you’re here instead of your home?”

“No,” Loki said immediately, more sharply than he meant. “Not that. Not anymore.” He paused, looking at Steve’s face. “I suppose you could say as much.”

Steve examined him. “I get it,” he said after a moment. “Feeling like…you’ve changed so much, or everything else has changed so much, that you’re not…who you used to be. But that’s just…people change.” He sounded a little as though he wanted to convince himself. “Besides,” he added after a moment. “It suits you. More than ‘Luke’ does.”

“Hey,” said Stark, trudging into the living room with a blanket around his shoulders. “Are you having a slumber party without me?”

Steve’s expression tightened slightly, but his voice was mild enough when he said, “the two of us just couldn’t sleep. Sorry if we woke you up.”

“Nope,” Stark said. “I wasn’t sleeping. Don’t think I could sleep even with a whole body of that swill Barton calls bourbon in me.” He sat down on the edge where Loki’s magelight illuminated, and reached out to poke at it. “How’re you doing that?”

“I could probably work out the equations for you, but I doubt you would be able to solve them,” Loki said coolly.
“I’ve almost figured out the other ones,” Stark protested. “Seriously. I’m close, I can tell. I’d be closer if you’d actually talk to me about how it all works. You’ll chat up SHIELD techs but not me. Sheesh.”

“It’s up to Loki who he wants to talk to about his magic,” Steve said. Stark grimaced.

“Don’t call it that, it makes my teeth itch.” He turned toward Loki. “Speaking of which – or not – how come he’s Steve, Barton is Clint, and Romanov is Natasha, but I’m still Stark? I don’t like it. It makes me feel like I’m at British boarding school, or something.”

Loki eyed Stark sidelong. The man looked back at him. “If it is so important to you,” Loki said after a long pause, “I suppose I might call you Tony.”

“Good,” Stark – Tony – said, sounding pleased with himself. “We’re all friends here. Friends and rebels trying to save the world.” He rubbed his hands together. “We should do something.”

“How about a card game?” Tony and Loki both stared at Steve, and he shrugged, looking a little self-conscious. “It’s what we used to do before a mission. Or in between. To take our minds of things.”

“You are such an old person,” Tony said. Loki glanced sidelong at him.

“In terms of years lived,” he observed, “I think you are older.”

“And what about you?” Tony asked. “How long do aliens live? Are you, like, nine hundred years old, or something?”

“Just over a thousand,” Loki said, and grinned when they both stared at him like they couldn’t decide if he was joking. “So. Cards?”

The rules were simple enough – near to a game Loki knew, though by a different name. Steve had just started dealing hands when Natasha settled down between him and Tony.

“I heard you talking,” she said, before anyone could ask. No one asked her if she was having trouble sleeping herself, though Loki didn’t miss the creases in between her eyebrows. Clint followed her out, yawning, only a couple minutes later. He took one look at the cards and shook his head.

“Nuh-uh. I’m not playing Texas Hold-Em with him.” He gestured at Loki. “How about a board game?”

“You have board games in your safe house?” Tony said. Clint gave him a look.

“Yeah. What else are you supposed to do holed up in a cabin in the woods?”

“Fair point. What do you have?”

Clint and Tony fell to bickering back and forth about game choices. Natasha looked amused, and Steve was watching them with his eyebrows raised. For just a moment, all of it – Thanos, Doom, the Tesseract – felt very far away.

It only lasted a moment, but Loki held onto it just the same. He might need it before the end.

The others fell asleep eventually, mostly making it back to their beds with the exception of Steve and Stark, who fell asleep in a chair. Natasha left last, after giving Loki a long look like she wanted to say something.
He didn’t sleep, instead occupying himself with a book from the shelves that was only somewhat diverting, but enough of a distraction until the sun started to rise. Then he stood and stepped outside, moving through a series of stretches that he remembered from his training long ago. He managed to get lost in them enough to clear his head, to not think about the training itself, about Asgard.

He’d managed to hold it at arm’s length for so long, and now it was all coming back. He wished…

Well, there was no use wishing. What would be, would be. He would just see that his friends were safe before he was done. Then…perhaps then he would see fit to surrender, and let the All-Father and Asgard do what they liked with him.

“Loki,” Natasha said lowly, and he stopped, turning to face her. His heart sank at the look on her face. “You had better come inside.”

“What news,” he said.

“Two things,” she said. “Sometime in the middle of the night, Jane Foster disappeared. There were signs of a struggle.”

Loki’s blood froze. “She was coming here,” he said. “Perhaps she did it herself, to throw SHIELD off her trail-” But Natasha was shaking her head.

“Her assistant Darcy Lewis was there. Unconscious from a blow to the head.” Natasha’s expression was set. “And then there’s the second thing.”

“The second thing,” Loki said.

“All communications out of Latveria just went dark,” Natasha said. “About thirty minutes ago. Total silence, and no one’s spies are reporting in.”

Loki’s heart thudded. Foster gone. Taken. He was surprised by the stab of mingled anger and fear. Silence in Latveria.

“Loki,” Natasha said. He shook himself and gave her a faint, grim smile.

“Well,” he said. “It sounds as though we are out of time.”
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Home from a very nice vacation and figure that I can cheer myself up by posting a new chapter! I am very pleased with this one, and that's all I'm going to say. Very, very pleased.

Also very excited to write the next one.

Innumerable thanks to ameliarating, who is truly a gift of a beta.

Loki now understood why Thor often preferred to leap into battle without a plan.

(Thor. There was a tangle of thorns he would need to face, and soon.)

Events might be moving quickly, but planning still took time, and despite his impatience Loki knew it was necessary. “We need to get Bruce out of SHIELD,” Natasha was saying. “ASAP. Tony…”

“Got it,” he said. The man’s usual smile was absent. He had muttered upon waking up, but sobered quickly when Natasha explained the situation.

“Maybe we should bring SHIELD in on this,” Steve said, though he didn’t sound entirely happy about saying it. “They have money, resources-”

“I’ve got those too,” Tony pointed out. “And no track record of throwing people in dungeons.”

Natasha hesitated, then shook her head. “Not yet. We can’t risk them getting derailed by trying to haul Loki back in. When we have actionable intelligence, then I’ll go to Maria.”

“Not Fury?” Clint sounded surprised.

“Nick is the Director of SHIELD,” she said. “He can look the other way, but sometimes it’s easier for Maria to make the...unorthodox choices. She can make the call on whether Nick can get involved.”

Loki could feel himself nearly vibrating. “We know where the Tesseract is,” he said. “Or as good as. The silence from Latveria speaks volumes. If we move swiftly-”

“That’s a terrible idea and you’d know it if you thought about it for a second,” Natasha said. Loki glared at her, but she met it evenly. “Doom has to know we’d notice the communications loss. He’ll expect some kind of move and there’ll be traps set for it coming - I’d bet especially for you, Loki, since you’ve already made yourself his best friend.”

Loki stiffened, stung, but Natasha hardly paused. “We don’t have any idea what Doom’s planning. We don’t even know for certain that the Tesseract is within Latveria’s borders, or where. Going charging in blindly is a recipe for all of us to end up dead.” Or worse, she didn’t say, but Loki felt his stomach clench in memory anyway, sick fear twisting through his thoughts before he suppressed it.

She was right. He might not like it, but she was right. Still- “And what of Dr. Foster?” He said,
stubbornly refusing to say Jane. “I doubt she is being treated as an honored guest.”

“You’re right,” Natasha said. “She probably isn’t. But Doom - assuming he’s the one who has her - also isn’t going to hurt her, not while he needs to use her. And I’m betting that he does need her for something to do with the Tesseract, so we find that…”

Loki’s lips twisted, but she was right about that, too. “Perhaps there is somewhere else we can turn for intelligence,” he said stiffly. “Someone else who might know what game Doom is playing. If you would permit me to seek him out.”

Natasha looked at him for a long moment. “You’re talking about Osborn, aren’t you,” Stark said. “Didn’t that...not go very well for you last time?”

“Wait,” Steve said. “Osborn? Norman Osborn? What does he have to do with this?”

“Oh, yeah,” Tony said. “You missed the part where good old Norman was working with Doom for fun and profit and helped him kidnap Loki. It was a great time.”

Steve’s head swiveled to look at Loki, and he had to try not to look away. “That isn’t important right now,” he said stiffly. “And this time I would hardly be rushing in unprepared. I was surprised. I do not make the same mistake twice.”

Natasha’s raised eyebrow made him flush, but after a moment she nodded slowly. “I guess...he might know something. And on short notice...you’d be better able to find out what than me.” Steve looked visibly uncomfortable, but he didn’t object aloud.

“I don’t expect I should take more than an hour,” Loki said. “I will return here?”

“For now, yeah,” she said. “Tony - when you get Bruce, take him to your tower. I’m guessing he’ll need the equipment there, and you’re right about SHIELD hesitating to make a move there, if they’re going to. When you have that set up...the rest of us will head there.”

“We do not have time to waste,” Loki said. “Is there anything else, before I go?”

“Be careful,” Natasha said, after a moment’s pause. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Should probably leave Osborn alive, too,” Clint said.

“You can stuff him in a closet, though,” Tony said. “Or maybe turn him into a toad. It’d be an improvement.”

Loki looked at Steve, who shook his head. “Just what Natasha said,” he said. “And...call if something comes up.”

*If something comes up I may not have time,* Loki thought, but he just nodded. He remembered the path to Osborn’s tower well enough, and stepped through space.

Almost immediately he felt the brief tingle of a ward on his skin, but it was not strong enough to repel him and he dissolved it with a twitch of his fingers. It might alert Doom, but Loki did not think he was capable of world-walking, and likely he was distracted besides. Still, he wove a protective ward of his own.

He hadn’t stepped directly into Osborn’s office, but rather onto the ground floor of the building, making himself inconspicuous as he moved across the floor. A few sets of eyes caught him briefly before drifting away, but no one reacted as though they truly saw him. He took the elevator, glancing
briefly at the security camera in the elevator.

Loki had considered making his approach more obvious for the effect of intimidation, but he suspected Osborn would fear him enough. And if he saw Loki coming he might be able to run.

He slid past the security guards that increased in number as he approached the office he remembered, checked for wards or traps on the room - carefully - and opened the door with a touch.

Osborn looked up when the door opened and started to frown. “I asked not to be interrupted,” he started to say.

Loki closed the door, locked it, and added a working that would hold back a charging bilgesnipe. He let the spell hiding him from sight fall away. “Good afternoon, Norman,” he said, letting his voice settle into a smooth, malevolent register. “It’s so good to see you again.”

Osborn jerked to his feet, his eyes widening. “What did - how did-” He lurched for his desk, lunging for either a weapon or a panic button. It was a moment’s thought to freeze him in place. He glided forward until only the desk separated him.

“I was told that I could not touch you, no matter how much I might wish to,” he said. “That I could not tear off your limbs and force them down your throat, or strangle you with your own entrails. I considered both.” He let his eyes bore into Osborn’s, unblinking.

Osborn’s throat bobbed. “I - it was not my idea, it was-”

“I don’t care.” Loki didn’t raise his voice, but Osborn cut off as though he had shouted. He bared his teeth. “Times change. I have been let off my leash, Norman.” His eyes flickered toward the door. “No one is coming to save you.”

Osborn looked as though he wanted to be sick. “There will be an investigation,” he said. “You can’t just-”

“You will find,” Loki said, leaning forward, putting his hands on the desk, “that I can do a great many things.” He let the silence stretch, Osborn’s heartbeat almost audible. “But I am not here for personal satisfaction alone. I need information. And while it would give me great pleasure to hurt you for it, I am willing to grant you a swift death if you speak quickly. Your colleague. Victor von Doom. What do you know of what he is doing?”

Osborn’s eyes flickered around the room, the only thing he could move. “What? He isn’t - a colleague. He used me, I haven’t heard from him in months. I don’t know anything-”

“Don’t try to lie to me,” Loki snapped. He leaned forward further and bared his teeth. “I can keep you alive while I braid your nerves into a rope to hang you with.” Probably not, but Osborn didn’t need to know that. “Try again.”

Loki could almost smell the stench of Osborn’s terror. “I don’t know. I swear. Not for certain. He didn’t tell me anything, just that he had a plan and needed to procure - needed me to help lure you into a trap. That he was working on something that would change the world.” His face was turning red, panic making him sweat. “He said-” Osborn cut off, gulping like he was going to vomit.

“Said what,” Loki snapped, nearly climbing onto the desk. All he needed was one small detail, a hint, to tell him what Doom was doing. “Speak. What did Doom say?”

Osborn’s mouth opened and closed. He gagged, and Loki moved back.
Something *clicked* like the tumbler of a lock settling into place. Or like flint and tinder striking a flame.

Loki flung up a shield just in time as the explosion flung him back. He landed hard, his shoulder and hip slamming into a wall before he dropped to the floor, his head turned enough to see the fiery conflagration that Osborn’s office had become. He stared at it, dazed, aware of shouting somewhere - one guard staggered, dazed, clutching a mangled arm; two others lay facedown on the floor, unmoving.

His head spun, not just because of the impact. He hadn’t felt the trap because Osborn was the trap. Rigged to go off if he threatened to reveal more than Doom meant. When had he laid that groundwork? Months ago?

Just how far ahead of them was he?

People were pointing at him, drawing guns. Loki dragged himself to his feet, ignoring the sting of burns on his face, and spun himself away. He’d been seen, and he had no doubt the word of this would spread fast. *Norman Osborn murdered by mysterious assailant…*

Doom must have known he would come, would leap at the chance to have revenge. Had set the stage to eliminate a leak and, if not kill, then frame an enemy for murder. He could almost admire the neatness of it.

He didn’t go back to the safehouse. Went, instead, to a small forest in the middle of nowhere, a shack with a hole in the roof that had grown larger since he’d last seen it. It was raining lightly, but Loki ignored it, sitting down on the moss-carpeted floor.

The rain felt good on his face, the lingering burns. He thought his eyebrows might have been singed.

He needed to think.

Doom was at least three steps ahead of them, maybe more. He had the Tesseract, almost certainly - he was in contact with Thanos. He used magic and technology in strange ways that challenged even Loki, and as a leader of his country he almost certainly had an army at his disposal - not to mention his duplicate robots, and whatever army Thanos had in his possession. And they had...what?

Too little, and Loki knew it.

He rubbed his eyes and inhaled deeply. The cold truth of it was, he never should have let it get this far. *You’re ours now,* Natasha had said, and Loki wished he could believe that it would matter.

How long would he have, once it was done? Time enough, he hoped. But not too much.

Loki drew up his knees and rested his head on them, inhaling slowly and exhaling slowly. *It will be worth it,* he told himself. *For them. For this young, small realm, just beginning to grow into its full strength.*

He stayed sitting, reaching inward for the first magic he’d ever worked on Midgard: the spell that hid him from Asgard’s guardian, woven deep into his bones. It took no time at all to unravel it and let it go.

The moment it was gone he felt naked, exposed. He wanted to run and forced himself to hold still.

“Heimdall,” he said. His voice shook, and he forced it to steady. “--Heimdall.” There, that was better. “Midgard is….” Should he try to explain? No, better to keep it simple. “Midgard is in danger.
It needs Asgard’s help, as soon as possible. Send...whatever aid you can. And tell the All-Father...” His stomach churned, but he forced the last few words out. “Tell the All-Father than Thanos is coming, seeking the Tesseract.”

He fell silent. Nothing happened, but he could feel himself shaking minutely, waiting for lightning to fall from the sky and strike him down.

He stood slowly, brushing off his clothes, and pulled himself together. He needed to go back. Tell the others what had happened. Do everything he could, and wait, and hope that Asgard had heard and would listen.

Let them not come too late.

Loki didn’t know what he looked like, but apparently it wasn’t good. When he stepped out into the living room of the cabin, Clint recoiled. “What happened to you?”

“Osborn is dead,” Loki said. Steve, Natasha, and Clint all stared at him, and Loki shook his head. “Not me. A spell inside him that...detonated when he was about to reveal something about Doom’s plans.” He saw Clint mouth ‘inside him?’ with a look of horror on his face, but Natasha just frowned.

“He planted a failsafe,” she said. “In case Osborn turned on him.”

Loki nodded shortly and Steve ran a hand through his hair. “Great,” he said. “Did he give you anything we can use?”

“No,” Loki said, after a moments’ pause. “My apologies.” He wondered if he should tell them about the fact that they might have company soon, but it would only distract them from the more urgent matters when they could hardly do anything that would change the outcome.

“So back to square one,” Clint said, the frustration audible in his voice. “Wait. Did anyone see you?”

Loki shook his head slowly. “I don’t know. Possibly. Some. But I don’t know if they identified me.” Natasha swore, and Loki squeezed his eyes closed. “We should probably proceed as if they did. Not that that changes much.”

“So all we can do now is wait for Stark and Banner to contact us,” Steve said. Natasha nodded, frowning at Loki. His skin felt too tight and the urge rose to snap at her. He shoved it down and turned on his heel.

“I need to walk,” he said shortly. “I will not go far. Call me if anything happens.”

He was careful not to slam the door on his way out. He walked fast out to the edge of the boundary he’d laid and stared out at the woods. This is your fault, a voice whispered at the back of his mind. For trying to be a hero and walking into a trap. If you had never gone to Thanos, then like as not the Tesseract would still be buried somewhere-

And eventually he would have found a way through regardless, but there would have been no warning, a smaller, quieter voice murmured. Maybe SHIELD would have activated the Tesseract accidentally, or maybe Doom would have stolen it, or maybe Thanos would simply grow strong enough to rip reality apart breaking through, and that would certainly be worse.

Loki looked toward the sky, half expecting thunder, but it was clear. Cloudless. Come, old man. Has age made you so slow?
Or do you truly mean to abandon Midgard to its fate?

“Mind if I join you?”

Loki glanced sidelong at Clint, standing next to him with his hands in his pockets. “Did Natasha send you to keep an eye on me?”

“Do you need keeping an eye on?” Clint asked. Loki just looked at him and Clint shrugged. “I do have a mind of my own. I don’t just do everything Natasha tells me.”

“You do everything Natasha tells you, and a few things of your own accord,” Loki said with a faint smile, and Clint huffed.

“Excuse you. I try to be companionable and this is the treatment I get?”

“I would think you would know what to expect by now.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Clint rocked forward on his toes and then back. “Sorry about Osborn.”

“Beg pardon?” Loki said. Clint raised his eyebrows.

“That Doom blew him up before you got to?”

“Ah,” Loki said, after a moment’s pause. “Yes. That is a bit disappointing.”

“Couldn’t happen to a nicer guy.”

Loki exhaled. “Did you want something?”

“Do I need to want something?” Clint asked lightly. Loki didn’t reply, and after a moment he sighed. “You and Nat. Not everything has an ulterior motive. Unless you call ‘wanting to get out of the crowded cabin and talk with a buddy’ an ulterior motive.”

Loki paused, then laughed quietly. “It could be. But I suppose… I should not be so suspicious. You have all been good… friends. To me.”

“Whoa,” Clint said. “You said the f-word. Milestone reached.” Loki blinked at him, and Clint gave him a lopsided smile. “Friend. That one? Don’t worry, I’m not offended. It took Nat two and a half years to get to that point, so you’re doing better than her there.”

Loki was almost impressed. “Two and a half years?” To keep it light, he added, “how did she resist your charms that long?”

“Good question. Will of iron, I guess,” Clint said airily, though his crooked smile faded quickly. “Nat’s… well. It’s not mine to say anything. But she’s come a long way through hell.”

“She is… very strong,” Loki said. Clint nodded.

“Damn right she is.” He paused, and looked out at the woods, away from Loki. “You know… if we do call Asgard in… Thor might be worthy of a big hammer but I don’t know him. I know you. We’re not looking to trade you out for a different model.” His gaze was steady, sharp. “Just figured you should know that.”

Loki gave Clint a startled look. It was easy to forget that while Clint might act careless and casual, his mind and eyes were keen. He made it easy to forget. But in a few words, Clint had cut past the immediate fear to the far deeper one. The thought he’d spoken to Dr. Fisher: why accept me when
“Thank you,” he said slowly, after a moment. “I…appreciate that you would say so.”

“But you don’t buy it, yeah?” Clint shook his head. “Figured not. Thought it could still be said.” He clapped Loki on the shoulder. “Want to come back inside and stand around feeling useless with the rest of us?”

“I suppose I might as well,” Loki said. He turned and followed Clint back to the cabin and inside.

Steve and Natasha had their heads together, talking in low voices, but they both looked up when Loki and Clint walked in. Loki tensed.

“Is there word?”

“Not yet,” Natasha said. “I was just filling Steve in on some background, and talking through possible tactics. The first goal is obviously to stop Doom before he brings Thanos through. If that fails, though…what’s our next steps?”

Loki walked slowly over to the kitchen table and sat down. “If I knew the location of any of the other objects of its kind, I would have a readier answer,” he said heavily. “As it is…I have nothing but conjecture. We might be able to expel him again the same way he came, using the Tesseract – provided we can gain control of it before he does. Or…” No or came to mind. Loki pressed back against the despair that washed against him. “I will need to think further.”

By the grim looks on their faces, they understood what he would not say. Steve was staring at him with furrowed brows and a worried look on his face. Loki avoided meeting it and focused on his breathing. Was that a flicker of lightning at the window?

Natasha’s phone rang and they all jumped. She glanced at the screen and set it on the table.

“Hey, pals, hope you’re all doing peachy,” Tony said. “Jolly Green is en route.”

“Don’t call me that,” Loki heard Banner say. He did not sound much pleased.

“Doctor Banner,” Natasha said smoothly. “Can I just say how much we appreciate your help?”


“Jesus,” Tony said. “I can feel you glaring through the phone, Romanov. Okay, maybe I didn’t get around to the explanations yet. We have an hour drive to the plane. I’ll fill you in on the way, buddy.”

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Banner said unhappily.

“Star Wars reference!” Tony sounded delighted. “Right – I’m going to hang up. Meet you at the Tower in – oh, give it two hours, give or take. Or just have Loki take you there early, he knows where the alcohol is.”

“Loki?” Banner said.


“Bye, Tony,” Natasha said, and hung up. Loki looked up at the ceiling, grimacing. Another person now who knew his little secret. He didn’t know why that would still bother him now, especially when most of them still did not know the half of it. Only Clint and Natasha knew all of what he’d
done, and none of them knew what he was. Banner knew he was something, but he had still believed Loki was human, at least in the general sense.

Would he tell Tony what he had seen? What might he make of that little detail? Perhaps nothing. It seemed no one on this Realm remembered the Jotnar, or knew what that name meant.

Jane - Doctor Foster was the only one who knew the whole truth, Loki realized. The only one on this Realm who had seen his true skin and knew its significance. She knew what he had done, and what he was, better than anyone else, even Natasha. It was a jarring thought – as jarring as the one that followed. *I hope she is not hurt.* Not Foster, too curious and clever for her own good. No doubt she would be thrilled to see Thor again.

That thought was not bitter so much as vaguely melancholy.

They arrived at Tony’s tower a half an hour before the man himself. All declined Loki’s offer of Tony’s liquor – which he did, indeed, know how to find – but Loki poured himself a generous half glass of whiskey just before Virginia Potts stepped into the room.

“All right, JARVIS, what did you want me to-“

Based on the stunned look on her face when she entered to find the four of them there, Loki suspected Tony had not informed her of the goings on before. Apparently he had decided to do so now. Loki wondered briefly if that was wise, then dismissed it: Potts was a discreet woman, and loyal.

“Pepper,” Natasha said, with a crooked smile. “Sorry to barge in on you like this. I’d have called, but things have been a little hectic.”

“That’s…” Potts trailed off, blinking at Steve. “That’s…all right. I know you and Luke. Can you introduce me to…”

“You already know Steve Rogers, too,” Natasha said, seeming a little amused.

“Ma’am,” Steve said. “Good to meet you.”

“A pleasure,” Potts said, impeccably polite although she still looked a little dazed. “Please, call me Pepper.” A faint touch of pink appeared in her cheeks and she turned quickly to Clint. “And you are…”

“Clint Barton,” he said. “Good to finally meet you. Nat says great things.” Potts glanced at Natasha, who smiled faintly.

“Tony’s on his way back now; he’s going to be bringing Bruce Banner.”

To her immense credit, the woman only blinked once. “I see,” she said. She cleared her throat. “I take it something’s…gone wrong. Is there anything I should know?”

*The end of everything you know and love may well be nigh, and we are next to powerless to stop it,* Loki thought. He looked at Natasha, who paused, then shook her head.

“But yet,” she said, “but you should probably tell your employees to take the day off tomorrow. Maybe tell them to leave early today, if you can.” She paused. “And…be careful. The next couple of days might get…hairy.”
After a long moment Potts nodded. “From you, I suspect that’s an understatement,” she said dryly. “But I’ll tell the workers to clear out. I can say we need to fumigate, or something. I doubt anyone will ask too many questions.” She glanced at Loki, and frowned. “What happened to your eyebrows?”

Loki reached up and touched his brows, and found that they were at least partially singed away. He grimaced. “It is…a bit of a long story.”

Potts looked like she was about to ask, but Natasha shook her head minutely and she dropped the subject. “Well,” she said. “I had better go see about clearing the building.”

“And you?” Natasha said. It sounded a little pointed to Loki’s ear, but if it was Potts appeared to ignore it.

“Let me know when Tony gets back,” she said. “I think we should have a talk.” She turned and went out, heels clicking on the floor.

The time passed mostly quietly. It was only about an hour before Stark arrived, Banner following after him and looking a little stunned. His eyes went to Loki first, followed shortly thereafter by Steve, who gave him a small smile.

“Doctor Banner,” he said. “Good to meet you.”

“Yeah,” the man said, a little faintly. “You too…can someone explain – slowly – exactly what’s going on here?”

Natasha looked at Loki, and whatever expression was on his face appeared to make her decide that this time she should do the explaining. That didn’t keep Banner from glancing at him periodically, the furrow between his eyebrows growing progressively deeper.

“But for the moment,” Tony interrupted, “all we want you to do, buddy, is find the Tesseract. Which is what you were already doing, but now you get to do it without the government breathing down your neck.”

Banner looked like he couldn’t decide whether to grimace or laugh. “Right,” he said. “Because there’s some kind of terrifying extradimensional being trying to break through who wants to use the Tesseract to make a door in space.”

“Yep,” Tony said, and patted Bruce on the shoulder again. “You got it.” Clint made a coughing noise that failed to disguise his laugh.

“Do you need anything?” Natasha asked. She seemed tense, Loki realized. Uneasy, though she hid it well. And it was new. He supposed it was not surprising that Banner’s proximity might make her nervous; however skilled she might be, that was not a fight she could win.

“Nothing I don’t have,” Tony said, before Banner could open his mouth. “Come on, Bruce, I’ll take you upstairs, get you some coffee – do you drink coffee? – get you set up, then we can come back down for some team building activities. Sound good?”

Banner looked at Loki again, seeming as though he was about to say something, and changed his mind. “Right,” he said. “Sure. No coffee, though. Do you have any tea?”

“So,” Clint said when they were gone. “Now we wait.”

Loki turned back toward the windows, watching the sky.
Tony and Banner returned before too long, their heads together and talking quietly about something or other. “Well?” Loki asked, probably more sharply than he should have. Tony raised his eyebrows.

“Patience, young padawan,” Tony said. *I don’t have time for patience,* Loki wanted to snap, but managed to contain himself to a twist of his lips.

“It shouldn’t be too long,” Banner said quietly. “Maybe an hour and I’ll have a location. Do you know what you’re going to do then?” *You,* Loki noticed. He was not including himself. Loki wondered if he could be convinced otherwise; his alter ego could potentially be quite useful.

“We should probably talk that through,” Natasha said. “We can’t just charge in after Doom half-cocked.” That sounded vaguely pointed, but Loki chose to ignore it. “The way I see it, we have two primary goals: extracting Jane Foster and retrieving the Tesseract.”

Loki hesitated. “We should keep in mind the possibility that…Doom may have received other – gifts, to facilitate his service to Thanos.”

Steve’s eyebrows shot up. “What kind of ‘gifts’?”

Loki shook his head. “That I am afraid I do not know.” Whatever Doom’s servants had used on him in India, Loki now doubted it was of his make. Or at least, not solely. He wondered how much of the means of inhibiting his magic Doom had found without help, too. It would be unwise, surely, to underestimate the man’s ingenuity on his own, but the possibilities expanded greatly if Thanos offered more…material help.

He could only half listen to the buzz of conversation behind him. It might be vital information, but he could not make himself focus on it. Would it be Thor? Or would the All-Father send someone else? No, it would have to be Thor, at least - though Loki hoped that others would come too. Even one of the Warriors Three - or even better, Sif.

Though another part of him cringed at the thought of others joining Thor. Thor he might be able to convince to hold off, if he spoke quickly enough. Others…it was less likely he could convince them. Sif alone must be howling for his head.

And then there was Foster. Jane. There was no question as to what Doom wanted with her - undoubtedly her help using the Tesseract. But she was brave - foolishly brave. Loki would not be surprised if she refused outright. What would Doom do to her then? He couldn’t kill her, not while he needed her. Could he? Would he control her mind as he had tried to do to Loki? Torture her?

Thor would no doubt blame Loki for anything that happened to her. He had threatened her last time they’d seen each other. Loki felt vaguely ill at the reminder, and pushed it hard away. Dr. Foster, he reminded himself, was a detail. Her capture was unfortunate but primarily concerning because of its part in the wider picture.

*Take care, Loki,* she’d said. *I hope you’re wrong. About what Thor might do.*

*I believe you. Just tell me how I can help.*

*Forget about her,* Loki thought savagely. *Focus. The Tesseract. Would Doom be able to harness it?*

Everything Loki knew said that no human could hope to use an Infinity Stone without burning out their mind at the least. But Doom was…exceptional. And if he had help of some kind…and the name. Thanos. Where did he know it from, what half forgotten memory?
His thoughts circled back to Thor. What did he know? What had Odin told him? Surely the truth, by now - what his beloved brother was. If Loki’s nearly killing him had not turned Thor wholly against him, surely that would finish the job. He could only hope that Thor would give him time to explain. If he pleaded for help, emphasized Midgard’s need...Thor was fond of this Realm. Surely he would be glad to play the hero. And Loki could promise that when it was over he would...would…

Walk quietly to your execution? Will you? Or will you try to hide behind your friends, knowing they will defend you even if they cannot hope to win?

“Hey, Loki,” Tony said. “What’s eating you? You look like you’re about to crawl out of your skin.”

Don’t I have reason enough, Loki was about to say, but then he felt the pressure drop between one second and the next, far too quickly to be natural, a moment before he heard the low rumble of thunder what sounded like directly overhead.

He squeezed his eyes closed for a moment, dread making his stomach clench before he shoved it down and locked it away. “I need to go to the roof,” he said, turning on his heel and starting for the door. There was every possibility that Tony would end up with a hole in his building otherwise, and that would be a poor beginning.

“Wait, what?” Tony said, frowning, and he wasn’t the only one. Steve looked toward the windows, seeming surprised. A flash of lightning nearly made Loki flinch, and another muttering roll of thunder followed on its heels.

Loki started to stride for the door without answering, but Natasha got in his way. “What did you do?” She asked, her voice hard and her eyes even harder. Loki met it, not backing down.

“What I had to,” he said. “There wasn’t time to wait.”

“Oh,” Clint said. “Shit.”

“What?” Bruce said, tense. “Can someone explain-”

“You called Asgard,” Steve said. “Right?”

“Yes,” Loki snapped. “And it appears Asgard has answered. Now unless you want your tower to suffer potentially significant damage, I suggest you get out of my way.”

“Significant damage?” Tony glanced toward the window. “What kind of trouble are you in? And how did you get in touch with them, I thought you needed a Bifrost for that-”

Thunder drowned out whatever ended his sentence. Loki’s chest tightened like a serpent was compressing his ribs. Steve took a step toward him. “If you’re in danger,” he said, “maybe we should talk to whoever this is, first.”

Loki jerked his head to the side. “He’ll just go through you without listening. He never-” Loki cut off. “Natasha,” he said, trying to sound reasonable and not like he was on the verge of panic. “I appreciate your eagerness to help, but we have to think of the larger picture.”

“Has it occurred to you that we might need you every bit as much as one or two alien warriors?” Natasha snapped. “Maybe more?”

“Guys,” Bruce said, sounding a little faint. “I think-”

Lightning flashed. Glass shattered. Loki whirled around, casting a barrier between himself and the
others, and planted his feet. He’d tried to convince himself that he was ready, tried to plan what to say. All of it flew out of his head.

Thor stood little more than an arm’s length away. His hair was longer and wet with rain, his red cape hanging near the floor. His eyes were like the storm outside, touched with lightning.

Ten seconds, Loki thought. He had ten seconds, maybe less.

“Thor,” he said faintly, but no other words came.

He’d forgotten about Bruce Banner. Or perhaps more correctly, forgotten about the Hulk. A growl he’d taken for thunder rose to a roar. Loki staggered as his barrier snapped under unexpected force from the wrong side. A large, green hand swatted Loki out of the way, grabbed hold of Thor, and threw him back out the window he’d come through.

*Oh, Loki thought dazedly, halfway through one of Stark’s walls. A poor beginning indeed.*
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

It wasn't that long! I didn't make you wait for a terribly long time!

This chapter was kind of a beast to write in some ways, and I feel like I've barely begun to scratch the surface of everything that needs dealing with. But hey, it's a start. Thor is here, the plot is here, everything is happening at once and I know...more or less where I'm going with the rest of this fic. If with very, very little idea of how I'm going to get there! It's a fun adventure for everyone.

All my thanks and love to the ever patient beta, and to professional cheerleader portraitoftheoddity, and also to you guys, my overall wonderful readers.

Enjoy the reunion you've all been waiting for. Well, all of you except for Loki.

Loki pushed himself to his feet only moments before Steve was there. “Are you all right?” He asked.

“Yes,” Loki said. He was, physically; the rest was more in question, but he didn’t think there was anything Steve could do about that right now. “Banner – and Thor-” He lurched forward, pushing past Steve, who grabbed his arm.

“Hang on,” he said, but Loki shook him off and strode forward.

“I’m going to give you until the count of three to surrender and then I’m letting Bruce go at you,” he heard Tony saying. The Hulk loomed in front of the broken window, but did not appear to have lunged after Thor.

It occurred to Loki abruptly that perhaps Banner had not simply been knocking him out of the way so he could reach his target, but rather knocking him out of the way of an expected threat.

“Stop this!” He said, amplifying his voice with a touch of magic. “This is not a battlefield.” He could see Thor, Mjolnir spinning, and Tony in his armor between him and the Hulk.

“You sure about that?” Tony said, not looking back at Loki. Thor did, and Loki had to fight not to quail back.

“It must not be,” Loki said, with all the firmness he could muster. “We cannot afford to fight amongst ourselves.”

“Tell him that,” Tony said, gesturing at Thor. “He started it.”

The clouds overhead roiled, the storm only building. “You will not speak so to me.”

“I’ll speak however the fuck I want,” Tony said. “Ask anyone.”

“Stark,” Loki said, emphasizing the name. “We need him.”

“You keep saying that. I’m not convinced.”
Banner leaned forward and roared. Lightning crackled around Thor and Loki heard a sound that he was certain was Tony’s weapons readying to fire.

“If you fight here, innocents will be hurt,” Loki said, talking quickly. “And we will be weakening ourselves, distracting ourselves.” He could only pray that Thor would consent to wait until after Thanos’s threat was taken care of to carry out whatever sentence the All-Father had passed in his absence. He locked his gaze on Thor, raising his voice to be heard above the wind. “Thor, please.”

“And what of this beast that attacked me?” Thor’s eyes fixed on him made Loki’s chest feel tight and his breathing come short. He fought through it.

“Just what Bruce does when he’s pissed,” Tony said. “Happens when you go smashing windows and threatening friends. At least on this planet.”

Thor’s jaw tightened. “I was not threatening anyone.”

“Really?” Clint said, though he was standing a distance back. “Could’ve fooled me.” Natasha was with him though she was coiled like she was going to spring, her eyes flickering between Banner and Thor.

“Loki,” Steve said tensely, but Loki set his jaw and moved toward Banner. Banner wheeled toward him with a growl and Loki heard someone suck in a breath behind him, but he set his feet and summoned his magic, thinking _calm, at ease, relax._

“Doctor Banner,” he said, fighting to keep his voice level, willing Thor not to attack – willing whatever was making him hesitate to continue to do so. “There is no need for…this. We do not need your warrior…just now.”

Loki just managed not to slump with relief when Banner twitched, stepping back, and began to change. He did hold his breath until it was finished and Banner was human once again, though shivering and bereft of his clothes. Steve moved first, grabbing a blanket off a nearby couch and putting it around Banner’s shoulders. Loki didn’t see Thor land, but he felt it. The tread of his feet on glass was far too familiar.

“Well,” Clint said after a moment, “that was exciting.”

“The excitement’s not over yet,” Tony said. “We’ve still got a houseguest who needs to explain himself.”

Loki moved further away from the windows – further away from Thor. “Is Doctor Banner well?” He asked. _You are stalling. How long will he wait?_

“Been better,” Banner himself said, from within his huddle of blankets. “But…how did you do that?”

“I would speak to my brother alone,” Thor said, before Loki could respond. Loki could feel Thor’s eyes boring into him and knew he ought to meet them, but couldn’t quite make himself look up.

“Yes,” he started to say quickly. “That would-”

“I don’t think so,” Natasha interrupted. “Sorry.” She did not sound apologetic at all, and Loki winced. “You’re the newcomer here. You don’t get to charge in and make demands until we know more about your intentions.”

“My intentions?” Thor did not sound pleased. “I was sent here by the Allfather - by our father-”
“Not ours,” Loki murmured, but Thor seemed to ignore it.

“To help you. I was under the impression that it was urgent, but you treat me with suspicion, attack me on sight—”

“You didn’t exactly come in peace,” Tony said. “You smashed through a window.”

Loki could feel Thor’s temper darkening. “What is this?” He demanded. “I am a friend of Midgard. An ally.” He paused, then went on, sounding confused and upset. “Is this your doing, Loki? Poisoning them against me? Is there any true danger at all?”

A laugh bubbled up in Loki’s throat. Oh, there is, he meant to say, but Steve’s arms unfolded and he stepped forward. “Hey,” he said. “Loki’s a friend.” There was an emphasis there that suggested and you aren’t. Loki wasn’t sure whether to feel satisfaction or dismay.

“Loki is my brother,” Thor said loudly.

Loki pressed his fingers to his temples. “You know I am not.”

Again, Thor ignored him. “I apologize for the...abrupt manner of my arrival,” he said to Tony. “I will see that any necessary repairs are paid for. But you must understand—”

“We must understand nothing,” Natasha said, still coldly, “until we know if you’re a threat.”

“A threat!” Thor sounded profoundly insulted now, and Loki wanted to put his head down on the table and groan. He ought to be doing this himself. Should speak up now, except it seemed Thor was going to ignore every word he spoke. That should not be surprising. “I am sworn to defend Midgard, an oath I would never break.”

“Not a threat to Earth,” Natasha said. “To Loki.”

Perfect silence. There was a rumble of thunder outside.

“I would speak to my brother alone,” Thor said again, and added through gritted teeth, “please.” No one moved. Even more testily, Thor added, “you may have my word that I will not harm him.”

“Loki?” Natasha said. He pulled his hands down and looked at her. “I think one of us should stay here. Maybe Steve, or Bruce. Just in case. But it’s up to you.” She narrowed her eyes. “Think carefully.”

“He swore,” Loki said. “That means he is telling the truth.” At least for now. There was another distinctly ominous rumble of thunder.

“I am glad you will grant me that much,” Thor said tightly. Natasha cast him a look, but they left, slowly, Steve casting a worried look over his shoulder and pausing until Clint pulled him through.

Thor waited, to Loki’s surprise. He did not immediately start shouting. Oh, Loki could feel him glowering like the storm, but he seemed to be...containing himself.

“These people...they are your friends?”

“Of a sort,” Loki said carefully.

“They seem...protective.”

“I suppose so,” Loki said. He glanced up at Thor. “I doubt this is what you wished to...discuss.”
Thor exhaled harshly. “Why do your friends think that I would harm you?”

Loki blinked. Stared at him. Blinked again. He let out a harsh, stuttering laugh. “Thor. I am not a fool. Do not treat me like one. Do you wish to hear me enumerate my crimes as they stand? Treason and murder first among them. I confess as much freely. But at the moment it is more important—”

“You think,” Thor said slowly, “that I am here to punish you.”

“No,” Loki said wearily, “I think you are here to save Midgard and then punish me. Or at least I hope that is the intended order of events.” He rubbed his eyes. “I am sorry that my allies treated you with disrespect. I ask that you would not hold it against them.”

Thor’s frown had deepened. “They believe as you do.” Something was odd about what Thor was saying, but he couldn’t think of it. He needed to focus on convincing Thor to work together with the others, soothe his ruffled feathers and make him understand.

“I suppose,” Loki said after a moment. “But they understand that the primary goal of protecting this Realm is paramount. I can convince them that you—”

“Loki,” Thor said, something odd in his voice. “I am not here to bring judgment upon you.”

Loki blinked. Of course, he realized slowly. If he had already exiled myself. The Allfather would hardly want to draw attention to his shame by making any formal charge. “Oh,” he said, startled by the curiously numb feeling that gave him. Shouldn’t it be a relief? “--well. Then we can discuss—”

“Loki,” Thor said. “I am here to help, yes. And then to bring you home.”

Loki nearly gaped at him. Rocked back on his heels and stared at Thor, who looked back at him, jaw set. The ground seemed to have dropped from underneath his feet. Thor took a step forward and Loki stumbled back reflexively. Thor stopped, a pained expression flashing across his face.

“I thought you dead,” he said. “We thought you dead. You fell, and Heimdall could not see you.”

Fell, Loki thought numbly. I let go. I gave up, because there was nothing left. He stared blankly at Thor, uncomprehending. “Your approach,” he said finally, “did not seem like a welcoming one.”

Thor’s jaw set. “We grieved,” he said. “And then, suddenly, you reappeared, on Midgard, speaking of peril and the need for aid. I grieved for you and you have been here, all along, taking your ease—”

There was the anger. More expected, more familiar. And it sparked some of Loki’s own.

“I have not been taking my ease,” he snapped. “You speak of yourself as a protector of Midgard, but you have not been here. I have. I have been working with them, helping them, and I may not be the hero you are but at least I am here.”

Thor drew himself up. “I could not be! Because the Bifrost was broken, Asgard has been cut off. And whose fault was that?”

Loki felt himself tensing. “It was your hammer that shattered it.”

“To stop your monstrous actions—”

“You call it monstrous, to try to end at one stroke a generations long war and erase a blight from the Nine Realms?” Loki could hear his voice rising and could not hold it back. Thor’s expression flickered.
“That is not...there must be Nine Realms, Loki. You know that. To destroy one entirely-”

“It was you who said it,” Loki hissed. “When I am king, I will hunt down the monsters and slay them all. You haven’t acknowledged it. Did your father tell you the whole truth, or did he flinch from that?”

Thor’s expression pinched. “Brother-”

“I am no brother of yours,” Loki snapped. “Do you hear me? That was a lie. All of it was a lie. And you do know what I am; I can see it on your face, and you cannot bear to think it. Let me say it for you, then: I am Jotun. The blood of your ancestral enemies is my blood. Would you like to see my true face?”

“No,” Thor said sharply, and then seemed to shake himself. “I will not let you goad me.”

Loki sneered. “That is a change.”

“You should not have hidden,” Thor said, his voice stern. “The suffering you caused our family-”

“Your family,” Loki snapped again. “And yes. Of course. Their suffering is what matters. What matter is it what I think, or feel, or want.” He looked away, jaw shifting. “You claim you are here to bring me home, as though Asgard is that, or ever has been. And what if I don’t want to go?”

Thor looked taken aback. “It is where you belong.”

“No,” Loki said, turning his back and stalking as far from Thor as he could go. “It is not.” He flexed his left hand, wondering if he dared change skins, as he’d threatened. He wanted to, the same way one wanted to rip a scab off a wound. Prove to Thor how hollow his words were.

And yet did not want to see the disgust on his face.

“Is everything all right?” Banner’s voice was quiet, poking his head into the room. Loki could just make out Steve hovering over his shoulder. “We heard raised voices.”

Thor exhaled loudly. “All is well,” he said flatly. “Are we to have no privacy at all?”

Both Steve and Banner looked at Loki, and he felt some small, petty satisfaction that it was his word they wanted. “As you can see, I am unharmed,” he said. “Thor and I were merely discussing where things stand. But I think enough has been said-”

“Enough has not been said,” Thor growled. “Not by far. You will not listen to a word I say.”

Loki’s jaw tightened. “Just because I will not agree with you does not mean I am not listening. And much as I am enjoying this little conversation, perhaps we should return to the important matter?”

Thor opened his mouth, eyes flashing, and then, to Loki’s immense surprise, closed it. He took a deep breath and looked away, his jaw working. “Yes,” he said, “I suppose. Though we will talk further later.” There was something in that of a threat, and a part of Loki wanted to cringe. The rest of his feelings were…too much a tangle to resolve.

But Thor was not going to kill him. That...probably ought to have been more of a relief than it was.

“Great,” Steve said, almost aggressively. “Have you given Loki the chance to catch you up on the situation yet, or...”

Thor looked at Steve, his eyes narrowing a fraction, but after a moment he seemed to come to some
sort of conclusion and deliberately relaxed his shoulders and leaned back on his heels. “I do not think I heard either of your names,” he said. Polite, and by the lift of Banner’s eyebrows that startled him almost as much as it did Loki. “Loki has explained enough to me that I know you are his friends. I am pleased that he should have found such worthy folk on this Realm.” Thor smiled – small, but it was still one of his smiles. “Given what it seems Loki expected of me, I must be glad of your readiness to defend him as well, however unnecessary.”

The tangle of mingled resentment and misery that squeezed in Loki’s chest caught him by surprise. Thor might have arrived angry, and been surprised by his less than warm reception, but he was back in form now. Prince of Asgard, charming, charismatic, as beloved by all who saw him as the sun.

“Oh, Steve said, sounding unimpressed. “I’m Steve. Rogers.”

“Bruce Banner,” Banner said. “And I am…sorry about throwing you through a window.”

“It is already forgiven,” Thor said. “But how do you manage it? I did not know that there were any berserker among the Midgardians.”

“It’s a long story,” Banner said quickly. “Maybe, um, later. Loki…?”

He realized that he’d begun, unconsciously, to move back. Out of the conversation. They were all looking at him now, though: Thor, Steve, and Banner. Thor’s eyebrows were faintly furrowed. Steve and Banner looked downright concerned.

We’re not looking to trade you out for a different model, Clint had said.

“We should go,” Loki said. “Meet with the others. Go over what Thor needs to know. Do we know the Tesseract’s location yet?”

Thor’s head jerked back. “You do not know where it is?” Loki didn’t answer him, focusing on Banner.

“Not yet,” he said. “Soon.” Loki nodded.

“Loki,” Thor said.

“Give it a moment, Thor,” Loki said, more sharply than he meant to. “You will be updated on everything you’ve missed shortly. Now, if Steve knows where to find the others.”

“I do,” Steve said simply. “Just a floor down. Natasha grabbed one of the conference rooms.”

“Then perhaps,” Loki said, “we should attend to the real reason you are here? If you will agree to as much, of course.” He could hear the tightness in his voice and knew it would probably only irritate Thor, but a part of him still itched for an argument.

“I will agree,” Thor said, the intensity of his eyes fixed on Loki almost enough to make him flinch. “But as I said, we are not finished.”

“No,” Loki said flatly. “Not until you say so, I am sure.” He turned his back on Thor and gestured to Steve. “Lead on.”

He could feel Steve studying him. Wanting to say something, perhaps, but holding his tongue. Loki waited until he sighed and looked away. “Right,” he said. “This way.”

There was, it turned out, a great deal to catch Thor up on.
Loki tried to skim over the irrelevant details – he largely left Jane out of his explanation, focusing primarily on SHIELD’s efforts and touching on his own ill-advised venture hardly at all. Anything that seemed likely to be a distraction, he left out, and to his relief no one seemed inclined to object to his omissions. Thor asked few questions, simply sat and listened.

When he was done, Thor sat back in a chair that seemed too small for him, in a room that felt too close. “This explains much,” he said, “but not all. How could this happen and Heimdall see nothing of it?”

“I do not believe that Heimdall’s sight reaches beyond the Nine Realms,” Loki said, “and I doubt he considers the actions of most mortals of relevance to Asgard’s safety.”

Thor gave him a sharp look. “That is unjust.”

“But not untrue,” Loki shot back. Thor frowned, his expression darkening, and Loki braced for another argument. Natasha, next to him, put a hand on his arm and squeezed.

“Regardless of the hows or whys,” she said, “we need to deal with the situation at hand. And unless Thor has any insight to offer, what’s more important now is laying down a plan to deal with Doom.”

Thor glanced at Natasha. “I assume you are not referring to the general concept,” he said dryly. Tony made a muffled sound that attempted unsuccessfully to disguise a snort.

“Victor von,” he said. “Lovely fellow, completely nuts.” For a moment Loki thought he might make some remark about Loki’s…history with the man, but to his relief Stark did not.

Thor nodded slowly. “And he is part of this…plot.”

“Yes,” Loki said, at the same time Natasha said, “we think so.” Loki glanced at her sharply but she went on, “we can’t be completely certain until Bruce finishes running the numbers, and I’m not willing to move before then, but it seems likely.” Natasha leveled her cool stare at Thor, and Loki felt a nearly absurd warmth toward her. “So. Anything to add?”

Thor frowned at the table. “The name you gave when you called to Heimdall. Are you...certain of it?”

Power pawing through his mind. That immense presence bearing down on him. Loki stiffened. “I am certain.”

Thor looked up, his expression grim. “I did not know the name. Father did. Not from memory but from...something approaching legend. Hidden deep in Asgard’s secret histories.” Thor’s smile was faint and strangely uncertain. “I am surprised you are not familiar with the stories.”

Loki did not let himself respond to the near teasing, the reminder of the time he’d been caught sneaking into those restricted areas of the records. Odin’s response had been...memorable. “And?”

Thor’s faint smile faded. “It seems this being was fought once before. He forged the Infinity Gauntlet and harnessed the power of the Infinity Stones-”

“The what?” Clint interrupted.

“The objects I told you of. Like the Tesseract,” Loki said. “That is one name they were known by.”

Thor nodded. “He was repulsed, but the cost was great. The records are not clear on how he was defeated, but they were clear that it seemed he could not be killed. So he was cast out into the Void,
where they hoped he would remain.”

Loki felt cold. It must have been ages ago, to be so deeply forgotten. And all that time, Thanos had squatted out there in the dark. Thinking. Planning. Waiting.

Loki swallowed hard, a bitter taste in his mouth that he knew for fear.

“And there’s really nothing on how they defeated him then?”

Thor shook his head. “Nothing.”

Clint sat back in his chair, hard. “Great.”

Loki caught himself chewing on his thumb and made himself stop. “Are others coming?” He asked.

Thor’s expression was solemn, and he shook his head. “I doubt it. Father can only gather so much dark energy, and not quickly.”

Loki sat back, disappointment washing through him. He had hoped for more. Had dreaded it, but hoped that perhaps…cynically, he wondered if the Allfather intended to let Midgard fall in the hopes it would weaken Thanos before he struck with Asgard’s power.

“All right,” Steve said slowly. “Is there…anything we can do to hurry that along?”

“I do not think so,” Thor said slowly, but then sat up a little. “Perhaps Jane…”

“It would be better on the whole,” Loki interrupted, “if we dealt with Doom first and prevented his plans from coming to fruition. True, we will still have to deal with the larger problem at some point, and likely soon, but at least the reckoning can be delayed.” He could not deal with Thor getting wind of Foster’s captivity and plunging off to rescue her against all sense.

She was still alive. Doom wouldn’t kill a useful tool.

*Not kill, maybe.* Loki remembered, abruptly, the automatons Doom had made of the men and women where they’d first met. He pushed the thought away.

“Well,” Banner said, looking at his phone, “I think we can say for sure that Doom’s involved somehow. I’ve got the Tesseract’s location. A little east of Doomstadt in the Carpathian foothills.”

Steve’s eyebrows shot up. “Doomstadt?” He said incredulously, at the same time as Stark said, “so you could say he’s on Mount Doom?”

Clint laughed. “All right,” he said. “So that’s where we’re going. Mount Doom.” His expression sobered quickly. “Do we know anything about the area? Fortifications, defenses…”

“Not much,” Natasha said.

“JARVIS, map,” Tony said, and one flashed up on the wall. Steve stood up and moved over to it. Loki glanced over at Thor, astonished that he had remained quiet. Not interjecting, not demanding that they attack directly, not trying to shove his way into the planning. Oh, he didn’t look *pleased,* but…

Thor’s head turned just slightly to look at him. Loki flinched involuntarily and an odd look, almost pained, passed over Thor’s face. Loki suddenly felt like he was choking.
“I need some air,” he said, and left without waiting for a response.

It was childish, he knew. He had responsibilities, duties. He couldn’t afford to let himself be distracted by – by details. Thor was going to help. That was all that mattered. Or it should be.

A great gnarled mass of something seethed in Loki’s chest. He remembered feeling this way just after Thor was banished, before he’d gone down to confirm the truth of what he was. Overfull and about to shatter.

Loki found a room with a balcony and stepped outside, turning his face into the wind. The cold slap of it jarred him just enough to clear his head, at least a little. He did not know how to process everything that had passed with Thor – Thor who he’d last seen shouting as Loki let go; who, it seemed, was not going to kill him. Loki had been afraid of the seeming inevitability for so long that having that truth gone seemed…implausible.

And yet…somehow having that certainty stripped away did not ease him. On the contrary, it only seemed to tangle his tangled feelings further. He had managed, more or less, to keep thoughts of Thor at arm’s length since landing on this Realm. Now that Thor was here…as always, he was impossible to avoid. Overwhelming, so much so that Loki could almost feel himself being subsumed into his presence. Reduced to a satellite in Thor’s orbit, and Thor never aware of how he blocked out the sun.

Loki tensed, hearing familiar footsteps approach, the door open.

“I wish to be alone, Thor;” he said flatly, not turning. “Should you not be attending to the battle planning?”

“Should you not be?” Thor asked. Loki had no good answer for that, so he stayed silent. Thor sighed. “May I not speak with you a moment?”

It’s never just a moment, Loki thought, and on its heels a moment is too much. He felt scraped as raw as ever he had after a session with Dr. Fisher, but not as though he had gained anything. If anything, he understood less than he had before Thor’s arrival.

“Fine,” he said, though, because arguing with Thor seemed likely to be fruitless.

“Are you…well?”

Loki barked a laugh. “Are you making small talk or are you asking if I am mad?” Thor’s flinch brought him some small, petty satisfaction.

“Not small talk, but not the latter either,” Thor said. “Or at least…not as you would have it. I am…” he sighed. “I went over what happened the night I returned a thousand times,” Thor said, more quietly. “Again and again. I thought of how I might have reached you to keep you from falling, or how I might have kept you from the edge in the first place.” He frowned out at the city, at nothing. “I have had so many questions. And I was angry, but I swore that I would forgive all if only, by some impossibility, you lived.”

“How is that going,” Loki asked. Thor sighed.

“It is…hard. To will forgiveness. And to let go of anger.” He hesitated. “It might be easier, if you were willing to provide answers.”

“I do not care for your questions,” Loki said coldly.
“Will you allow me no curiosity?” Thor demanded. “Do you not want me to understand?”

“You will not,” Loki said, implacable. “I know you, Thor. Whatever we are, or were, I know you. And I know what you understand, and what you don’t. You proved, again and again, that you might claim to want to understand me, but what you wanted was to bend me into something you could understand. I am tired of being bent. I will not pretend to be other than I am.” He felt his jaw twitch. “Do you want to know the truth? I think it is possible that my letting go was the best thing to have happened to me in a very long time.”

Thor jerked back. “You cannot mean that.”

“Can I not?” Loki looked away from Thor, keeping his face still. Hard. Thor seemed, at least for a moment, lost for words.

“Your lover,” Loki said, keeping his voice distant and not looking at Thor. “She has been captured by the man serving as Thanos’s lieutenant on Earth. Probably for her help opening a portal.”

Thor went rigid. “What? How do you know this?” He paused, and turned toward Loki, his face hardening. “Loki, if you have touched her…”

Loki laughed harshly. “What if I told you that I had? What if I told you that she sought comfort in me, the nearest thing to the man who abandoned her, however pathetic a substitute?” He knew it was cruel as he spoke the words, felt his stomach twist. A growl rumbled in Thor’s chest and Loki braced for impact, thought he would almost welcome it. A moment later, though, Thor subsided.

“That would be Jane’s choice,” he said. He did not sound happy about it. “But if you mean to hurt her-”

The bile drained out of Loki and he smiled mirthlessly. “Peace, Thor. Doctor Foster is as faithful to you as ever.”

Loki could feel Thor looking at him but for several seconds he said nothing. “You have changed, Loki,” he said at last.

“Yes,” Loki agreed. “I have.”

“You seem…” Thor trailed off. “I do not have the words for it. When we fought on the Bifrost you seemed a stranger. Now...I can see in you the brother I knew, but also someone else. Someone I do not know.”


“That is not it.” He paused. “You truly believed that I would...hurt you. Kill you.”

“Yes,” Loki said dully.

“But you called for aid anyway.”

“Yes,” Loki said again. Thor fell quiet. Loki wondered what he was thinking.

“You have always been my brother,” Thor said. Loki opened his mouth, and Thor interrupted. “No, do not. Whatever...whatever your blood, you are my brother, and always have been. I arrived in anger because I could not understand why you had hidden for so long, because I expected some trick. But I have never wanted to harm you.”
Loki closed his eyes. “That does not mean you have not, Thor.” He took a deep breath. “There are things I need to do.” Turning to go back inside, Thor caught his arm.

“Loki,” he said abruptly, “how did you learn that Thanos moved in the Void?”

Loki shook his arm free and turned to look at Thor, smiling crookedly. “I did what you would have done.” Thor frowned, and Loki huffed a humorless laugh. “I leaped without looking first. I went to fight him, not knowing what I would face. It did not end well.”

Thor’s eyes widened and his mouth opened, but he did not speak. Loki swept back inside and closed the door firmly between them before Thor found the words to reply.
Natasha accosted him before he made it back to the conference room. “Are you all right?” She asked, a certain set of her mouth suggesting that if the answer was no she was going to do something about it.

Loki felt a flash of annoyance. “Are the rest of you going to follow me as well?” He asked. “Was it unclear that when I said I needed some air I meant I wanted to be alone?”

Natasha looked at him without answering, her expression not relaxing in the slightest. Loki glanced away. “I am fine.”

“So Thor did come find you,” she said. Loki gave her an exasperated look. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t need to.” Natasha studied him. “He’s an interesting fellow, your brother.”

“He isn’t my brother,” Loki said flatly. “And I would rather not discuss him, if it is all the same to you. What did I miss?”

“Not much of substance,” Natasha said. “A lot of wrangling. Thor seemed to stop paying attention after you left, and when he went I figured it would be better to put things on pause until you came back.” She glanced past him. “Is Thor coming?”

“I imagine shortly,” Loki said, his voice curt, and moved around Natasha to head back to the conference room. She couldn’t quite match his stride, but she managed to keep up perfectly ably. Loki deliberately did not look over his shoulder to see if Thor was following him.
“Are you going to be good to do this?” Natasha asked quietly. Loki stiffened.

“Good to do what?”


“I am capable of being professional,” he said flatly. “And I will be. I recognize that the overall goal is more important than my... family issues.”

“That’s only half true,” Natasha said. Loki gave her a sidelong look, and she raised her eyebrows. “Your family issues are very important in the context of whether this whole project is going to work. And if that means we have to find some way to keep Thor off the pitch...”

Loki shook his head. “You can’t afford it. Nor do I think you could stop him.” Though some part of him insisted on being touched that she’d offered. That she would, even having met Thor, put Loki ahead of him.

Natasha stopped and turned toward him. “You should have told us before you called Asgard,” she said. “You took a huge risk.”

Loki felt a flash of frustration. “I was not expecting you to get in the way.”

Natasha jerked, her expression spasming, though it smoothed out a moment later. “You have a pretty low opinion of us, don’t you?” She said coolly. Loki blinked.

“What? Of course not. I wouldn’t be here if I did.”

Natasha’s eyes bored into him. “But you think we’d just abandon you and let you waltz into a situation that clearly terrified you. You think Stark and Rogers would just accept you vanishing without a trace, or that I’d leave you locked up in solitary to martyr yourself. Sounds like a low opinion to me.”


“Trust doesn’t come easy,” she said. “Believe me, I know that. But I wish you’d stop expecting us to let you down.”

She turned on her heel and kept walking. Loki saw Thor approaching out of the corner of his eye, and quickly turned to follow her.

“I’m going to remind you all,” Natasha said, “that until Doom makes a move, we can’t do anything loud. And since we’re hoping to cut him off at the pass before it gets that far, this entire mission is going to be stealth.” She glanced at Tony, who looked at Bruce.

“You hear that, big guy?” He said. Natasha’s eyes flicked toward the ceiling.

“Hopefully, your, ah, friend won’t be necessary,” she said. Bruce looked like he wanted to sink down into his seat. “What we want to do is sneak ourselves into Doom’s hideout, retrieve the Tesseract - and Dr. Foster - and bug out.”

“Doom’s bound to have traps set up,” Steve said. “Defenses. We don’t know what those look like and there isn’t time for recon.”

“Probably some combination of magic and technology,” Loki said. “That seems to be his favored
method.” He couldn’t quite keep the scorn out of his voice.

“What’s the matter with technology?” Tony asked, sounding offended.

“Nothing,” Loki said. “It is the way he combines the two that I object to.”

“Focus,” Natasha said. “It seems to me our best option is a bait and switch. We give Doom something shiny to look at. Make him think he’s dealt with the threat, and then move.”

Clint’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re talking letting Doom catch one of us.”

“Two, actually,” Natasha said. “He won’t believe just one. But a small infiltration rescue mission of two? We can make him buy that, if we play him right.”

Loki could see Thor out of the corner of his eye. He hadn’t spoken in some time, which was a surprise, and hadn’t objected to the underhanded nature of Natasha’s suggestion, which was also a surprise. But then, he looked as though he might not be paying attention. Tony’s eyes were narrowed. “So who goes?”

“Me,” Loki said, before anyone else could speak. “Obviously.”

That got Thor’s attention. “Then I will as—”

“No, you will not,” Loki interrupted, not even glancing in his direction. He kept his eyes on Natasha. “It’s simple, isn’t it? Doom...knows me. We know he has...an interest in me. If anything is likely to draw and keep his attention, it is the prospect of capturing me.”

Natasha’s nostrils flared. “Again?” She said, her voice hard.

“Again?” Thor repeated. Loki felt his face tighten.

That was deliberate, wasn’t it? he thought viciously.

“Yes,” Loki said flatly. “All the better. I got away once; he will be angry at that, angry that I have the audacity to waltz, fearless, into his domain.” Not fearless. Even contemplating it made his stomach bubble, but he could control himself enough to keep it from showing. He could feel them staring at him. Clint’s lips were twisted like he’d bitten into something foul, and Tony looked pale. Thor leaned forward.

“This...Doom. He captured you? You neglected to mention this.”

“Some time past Victor von Doom was able to trick me, yes,” Loki said after a moment’s pregnant silence. “I was freed. With help.” He gestured at Tony, Clint, and Natasha.

Thor looked like he was going to start gathering thunderclouds.

“You’re leaving out the part where what Doom’s interest is in is dissecting you,” Tony said, his voice strained. Loki could not keep himself from flinching. He saw Steve’s eyes widen a fraction, horror flashing across his face, but he felt Thor’s anger roll through him.

“Sit down, Thor,” he snapped, refusing to look at him, his stomach a hard knot, sick shame twisting through him. “It is done with.”

“Not if you’re planning on walking back into his welcoming arms,” Clint said, to his surprise. Loki couldn’t help but give him a betrayed look.

“I will not allow,” Thor started to growl.
“What I do is not up to you,” Loki said, his voice rising sharply. “You do not tell me what is allowed or not allowed. I do not owe you my obedience, Odinson.” To the rest of them, he said, “you do not have to like it. But it is the best option. You aren’t the only one capable of deceit, Natasha, and, to be blunt, I am stronger than you. Less vulnerable. If I am there, Doom will not only believe that we are the true threat, but he won’t be able to resist taking the bait.”

“Loki,” Thor said, and if his voice vibrated with anger it was clear he was striving for calm. “This is folly. You must see—”

Loki rounded on him, but the anger that came was cold, icy, wrapping him in near numbness. “I must nothing. One more word, Thor, one more, and I will put a knife in your eye and leave you matching the man you are trying so hard to resemble.”

Silence fell. He could feel his friends staring at him and couldn’t care, eyes locked on Thor, waiting. Finally, finally, Thor leaned back, though his expression promised that there would be words later. Fine, Loki thought.

He wasn’t sure he’d meant the threat. But he wasn’t sure he hadn’t, either.

Looking back at Natasha, her expression told him nothing. At length, Steve cleared his throat. “I’ll go,” he said. “Whoever else does. But...I do think Loki’s right. Whoever walks in there...I don’t imagine it’s going to be pretty. I don’t doubt your endurance, Natasha, but you’re the de facto leader of this team. We need you on the outside. And I think it’s better to keep Thor an unknown quantity as long as possible.” He didn’t glance at Loki as he said that. Loki had to appreciate his tact. Loki glanced at Bruce, who hadn’t spoken, and regretted doing it. There was an awful pity in his eyes.

He looked away quickly, back to Natasha. She sighed and rubbed her eyes. “You’re right,” she said. “I’m not happy about it.”

Loki gave her a crooked smile that she didn’t return. “If all goes well,” he said, “we can get ourselves free and let you in. Find the Tesseract and remove it, and leave.” After destroying Doom, he thought, but didn’t say. It was time, and past, that he be dealt with. Whatever Natasha said.

“That’s optimistic,” Clint said. Loki shrugged. “Next question. How are we going to get there?”

“I have a plane,” Tony said.

“Do your planes have cloaking tech?” Natasha asked. Tony grimaced.

“So we need something military,” Steve said. “Does anyone know where we can find one?” There was a brief pause, and he added, “I have a little experience stealing planes from the U.S. military.”

Clint made a sound like he was trying not to laugh. Bruce shifted. “I’m guessing I’m not going to get away with staying back here,” he said. Tony elbowed him.

“C’mon, buddy,” he said. “It’ll be fun.”

Loki could feel Thor’s eyes on him, burning, but whatever he was thinking, he didn’t say it. At least not yet. Loki wrapped indifference around himself like a cloak, but it felt very, very thin.

They dispersed to ready themselves. Loki could tell Steve was lingering, wanting to talk to him, but he looked at Natasha first. Determinedly ignoring Thor.
“You know it was the best option,” he told her. She shook her head.

“And you know I can’t necessarily trust you to make that call clearly.” She glanced at Thor, and then back to Loki. “I need to go talk to Clint. But we should talk. Privately, and soon.”

“Sounds like fun,” Loki said dryly, and finally her lips quirked. Barely, but it was a sign she might forgive him, eventually.

If he survived. If not - he would have other things to worry about.

Natasha exited, and Steve looked pointedly at Thor. Loki smiled humorlessly. “You shouldn’t try subtlety, Steve. He won’t notice.” To Thor, he said, “remove yourself.”

“I will be waiting in the hallway,” Thor said stiffly, after a long pause. But he left.

“Anything else I should know?” Steve asked, with a little crooked tilt of his mouth. Loki glanced away and shrugged.

“You knew Doom had kidnapped me. Stark told you.”

“You didn’t mention - what he did.” Steve’s voice was strained. Loki managed not to twitch.

“The specifics were not relevant, and I didn’t wish to discuss it. What would have changed?”

Steve sighed. “That’s...fair. But...I don’t know. Feels like I should have known.” He sat down, looking at his hands. “Are you...what Tony said. What keeps Doom from killing you?”

“He can gain more from me alive,” Loki said, pushing down the brief surge of nausea. “He wants knowledge. There is only so much a corpse can give, particularly since with life goes any chance he has of understanding my magic.” Loki shrugged one shoulder. “He wants to become a god. To him I am, I suppose, one pathway to achieving that.”

Steve shook his head slowly. “That seems like pretty thin insurance to me.”

Loki stiffened. “Are you trying to talk me out of this?”

“Wouldn’t work, would it?” Steve smiled, strained and humorless. “I don’t like losing friends.”

“You should worry more about yourself,” Loki said.

“I don’t know. Seems like you don’t worry enough about you. Someone’s gotta.” Steve lifted one shoulder and let it fall, then glanced toward the door. “Thor...is he going to be a problem?”

“He isn’t going to kill me, it seems,” Loki said. When Steve just looked at him, he grimaced. “Whatever I think of him, Thor is honorable, and he is a warrior. He swore an oath to defend this Realm, and he will do it. You needn’t doubt that.”

“And you and him,” Steve said. Loki’s teeth gritted before he forced his jaw to relax.

“I don’t know,” he said eventually. “I am hoping that can wait to be resolved until the more pressing issue is taken care of.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “He doesn’t seem like a very patient guy.”

“He isn’t. I find avoidance a fairly effective strategy.”
Steve hesitated. He seemed to be thinking, and so Loki waited until he said, “I know it might be...a
sensitive subject, so feel free to tell me to buzz off. But...you kept telling Thor he isn’t your brother,
but he seems to think you are. Why?”

He didn’t know, Loki remembered, and the thought was jarring. A part of him always felt that it was
somehow visible, written on his skin. And at the same time he held it close to his chest, a secret. His
greatest.

“I was taken,” he said, after a moment. “Stolen, I suppose, though can one steal something
unwanted? Thor’s father - Odin called me his own, but I am not. I am not even truly Aesir. I
am...something else.” Something monstrous. But still, he could not say it. Could not go that far.

“Adopted,” Steve said after a moment. “That’s usually the word people use, describing that
situation.”

Loki remembered Megan’s words. Don’t they have adoption where you’re from? But adoption was
for children, not...whatever he was. Odin had not taken him as a baby but as a tool cast aside by its
maker. “I suppose,” he said, finally. Steve was looking at him with a strange expression on his face.
“I should probably go speak with Thor,” Loki said, needing to break the silence. “Before he breaks
the door down.”

“I’ll see you soon,” Steve said. “Good luck.”

“Thank you,” Loki said, and summoned up a smile. Steve didn’t smile back.

Thor was indeed waiting in the hallway, and he pounced the moment Loki emerged. “Loki,” he said,
his voice tight, “if you are doing this to prove something to me, or father, you should know that this
recklessness-”

“You are a fine one to speak of recklessness,” Loki said flatly. He would not let his anger control
him again. “And not every choice I make has to do with you.”

“I know you are clever. Surely you can think of another solution.”

“Do not seek to flatter me. You know nothing of the situation, and subterfuge was never your strong
point anyway.”

“I should be there with you,” Thor said, and there was a strangely plaintive note in his voice that
stabbed through Loki, impaled him like a spear through his lungs. For a moment his breath caught,
and he nearly caved, the weight of years pressing on him, the urge to surrender, to give Thor what he
wanted, to please him.

He shoved it back. “No,” he said, hating the rough sound of his voice. “I am not your brother, Thor.
I am not your shadow.”

“But I am your protector,” Thor said. Another spear through his stomach. Loki wavered. How can
you push him away, murmured a voice, deep in his heart. He is a piece of you that cannot be cut out.
He is the sun around which you have always orbited. Without him you are nothing.

But he wasn’t nothing. He wasn’t.

“You have not been that,” Loki said, and now his voice was firm again, “for many years.” Thor’s
face fell.

“I would be, if you let me.”
“Loki,” he said at length, “do you seek death?”

Loki jerked like he’d been punched in the face. He felt it, a little. “What?”

“You let go of Gungnir,” Thor said, the words slow and halting. “I thought at first, when we learned you lived, that you knew somehow you would come here. But I have been thinking—”

“Daring of you,” Loki said, his voice brittle as glass. Thor ignored him.

“You said that...you plunged into battle with this Thanos, utterly unprepared. This mortal ‘Doom’ tricked you, and you return now to give yourself to him again. What the woman...Natasha?...said she could not trust you to choose clearly. What did she mean?”

Loki bit down on the inside of his cheek, cursing Natasha, cursing Thor for choosing now, of all times, to see clearly. “In your absence, someone has to take up your mantle of recklessness,” he said, and realized too late how much it sounded like something he might have said before.

“Loki...”

“No,” Loki interrupted. “We will not speak of this.”

Thor stiffened. “That is as good as a yes.”

Loki swallowed hard. “No, it is a we will not speak of this. Not now. Most likely not ever. You are not entitled to my thoughts, Thor. I do not belong to you. Not anymore.”

“You have never belonged to me,” Thor said. “You are my brother.”

Loki’s lip curled. “You say those words like a talisman that may sweep away everything else.”

“I would hope that they mean something.”

_They do not_, Loki meant to say, but what came out was, “something, perhaps. But not what you would have them mean.”

“Then what?”

The weariness caught up with him again, and Loki was suddenly exhausted. He wanted Thor to be gone, or else wanted to give up and give in, accept what Thor was trying to do and push down all his anger, back into that festering place he had kept it for years, a rot consuming from within. “It is a reminder,” he said. “Of a thousand moments that didn’t matter to you, but mattered to me. Of being left behind, of being forgotten in your wake. A reminder of everything I am, and everything I am not. There is weight in those words, but you would have it be a link between us. For me, it is a chain, or else a broken thing, a lie.” Loki met Thor’s eyes. “I should not have attacked you. I should not have lied to you. The moment I knew the truth, I should have walked away. I know that now.”

“You should have come to me for help,” Thor said, his voice strained. Loki’s lips twisted.

“And what help would you have offered? You were weak. You were lost. And you misunderstand: the great lie - the lie of what I am - was not the only wound that severed me from Asgard. Just the last one.” He paused. “If I should see Doctor Foster, while I sojourn in Doom’s lair, I will endeavor to free her. For her sake. Not for you.”

He could feel Thor’s unhappiness beating on him like a tide. Pulling at his heels. Perhaps, if he had
said something, it might have drawn him back.

But Thor did not call after him. Loki told himself it was freedom, but it hurt like fingers tearing into an open wound.

The journey to Latveria was subdued.

They took two planes, with Clint, him, Steve, and (to Loki’s irritation) Thor on one, and the others on the second. Thor didn’t speak to Loki, but Loki could feel his eyes every so often. He did eventually address Steve.

“Loki said you are a hero to your people,” he said. Steve looked up from frowning at his lap, his expression...Loki would have described it as ‘wary.’

“Some people would say that. I fought in a war a long time ago.”

“Oh? Who were you fighting?” He sounded genuinely interested. This being something to do with battles, perhaps he even was.

“I don’t know that it’d make a lot of sense to you if you don’t know Earth history,” Steve said, sounding reluctant.

“But you were fighting other humans,” Thor persisted. Steve looked like he wanted to grimace.

“That’s what war always is, here.”

“Not always,” Loki said smoothly. “Almost a millenium ago your Realm was invaded by another. The Jotnar. Frost giants.” He glanced at Thor with a thin smile. “Surely you remember this.”

Steve’s eyebrows pulled together. “Frost giants? I don’t think that popped up in any history I read.”

“There may not have been many living witnesses to tell the tale,” Loki said. “I am sure Thor could tell you all the sordid details; he used to be fascinated by the whole thing. Jotnar hauling off babies to eat, bathing in the blood of their victims-”

“I no longer believe in the accuracy of those accounts,” Thor interrupted, his voice harsh. “All written by scholars years later who were not there.”

“Does it not seem likely?” Loki pressed. His smile felt sharp enough to cut. “You’ve seen the beasts. Witnessed their savagery firsthand. You used to say-”

“I may have been - I was overly harsh,” Thor said. “I believe now that Asgard may hold...unjust prejudice against the Jotnar as a whole.” Steve was looking back and forth between them, his eyes narrowed.

“I get the feeling I’m missing something.”

“Not at all,” Loki said. “Just a friendly debate.” He turned his head toward Thor and met his eyes. Thor looked back at him, his expression stone.

At length, he turned back to Steve. “But we were speaking of you. I would know more of my brothers’ companions.”

“There’s not a lot of story,” Steve said slowly. He paused, and then leaned forward slightly and asked, “I’d rather know a little more about you.”
Thor’s eyebrows rose. “Is that so? It seems Loki has told you...some.” There was more than slight irony in his voice. Loki kept his back straight.

“Not really, actually,” Clint called from the front, apparently eavesdropping. “He hasn’t talked about you much.”

Loki caught a flicker of hurt out of the corner of his eye; it startled him that there was little satisfaction in it. “Ah,” Thor said after a moment. “You know that I am Thor, eldest son of Odin All-Father.” Only son, Loki thought, but he kept his mouth shut.

“The All-Father,” Steve said. “That’s like a king?”

“More like an emperor,” Loki said, and then with a twist of his lips added, “a despot, really.”

Thor jerked. “That is not true.”

Loki shrugged one shoulder but did not pursue the subject. Steve was looking at him with narrowed eyes.

“Loki is...he exaggerates,” Thor said, and Loki stiffened.

“As usual,” he said casually. Thor’s eyes closed with obvious exasperation.

“Must you,” he said. “I know you are baiting me, Loki, and I do not wish to fight.” Steve didn’t scold him, but there was a look in his eyes of silent reproach. Loki’s stomach twisted and he felt a flash of vicious anger, of course, take his side, everyone always does, but he knew that was unfair. He was baiting Thor, and he was not even certain why. There was no pleasure in it. No relief.

“I am going to go speak to Clint,” he said abruptly, unfastening his belt and standing to go up to the cockpit. Steve’s mouth opened like he was going to call after him, and then closed.

He sat down next to Clint, hands folded in his lap and staring straight ahead. The roar of the engine drowned out much of the sound from behind them; he was surprised Clint had heard anything.

“You doing okay?” Clint asked quietly.

“Of course,” Loki said without hesitation. Clint said nothing, just raised his eyebrows, and Loki twitched. “Perhaps I have been better. But under the circumstances I think that is understandable.”

“Which circumstances,” Clint said, “the ones where your not-sibling is back and fucking with your life, or the ones where you’re hooking back up with everyone’s favorite mad scientist?”

His smile felt strained. “Pick your poison.”

Clint snorted. “Fair enough.” He paused. “So...if Thor’s not going to kill you - which, seems like he’s not planning on it. What are you going to do about him?”

Loki rubbed the heels of his hands into his eyes. “I don’t know. I know what I will not do: I am not going back to Asgard. Hopefully once Midgard is safe he will return agreeably back there and leave me be.”

“Seems likely,” Clint said dryly. Loki laughed wearily.

“Indeed. Of course, it may be a moot point, if we do not make it through this.”

“Nice and optimistic. I like it.” Clint glanced sidelong at him. “We’re nearing the drop point. Need
“Your good wishes,” Loki said with a grim smile.

“Those you’ve definitely got,” Clint said. “In abundance.”

He and Steve dropped down into woods on the side of a mountain, two miles from the Tesseract’s location. They’d brought communicators to keep contact with the others, but it still felt very much as if they were truly on their own now.

Steve gave him a faint smile. “Well,” he said. “Shall we?”

“We do have some walking to do,” Loki said, with his own faint, strained smile. Now that he was close, walking toward - to be coy about it - his doom, he kept thinking of metal biting into his skin, pain that seemed to go on without end, the release of unconsciousness denied. He could not waver, but he was not exactly eager.

Steve’s effort at a smile faded away. “Loki…?”

“Don’t,” Loki said harshly. He heard Steve sigh, but he fell silent.

“I figure we should split up a ways out,” Steve said finally. “Stay in touch via comms, so we know...when something happens. If we get split up-”

“I can find you,” Loki said. Steve glanced at him, and Loki gave him a thin smile. “Magic. A minor working will create a...resonance that I can follow to your location.”

“And if I need to find you?” Steve asked.

This was the part of the plan Loki had liked least. Natasha had all but threatened him into agreement, however. He pulled the little pin out of his pocket and held it out. “This. It should be invisible to everyone else, but if it is noticed...hopefully it will seem innocuous. It is linked to a...chip, temporarily embedded under my skin. Press the button on the back and it will show you my location.”

Steve studied it, turning it over in his fingers. “Handy.” He glanced at Loki. “I’m surprised you allowed that.”

“Agent Romanov is very persuasive,” Loki said stiffly. Steve, to his surprise, huffed a laugh before attaching the pin to his collar.

“There are a lot of ways this could go wrong,” he said.

“We didn’t have a lot of options,” Loki said. “Regretting joining me here, Captain?”

“Nah,” Steve said after only a moment’s hesitation. “Going behind enemy lines on a reckless mission against orders? Feels just like old times.”

“Not the old times I would expect you to miss,” Loki said. Steve’s expression tightened, very briefly.

“More than you’d think, actually,” he said. The ground started to slope upwards. Loki wondered if he ought to pry at that statement, but decided that he had better not, at least not right now.

He wondered how the others were faring. He did not envy them their wait.
He and Steve covered ground well. The forest thinned out as they climbed upwards into the foothills. “What do you think,” Steve asked, “did this von Doom fella take his cues from Count Dracula?” Loki cocked his head, giving Steve a quizzical look. “You’ve never seen - oh, right.” Steve half smiled. “Well, you might be the only person who knows even less about pop culture than I do. It’s a book - there was a movie about it, came out in ’31. There’s this vampire - you know vampires, right?”

“I do know some things,” Loki said.

“Just making sure. So this vampire, Count Dracula, lives in a spooky castle in the mountains, surrounded by wild wolves.”

“I doubt Doom is in his castle,” Loki said. “And I am somewhat fond of wolves.”

“It was a,” Steve started to say, and then noticed Loki’s faint smile and scowled. “Oh, ha ha.”

Conversation died as they got closer, though. Loki caught himself scanning the trees anxiously and forced himself to stop. They had a ways to go yet.

“Time to split up, you think?” Steve asked quietly.

Now that it came to it, Loki didn’t want to. His heart was pounding despite the reminders that this was planned, it was deliberate, and regardless of what happened there were people who were coming for him. This wasn’t like the last time. Doom wouldn’t kill either of them, not without knowing what they were up to. His curiosity would be his downfall.

“Loki?” Steve said. He shook himself.

“Yes,” he said, forcing himself to smile. “Probably. Best of luck, Captain. May we see each other soon.”


“Soon,” Loki said, and gripped Steve’s hand briefly.

He watched Steve go before turning and heading in the other direction. He called his magic and veiled himself from sight - making himself too easily noticed would be suspicious, and there was a slim possibility, too, that he could slip through Doom’s lines. Unlikely, but if there was any chance of avoiding his expected fate Loki would take it.

Almost before Loki expected it, the trees thinned out and he saw the edifice of a building rising up in front of him. He almost laughed: it was, indeed, a castle. One that looked to have been long abandoned before it had been reoccupied.

He hoped Steve would share his amusement at Doom’s...showmanship.

Extending his senses outward, Loki dealt with the mundane traps first before working through carefully disarming the magical ones - at least those he could sense. He had to reckon with the possibility that there might be some he could not, and moved cautiously, skirting the walls looking for an opening. For a moment he imagined simply waltzing in through the front door, taunting Doom with his audacity - but that might cast doubt on this entire gambit.

It was a good thing that the castle was old. He found a small culvert with only a trickle of water running through it, and wrenched the metal grate out of place. It was not comfortable, but he could
crawl through. At least that got him through the walls.

The inside of the castle was more modern than the exterior. Loki kept his movement slow and quiet, wondering where Steve was, if he had been captured, if he had been harmed. He doubted it; Doom would want to gloat over his prize. But depending on how hard Steve had fought…

He paused and reached outward with his magic, trying to sense which direction he should go. Too late, he felt it brush a snare hooked into one of the walls, almost invisible.

Loki snapped back to himself before the backlash hit him, but he doubted the reaction had gone unnoticed. The trap had been sprung. He doubted there would be time to get away now, not without leaving Steve, not without abandoning the primary target of this mission. No, onward and forward.

He sped up his pace, no longer watching quite so closely for traps, weaving his way toward what he judged as the center. He could feel it now - there must be some kind of buffer, but the Tesseract was too strong to be muffled completely.

Its magic sang, and Loki almost swayed at the pull of it, the desire that swept through him, a promise as sweet as it was deadly. Even knowing how dangerous it would be to try to control that power, Loki was still tempted to test his will against it. What he could do then...

All he needed to do was take it. Not use it. He’d done it once before, while Thanos was riding his body, so at the very least he was strong enough for that.

“Loki?”

He whirled, eyes widening. Foster stood there, unchained, free - but her dark eyes were... changed. An unnatural blue that send a shudder through him. “Foster?” he said blankly, and then he heard the sound of heavy feet marching. Four at least, maybe more. “Stay back,” he said, turning toward the sound.

“Loki,” Foster said with enthusiasm, seemingly not hearing him. “Victor said you might come. I’m so glad you’re here. The Tesseract-”

“Not now,” Loki said, almost snarled, as the first of Doom’s soldiers rounded the corner. They wore armor like Doom’s, faceplates the same. By the way they moved, Loki judged there were no humans among them. Perhaps Doom didn’t trust them enough.

He summoned his magic and lashed out, crumpling one of the ones at the fore and flinging it into one of its companions. He cast one spell after another in quick succession, but he could hear more coming.

Loki did not intend to make it easy to capture him. He had planned to fight. But as the robots, armored like their master, closed in, he stopped thinking. His thoughts went blank, magic surging to his command as rage consumed him, rage with terror on its heels. *Never again, you’ll never touch me again,* the magic building in him to tear this building to the ground along with everyone in it-

Foster. Steve.

Loki jarred back to himself. He was holding one of the robots by its metal throat, moments from crushing it, but in that moment its hands gripped his wrists and lightning coursed through his body, a relentless flood that drove him to his knees. His spasming hand obliterated the thing, but there were more of its brethren on its heels.

He would have kept fighting, but it was already over. Whatever Doom’s servants had used on him in
Calcutta, he seemed to have improved upon it. He could feel his magic being crushed down within him, bound as tightly as his wrists were bound behind him.

“You’ll understand soon,” Foster said earnestly, hovering nearby. “I promise. Why didn’t you tell me how beautiful it is, Loki? The Tesseract. It’s...everything.”

“What has von Doom done to you?” Loki asked. His voice slurred slightly. Foster shook her head.

“He didn’t do anything,” Jane said, her eyes shining strangely. “He just showed me the truth. I understand...so much. You were trying to explain but I couldn’t really get it until now.”

“Whatever he’s told you is a lie,” Loki said. “Whatever he has said to convince you - he is using you.” He knew it was useless. It must be magic, somehow - but at least she still had her mind. At least she was not one of those mindless automatons.

They dragged him to his feet and forward.

He struggled, because Doom would expect it and in truth because panic still beat a drumbeat in his stomach despite the fact that this was the plan, this was what was supposed to happen, all of this was as intended. Still, when the creatures restraining him half pushed, half dragged him into a room and he saw Steve already there, bound and on his knees, he felt a lurch of dread.

Steve’s head turned slightly in his direction, his expression tight. Loki tried to calm himself. This was your choice, he thought, but at the moment that just made him doubt his own sanity, half certain of the accusations Thor had made, that Natasha only barely did not make.

“You too?” Steve said, with a strained smile. Loki scanned the room, but there was no sign of their host.

“So it would seem,” he said absently. Steve’s eyes moved past him and widened.

“Doctor Foster?” He said.

“Something has been done to her,” Loki said. “She isn’t herself.”

“I would beg to differ,” said a voice that made Loki’s whole body clench with mingled fear and anger. He clamped down on the former and held tightly to the latter. “And so would she.”

Loki lifted his head sharply. Doom stood, expression inscrutable behind his metal mask. Seeing him, Loki’s thoughts went blank and he was back strapped down to Doom’s table, screams locked behind his teeth as he was flayed down to raw nerve.

“I bet you would,” Steve said. “People like you usually think everyone should be real grateful.”

Loki sucked in a breath through his nose and made himself laugh. Doom’s head turned slightly toward him.

“You,” he said. “I was disappointed to lose much of my research when you slithered away.”

Loki smiled, knowing how it would look. “Such a pity.”

“It doesn’t matter any more,” Doom said. “I have moved beyond such petty concerns. There are greater prizes than you for the claiming.” His face turned toward Steve, who was glaring daggers at him. “Captain America, is it?”

“Can’t say it’s a pleasure,” Steve said flatly.
“Ah, but I am honored to have someone of such stature here to witness the beginning of my victory.” Doom stepped forward, moving further into the room.

Loki’s stomach dropped. Doom was holding a scepter, the haft shimmering gold but that was nothing to the twisting, swirling glow of the jewel it held, the power he could feel thrumming from it, and the terrifying thrill of understanding. Of course Thanos had not left his lieutenant unarmed. Of course he would give him power, promise and reminder in one. Of course.

He felt sick.

“What is that,” Steve asked, his voice strained.

“I am glad you asked.” Doom walked toward them. Slowly. Loki strained, twisting, but Doom knew his strength and had calculated for it.

“No,” he said, too loudly. “You cannot control me. You do not have the will, you do not have the strength. You are a fool toying with forces beyond your comprehension. I will fight you to the end and I will not break-“

“Before an Infinity Stone? You would,” Doom said, but he sneered. “You rejected the Titan’s offer. You were always a flawed tool at best. I have no further use for you, Loki of Jotunheim.” His face turned, slowly, toward Steve.

Steve’s eyes widened. He might not know exactly what he was facing, but he fought, he struggled until the robot holding him nearly wrenched his arms from his sockets.

In the end, Doom was right. There was no fighting an Infinity Stone.

The robot released Steve, but he didn’t stand. Loki could see his eyes, washed an unnatural blue. “Steve,” he said, and he turned to look at Loki, and then looked up at Doom.

“Leave him,” Doom said. “There is nothing he can do to stop it now.”

Steve stood. Loki wanted him to stumble, or move like a puppet, but he just moved like himself. “Where are we going?” He asked, all business. Loki thrashed, a howl bursting from his lips.

Foster stepped toward him. “Come on, Loki. It’s going to be beautiful. You should be there. Don’t fight it, you can help-“

“Jane,” Doom said, in a voice like an indulgent parent. “Come along. We have places to be.”

“You’re a fool if you think he will leave you anything!” Loki shouted. “He will use you up and then destroy you-!”

“Not if I destroy him first.” Doom turned and walked away. Steve fell into step behind him, and Jane glanced at him once more, sadly, before turning away. Loki screamed, wordless, wild, and Doom paused.

“You’ll lose,” Loki snarled. “And I will be there. I will destroy you, I will rip you apart and scatter your remains, I will erase every memory, every trace of your legacy-”

“Ah, Loki,” Doom said, hideous condescension in his voice. “You should have accepted Thanos’ offer when he gave you the chance. He was more generous than I will be, when the universe is mine.”
Loki shuddered. With hatred, with fear, with rage. But he was helpless. Utterly, completely, *pathetically* helpless.

A needle jabbed into the back of his neck, directly into his spinal cord, and pain chewed holes in his thoughts until there was nothing left. The last thing he saw was Jane Foster closing the door, mouthing *I’m sorry*. 
“Loki. Hey. Loki!” He stirred, groggily. His whole body ached, and he dimly recognized Clint’s voice. “I found him! Over here!”

He prised his eyes open and turned his head a fraction to look at Clint. “Welcome back,” he said. “You look like shit. Where’s Cap?”

Gone, Loki meant to say, but had to try again. “Gone.” He couldn’t quite summon up despair. Just a numb feeling of failure. He should have seen this coming. Or at least should have stopped it. Twisting Steve from himself, turning him into little more than a puppet…

He felt sick. But that might be the lingering effect of the drug.

And Doom had not even bothered to take Loki with him, or kill him. He’d looked at Loki and seen exactly how useless he was, what he was worth, and discarded him.

“Loki, focus,” Clint said. “What do you mean, gone?”


“Where’s Cap?” He heard Tony ask, and wanted to flinch from that, too.

“Taken,” Loki said dully. “Doom has...I do not know how, but it seems he has come into possession of the Mind Stone. A gift from Thanos, which suggests he is much closer to breaking through than I thought.” He felt Thor go still, momentarily frozen.

“Both Foster and...and Steve are bound to his will, now,” Loki said. He closed his eyes so he did not have to see their faces, did not have to see them thinking why didn’t you stop this. A cold part of him knew that in some ways this was better. He could be used to deadly ends in Thanos’s hands, and other than Thor his friends would be hard pressed to stop him. But he could have fought, perhaps could have wrested control of the Infinity Stone away-

_Hubris, nothing more._

“Shit,” Clint said. “_Fuck._” From Natasha, silence. From Thor…

Loki could feel the charge building in the air. “What did he do to Jane?”

“Thor,” Loki said wearily. “You cannot just go charging after...likely at the moment she would throw herself in front of her new master to defend his life.”

“This - _Doom_ has stolen her will, her very _mind_, and you would tell me to _hold_?” The storm was growing closer and Loki almost wanted to surrender to it, to let Thor do what he would, but...if Doom captured Thor’s heart, or attacked him - his mind conjured images of Thor bound with magic and writhing in pain and his very body revolted against it.

“This has gone on long enough. I heeded you, Loki, but this man, this _cur_ - he wounded you and now he has taken Jane as well. I will seek him out and destroy him utterly-”

“Whoa, buddy,” Stark said.

Some part of Loki insisted on being touched at Thor’s anger on his behalf. He shoved it away, pressing his fingers into the ground. “No, Thor,” he said. “You will not. You cannot fight him alone. Doom now has the power of two Infinity Stones at his fingertips. He has Steve Rogers as a bodyguard. I underestimated him and it cost me once - and this time it’s cost all of us.” He closed his eyes. “I urge you not to make the same mistake.”

Clint was still crouched next to him. “Hey,” he said. “The plan was solid. We had no way of knowing about this...Mind Stone thing.”

“I will not stand idle,” Thor said hotly.

“You aren’t,” Natasha said quietly. “But Loki’s right. You go haring off on your own and it puts the whole team in danger - and maybe Jane besides. We need to pull back. Regroup. Loki...do you know if the mind-control can be reversed?”

Tony hissed. “Shit, it might _not_ be reversible?”

“It should be,” Loki said hoarsely. “Very little magic is...irreversible. But I do not know. The Infinity Stones have always been a thing of myths. Legends. No one discusses their...practical use.” He paused, looking around them. “Where’s Banner?”

“Held back,” Natasha said. “We weren’t sure what we were walking into and didn’t want anyone accidentally crushed by a wayward Hulk.”

Loki nodded fractionally. He felt like he’d been beaten within an inch of his life, but he knew his injuries were far from severe. Failure burned in his gut.

“We should get out of here,” Clint said. “This place could be rigged, and it seems to be empty. No point in hanging around waiting for it to blow.”
It was Thor who clasped Loki’s wrist and pulled him to his feet, and he did not have the will to pull away. His expression was tight, still angry, but it softened slightly as he searched Loki’s face. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” Loki said, looking away. “I am not. It appears Doom decided that I am...irrelevant.”

Thor’s expression hardened again. “A mistake he will rue,” he said, and Loki glanced at him, surprised. Thor’s hand squeezed once and then fell away, turning to Natasha. “Very well,” he said. “I will hold. For now. But Doom’s head is mine.”

“Unless I take it first,” Loki said, and if the anger wasn’t strong enough to overcome the gloom that had swamped him, it at least added a counterweight.

“Claims on Doom’s head aside,” Natasha said, her voice tight, “we need to find him, first. And hopefully there’s still time to cut him off before he opens any doors. That has to be our priority, not Dr. Foster and not Steve.”

“Guys,” Tony said, a strange note in his voice, “I don’t think finding Doom is going to be the problem.”

Loki’s whole body went cold. Colder. “What do you mean,” he said.

“Because he’s standing on top of my tower right now,” Tony said, “what a motherfucking asshole, that’s my tower, named after me, doesn’t he have enough Doom-themed buildings to stand on-”

Loki’s head spun. Oh, this, this was bad. He had thought it was bad enough but now it was worse, a lot worse, because if von Doom was showing his hand this brazenly-

“How do you know?” Thor asked Tony. “Do you know if Jane is there? Can you see her?”

“Aaaand I’ve lost cameras,” Tony said. “Son of a bitch! If he’s fucked with JARVIS...sorry, big guy, didn’t see her.”

“We need to go,” Loki said. “Now.”

Natasha’s expression was grim. “It’s starting, isn’t it? For real, now.”

“Yes,” Loki said. “It seems it is.” There was a long pause.

“Well, shit,” Clint said.

Natasha called Maria Hill on the plane.

“You wouldn’t happen to know anything about our fugitive agent, would you?” Hill asked, her voice suspiciously neutral. “Or Dr. Banner, for that matter?”

“They’re with me,” she said, which struck Loki as possibly too brazen. “But we’ve got bigger problems. The Tesseract was in Doom’s possession, and it turns out he has another item of similar power. He used it to brainwash both Jane Foster and Steve Rogers into working for him, and he’s in New York now, probably about to open an interdimensional portal.”

To her credit, Hill only paused a moment before asking the obvious question. “An interdimensional portal to what?”

Natasha looked at Loki and just said, “something bad. We’re on our way.”
“Who’s we?”

Natasha’s lips twitched. “The Avengers, Maria. Who else?”

“Should I ask who that means?”

“Does it matter?” There was a little bit of bite to Natasha’s voice. “We’re on the clock here, Maria. This could get bad, fast. Fury needs to be called in. If things go south…we’ll need backup. The heavy kind.”

Bruce frowned. “What does that mean?”

“Understood,” Maria said after a brief pause. “Once this is over, though…we need to have a chat about rules and how they do technically apply to you.”

“Sure,” Natasha said. “As long as we’re not all dead by then.” She hung up and turned back toward the rest of them.

“What is ‘heavy backup’?” Bruce asked.

“If it comes to that then we’re probably already screwed,” Natasha said. Loki shifted.

“They aren’t taking this seriously,” he said. His skin was humming anxiously. How long did they have? He should have just shadow-walked back, but that would mean going with at most two others in order to travel safely, and he couldn’t ignore the possibility that Doom had set something that would react to his magic specifically. The man had shown himself clever before, and as he’d told Thor, Loki had underestimated him too many times. “You haven’t faced anything like this before-”

“Exactly,” Natasha said. “We haven’t. It’s hard to respond to a threat on a magnitude that you can’t really conceptualize.” She rolled her shoulders back, betraying a tension Loki realized she was trying hard not to show. “SHIELD’s adaptable. Once they do understand…”

“And if that understanding comes too late?” Loki snapped. Thor stirred.

“This Victor von Doom may be a formidable foe, but he is not invincible,” Thor said. “Whatever his power, he is only human.”

“And what if we cannot stop him?” Loki demanded. “Would you say the same of Thanos?”

“Whoa there,” Tony said. “Could you cool it with the fatalism? Let’s not assume the worst just yet.”

“Not assuming the worst is what got me here,” Loki said. “I should have guessed that Doom would have received assistance from Thanos in some form, that he would have some power augmenting his own.” He flexed his right hand. And at the very least I should be the one paying for not seeing it.

Natasha made a disgusted noise. “Or I should have seen it. I’m team leader, right? Or Bruce could’ve been looking for some kind of anomalous energy signature, or we all could’ve gotten there faster. We can play the blame game all day if you want, Loki, but it’s only going to weaken everyone. Let’s focus on what we can do, rather than what we should have. Okay?”

Loki felt…distinctly chastened. Embarrassed. He had failed, yes, but wallowing in his own guilt wouldn’t defeat Doom. All he could do was…do better. Not fail.

Tony whistled. “Good speech,” he said. Natasha shot him a dirty look. Loki glanced over at Thor, surprised by his silence, and found himself meeting a considering gaze.

“It is nothing,” he said.

“Then please, find somewhere else to stare,” Loki said flatly. “Or you will find yourself flying back to New York, and not on this plane.”

Silence fell, all of them drifting off into their own private thoughts. Thor seemed to take Loki’s words to heart and struck up a conversation with Stark, who kept shooting Loki looks like he was expecting Loki to object. He pretended not to notice, and tried to pretend not to be aware of Thor’s periodic glances in his direction.

What did Thor want? After this was over, if they all survived…Thor said he wanted Loki to go back to Asgard with him. That he would be welcome, that he would be forgiven. He made it sound like the truth, but that seemed impossible. With all he had done…exile was the least sentence. Surely Odin would not so easily countenance the return of a traitor-

(No, Loki.)

No. The question was, was Thor’s belief irrational optimism, or had the Allfather lied about his intentions in order to coax his wayward pet back? To kill, to imprison – did it matter?

And what if, whispered a soft, stubborn voice, Thor speaks the truth? What if they would welcome you home, even after everything?

What then?

It wouldn’t, Loki reminded himself, matter in the least if von Doom opened a portal and unleashed Thanos on the world. After.

If he survived this.

And that was far from certain. Natasha could call that fatalism, but Loki thought it better to keep that knowledge close.

The coast - and New York City’s skyline, with Stark’s tower a finger pointing toward the sky - came into view. “Loki,” Natasha said, “can you check for any kinds of traps for approaching aircraft?”

“Shit,” Clint said. “Didn’t think of that. Should I pull up?”

Loki cast out his magic, relieved that it came. He probed for traces of Doom’s magic in front of them, but could not feel anything. Stretching further until he began to feel the strain, though, he caught a wisp of - something.

“Loki?” Clint’s voice was tense. “It’d be nice to know if I should be expecting to explode.”

“Not immediately,” Loki said absently. “There’s something…”

Natasha’s phone rang. She picked it up, glanced at the screen, and turned on the speaker. “Maria.”

“We’ve got a problem,” she said. Her voice was taut. Loki listened with half an ear, still trying to pinpoint the source of that faint tickle. “Doom’s claiming he’s there to prevent a terrorist attack connected with the murder of Norman Osborn. He says there’s a massive network of explosives under the city and he’s the only one who can hold it in check while he tries to dismantle it. There are Doombots on the streets, supposedly to maintain order.” Her expression spasmed. “Guess who he’s
Loki felt heads swivel in his direction. “What a fucking rat,” Clint said.

“Not publicly. Yet. But that’s obviously not our biggest problem. If we move, he’s going to trigger whatever he’s got in place, and I doubt we’re lucky enough that it’ll kill him along with 1.5 million people.”

“He could be bluffing,” Banner said, sounding hopeful. “No,” Loki said, jerking his magic back. “He isn’t.”

“Shit,” Tony said. “Did you...find something?”

“Something,” Loki said. “I don’t dare get closer without knowing exactly what it is. It isn’t just magic, though.”

“Shit,” Tony said, more loudly. “So the second we go in there-”

“Boom,” Clint said. He looked a little green. “What the hell are we supposed to do?”

Loki shook his head. “He won’t set it off until his device is secure. Until he finishes what he came to do. He isn’t bluffing, but it would be a setback he may not be able to afford.”

“How sure are you of that?” Tony asked nervously.

“Almost entirely.”

“It’s that ‘almost’ that worries me.”

Thor shifted. “This trap,” he said, and it took Loki a moment to realize that it was directed at him. “Is there some way of disabling it?”

Loki grimaced. “Without knowing more...I’d be loathe to try. Doom knows me. Knows my magic.”

“And there’s the other thing,” Natasha said grimly. “Doombots in the streets. There’s going to be panic. Even if Doom doesn’t unleash the Big Bang, he can always turn them on civilians.”

“We’re coming in fast,” Clint said. “Any ideas?”

Loki inhaled. “Land the plane. Make it look like we’ve turned back, been stymied in our efforts.”

“We haven’t?” Banner murmured.

“No yet.” Loki rolled his shoulders back. “Two things. We need to deal with Doom before he manages to finish his work with the Tesseract. He’s moved slowly before this, but either he’s rushing now because he’s overconfident or because he has a time limit. Either way, that gives us an edge. A slight one. And there are his machines that need to be dealt with. We need Doom distracted enough that he can’t, or won’t, set off whatever he’s embedded in the ground.” He paused.

Instinct whispered you’ll need all of them. Stronger with the entire group, Doom is the bigger threat, there may be casualties but what does it matter in the scheme of things-

There were people in those streets. Like the people who had taken him in in those first, stumbling,
confused days full of despair. Like Maureen, and Chandra, and maybe Roslyn (even still). Doctor Foster.

These humans in this plane now.

“And...someone should be on the streets. To deal with Doom’s machines.”

They were all looking at him, Loki realized. Natasha’s eyebrows were raised, but there was a faint smile turning up one corner of her mouth. The look on Thor’s face was even stranger, both startled and thoughtful.

Loki winced. “I do, of course, defer to our leader.” He nodded toward Natasha.

“No,” she said, “it’s a good idea.” Loki felt an almost unreasonable well of pleasure. “We’ve been playing defense for too long, letting Doom dictate the terms of the game. Time to change tactics and take the fight to him.” She glanced around the plane at all of them. “Tony, Clint and I will take on the Doombots. You, Bruce, and Thor head for Doom.”

Loki’s eyebrows twitched. “You’re not keeping me back from him?”

“You’re not going to be on your own. And you are the strongest. Do you think you can get Steve and Doctor Foster back?”

Loki set his jaw. “I can try.” He could feel Thor looking at him like Loki had just made some great concession, and tried to ignore it.

Banner looked unhappy. “You know I don’t have much control over...the Other Guy, right? He’s not exactly a finesse sort of person.”

“Don’t worry about my tower,” Tony said. “I can always build a new one.”

“I’m more worried about Midtown. Or the possibility that he might end up hurting one of you.”

“Right now,” Loki said tightly, “we don’t want finesse. We want Doom dealt with as quickly and decisively as possible.”

Tony twitched. “You’re going to kill him.”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “That is the goal. Is that a problem?”

Thor frowned. “Why would it be?”

Stark didn’t look happy, but he shook his head. “Guess not.”

Natasha eyed them. “Be careful,” she said eventually. “First priority is retrieving the Tesseract, then extracting Steve and Dr. Foster. Doom...if we need to, we can deal with Doom once the immediate threat is cleared.”

Loki flashed his teeth. “I am not going to let him get away again.”

“You will if that’s what it takes.” Natasha looked him directly in the eye. “Understand? Tesseract, our people, Doom. In that order.”

Loki looked at her for a long moment, and finally dipped his chin. “Fine.”

“Heading down for the landing,” Clint said. “Everybody buckle up. This might be a little bumpy.”
They landed just outside the boundary of the magic Loki could sense. “What now,” Clint asked a little dryly. “We take the subway into downtown?”

Loki shook his head. He glanced forward, fingers twitching, then stepped over the invisible line, casting a shield over the others.

Nothing.

“It doesn’t react to magic,” Loki said. “I think we can assume that Doom’s power is stretched thin, even with his...assistance. He cannot, or will not, react as long as we move cautiously.”

“All right,” Natasha said, “So that’s what we do. Loki, how many people can you take with you?”

“Two with certainty of safety. Maybe three for a short distance.”

She nodded. “Right. Thor, you can fly, right? That leaves me, Clint, and Dr. Banner. How confident are you in that ‘maybe’?”

Loki hesitated, calculating. “Fairly confident.”

“Wait a minute,” Banner said. “Take with you how?”

“We’re going to need you to stay calm, Dr. Banner,” Natasha said. Her mouth was a narrow, tense line. “Thor, Tony, go. Stay low but move fast. Let’s go.”

“Dr. Banner,” Loki said, starting to weave, “close your eyes. And take a deep breath.”

He stepped through space into the top floor of Stark’s tower, slamming a shield down around them.

“Oh, fuck,” Banner said, bent over and shaking. “Fuck, I’m - I’m-”

“Go,” Loki snapped to Clint and Natasha. “Be careful.” To Banner he said, “Focus on Doom. You know what we’re here to do.” A moment later he added regretfully, “I am sorry. I know you didn’t want this.”

With a roar, Banner transformed. Loki heard thunder overhead. He ran for the stairs.

He took in the scene on the roof in a series of quick glances - Foster crouched by a machine wreathed in layer upon layer of defensive magic, the Tesseract embedded at its core. Doom standing nearby, holding his new weapon vibrating with magic. Steve at his shoulder, the unnatural blue of his eyes washing out his face.

“So you’ve returned,” Doom said, “to witness my victory.”

“I’ve come back to rip you to shreds before you destroy the world with your folly,” Loki said. He bared his teeth. “And I did not come alone.”

He just managed to get out of the way in time as Banner exploded through the ceiling with a roar, lunging toward Doom - but Doom just smiled.

He raised a hand and swept it down. A shield rose up in front of him, but even as Banner hammered against it Loki saw Doom’s mouth moving.

“Get back!” He shouted, lunging forward, but by then he could see something flying rapidly toward them, growing larger and larger-
“You didn’t think I would have come unprepared,” Doom said, his voice sounding as though he was amplified with magic. “I did not expect my victory to be easy.”

Loki lunged and rolled out of the way as the creature - mechanical, something like a dragon, crashed into Banner and bore him off the edge of the building. He summoned his magic only a moment before lightning struck from a blue sky, shattering Doom’s shield.

He slammed into the roof of the tower and Loki almost staggered back from him, a flash of fear briefly coursing through him - a near instinctive response even still. But that rage, that power, was turned entirely toward a different target.

“You seek the ruin of this Realm,” Thor said. “If that was all, I might accept your surrender. But you hurt my brother. You stole Jane’s mind from her. And for that...”

“Don’t kill Steve,” Loki shouted. “He can be freed!”

Loki was almost sure of that.

Thor did not answer. He leaped for Doom, hammer raised, and Loki could not hesitate to ensure he listened, however much he wanted to. The priority is the Tesseract. Its energy was building - he could feel it coalescing in the prickling on his skin. He touched it with his magic and jerked back with a yelp, a shock like Thor’s lightning shooting through him. Dr. Foster turned.

“Loki!” She said, beaming. “Look! Isn’t it beautiful?”

He glanced briefly over his shoulder, but both Doom and Steve seemed occupied with Thor.

He ran toward Foster. “How do I stop it,” he demanded. She shook her head, wide-eyed.

“Why would you want to?” She asked. “This is what I was trying to do, all along - he showed me how. It’s going to be incredible.”

“It is going to be considerably more than that,” Loki said. There wasn’t time to argue, and the conviction in her gaze was unwavering. The magic wouldn’t give for persuasion. There was no room to change her mind with words.

He grabbed Foster and dragged her back away from the machine. She screamed, struggling, but he tightened his grip and called on his magic, winding it around those tendrils of foreign power and pulling, too aware of time slipping away. Ignoring Jane’s heels kicking his shins, Loki tugged. It was like trying to pull a weed, but without damaging the soil. Removing an arrow, but an arrow that seemed to be pulling back.

Then he felt the connection snap, abruptly vanishing. Foster went limp. She’s dead, there was a failsafe of some kind, Loki thought wildly, but then she stirred.

“Uh,” she said faintly. Loki set her down, meaning to let go, but when he started to she almost crumpled.

“Dr. Foster,” he said urgently. “I need to go. If you can pull yourself together, the machine you helped make - try to find a way to destroy it, or deactivate it. Don’t touch the Tesseract.”

Foster blinked at him, seeming dazed. “Loki?”

Loki cast a look over toward where Thor was battling Doom and Steve simultaneously.
“Destroy the machine,” he repeated, and left her, sprinting back towards Thor. He reached for his magic, forging a vicious curse, but before he could cast it Steve was in his way, unearthly blue eyes almost glowing.

“I can’t let you do that,” he said, and slammed his shield into Loki’s face.

Loki felt his nose crack. Had the magic made him stronger? He grabbed Steve’s arm behind the shield and flipped him, but Steve sprung back to his feet, and Loki couldn’t unleash his full strength without damaging him, killing him.

But he was an obstacle. That was, Loki thought, a good portion of why Doom had taken him, knowing that a familiar face would be a distraction.

He needed to end this fast. Take Steve off the board, because while Thor might be handling Doom for now, and he hoped Foster was dismantling her work, they were as much - if not more - out of time as Doom.

Priorities.

Loki set his teeth. He could sense the magic woven through Steve’s mind, snarled around his heart like fine blue chains, just as with Dr. Foster. He reached out to undo it and only barely dodged his fist in time.

He could fight or he could try to undo Doom’s work. He couldn’t manage both.

An easy choice, really.

Loki shunted his focus sideways, calling on his magic and grabbing hold of that gleaming blue magic. It fought him, and he felt Steve knock him off his feet, rolled back up and danced out of the way. He could still react, but too slowly; he was going to come out of this bruised.

It was strong. The magic Doom had used – the Mind Stone – was like nothing Loki had touched before, and he could feel it fighting him, resisting his will – but its will and Loki’s were not the only ones at work. He saw Steve’s movement hitch slightly and struck for that weakness, throwing him down on his back and pinning him down.

He could feel Steve struggling against it. Pushing back.

A tendril of magic slithered free, and Steve flipped them again, grabbing Loki’s hair and slamming his head back against concrete.

Loki’s vision doubled and he almost lost hold of his magic, but he clung to it, teasing magic free like unweaving a knot, and Thor, keep Doom busy, keep him-

His focus shattered as his skull cracked against pavement. Loki grabbed Steve and threw him off and to the side, staggering as he pushed himself up. He snatched for his magic, spun to look for Doom. If he could break the link between him and the scepter bearing the Mind Stone-

He caught a glimpse of Thor raising Mjolnir high and just looked away in time that the lightning that flashed down to strike von Doom didn’t blind him. When he looked back Doom was still standing, though, and laughing.

“The Tesseract!” Foster was shouting. “Someone take the Tesseract-“

Loki lunged back toward it, but Steve was in his way and he couldn’t be sure of disabling him
without permanent damage, but they were running out of time.

Steve punched him in the stomach and Loki snarled, grabbed him by the neck, and pulled the loose end of magic until he felt the rest of it slither free, spinning back toward Doom and sending a bolt of power back along the connection that had linked his scepter to Steve.

Doom’s laughter cut off and he lurched back. “Thor, the Tesseract,” Loki shouted, his heart pounding, but Doom lashed out with a blast of blue light that left a smoking hole in the roof.

“You fools! You think you can stop me?” Doom’s voice vibrated, and Loki could not tell how much was magic and how much the madman himself. “It ends now.”

“Loki?” Steve’s voice sounded blurry, confused. “What the hell…”

They were all too far away. Loki felt the Tesseract awaken.

A beam of blue light flashed out of the machine holding the Tesseract, the power of it reverberating against every one of Loki’s senses.

A hole opened in space, yawning into empty, black, nothingness. No, not nothingness, Loki realized, staggering back. An enormous figure, looming as he stepped through.

And smiled.
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

There are a lot of things I could say here but it would probably just devolve into a lot of "ahhhh" and "insecure yelling" so...I'm going to leave that off, and just say a very sincere thank you to Amelia for all her beta-ing work, Lena for giving me a second pair of eyes on this chapter, and all of you for your patience.

Shorter chapter this time, but hopefully the next one will be sooner. We're really in the home stretch now.

Enjoy.

Oh, Norms, Loki thought.

Or, more accurately and more pithily, oh, fuck.

Thanos stood before them, titan in truth as well as name, a golden glove on one hand with a socket on each knuckle.

Loki’s heart jumped into his throat and his thoughts briefly flashed to a shattered world, fingers tearing through his mind, screaming as his being was turned inside out. Fear froze him in place, instinctive, animal.

“Lord Thanos!” Doom said, triumph ringing in his voice. “I brought you here! I unlocked the door, I have been your loyal lieutenant.”

You fool, Loki thought. He felt like he was trying to move through tar, everything slowed. He couldn’t see the others, Thor, Steve, Jane…

“So you have,” Thanos said. There was very little tone in his voice.

“And so I will,” Doom said. “Give me my promised reward, and I will be your right hand to help you claim all you seek.”

“Our promised reward,” Thanos said, sounding almost thoughtful. “Of course.”

Doom stepped forward. “I have done all you asked, Lord Thanos. Let us finish this together.”

“You have indeed served admirably, Victor von Doom,” Thanos said, but his eyes turned to fix on Loki, and his lungs froze. His gaze seemed to pin Loki like an insect as he raised one hand. “You asked for immortality. I will give you the truest immortality there is.”

He snapped his fingers. Loki heard Doom’s neck break and he dropped, limp, to the ground. Thanos didn’t even look at the body, turning toward the city slowly, as though he had all the time in the world.

“Thanos!” Thor’s voice cracked like thunder. “Turn and face me, if you do not fear a worthy opponent!”

Thor, no, Loki thought, and finally, finally he managed to move, lashing out with the nastiest curse he could think of. Thanos glanced at him and caught it in one hand like a child’s ball.

“Oh,” he said, smile broadening. “My defective pawn. You’re sturdier than you look.”

He crushed Loki’s curse with one hand and Loki only had a moment’s warning before Thanos reached out, shredding Loki’s defenses (so feeble, he’d thought himself so strong), and dug his fingers into Loki’s mind. He fought it, struggling like a rabbit in a snare that only tightened around his throat. He couldn’t tell if Thanos meant to crush him or just turn him into a mindless automaton in truth, his to command, everything that was Loki wiped away and turned, a weapon, against his friends-

The connection snapped and Loki reeled back, almost falling. Thor struck with a roar, lightning exploding out of the sky, Mjolnir connecting with Thanos’s face. His head snapped to the side and for a moment - a moment - Loki thought perhaps he’d done some damage. But when he turned his head back toward Thor, slowly, there was not so much as a mark on his jaw.

Loki saw it about to happen and shouted without words, lunging forward, but Thanos had already struck, casual as swatting a fly; he backhanded Thor and Thor - Thor - went flying.

No, Loki thought desperately, and then thought of the scepter. He turned, found it, and ran. “Steve!” He shouted as he sprinted across the rooftop to where it had fallen. “Take Jane and run-”

He lunged, grabbed the scepter and rolled to the side, ripping the gem out of it and slamming it against the roof. Steve was shouting and he heard a rumble of thunder. Finally, the casing cracked, revealing a small - so small - yellow gem. He wrapped his fist around it and whirled, surging to his feet.

He turned just in time to see Thanos throw Steve across the roof. He skidded to a stop and rolled back up, but his shield was gone. Loki could see the pieces of it on the ground, and Thanos stepped on one as he moved forward, slow and implacable as a rockslide.

“Do you really think,” he said, his eyes on Loki, “that you can use what is mine against me?”

“No,” Loki said. His voice came out sounding breathless. He opened himself to that power, pulled it in and let it blaze through him, dizzying, intoxicating, let him know what it feels like to have his mind torn open-

He reached for Thanos, honing the Mind Stone’s power into a knife, and attacked. For a moment, he thought he had him.

Thanos caught the tendrils of magic like they were strings and pulled. Loki fought it, held his ground and held fast, but he wasn’t - couldn’t-

“Mine,” Thanos said. The Stone tumbled from Loki’s suddenly nerveless fingers, flying to Thanos’s hand. He placed it, almost tenderly, into the Gauntlet.

No, Loki thought. No.

Thunder rolled across the sky, echoed by a roar. Loki got out of the way as Banner’s green form climbed onto the roof. He set down the figure he was holding in one hand and flung Doom’s mechanical dragon at Thanos with the other; Loki teleported himself across the roof to where Banner
had come up. For a few seconds, at least, he would have to hold Thanos back.

“Holy fuck,” Clint said, though his bow was already in his hands and drawn, eyes wild. “Doom’s bots went down and - holy fuck, I thought traveling by Hulk was bad-”

“Where’s Natasha?” Loki asked.

“Here,” Natasha said, as Tony set her down. “Where’s Doom?”

“Dead,” Steve said. His voice sounded hollow. Tony raised his repulsors in his direction, but Steve just said, “Loki shook him loose. It’s me.”

“How do we deal with this,” Natasha asked, and Loki wanted to shake his head, I don’t know, I don’t know what to do, I don’t know if we can beat him.

“Holy fuck,” Clint said again. Loki turned back.

Banner’s berserker form was on one knee. Thanos’s fist was clenched, the Mind Stone glowing, and Bruce was...shrinking. Diminishing.

Becoming human.

“Tony, get him out of there,” Steve said, already running - unarmed, no shield.

A deafening crack of thunder sounded, and a flash of lightning that drowned out Thor’s roar of rage, almost as loud as Banner’s.

Thanos turned away from Bruce with an expression more of annoyance than pain. Steve snatched up Doom’s empty scepter from the ground and went for the chink in armor at his knee. Tony, one arm across Bruce’s chest dragging him away, aimed a repulsor for Thanos’s face.

Stop watching, Loki screamed at himself. Move.

He swung into motion. He’d fought trolls, dragons, giants. Sometimes he and Thor alone, and they were not alone.

But Thanos was no troll, or dragon, or giant, and they were failing. He saw Thanos crush the arm of Tony’s armor, the eyes going dark as its power failed. He couldn’t see Steve, Clint, or Natasha. And Thor-

Thanos looked up at Thor, the lightning hardly seeming to touch him. The Mind Stone flashed gold and Thor screamed, Mjolnir falling, Thor falling -

No-

More. He needed more power. His - theirs - wasn’t enough.

He knew what he needed, and he knew where it was.

“Hold him off!” He shouted, and reached. A summoning spell, to call an object to him. The principle was simple. And easier with objects that one had touched.

But across Realms? He’d never tried. Never dared stretch so far. Warnings echoed in his mind, Frigga’s voice: once you commit to a working, you can’t stop. Even if you don’t have the strength, it will carry through. Even if it has to drain your very life to do so.
He had to do something.

He’d held it. He’d used it. It’d resonated in his blood in ways he’d fought to deny, sick for what it said of him that he heard that song. *Come to me,* Loki thought, and cast.

The tug under his sternum. Magic being drawn out of him, sucked away like a receding tide, and for a moment he thought he’d failed, thought he would fall for nothing - but then it was in his hands. The Casket of Ancient Winters.

He turned it on Thanos, and opened it.

The force of it slammed him back a step, but he planted his feet and held his ground. He couldn’t go too far and damage this Realm in the name of saving it. He had to go just far enough.

The sound of it roared in his ears. The song of it echoed in his blood. Loki gritted his teeth, held, waited-

Slammed it closed.

He reeled back and just managed to keep his footing. His head spun and throbbed, and he could feel something hot on his upper lip. But when his doubled vision cleared-

The ice surrounding Thanos was already cracking. Loki’s heart sank, despair seeping into his bones. No time. They were going to lose, and all the Nine would burn. They’d as good as handed him two Infinity Stones-

No, he thought. One more chance. One more.

“Jane,” he said wildly, but when he looked over his shoulder she was unconscious on the ground. Hopefully just unconscious. “Natasha,” he said instead. “Natasha - be ready to open the portal when I say. Clint - help her.” Thor was down. Steve was down. Bruce, no longer in Hulk form.

Him, Natasha, Clint. His first friends. Only human, and here they stood - if only barely - underestimated, unnoticed, irrelevant.

Not irrelevant.

The ice shattered. “You are a fool, little Jotun,” Thanos said, but for once Loki didn’t flinch at the truth of his nature. It didn’t matter. Not now. It wouldn’t ever matter if he couldn’t make this work.

He opened the Casket again, gritting his teeth. This time Thanos brought his gauntleted fist up to block it; ice rimed the metal and the Mind Stone flared.

The blast of mental backlash snapped into him like a punch to the solar plexus. Loki gasped, something bursting behind his eyes, but he held his ground, focused, pushed.

Thanos moved back one step. His eyes narrowed, and Loki bared his teeth with a wild laugh.

“Your little Jotun,” he said. “Your apostate. You should have killed me. I am not your pawn. I am not anyone’s pawn.”

Another step. Another psychic blow, and Loki could taste the blood dripping down the back of his throat. “You cannot kill me,” Thanos said. “What do you think you will achieve?”

“I don’t need to kill you,” Loki said. “They will. *Now.***
He slammed the Casket closed and dropped. The Tesseract sang back into life, a bolt of light shooting out, tearing open a portal where Thanos had first come through. It opened into deep space, beautiful, terrible: the black of spaces between stars, the roar of the cosmos itself.

It opened directly in the center of Thanos’s chest.

For a moment he looked surprised. And then almost amused.

“Ah, Death,” he said. “Does this mean I am worthy?”

“The only thing you are worthy of,” Loki panted, “is annihilation.”

The portal widened. On the other end, the Void sang. Loki stared into the gaping maw of the universe, the echo of the tear left behind by the shattering Bifrost.

He was too close. Maybe if he’d been ready, maybe if he hadn’t weakened himself so much, he could have resisted it: the pull of gravity that dragged him forward, insisting he pass through. And this time when he fell it would be forever.

What perfect symmetry. He’d started this path by falling. Here he would end it the same way.

But he’d done it, hadn’t he? He’d done something good.

Something brought him up short, stopping his fall.

“No you don’t,” a familiar voice said in his ear. “Not this time.” Thor’s arm locked around his chest, holding him back. An anchor holding a ship fast against a storm.

He could hear shouting, someone saying “close it.”

The singing stopped. Everything went quiet. He could hear himself breathing, feel Thor’s arm holding him tightly, burning startlingly hot against his skin. He didn’t have to look at himself to know why. They’d all seen, now. All knew.

It was hard to remember why that mattered. Maybe it didn’t.

Loki’s whole body hurt. He was fairly certain there was something bleeding inside him. His right arm was shattered and unresponsive. He remembered seeing Steve thrown aside, Tony on the ground and not getting up. Were they hurt? Alive?

He was so tired. It was so hard to keep his eyes open. It didn’t matter now, he told himself; he’d done what he’d meant to do.

“Loki?” He heard someone say, far away, but he’d already faded out.

Interlude (XLI)

A long, long time ago, Loki remembered waking screaming from a nightmare of ice and cold, wandering through blinding snow utterly alone. He could hear someone calling far away, but they never seemed to come any closer, and there were monsters chasing him, hidden behind curtains of white.

He stumbled through the dark to his parent’s rooms and crawled into bed between them, shivering.

“Loki?” Odin said, his voice blurry with sleep.
“I was lost,” Loki said, ashamed of how his voice trembled. “It was so cold, and I was all alone, and no one was coming.”

He heard his father’s breath catch strangely. “You are not alone,” he said, pulling Loki against his chest. “You are here with us.”

Loki woke up from that dream and could almost feel Odin’s arms around him, warm and tight and safe. He lay awake in the dark in his new flat and his eyes burned.

Giving up on sleep for the rest of the night, he got up and read instead. If there was one thing he could give humans unqualified praise for, it was their variety of literature. A lot of it he struggled to follow, but he had a computer, now, that he could use to search the references he missed. There were so many, all intertwined with each other, layer upon layer in conversation with what came before.

Like all things, Loki supposed. One thing after another after another, all leading to each other. Inevitable, perhaps, the slow steps that defined the longer road. A war, an abandoned baby, a king who brought that baby home. A pair of brothers, close but so far apart, the gap between them widening and turning bitter. A plot to prove a point, a deception revealed. One thing leading to another leading to another.

Maybe he had always been meant to end up here.

And if he had...then what? What was his next step? Or was this the end of his road, and there was nowhere else to go? If that was the truth-

Then what was the point?

Hanging off the end of the Bifrost, he’d thought, what if I die. Now, he thought: what if I don’t? What if he just continued like this, day after day - pursued by petty men who wanted to use him, hunted by those who saw him as a beast to be contained?

Did he want that?

Loki closed the book in his lap and turned his head to stare out the window. He felt strangely heavy. Relaxed. Resigned.

Someone knocked on the door.

He jerked upright, turning toward it. “Yes?” He said, and then moderated his too-sharp voice. “Who is it?”

“Margaret,” she called. “I was making cookies and had some extra. Would you like some?”

Loki stared at the door a moment, then stood up and moved over to it. He opened it slowly and peered out to see her holding a plastic container that did, indeed, seem to hold cookies.

“Thank you,” he said, taking them slowly. “I appreciate it.”

“You’re settling in well, I hope?”

“Yes,” Loki said, to his surprise. “I am. It’s very...nice, here.”

“Good, good,” she said, and smiled. “Well, if you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Of course,” Loki said, summoning a smile, and said again, “thank you.”
He closed the door and stared at the container she’d brought him. Opened it and took one out. They were still warm, chewy. Perfect.

Setting the cookies down, he put his face in his hands and felt his shoulders start shaking. He sat down heavily and leaned forward to rest his head on the table.

One thing after another after another. Small steps.

One more night, at least. One more night.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

oh hey new chapter

I had this hilarious pipe dream that I might finish this fic before Infinity War brings everything crashing to the ground, but that is...extraordinarily unlikely to happen, barring a miracle. Still, I can see the end from here and it's basically...well, there's a lot of talking, I can tell you that much. We're in the "denouement" stage now, folks. And there's still plenty of emotional damage to process!

So anyway: here, have a chapter. And to all of you, silent readers and wonderful commenters both: thanks. (And to my ever-patient beta as well: thank you especially.)

If you like what I do - you can also find more of it on Tumblr, if by "what I do" you mean "scream a lot about my feelings and sometimes about writing".

Cheers.

He was drifting, barely tethered to himself.

When he’d been a youth, just shy of his majority, he’d apparently fallen ill with some sort of fever and nearly died. He only remembered the short, blurry prelude and the slow recovery, and next to nothing in-between. He imagined if he could, it might be something like this: the feeling like his soul was held back by a fraying rope, like his atoms were barely clinging together and a sharp breeze might scatter him.

He hovered, somewhere between life and death, and couldn’t tell which way he was going to fall.

All of this, Loki thought distantly, perhaps should trouble him, but he felt more at peace than he could remember feeling for a long while. Like lingering in that moment between letting go and falling: the clarity, the serenity, none of the fear or despair that came before or followed after.

It was good. He didn’t want it to end.

Which of course meant that it did.

Loki did not crash back into his body all at once. It was more of a slow sinking, like a stone into water complete with the accompanying increase in pressure. His flesh felt unbearably heavy, and following that came the pain, hammering against the walls of his skull, a fever-ache in his muscles.

Only following that came memory: Thanos, and his eyes snapped open, jerking up off the roof, he needed to finish it--

“Loki,” someone was saying, and his eyes fixed slowly on a young woman - unfamiliar, should he know her? - standing with her hands raised in an appeasing gesture. “It’s over. It’s safe.”

His companions - his friends - sprawled in broken heaps on the ground. Steve’s shield, shattered. His memories were muddled fragments he struggled to assemble. “The others,” he tried to say, but the
words came out slurred, garbled. “Where are they?”

She hesitated. Her eyes flicked nervously to the side, and Loki’s stomach plummeted. He started to claw himself up; there were needles embedded in one of his arms and he ripped them out.

“I have to,” he said, breathing hard. “I have to-”

Something gave in his chest. He coughed and it was wet; he tasted blood on the back of his tongue. His vision tunneled even as he tried to stand. He could hear buzzing that might be words but he couldn’t make any sense of them.

His knees gave out, but someone caught him before he hit the ground. His face was pressed to a warm, solid, shoulder, an unbearably familiar smell filling his nose.

“Thor?” He thought he said.

“Loki,” he heard, or felt, or just knew. He could not understand the rest of the words being spoken, but that one was enough. He went limp.

Thor laid one hand heavily over his. Not this time, Loki remembered Thor saying, fierce and desperate, his arms tight around Loki-

“What are you doing? Do you hear me? What are you doing?”

Loki felt a familiar voice, soft and reassuring, right next to him. “Loki, if you didn’t want to go in the first place, why are you doing it now? Tell me, Loki.”

“Am I dreaming?” He asked.

“No,” Thor said. “This is real.”

Loki slipped away to that. It was only on the cusp of sleep that he realized what he’d seen of his own skin had been blue.

“--seems to have stabilized, at least as far as we can tell. It’s hard to know for sure given we don’t know what’s normal, but…”

A soft exhale of what sounded like relief. “That’s good. Thanks.” Loki recognized that voice, at least, if not the other one. He grabbed on to it, fighting his way up out of the foggy blur of semi-consciousness. His body ached, somewhere deep down in his core.

“I have to go,” said the unfamiliar voice, sounding apologetic.

“That’s fine. I’m just going to stick around for a bit.”

A door closed. “You’re alive,” Loki said, opening his eyes with almost painful effort.

Natasha’s smile was very faint, and didn’t quite reach her eyes. “So are you.”

Loki swallowed hard, fear lurching in his chest. “Everyone else…?”

“Hanging in there,” Natasha said after a brief pause. Loki inhaled sharply, hearing the unspoken so far. “Better than a couple days ago,” she added.

“A couple-” Loki’s stomach lurched. “How…long has it been?”

“Since Thanos? Four days,” she said, simply. There was something briefly aching in her expression before it was gone. Four days, Loki thought, dazed. He’d been out of it for four days, baring one brief waking-
He remembered what he’d seen, in that moment before he’d slipped back under, and jerked his head up, forcing one of his hands to lift. He stared at it like it belonged to someone else. It looked like it should. He wasn’t exactly surprised - the Casket had burned his other skin away, and with how weak he’d been perhaps his body couldn’t hold the change. But his stomach still knotted.

Of course now it was too late. Everyone had seen him. And--

And Natasha was sitting here acting as though everything was just the same.

“For a couple days it looked like you were going to die,” she said. “It’s only in the last twenty-four hours that it started to look like you were going to pull through. Thor’s been a terror. Driving the doctors crazy.”

“You’re not going to say anything?” Loki said, before he could stop himself. And before he could think too hard about any of the rest of what she’d said. Natasha’s eyebrows pulled together.

“Say anything about what?”

“About - how I look,” he said, almost choking on the words.

“Oh,” Natasha said. “Yeah. I figured that could wait until you weren’t flat on your back and half dead.” There was a faint, sharp, note in her voice, and in spite of himself Loki scowled.

“I wasn’t being stupid,” he said. “I did what we needed to do. To win.”

“And almost killed yourself doing it. No, I’m not…” She sighed. “I’m not saying you did anything wrong. Just…” Her expression shifted a little, and suddenly she looked...vulnerable. Afraid. “Clint’s pretty bad off. Tony’s still unconscious. And I thought for a while there I was going to lose you, too, even after Thor kept you from getting sucked into the portal.”

Loki forgot about his skin. “Clint’s…”

“He’ll live,” Natasha said. “That much is clear at this point. But he’s a mess. And for people like us...the recovery doesn’t go fast.”

Loki set his jaw. “I can help,” he said, and started to push himself up, only his arm wouldn’t respond and something hot went off like an arrow in his chest, answered by a burst of pain at the base of his skull. He collapsed back with a sharp gasp.

“Uh-uh,” Natasha said. “You’re not moving, buddy. Do you want to know what was wrong with you when Thor dragged you in here? Broken arm, shattered collarbone, arrhythmia with no obvious cause, intracranial bleeding. And that was just what we could see, Thor was saying something about energy imbalance that no one could understand and even he didn’t seem to know how to deal with. You’ve been unconscious for four days barring about five minutes. I don’t think you’re in any condition to go anywhere.”

Loki slumped. He knew she was right, but it left a sour taste in his mouth.

“Everyone’s alive,” she said quietly. “Not great, but alive. That’s...more than we had any right to expect, honestly. And that’s because of you.”


“Here. Fine. Exhausted, freaked out from having Doom in her brain, but...she’s tough.”
Loki nodded, closing his eyes. “And Banner? Steve?”

“Bruce is...maybe best off,” she said. “At least, physically. He’s got a big, green, guardian angel. Steve’s awake but not mobile yet. Nobody seems to know how long it’ll take a super soldier to heal a broken femur, and the amount of drugs he’s on just to dull the pain means he’s barely coherent.”

It was better than they had any right to expect. Loki knew that was true. Thanos was gone. They’d won.

Maybe he was just too tired, at the moment, to really feel the victory.

“This...skin,” he said. “It’s what I am. The truth. I was taken from another Realm, called Jotunheim, after Asgard warred with them.”

“Does that have something to do with why you left home?” Natasha asked. After a long hesitation, eyes still closed, Loki jerked his head in a nod.

“It does.”

“Okay.” She paused. “We don’t have to talk about this more, if you don’t want to. It doesn’t really matter to me.”

So easy, Loki thought, almost with awe. He remembered Jane’s reaction, her confusion. To them, it meant nothing. To him, it meant everything. Had meant. He had looked down at his arm on Jotunheim and felt the world invert.

*If you were not Jotun, whispered a thought across the back of his mind, you would not have been able to call the Casket. You would not have been able to stall Thanos long enough. You would not have been able to stop him.*

*It doesn’t really matter to me,* Natasha said.

Had he looked like this when Thor caught him, held him back from falling? *Not this time.*

There was a lump in his throat. Loki swallowed hard.

“Should I let you rest?” Natasha asked, her voice so very gentle.

“Please,” Loki said, hoping his voice didn’t tremble. He forced his eyes to open, to look at her. She reached out, and Loki opened his mouth to tell her to stop but when she laid her fingers lightly on his forearm she didn’t flinch away. Her hand felt hot, and she only left it there for a moment before standing.

She stood up, then, smiling crookedly. “Congratulations,” she said. “We saved the world.”

Loki didn’t expect to be able to fall back asleep after Natasha left, but exhaustion dragged him down. Apparently whatever he’d done to himself pulling the Casket to him, combined with everything the fight itself had taken, left marks that weren’t healing easily. His body demanded rest.

When he woke again the headache had eased, some of the deeper ache had faded, and when he tried to sit up, the room only spun for a few moments before falling still. He looked down at his hands and, to his immense relief, they looked like his own again - *no, the others are yours, too.*

*Just less familiar.*
He could feel restlessness starting to itch at him, the desire to rise, to see the others for himself and
know that they lived, that Natasha had not lied to soothe him.

He swung his legs off the bed and discovered that he was wearing only a flimsy sort of garment, his
own clothing nowhere to be seen. He gestured to summon it, and doubled over around the vicious
cramping pain that resulted. Loki let out a stream of curses, pressing his head to his knees.

No, he thought, trying not to despair. No.

“Luke - Loki? Are you all right, should I get a nurse-”

Loki jerked upright and Roslyn almost jumped back away from him, holding up her hands. “Sorry!
I’m sorry, I just heard - I thought you might be in trouble and I…” She trailed off and swallowed, her
eyes wide and nervous.

He stared at her, wordless. She dropped her eyes to stare at the ground.

She didn’t know, said Natasha’s voice. She came to me practically crying.

“How long have you been standing in that hallway trying to decide what to do?” He asked. Her
cheeks turned ever so faintly pink and she didn’t look up.

“Um.”

“A while, then,” Loki said dryly. He summoned a very faint smile. “You might have knocked.”

“I wasn’t sure if you were awake,” she said timidly, and then paused. “Are you all right?”

I have no idea, was the honest answer, but he wasn’t ready to give anyone that. Wasn’t ready to
even consider the idea that he might have damaged himself beyond repair. “Quite,” he said.

“Oh,” she said. “Good.” Another small fidget. “I’m sorry,” she blurted out. “I know I said before,
but-”

“You don’t need to repeat it,” Loki said. His laugh sounded a little strange. “In retrospect, perhaps I
should be grateful. Without your intervention perhaps I would never have put together that I was
being...used.” That was not, perhaps, entirely true. By the way her eyebrows drew together, Roslyn
knew it too. But she still seemed relieved to hear it.

“Is there anything I can do?” She asked. Loki considered that seriously.

“Find me some clothes,” he said. “I would like to see my friends.”

That final word felt strange on his tongue. But it wasn’t inaccurate, was it?

Roslyn hesitated. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?” She said. “I...understood that you were pretty
badly hurt.”

“I can manage,” Loki said, and used the leverage he had. “You asked if there was anything you
could do.”

He almost felt guilty at how she visibly winced and said quickly, “I’ll - see if I can find some clothes.
Or - a robe. Or something.”

She almost fled. Loki huffed a very quiet laugh.
She didn’t come back alone, though. She came back with Jane, and without either clothes or a robe. “Loki,” Jane said, and smiled with obvious relief. “You’re awake!”

Loki blinked, startled. “More or less,” he said.

“Oh, good,” Jane said, turning very slightly pink. “That’s...I’m glad.” Loki looked her over, briefly and he hoped not too obviously.

“You look to be in one piece.”

Her smile wavered. “More or less.”

“It is a pity von Doom can’t be killed more than once,” Loki said. Both Jane and Roslyn went a little pale, and Loki realized belatedly that perhaps that was a bit much by Midgardian standards. He exhaled through his nose and said, “I hope that you are...recovering well.”

Jane straightened, raising her chin. “I’m fine.”

Loki huffed. “I suppose you are,” he said. She looked like she was going to start frowning, so Loki moved on quickly. “You didn’t bring back clothes, did you?”

“No,” Roslyn said, looking a little guilty. “Jane insisted I bring her back here. But I can go now.”

“I would appreciate it,” Loki said, though he was starting to feel weak from just sitting upright, and wondering if perhaps it was a bad idea to try standing at all. By the way Jane was looking at him, frowning, she might be thinking the same thing.

“I’ll be back,” Roslyn promised, and took off again. Jane fidgeted in the doorway. She looked pale, drained.

“It’s all gone,” she blurted out after a moment. “Right?”

“Yes,” Loki said. “Even if I hadn’t...removed the connection, it would have dissolved with Doom’s death.”


Loki gave her a very faint, shallow smile. “So you needn’t worry about that, at least.”

“What about you?” She asked after a moment. “You look...”

“Don’t bother looking for something tactful,” Loki said. “I can’t imagine there is anything suitable.”

She looked faintly embarrassed. “You look better than you did,” she said after a moment. “After...after.” She paused. “Thor was...he was scared you were going to die.”

Loki had to concentrate so he wouldn’t look away. Not this time.

Jane was still looking at him with furrowed eyebrows. He dredged up a smile for her. “I am alive. And so I am healing. Quicker than others, I’m sure.”

“All right,” said the woman who appeared suddenly in the doorway. “Everybody out. I need to talk to my patient.”

Loki blinked at her. She didn’t look familiar, but she fixed him with a frown and said, “you weren’t thinking of going anywhere, were you?”
Healers, Loki thought. “No,” he said, though with a sigh. “Of course not.”

“Good,” she said. “Because you’re not. Not until I say you’re clear for it.”

Loki looked at Jane, who glanced at the doctor and then said, “I’ll...come back later.”

You will? Loki had assumed this was a visit for the sake of politeness. Not that she was actually...perhaps, by now, he should have known better. “Thank you,” he said, after a moment. She shook her head.

“Thank you,” she said, and left. Loki sighed and turned toward the healer, bracing himself for the barrage of questions he was only going to lie his way through. He was already tired of being stuck here, and needed something to distract himself from the gnawing fear that something had gone badly wrong with his magic.

The healer pronounced him mostly physically healed, though still weakened. She told him sternly to take it easy, there’s still room for a setback, we don’t really know what to expect.

Loki listened, and nodded, and tested his limits by limping to use the bathroom before going back to the bed. He made it, though he was breathing hard and trembling when he sank back down. Loki gritted his teeth and tried not to rage against his infirmity.

You’re alive. That is more than you expected.

He heard footsteps and jerked himself upright, trying to look better than he felt. He expected Natasha, or perhaps Roslyn or Jane returning, but it was Thor who appeared in the doorway. Loki felt himself tense almost immediately.

“Jane said you had awakened,” Thor said. “How are you feeling?”

“Wonderfully,” Loki said. He could feel his hackles going up. “Never better.” Thor twitched, his head turning like Loki had struck his cheek, though he recovered well. Loki felt a stab of guilt anyway.

“You must be,” Thor said after a moment, “to return to hating me once again.” He smiled, like that would take the meaning out of the words that visibly pained him. Loki sighed and closed his eyes, the venom draining out of his pores.

“I do not hate you, Thor.”

“I am...glad?”

“You saved my life,” he said, after a moment.

“I should have before,” Thor said, his voice gone quieter. “I was not going to fail you again.”

Loki shook his head slightly. “You didn’t fail me,” he said, though the words dragged coming out of his mouth, something about them tasting vaguely unpleasant.

“Didn’t I?”

Loki’s tongue felt heavy. He didn’t know how to say everything, didn’t know how to condense century upon century of hurts swallowed and suppressed in one conversation. Didn’t know how to say I think something in me has been broken for a long time. “I don’t know,” he said, finally.
“If I gave you some cause to believe that I would hurt you,” Thor said, “then yes, I think I must have. We are brothers, Loki. That means...that means something. At least to me.”

“Not just to you,” Loki said after a long moment. He forced his eyes open. “You have seen me, now. The truth of what I am.”

“I would like to say that I have always seen the truth of who you are,” Thor said, “but plainly that is not true.”

Loki laughed a little bitterly. “Not in this sense, certainly.”

“What I saw,” Thor said, speaking slowly - Loki had the impression he was choosing his words with care. “Was - my brother, fighting for this Realm alongside its people. Risking his life to defeat an ancient evil. Willing to sacrifice himself to do so. Courage worthy of songs.”

Loki wanted to look away from Thor. He could not.

“We could not have defeated him without you,” Thor said.

Loki twitched, suddenly uncomfortable. “All I did was stall for time,” he mumbled. Thor snorted.

“There is a time for modesty, brother,” he said, “but I do not think now is it.”

It was strange, Loki thought, how much he hungered to hear that praise, and how wrong it felt when he had it. How undeserved. How strong the urge to argue. And yet also the warmth that came with Thor’s words.

“I cannot say it is easy for me to understand,” Thor said, when Loki said nothing. “Or that it does not still seem...strange. But whatever skin you wear, you are Loki, and if one thing has been true all my life, it is that Loki is my brother. You have been a snake, a wolf, a fox - a Jotun is much smaller a change, isn’t it?”

He sounded so...achingly hopeful. Loki looked down.

“I would have thought it a good deal worse.”

“What was worse,” Thor said, “was believing you were dead.”

Loki almost flinched. He knew he should apologize. Knew he was meant to. But he couldn’t make himself speak the words. “I couldn’t stay,” he said instead, his tongue thick in his mouth. “Everything was broken. Ruined. I couldn’t.” He cut off. “It was the only thing I could think to do.” He took a breath, and finally said, “I’m...sorry. For what I did to you. The cruel lie, and then...with the Destroyer. I didn’t think - I don’t know. Everything about those days is...muddled.” His hands twisted together.

“I forgive you,” Thor said simply. Loki gave him a sharp, almost nervous look, but Thor just smiled, though it was small, almost uncertain. “You know me, Loki. I am not one to hold grudges.”

I might have killed you, Loki thought a little wildly. If that is not worth holding a grudge over--

“I am,” he said, abruptly. “I cannot just - it is not so easy for me to let go. To forget.”

“That has always been true.” Thor’s tentative smile grew just a bit stronger. “I suppose that I...cannot ask anything but that you try.”

Loki looked down, his hands still twisted together. “I will try,” he said.
Thor walked over slowly and sat down beside him. Loki did not tell him to leave.

At length, he took a soft breath and said, “I think something is wrong with my magic.”

He felt Thor turn to look at him, quick and sharp. “What?”

“It isn’t working as it should,” Loki said quietly. “It...hurts. I may have damaged it, when I...brought the Casket here.” Where was it? Loki realized that he didn’t know. He would have to find out; he didn’t want it to fall into...anyone’s hands. SHIELD’s intentions might be good - mostly - but they had been good with the Tesseract as well.

“Will it...heal?” Thor sounded concerned. Loki shrugged one shoulder, sneaking a glance at him sidelong.

“I wish I knew. Perhaps I just...overstrained myself.”

“I am sure that’s it,” Thor said, though he sounded like he was trying too hard to seem confident. “You did...what you did clearly took a great deal of power.”

Loki half smiled. “Do you know, I think that may be one of the first times you’ve acknowledged how much work it is to do what I do.”

Thor blinked, opened his mouth, and then closed it. “Then that is my oversight,” he said, “for not saying what I do know.”

It should not have made up for years of slights and overlooked contributions, but even those few words were a balm on a bruise. Loki let himself lean sideways, ever so slightly, so his shoulder brushed against Thor’s.

“You will be well,” Thor said, staunchly. “We all will. The battle is over. And once everyone is back on their feet - we shall have such a celebration that we shall all have to sleep for a week after.”

Loki already thought that he wanted to sleep for a week. But he half smiled nonetheless. “Tony will be distressed if you let fire-breathing goats loose in his building.”

“That was once,” Thor protested, but he could not hide the delight in his voice that almost hurt to hear.

He stood alone on the rooftop. Thanos dropped Thor’s broken body, his eyes staring blankly skyward, Mjolnir falling to earth like a stone. No, Loki said, but his voice was small and hollow, and it was already too late. They were all gone, all dead, and looking out he could only see desolation all the way to the horizon.

You were too late, little god, Thanos said, laughing. You lose.

Loki snapped awake gasping for air, his heart hammering. For a moment his mind stuttered, tugged between dream and reality, only to finally settle on the latter. Loki dropped his head forward and closed his eyes.

Too close. They’d come too close.

He sat up and pushed himself to his feet. He felt weak and unsteady but he could stand, needed to stand. There was a robe on the back of the door and he wrapped it around himself, feeling decidedly foolish, but he needed - needed to see for himself.
He steadied slightly as he moved. He thought he might be in Stark’s tower, but it was hard to tell - it was nowhere he’d been before.

Loki found Clint first. He had his own bed, but he was crowded by wires and monitors and Loki wavered, stomach lurching. His left hand was in a cast and Loki’s fingers itched to reach out and fix it but - he knew little of healing magic. And he did not dare reach for it, anyway.

He glimpsed movement and turned sharply, but it was just Natasha, shifting in the chair in the corner, curled up in sleep.

Loki turned away and moved on.

The next person he found was Steve, who was sitting up, his eyes open, and watching what looked like some kind of news report. His head turned when Loki stopped, and he blinked sluggishly.

“Luke - Loki?” He said. Loki leaned against the doorframe, annoyed by how quickly he’d tired.

“Yes,” he said. Steve looked pale, bruised, but he didn’t appear to be tensed with pain. Drugged, then. Steve smiled, a little.

“Good,” he said. “That’s...good. Are you - is something wrong?” He sounded foggy, confused, and Loki’s stomach twisted a little. He had always hated speaking to people when they were like this. It felt a little like talking to a stranger, even though he knew it wasn’t.

“No,” Loki said, and then adjusted, “I had a nightmare. All of you were dead and I had to know…”

The moment he said it aloud it sounded foolish. A child opening the closet to check for monsters.

“I am glad to see you awake,” he said, hoarsely. Steve smiled at him again.

“Yeah. You too.”

Loki’s legs wobbled and he pushed himself up, walking inside and sinking into the chair at the bedside.

“You okay?” Steve asked, sounding worried. Loki dredged up a smile.

“Merely tired.”

“Me too.” Steve’s eyes turned back toward the television. “But it’s over. Right?”

“It would seem so.” The chair wasn’t comfortable, but Loki sank into it like it was.

“And this time - this time nobody died,” Steve said. “Right? Everyone’s…?”

“Yes,” Loki said, pushing away the image of Clint, and what Natasha had said about Tony. She’d said they would survive. He’d trust her. “Everyone’s...fine.”

“Good,” Steve said. “That’s...good.”

“Maybe you should go to sleep,” Loki suggested. Steve sighed through his nose.

“Slept too much.”

“You need to heal,” Loki said. A grimace.
“I’ll be fine,” he said, but his eyes were drifting closed. Loki could feel his own dragging shut, like there were weights tied to his eyelids.

He hadn’t seen Tony or Bruce, yet. In a moment, he told himself. *I’ll just...take a moment, to rest my eyes.*

Time blurred, stretched. “There he is,” Thor said. A gentle hand pushing hair back from his face. “Should I wake him?”

“No,” said a soft, familiar voice he’d thought never to hear again. “Let him rest.”

He sank slowly back into darkness.
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

You may notice that the chapter count has changed. I'm 99% sure this is the second to last chapter. Just a few more loose ends to tie up, here.

This has been a hell of a ride.

In a lot of ways, I think this chapter is the culmination of a lot of what this fic was about, even more than the actual "plot climax" part. This is...where I was always trying to go. Well, this and the next chapter.

I don't have a whole lot else to say here, other than as always: thank you to everyone who has read, reviewed, left kudos, recommended this to their friends. And to my beta, Amelia, who has been with me since the start.

Loki woke with a crick in his neck and feeling miserably groggy, but much better than he had. Also covered in a blanket and sitting next to Steve’s bed, with Natasha standing in the doorway. She held up a phone.

“I hope you don’t mind that I took a picture.”

Loki grimaced at her, pushing the blanket down to his lap and trying to stretch out his neck. “Of me sleeping?”

“Uh huh. I’m going to sell it to the tabloids.” Loki studied her, taken a little aback by her relatively sunny mood.

“Did something happen?”

She paused. “Yeah,” she said, after a moment. “Clint’s awake and talking.”

Loki straightened, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “He is?”

“Yeah,” she said. “And Tony’s doing better, too.” She paused, looking like she was trying to make up her mind about saying something. Loki felt his smile fade.

“What?”

“They had help,” she said. Loki’s stomach twisted, but he said nothing, just looked at her, breathing suddenly shallow. Natasha chewed on the inside of her cheek. “You have visitors.”

Loki remembered what he’d taken for a dream. Looked down at the blanket draped over him - he’d assumed it had been Natasha’s doing.

The relief of hearing that his friends were going to be well washed away.

“From Asgard,” he said, faintly. She nodded, and Loki bit the inside of his cheek, cold starting in his stomach and seeping through him. “Where are they?”
Natasha hesitated. “Are you sure you’re up for it?”

“Up for what,” Steve said, sounding groggy; apparently whatever sleep he’d been managing to get they’d interrupted. Loki grimaced and stood up, and if he still felt shaky and weak at least he could do that without wobbling.

“I’d…rather just get it over with.”

He could see Natasha scrutinizing him and wondered if she was going to refuse to tell him, but then she said, “I’ll walk you there.”

Steve pushed himself up to his elbows, looking back and forth between them with furrowed eyebrows. “What’s the matter?”

“Take it easy, Cap,” Natasha said. “There’s no emergency. Loki’s just got some stuff to take care of.”

Steve looked skeptical, and Loki called up a smile that only felt a little strained. “I assure you, you aren’t going to miss anything exciting.” He hoped. Though honestly he had no real idea what to expect. His heart was beating just a little too quickly.

Loki stepped out into the hallway and Natasha followed him. “This way,” she said, and if Loki recognized that she was walking more slowly than usual, she didn’t make it obvious. He was grateful for that.

“Is it…who is here?”

“Just two people,” Natasha said, glancing at him sidelong. “It’s not…an army, or anything.”

Loki’s heart sank. Army enough. “The All-Mother and All-Father,” he said faintly. He caught that quick sideways look again.

“Quite the titles.”

“Yes,” Loki said. His feet felt heavy. If he could run, he thought he would run.

“Do you need backup?” Natasha asked quietly, and Loki’s stride hitched.

“You would…” But of course she would. They would. Even though… “The All-Mother healed Clint, didn’t she?”

“She did something,” Natasha said. “For him and for Tony.”

Something twisted in Loki’s chest. He shook his head. “I do not need…backup. This is…” He laughed, weakly. “A family matter.”

Natasha cocked an eyebrow. “Sometimes those are the ones where you need backup the most.”

“I don’t want any of you hurt. More. But…thank you.”

“Yeah,” Natasha said, “I should have known you’d say that. And you’re probably right that right now we can’t do much. But even if my just standing there can make a difference…”

Loki shook his head. “I don’t think so. Not in this.” They came to a stop before an unremarkable door. Loki’s knees were shaking and he stared at it, feeling like a child again, dragging his feet as he went to Odin’s study with the knowledge that he was to be punished.
Were they going to punish him? Now that the threat was gone, was this to be the reckoning? Was this about his drawing the Casket from the Vault - what must be seen as theft?

Was it even about him at all, or were they simply here to retrieve the Casket, the Tesseract, and the Mind Stone for safekeeping?

(That thought cut deepest of all.)

Natasha reached out and squeezed his arm. “Hey,” she said quietly. “You can handle this. You took down Thanos, didn’t you?”

*I might be more frightened of this than of him.* He smiled, a little sickly. “So we did.”

He reached out and opened the door, stepping inside.

He saw Frigga first. Sitting in an armchair, holding a mug of something steaming, her curly hair pinned back from her face. She looked just the same as when he’d last seen her, and it was like a knife through his heart.

Then Thor - Thor smiling, at ease, so sure of his place between his mother and-

Odin. Father, All-Father, who was already looking at him like he’d known Loki was there even before he had opened the door. Loki saw his face, looking down, remembered searching desperately for some sign of approval, of *understanding*.

*No, Loki,* he’d said, and stripped away the last shreds of Loki’s hope.

Standing here, it was like he was hanging over the abyss all over again.

“Loki,” Odin said, and he flinched.

“All-Father,” he managed after a beat, though his voice sounded shamefully hoarse. He did not bow, though. Would not go that far. A flash of an expression crossed Odin’s face, and was gone before Loki could read it.

Frigga stood and swept over to him, and Loki drew back from her as well. She stopped, a foot away, and her expression was easier to read. “My son,” she said. “Will you not permit me to greet you as your mother?”

Loki swallowed hard, trying to force down the sudden lump in his throat. “Are you that?”

“As I always have been,” she said, and there was something fervent, almost desperate, in the sound of her voice. Thor stood slowly as well, the look on his face anxious and tense. Loki closed his eyes and bit his lip, feeling small and weak.

“Not always,” he said quietly. “Did I not have another mother, once? Before the All-Father claimed me from the bloody field of war?”

Frigga flinched, and Loki felt another knife drive into his chest. “Then as long as I have known you,” she said. “It has been true.”

Loki looked down, biting the inside of his cheek.

“From the first time I saw you,” she said, “I have loved you as my own. We mourned you, Loki. But here you are, alive, and I have never been so proud of you as I am now.”
Loki reeled. This time, when she drew close, he didn’t move back, just squeezed his burning eyes closed and held very still. His inhale wobbled. *Amma,* he thought, but couldn’t say it. Couldn’t...

She let go, though she still held his shoulders. Loki felt like he would fall.

“You’re pale,” she said. “You’re still not well. You need to sit.”

Loki turned his head slowly to look at Odin, and the words came out of his mouth before he could swallow them. “And you, All-Father?” He asked. “Did you mourn, for your mistake?”

“Loki,” Thor said, his voice low, almost reproachful, but Odin held up a hand as he stood. Loki drew himself up as tall as he could, lifting his chin, telling himself - telling himself--

“Would the two of you excuse us?” Odin said. “I would like to speak with Loki alone.”

Loki felt his jaw tighten. Thor hesitated, visibly, glancing back and forth between them with clear conflict written on his face. He looked worried; Loki wondered who for.

“Thor,” Frigga said quietly, and he followed her out. Loki wondered who for.

“Will you sit?” Odin asked, after several moments of silence. It was a question, not a command. That came as a surprise.

“No,” Loki said. “Thank you.” Frigga was right, that he was not at full strength. But just now he felt the need to stand.

“I think I will,” Odin said, lone eye watching him, as sharp as ever.

“What do you want?” Loki asked. “What is it you wished to say to me, away from Thor and Frigga’s ears?”

“You have things to say to me, I suspect,” Odin said. “I thought perhaps it would be better, could you say them without interruption.”

Loki felt as though his legs had been cut out from under him. The sheer - *patronizing* ease of it took his breath away, and he exhaled in a hiss. “Oh,” he said, voice trembling, “is that it? You will, so generously, allow me to vent my spleen to you, sitting back and waiting for it to end? Is my anger no more than a child’s tantrum to be endured and dismissed?”

Some discomfort flickered on Odin’s face. “That was not my intent.”

“Really,” Loki hissed. “So you did not think that I would say my piece and then all would be over and forgiven?”

“Loki-”

“I am not a child,” Loki said over him. “I am not your child. I do not owe you forgiveness.”

“No,” Odin said, his voice pained. “You do not.”

That brought Loki to a halt. Fists clenched, he fell silent.

“I thought,” Odin said, choosing his words with obvious care, “that with your mother here, and your brother, you might temper your words. Or hesitate to speak plainly. Or that they would object to
Loki stared at him. He walked over, slowly, and dropped heavily into the chair.

“To answer your question,” Odin said, “yes. I did mourn. Not my mistake, as you would put it, but my son. And the ways in which I failed him.”

“Do you think your grief absolves you?” Loki asked, his voice trembling.


“All I wanted,” he said, trying to steady his voice, “was your recognition. Your approval. I chased it, always, but I never seemed to catch up. When you told me what I was, all of it made sense - and yet I still thought I could prove otherwise. End the war Thor began. Erase the stain from my blood. Make myself in truth a son of Odin.”

“You did not have to make yourself anything,” Odin said. “You already were.”

“Only in part.” Loki forced his hands to uncurl from their fists. “I was always balanced between. Odinson and Laufeyson. Your child and your political tool. To Thor, you could give everything; to me, only half.”

He expected denial, but Odin was quiet. Loki let out a shuddering exhale, some part of him relieved. Some part of him aching.

“Your mother has accused me,” Odin said finally, “of too often being more king than father. I am sorry.”

“I do not forgive you.”

Saying it was...it felt strange. A weight off of Loki’s shoulders. An exhilarating kind of freedom.

Odin’s shoulders fell. Loki looked him squarely in the eye.

“I do not forgive you,” he repeated. “Perhaps I will. Someday. But I do not have to. I do not have to define myself by your approval or your disapproval.” He took a deep breath. “And I am not...I do not intend to return to Asgard.”

For the first time, Odin looked surprised. “You know that - you are welcome. You will not be prosecuted-”

“Even so.” Loki swallowed hard. “I am not going back. I have found a place here. A purpose.” He lifted his chin. “When I - let go, I meant to die. This Realm saved my life.”

Odin stared at him in silence. For a moment Loki felt guilty, but only for a moment.

“You cannot change my mind,” he said, more quietly. “If that is why you came here - to fetch your wayward Jotun - you may as well return to Asgard now.”

“That is not why I came,” Odin said, after a moment. “I came to see my son. To speak with him. To bring him home.”

Loki felt himself smile, small and bitter. “Perhaps I have not been clear enough,” he said. “I am home.”

It was not until he spoke the words that he felt their truth. But they were there, now, hanging in the
“You are a prince of Asgard,” Odin said, his voice a little tighter.

“If I must forfeit that title, I will.”

“Loki…”

“Enough,” Loki said, soft but implacably firm. “Will you not listen to me, this once? Or do you have so little respect that you will not accept my decisions? Does my life belong to you, or to me?”

“You are my son.”

“Perhaps,” Loki said. “But I am not your slave.” He stood, and turned toward the door.


Those words, that he’d wanted to hear for so long, left him oddly hollow. He closed his eyes and exhaled softly. “As with your mourning,” he said at last, “your love and your pride cannot now heal all wounds.”

He walked out. His heart felt bruised, but his steps perhaps a little lighter.

Loki retreated to his room, feeling the need to be alone. He wanted to go see Clint, to check on Steve and Tony, maybe to speak with Natasha, but just now he didn’t think he could do it. He focused on trying to use his magic, trying to push through the pain, but it wouldn’t come.

It was thus that Frigga found him. She tapped lightly on the door.

“Yes?” He said, lifting his head from staring at his hands.

“It’s me,” she said. Loki considered turning her away, then sighed and stood. She was not Odin, and he should not look at them as the same, even if she was as complicit in the lie.

He opened the door for her. “Did Odin speak with you?”

“He did, yes.”

“Have you come to try to change my mind?”

“No,” she said. “I know the futility of that. You may consider longer, but when you come to a decision, you are every bit as stubborn as your father or your brother.”

“I suspect that is not a compliment,” Loki said dryly.

“It is neither compliment nor condemnation,” Frigga said. “Only observation. May I sit?”

Loki gestured at the lone chair. “By all means.”

She sat gracefully, looking at him, and Loki focused on staying steady under her scrutiny. Finally she said, “you know you hurt him.”

Loki’s spine went rigid. “You know he hurt me.”

“And two wrongs make a right?”
“No,” Loki said, something raw in his voice. “But he lied to me. You both did. All I did to him was speak the truth. That he doesn’t like it…”

Frigga bowed her head. “I know,” she said quietly. “I know we cannot make you…come home. Come back with us,” she corrected, before Loki could. “I only wish that you would.”

Loki looked down, biting his lip. He felt that tug again, the pull urging him to go. To fall in line, to step back into the place he’d been born to.

But he didn’t want that. Not anymore.

“Did you heal my friends in the hope that it would draw me back to you?” He asked bluntly. Frigga’s quick glance aside answered that question.

“That was not my only reason,” she said after a long pause. “But it did cross my mind, yes, that you might feel…more kindly disposed toward us if we helped these mortals you’ve taken to.”

“I am grateful,” Loki said, “but such crass manipulation is unworthy of the All-Mother.”

Frigga flinched as if he’d slapped her. “Is that what I am to you?” She asked. Loki wrestled with that.

“No,” he said, finally. “Not only that. You remain my mother, but that is no longer such an uncomplicated thing as it was once.”

“I understand.” She paused again, then leaned forward. “Give me your hands.”

Loki frowned. “Why?”

“Your magic,” she said. “It is damaged. Wounded, by your straining it so far. Let me help it mend.”

Loki eyed her. “Do you seek to put me in your debt?”

Her smile was tremulous. “No,” she said. “Only to spare you pain. A wound like this can fester, if left alone. I would have done it as you slept, but I wanted to wait for your permission.”

Loki inched forward slowly and extended his hands. She took them in hers, her skin soft and smooth, and her magic washed into him like a warm tide. The ache inside him eased, something that had been knotted tight loosening. He closed his eyes and didn’t fight against it.

When she pulled back, from the first time since he’d woken up Loki felt like he could breathe fully. He reached tentatively for his magic and found it, still weak, but he could touch it, hold it, feel its power before letting go.

“Thank you,” he said, honestly.

“You should still be careful,” she said softly. “You pushed yourself to the brink.” Frigga smiled weakly. “As you always have been wont to do.”

Loki looked away. “I did what I needed to do.”

“And I am glad, for the sake of the Nine, that you did,” she said, but reached out and cupped his face gently between her hands, drawing his eyes back to hers. “But beyond that, I am glad that I do not have to mourn my youngest son a second time.”

A lump rose in Loki’s throat, and he blinked rapidly to stave off the stinging in his eyes. “I am
“Sorry,” he said, because he felt, suddenly, that he had to. “That I made you grieve.”

“Not just me, Loki.”

“I will not apologize to him,” Loki said hoarsely. Frigga sighed.

“Nor will I force you to,” she said. “But someday...optimistic mother that I am, I will still hold out hope that you may be reconciled.”

“Thank you,” Loki said, when he thought he could control himself. “For healing my friends.”

“You are welcome,” Frigga said softly. She looked - very sad, but this time the tug was weaker. Loki hesitated, one more time.

“Will he want it back?” Loki asked. “The Casket?”

“He intends to take it back to Asgard, yes,” Frigga said, her eyebrows drawing together.

“I would claim it,” Loki said. “By right of my birth. You may tell him as much.”

“Will you not ask him yourself?”

“No,” Loki said after a moment. “I do not think that the All-Father and I have anything further to say to one another.”

That hurt her. He could see it in her face, the way she lowered her eyes and took a deep breath before looking back at him. “That is your choice,” she said softly.

“Yes,” Loki said. “It is.”

Loki half expected Thor to come charging in demanding that he explain himself, or change his mind, but he didn’t. He dozed for a little while, and when he woke drank some water and reached for his magic, just in case that had been some sort of fluke. He let himself draw on it, just for a moment, before letting go, wary of straining himself too far.

His phone buzzed and he picked it up, glancing at the screen to see a text from Clint: this is Nat. Clint says you should stop brooding and come join us.

Loki frowned at it. I’m not brooding, he wrote back. And join you where?

Same floor you’re on now. Nobody’s moving very far. Should I come get you?

No, Loki wrote. I’ll find my way to you.

He walked, though slowly. He might feel better, closer to normal, but the exhaustion still ran deep, and he suspected might for a while yet. He would just have to hope that Midgard could fend for itself for a little while.

He heard Tony’s voice first, loud and distinctive: “--can’t believe this is the best wheelchair in this building, going to have to do something about that - JARVIS, put it on the to-do list-”

He might sound almost like himself, but Loki could hear the faint strain in it, the sense that he was trying a little too hard to be normal. It was still a relief to hear the response in Clint’s voice. “If it doesn’t have repulsors so it can fly, I’m calling bullshit, Stark.”
A smile tugged at the corner of Loki’s mouth and he walked forward into the open room, large windows looking out at the city. This high up, the damage didn’t look so bad. Looked fixable.

Like the people sitting in the room itself: Stark in a wheelchair, visibly bruised and, Loki suspected, on some kind of painkillers, but alive; Clint slumped in a chair but eyes open and less pale than he had been the last Loki’d seen of him and Natasha with her feet curled up underneath her next to him. Steve with a pair of crutches propped up next to him, and Loki wondered if he ought to ask Frigga to see to him, too. And Bruce, his human self once again, apparently in one piece though he looked like he might be falling asleep.

He was surprised by Jane, looking awkward and a little out of place. Loki supposed she belonged here as well.

“Look who it is! The man of the hour,” Clint said. Loki huffed a little and walked over to a vacant spot to sit down.

“My apologies for my lateness,” he said, carefully nonchalant, as though there was nothing different about this gathering. “I wasn’t aware there was a party.”

“Party’s a bit of a stretch,” Natasha said dryly.

“It’ll come later,” Tony said. “Once I have my flying wheelchair.”

Steve’s lips twitched like he was trying not to laugh, but he glanced over at Loki.

“Hey,” he said. “You look...better. I think.” His smile was sheepish. “Memory’s a little blurry right now.”

“I am,” Loki said, and for the sake of honesty added, “there was something wrong with my magic. But Frigga seems to have set it to rights.”

“Frigga,” Clint said. “She’s the, uh, queen? You and Thor’s mom?”

Loki twitched minutely, almost corrected him, and then inclined his chin. “That’s her.”

Natasha was frowning. “You didn’t say anything was wrong.”

“Is that surprising,” Clint said to her, and Loki frowned at him. He shrugged, then winced. “You know it’s true.”

“I’m fine now,” Loki said defensively, when he noticed Steve frowning at him as well. “Better than most of you.” He was faintly surprised none of them were asking further questions about Frigga, or Odin. But more than a little relieved.

“I still need someone to recap things for me a little,” Bruce said ruefully. “More clearly than this guy.” He indicated Tony. “I feel like I missed the whole thing.”

They all looked at him. Loki blinked. “What?”

“Only four of us were conscious for the whole thing,” Jane pointed out. “And I was...out of it, for a while, there.”

“I don’t tell stories,” Natasha said.

“I missed the last few minutes,” Clint said. “And I don’t understand a lot of what even happened, so...”
Loki exhaled. “Later,” he said to Bruce. “I’d rather…not, right now. If it’s the same to you.” Some part of him still clenched tight thinking of the pull of the Void. “Give me time and I’ll come up with a proper skaldic poem.”

“Oh, good,” Bruce said. “No idea what that means, but…no rush.”

Natasha gestured at the table. “Help yourself, by the way. Pepper ordered Chinese.”

Loki leaned forward to inspect the offerings, though his stomach gave an uneasy little twist. He supposed he still ought to eat something. “How kind of her.”

“It’s a ‘thank you for not letting Tony kill himself’ gift,” Tony said. “She’s very grateful.”

Natasha shot him a look. She could hear it too, Loki thought. The slight trace of making too much of an effort. But she wasn’t going to call him on it any more than Loki was going to say anything about her obvious hovering. Or the shadows around Steve’s eyes, or Jane’s legs drawn up to her chest. None of them entirely unscathed. All of them still alive.

He served himself some dumplings and rice. He could see Natasha eyeing him like she wanted to ask about the outcome of his conversation, but she appeared to decide that it could wait.

For all the attempts at normalcy, it was a fairly subdued gathering. Not one of Asgard’s raucous victory feasts, though Loki supposed perhaps that would come later, like Tony said. This was more a meeting of friends (easier and easier, to think that word), weary but glad to be alive. Loki thought he might like this kind of celebration better.

“May I join you?”

Loki turned around sharply, surprised that Thor was asking. Not so much that he might want to be here but the fact that it was a request, rather than simply an assumption.

It took him a moment longer to realize that the others were looking at him. Waiting for his permission. If he said no, it occurred to Loki, told Thor to leave…

He looked at Thor, his furrowed eyebrows, the uncertainty starting to creep into his expression, and half smiled.

“Of course,” he said. “Sit down. Try some lo mein.”

Thor’s smile widened and he walked over, examining the takeout boxes. “Which is that?”

Loki pointed with his chopsticks, leaning back into the couch. Conversation drifted back in, but Loki stayed quiet, half listening.

“Mother said you were staying here,” Thor said quietly. Loki tried not to tense.

“I am,” he said, a spark of annoyance lighting in his chest at the expectation that he was going to have to justify himself, again.

Thor sighed. “I intend to stay on Midgard for a while,” he said. “To…catch up with Jane. If you were willing, I would like to stay close to you, that we may…continue talking.” He smiled faintly. “I think perhaps we have a great deal that we should discuss. Not least…I want to know everything about your life here.”

Loki almost wanted to laugh. You aren’t the same, are you, he thought. You have changed. Or
begun to.

“I think I could allow that,” he said. Thor settled a hand on his shoulder, and Loki caught himself leaning into it, ever so slightly. But maybe that wasn’t a bad thing.

For the first time in a long time, Loki thought he might actually feel at peace.
And here we are at the end.

This is officially the final chapter of *Life in Reverse*. I have a few things I've posted on my Tumblr - alternate POV things, an outsider POV piece that I'd like to finish at some point - that I'll probably drop over here in a separate fic, but other than that...yeah, it is finished. And before the six year mark! How about that.

This is where I thank the fanfiction writer's version of the Academy - which is to say, all of you who have read, reviewed, recommended, bookmarked, kudosed, sent me messages on Tumblr. This one's for you. One of the reasons I've gotten this far, and kept with this fic even when writing it was like wrestling a bear, was the fact that there were people out there who I knew were reading, and enjoying, what I was doing. That's some powerful motivation, and it's part of what got me here, forty-four chapters and 2,152 days later.

So thank you. Thank you, thank you.

And especially to my beta Amelia, Maura for encouraging me to post the first chapters when I wasn't sure if I should - or would, and Lena for always being available to help talk me through when I was stuck in a plot hole. (Or tell me to take a break for five minutes, as the case may be.)

And if you don't get enough of me in the author's notes, you can find me on Tumblr, talking about a whole range of nonsense including my many, many, future writing projects.

It's been a hell of a ride. Enjoy.

Frigga and Odin left without saying goodbye.

Loki hadn’t truly expected anything else, but it still gave him a pang. But he didn’t really think there was anything further that he would have wanted to say.

Besides, there were other matters to see to.

Natasha woke him up from a light doze with a knock on his door. Frigga might have mended his magic, but the weariness lingered. “Fury’s here,” Natasha said, her expression sober, serious. “He wants to talk to you.”

“I’m sure he does,” Loki said. “Should I assume he spoke to you already?”

“You can assume that, yeah.”

He looked her up and down. “You appear to be in one piece.”

She half smiled. “Technically I didn’t do anything I’m not allowed to do.” Loki raised his eyebrows
and she said, “broadly interpreted. But I think saving the world gets me some leeway.”

“Hopefully it will grant me the same,” Loki said dryly, “considering that I broke out of detention to get here, and am being blamed for Osborn’s death. I can imagine that might be causing some complications.”

Natasha’s half smile fell away. “Just don’t try to do any grandstanding. You’ll be fine.”

Loki paused. “I’m not going to let them lock me away again,” he said quietly.

“I don’t think they’ll try.”

“And if they do?” Loki asked, pressing, even though he shouldn’t. Even though he should just leave it be.

Natasha cocked her head a fraction to the side, and then said, “well, we broke you out once, didn’t we?”

It was fortified with those words that he went to meet Director Fury. His stride checked a moment when he didn’t find him alone, but accompanied by Coulson. His phone buzzed; he glanced back and forth between them, before glancing at it.

*Let me know if you want me to set off the fire extinguishers on the men in black*, said the message from Tony. Loki felt his lips twitch and schooled his expression to stillness.

“Agent Silver,” Fury said after a moment. Loki noted the Agent and wondered if it was a deliberate reminder of his status. Or perhaps he was reading too much into a small detail.

“Please,” Loki said. “Loki is fine. I don’t think there’s much need to keep up the pretense, at least between colleagues.”

“Loki, then,” Fury said. “Last I checked, you were supposed to be in lockdown. Instead, you’re here, at ground zero of an attack on the city, accused of the murder of a prominent businessman.”

Loki would not let himself tense. “I was needed more here.”

“That wasn’t your call to make.”

“But I wasn’t wrong. Or rather, Natasha - Agent Romanov - wasn’t.” Loki lifted his chin, refusing to be cowed. To doubt himself. “Without my help, this city would be in much worse shape than it is now.”

“That’s the other question I’d like answered,” Fury said. “What, exactly, did you do?”

“Stalled for time, mostly,” Loki said. “It was Doctor Foster who opened the portal in space, using the Tesseract, that killed Thanos.”

“And where’s the Tesseract now?”

“I imagine on Asgard,” Loki said. “You just missed its rulers. You could have argued with them over it, but I very much doubt they would have listened.” He paused. “They took the scepter Doom was using, too. If you were looking for that.”

Fury just looked at him. Loki smiled thinly.

“Victor von Doom send out a broadcast claiming you killed Norman Osborn. Blaming you for
holding the city hostage. Do you have an explanation for that?”

“Are you going to take Doom’s word for anything?” Loki kept his spine straight. “I confronted Osborn trying to assess Doom’s plans. He had left a failsafe behind that detonated when I pressed him for information.”

“Hm.” Fury leaned back. “You’ve put me in a bit of a difficult position.”

“I can appreciate that.”

“Your brother,” Fury said. “Should I guess that was your doing, too?”

“Yes,” Loki said. “It was. And if you are worried about any small towns, you needn’t be. We’ve...resolved matters.” Or begun to. Loki did not think that particular trial was over yet. But at least they’d made a start.

But that...that was between him and Thor.

“That’s good to hear,” Coulson murmured, the first words he’d spoken. His voice sounded dry, but Loki thought he was amused.

“I imagine it would be.” Loki kept his eyes on Fury, who stared back at him.

“Romanov said she tapped you for the Avengers Initiative,” he said at length. “Last I remember, you declined that offer.”

“Agent Romanov is very convincing,” Loki said. He didn’t think he imagined the twitch of Fury’s lips. He looked at Loki for several more long moments, then nodded.

“We can deal with the Osborn issue,” Fury said. “Once it comes out he was working with Doom...that’s easy enough to turn around.” He paused. “As for the rest of it...you’re burned as a spy. At least for a while. But as far as SHIELD is concerned...you’re in the clear.” Another pause. “And don’t lose our number.”

Loki blinked. “Are you...firing me?”


Loki almost wanted to laugh. “That’s...” He honestly wasn’t sure what he felt. “More lenient than I was expecting,” he said, finally.

“Agent Romanov is very convincing,” Fury said, perfectly deadpan.

“Then I’ll have to thank her,” Loki said. He clamped down on his seething feelings and raised his eyebrows. “Was that all, then?”

“You’re still going to need to turn in your paperwork for all this,” Fury said. “So have fun figuring out how to do that.”

“Perhaps I’ll just draw a picture,” Loki said dryly. He paused. “About my...my brother. Has he told you he intends to stay on Earth?”

They exchanged a glance. “He hadn’t,” Coulson said. Loki shrugged.

“I doubt he was asking for permission. But I thought you should know.” Fury didn’t look delighted, but he wasn’t speaking out against it, either. He and Coulson exchanged another look.
“I’ll walk you out,” Coulson said. Loki glanced at the door directly behind him and raised his eyebrows, but decided not to comment. Coulson closed the door behind him, though he stayed with one hand on the knob.

“Was there something you wanted to say?” Loki said, trying not to tense.

“I’m not going to apologize,” he said. “Based on the intel we had at the time-”

Loki flicked his fingers. “You made the only assumption you could. I am aware.” Any resentment he might feel over it...he could let it go. Though he thought he would see if Stark might, perhaps, be able to think of some kind of technological way to counteract what SHIELD had made. No matter who they were, he did not like anyone having the ability to cut him off from his magic.

“Director Fury can’t publicly condone anyone disobeying orders,” Coulson said, “but in this case...I think we’re all glad Romanov - and Rogers and Stark, for that matter - made the call they did.”

It was no more than Loki had said defending himself. It was still...good to hear. “Thank you,” he said. “I think.”

“I heard you could’ve left,” Coulson said. “Back to space. Glad you’re staying. Earth needs good defenders.”

“I thought it was ‘Avengers’,” Loki said.

“Yeah,” Coulson said. “I don’t know who came up with that name.” He stuck out a hand. “I expect I’ll be seeing you. Agent.”

Loki clasped his hand briefly. “Loki,” he reminded him, with a faint smile. “I’d like to get used to my name again.”

“Loki, then,” Coulson said. “But you’re going to need a last name. Are you sticking with ‘Silver’?”

Loki opened his mouth, then closed it. He could useOdinson, if he wanted. Thor would probably like it. There wasLaufeyson, though that he didn’t think he would ever claim.

“Let me think about it,” he said, and then added, “but probably.”

It was, after all, the name he’d chosen for himself.

So he was out a job. At least for now.

Oddly, that troubled him less than it probably should. He suspected he could get Stark to double his salary without too much trouble if he just offered to try to explain magic to him. The idea wasn’t entirely unappealing.

He set that aside for later and asked JARVIS the computer where he might find Jane Foster.

She was, as it turned out, in one of the common areas talking to a computer - no, he recognized the excitable voice responding to her as Ms. Lewis. “I’m fine, Darcy,” Jane was saying, though he doubted it was very convincing, considering her lingering pallor and audible exhaustion. “Really, I’m okay. It’s over now.”

“Is it true that Thor’s back? Is Thor there?”

She smiled, a little, and something in Loki’s stomach twisted, but it was faint. “He’s back. And here -
well, not here here, but-” Jane seemed to notice him abruptly, and sat up. “Darcy - can I call you back?”

“Only if you’re hanging up on me for Thor,” Ms. Lewis said.


“You somewhat less so,” Loki said, blunt but honest. “But that’s unsurprising.” He paused, inhaling slowly and letting it out. “I feel I should...apologize.”

She looked startled. “For what?”

“For a great deal of my behavior toward you, probably,” Loki said, “but most recently...I should not have left you unaware. Kept as much from you as I did. I should have known you might be in danger and warned you adequately.”

“Oh,” Jane said. “Huh.” After a moment she shook her head. “I don’t think...well, you did tell me what was going on. What you knew about it. You didn’t know Doom was going to come after me.” Her voice wobbled a little on the man’s name.

“I should have guessed-”

“No,” Jane interrupted. “You can apologize for being a jerk to me, but you don’t need to apologize for not predicting the future.” Her voice was firm. “And honestly - don’t worry about the other thing, either. You un-brainwashed me. I think at this point I owe you.”

Loki shifted slightly, uncomfortable. “You do not.”

“I feel like I do.” Jane folded her hands between her knees. “So...you and Thor.”

Loki let one corner of his mouth lift. “It appears I was wrong.”

“I’m glad you were,” Jane said, sounding entirely honest. “I would have fought him on it if you weren’t.”

A laugh bubbled up, though it felt a little hysterical. “You wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“One reason I’m glad I didn’t have to.” She paused, looking at him sideways. “It seems like you’re...doing better.”

“It seems like,” Loki said, carefully. He did not want to curse it by taking too much.

“That’s good,” Jane said. “I know it’s...I know Thor’s glad.”

Something warm and slightly uncomfortable sparked in Loki’s chest. He glanced away briefly before meeting her eyes. “I did not actually come to talk about Thor.”

Jane’s expression turned cautious. Almost nervous. “What did you come to talk about?”

Loki took a breath. “I came to ask if you would still be interested in...working with me. Well - not working, perhaps - apparently I’ve been temporarily expelled from SHIELD - but...discussing things as we have been. Though obviously less urgently.” Loki made himself stop talking, grimacing inwardly. You sound like a fool.

“Wait,” Jane said. “You were - expelled from SHIELD?”
“Temporarily,” Loki said. “I am rather conspicuous at the moment. And an accused murderer.”

Jane blinked twice, then shook herself and actually - smiled. “I kind of assumed that you wouldn’t be interested.”

Loki supposed that...wasn’t an unreasonable conclusion to make. He paused, pressing his lips together and considering his words. “You are clever,” he said. “And...interesting. Neither is so common that I can ignore someone who is both.”

Jane looked like she was trying not to smile. “Is that your very wordy way of saying that you like me?”

Loki was glad that his flushes didn’t tend to show easily, though he wasn’t sure that this one wasn’t. “I suppose it might be.”

She did laugh, then, which...while he hadn’t meant to amuse, was oddly rewarding. “I suppose I might like you, too,” she said, half smiling. “At least sometimes. And I can’t say I don’t want to pick your brain some more without the fate of the world on the line. So...sure.”

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Loki caught himself starting to smile and reflexively smothered it, then caught himself doing that and let it through. “I...appreciate that.”

Jane’s smile faded. “You know,” she said, quieter, “it’s interesting how much you held back that would’ve helped me get where you were coming from. I’m not totally sure I understand why.”

Loki opened his mouth and then closed it. He hadn’t thought of it that way - at least, not consciously - and he couldn’t think of a way to explain why. He wasn’t entirely certain why, except for some vague sense that he hadn’t wanted her to like him. Hadn’t wanted to like her. So he’d set himself to making sure it wouldn’t happen.

Apparently it had happened anyway.

“If you hadn’t done that maybe we could’ve gotten here a lot sooner,” Jane said.

“Gotten where,” Loki said. “A fingernail’s width from a horrible fate?” She just looked at him, and Loki exhaled through his nose. “I have never been very good at making things easy for myself.”

“I’ve gathered that.” Jane bit her lip, and then smiled a little, again. “Well...I have a lot of things to write down before I forget them about how the Tesseract works. Maybe you can help me sort through some of it.”

“I’ll do my best.”

She gestured to the tablet. “I should call Darcy back. She’s still freaking out, no matter how many times I’ve told her the world isn’t ending.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then,” Loki said. After an impulsive moment, he added, “I hope that Thor knows how fortunate he is.”

She turned slightly pink and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Thanks,” she said awkwardly. Loki gave her a bit of a smirk.

“Just an observation,” he said, and left her to it.

In his dream, the Void pulled him in. He could see Thor screaming, reaching for him, but he was just
a little too far away. And then endless darkness, cold, and he was either going to die or fall forever-

He woke up hard and fast, and it took him several gulping breaths to center himself back where he

was. Not in the Void. Thor had caught him. He was whole and - at least for now - safe.

Still, he didn’t close his eyes again. He rose and went walking with no real aim; briefly he considered

looking for Thor, but he set that idea aside. He caught the sound of music, faint but still audible to his

ear, and followed that, wondering who else was awake at this hour.

It turned out to be Steve, looking exhausted, tension around his eyes and staring into the middle

distance. He startled a little when Loki cleared his throat, and immediately stopped the music playing

from his phone.

“Sorry,” he said. “Was it bothering you?”

“Hardly,” Loki said. “I heard it, and wondered who else was awake in the middle of the night.”

Steve grimaced a little and ran his fingers through his hair. “I don’t sleep a lot.”

It was an evasion of a response, though Loki didn’t doubt it was true. He debated over commenting,

and decided he might as well. “You aren’t the only one with troubled dreams tonight,” he murmured,

with a self-deprecating smile. Steve gave him a quick glance, eyebrows furrowing, and then looked

down.

“I didn’t actually get that far,” he said. “But it’s okay. It’s not a big deal.”

“No,” Loki said. “You were just nearly killed by an exceptionally powerful being, after having your

mind overpowered and your will torn away. Not a big deal, indeed.”

Steve looked very slightly sheepish. “I’ll manage.”

“I’m sure you will,” Loki said. “But that doesn’t make it pleasant.”

Steve rubbed his forehead. “Thanks,” he said after a moment. For - freeing me. And sorry-”

“For letting it happen in the first place? Don’t be absurd,” Loki said. “We had no idea that Doom had

such a weapon. And truth be told - even before I freed you, you were fighting it. You, a human,

fighting the power of an Infinity Stone. That is impressive.”

Steve made a face. “Yeah, well...I wasn’t getting that far until you stepped in. So. Take the thanks.”

“If you insist.” Steve gave him a skeptical look, but Loki smiled crookedly at him and he relaxed,

leaning back.

“So,” Steve said after a moment. “I heard you’re staying on Earth.”

“I am, yes.”

“And so is Thor?”

“So it would seem.”

Steve was quiet for a moment, and then said, sounding a little awkward, “is that...okay?”

“I think so,” Loki said. “Actually. To my surprise.”
Steve smiled a little at that. “The good kind of surprise, I guess.” He paused. “I’m glad to hear that.”

Loki didn’t know why he asked. “Why?”

Steve’s eyebrows furrowed. “Why? Because...it seemed like it was making you unhappy.”

Oh, Loki realized. That was why he’d asked. Because he’d half expected it to be something about the need to make peace with Thor for the sake of harmony, because he was being unfair, because he was wrong. He remembered what Steve had said: you have better friends now.

He half smiled. “Silly question,” he said, and sat down. “So. What are you going to do next? Once you are...properly back on your feet.”

“I don’t know.” Steve rubbed his forehead. “There’s SHIELD, but...considering how they treated you, I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

“It was what they had to do,” Loki said. “If they hadn’t…”

“That didn’t seem to me like they were too keen on looking for other options,” Steve said, sounding a little mulish. “Makes me wonder what else they’re up to. They’re a secret government organization, so...probably things I wouldn’t like. Maybe that’s a reason to work with them. Or maybe it’s a reason not to.” He made a bit of a face. “I don’t really know what else I’d do, though.”

“Spend a few months wandering around a strange planet and you might figure it out,” Loki said dryly. Steve glanced at him.

“Is that what you did?”

“No exactly,” Loki said. “I didn’t figure out much that way. Maybe it would work better for you.”

Steve huffed a quiet laugh, dropping his head forward with a faint and wry smile. “Do you think - this - is going to be an ongoing thing?” He gestured at their surroundings.

“I have no idea,” Loki said. “There is a name for it, apparently.”

“The Avengers Initiative. Right.”

“If I had to guess,” Loki said slowly, “you...Midgard is growing. Maturing. You are starting to reach beyond yourselves, and touch greater and greater power - some of which you barely understand.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Condescending.”

“But true,” Loki countered. “Look at the Tesseract. And I think...the higher you reach, the more things you will find that answer. Many of which will not be friendly. And most of your world...is not necessarily equipped to respond.”

“So you think...yes. This’ll happen again.”

“Or something like it,” Loki said. “It seems more likely than not.” He paused. “Or maybe I am just a pessimist.”

“I’d say a little,” Steve said. “But that doesn’t necessarily mean you’re wrong.” He took a deep breath and let it out. “It feels strange,” he said. “The idea of having a...team, again.”

Loki raised his eyebrows. “Is that what we are?”
Steve turned his head, looking at Loki sideways. “Isn’t it?”

That caught Loki a little by surprise. “A rather motley one,” he said, finally. Steve smiled, though it looked a little melancholy.

“The best ones always are.”

He’d been right about Tony. Loki had barely managed to tell him that SHIELD had expelled him before he made the offer, eyes gleaming in a way that might have been unsettling from someone else.

The salary he threw out sounded absurdly high to Loki but he bargained up anyway, just to see if he could.

“This should probably go through Pepper,” Tony allowed. “For the official shit, anyway. But she’ll be cool with it. We’ll just call you a consultant, that word can mean anything. I’ll patch it through to her, there’ll be some paperwork...you can start on Monday.” He snapped his fingers and pointed in Loki’s direction. “You know this means you can’t dodge me anymore. I’m your boss.”

“Ask Nick Fury how effective that was in getting me to do what he wanted,” Loki said, but he smiled a little.

With that done, Loki took himself to SHIELD’s headquarters. There was nothing there he needed to retrieve - he’d just thought of someone else who perhaps deserved some explanation.

He didn’t hide himself from sight as he made his way to Maureen Fisher’s office, and felt the pairs of eyes on him, the uncertain whispers. It wound him tighter and tighter until he realized what it was: maybe just a touch of awe.

That...gave him the most peculiar feeling.

Loki had checked her schedule beforehand, but he still paused, hesitating, in front of the closed door. He made himself raise a hand with only a little difficulty and knocked, then stepped back. He could hear her crossing the room, so he was, more or less, ready when she opened it.

“Hello,” he said, suddenly feeling hopelessly awkward. “May I come in?”

“Yes,” she said, visibly recovering from her surprise. “Yes, you...is this a session?”

No, Loki meant to say, but he considered it for a moment. “Maybe,” he said, finally.

She relaxed a little. “Why don’t you sit down and tell me why you’re here?”

Loki came in and sat down, folding his hands on his lap. “By now,” he said after several moments, “I suspect you know that I was not entirely honest with you.”

Her eyebrows rose a little. “I work with a lot of spies,” she said. “I’m sort of used to that. Though I do try to encourage honesty in here.” She paused. “But I have...heard some things.”

Loki rubbed his thumb absently against the palm of his hand. “I suppose I should ask what you’ve heard.”

“That your real name is Loki, you’re from another planet, and something about saving the world,” she said.

*But not the part where my mind was overtaken and I was used against my will, thus almost damning*
the world first? Loki pushed that aside. That wasn’t the point, at least...at least not right now.

“That is all...well, at least the first two are correct. It seems a little self-aggrandizing to claim the third.”

“I see,” Doctor Fisher said. She looked like she was taking a few moments to absorb that confirmation, though Loki thought she must have expected it. Perhaps hearing it from Loki himself was different. He sat still, waiting to see what she would do. After several moments she shook herself and said, “and...the rest of what you told me?”

“True,” Loki said, after a moment. “If...adjusted, in places. But in substance...accurate.”

She seemed to be considering that, and finally nodded. “Thank you for coming to tell me,” she said. “I appreciate it.”

Loki blinked. “That’s...all?”

“Well,” she said. “I won’t lie. It’s a little startling - but then everything about the last few days has been startling. The world is weirder than I knew it was a month ago - and like I said, I’m used to my clients keeping things secret, no matter how much I wish they wouldn’t.”

Loki had expected her to be more upset. Even angry. He eyed her, a little wary that she might be hiding it, but if she was she was hiding it very well. “Thank you,” he said after several moments. “I appreciate your...understanding, Doctor Fisher.”

“You can call me Maureen,” she said. “Most of my clients do.” Loki blinked at her, and she smiled slightly. “Really.”

“Maureen,” he said carefully. “That seems...awfully informal.”

“That’s sort of the point,” she said. Loki supposed that made a kind of sense. He’d told her things he hadn’t voiced to anyone else. She knew his true name, now. He might as well use hers.

“And are you all right?” Doctor Fisher - Maureen - said. “What little I heard...it seemed like things were pretty rough.”

“I am,” Loki said, and when she raised her eyebrows added, “truthfully. I’ve been resting.”

“Good,” she said with a small smile. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“That was not...the only reason I came,” Loki said, more slowly. She cocked her head to the side, and he glanced down, hesitating.

“You made an offer,” he began, and then stopped.

She just waited in patient silence for him to find the words. Loki recognized the tactic, and was briefly annoyed by it. Coward, he told himself, less than gently.

“It seems I am...no longer working for SHIELD,” Loki said carefully. “I am not certain if you...ever take other clients, but if you were so inclined...I might like to continue our - conversations. I would, of course, compensate you for your time.”

“I’ve been known to take retired SHIELD agents as clients,” Maureen said after a moment. “I think we could probably work something out.”
Things between him and Thor were not easy. Better, certainly, but Thor’s uncertainty tugged at Loki’s temper. It would be easy to avoid him; Loki had always been good at that.

Instead, he walked into the room where Thor was staying without knocking and said, “I’m taking you out for coffee.”

Thor gave him a startled look that morphed into one of confusion. “Pardon?”

“Coffee,” Loki repeated. “It’s a Midgardian activity one does when one wishes to speak to someone over the distraction of food without committing to a full meal.”

Thor’s eyebrows rose a fraction. “I thought it was a beverage.”

“Yes,” Loki said, “that, too. Are you coming or not?”

“I am coming,” Thor said, rising. “Do I need to bring anything with me?”

“No,” Loki said. “Nothing.”

“Where,” Thor started to ask, when Loki grasped his wrist and pulled them through space. Thor made a startled sound, though unlike the humans he was used to this method of transport, and just glanced around them with curiosity, altering what he’d meant to say with, “is this?”

“A city on the other side of the country,” Loki said. “I lived here for a couple of weeks.” He walked into the cafe he’d been thinking of, ordering at the counter for both him and Thor while Thor hovered behind him. He claimed a table in the corner, automatically putting his back to the wall.

Thor sat down across from him.

“So,” he said. “You wanted to speak?”

“Yes,” Loki said. “I thought we should.” He tapped his fingers on his leg, under the table where Thor couldn’t see them. “I think we are going to have to do a lot of that. And as it is not...necessarily either of our strong points, I expect we will need practice.”

Thor’s lips twitched like he was tempted to smile and wasn’t sure if he was allowed. It faded quickly, though. “Was there something in particular that you wanted to address?”

There was that uncertainty again. Stop treating me like glass, Loki wanted to snap, and at the same time some part of him was grateful for Thor’s imbalance. He shook both away. “You haven’t asked why I didn’t want to go back.”

Thor’s expression was sober. He folded his hands on the table. “I didn’t want to make you think you needed to defend yourself to me.”

“The call came for their drinks, and Loki stood up to retrieve them before answering. He started absently pulling apart the chocolate croissant he’d ordered, looking down at it rather than at Thor. “I told you,” he said, “Asgard was not...there were many ways in which I did not - fit, there. And they only became more apparent with time. There were times, yes, when I was happy. But there were more and more when I was not.” He looked up. “You shine very brightly, Thor. Overwhelmingly so.”
Thor opened his mouth, and Loki waited for the denial, for the protest, for the supposed reassurance that told him he was imagining things. But Thor closed his mouth again without speaking, his eyebrows drawn together.

“Here…” Loki made himself stop pulling the croissant apart. “I found my own place. Where I was not just your brother, or the second son. Where I did not fall in your shadow.”

“I have never…” Thor stopped, hesitated, amended. “I did not mean for you to feel that way.”

“You told me to know my place,” Loki said, “and you meant it to silence me.”

For a moment Thor’s mouth tightened and Loki thought he was going to snap back, but then he took a deep breath, visibly calming himself again. “I was a fool,” he said. “And I was...you said it well. Arrogant, reckless, and dangerous.”

Loki blinked. “Who told you?”

“Sif,” Thor said. “She was indignant. But if harsh, it...may not be so unfair an assessment as I would like.”

“I didn’t think so,” Loki pressed his hands against the table.

“I…” Thor took another slow breath. “Please do not take this...the wrong way.”

Loki tensed. “Not an auspicious start, Thor.”

Thor grimaced, but he pressed forward. “I do not...recall things the way you do. I do not see what you describe.” Loki wanted to laugh, bitterly, but Thor held up a hand. “I’m not finished. I cannot assume that I would have seen, much as I wish I could claim it. And I am sorry-”

“For what?” Loki interrupted. Thor hesitated.

“For...not seeing. Not noticing. And doing nothing.”

Loki exhaled and looked down. “The last time you apologized, I tried to kill you,” he murmured. “Or...I don’t even know that I was trying. I was so - angry, and you were there, apologizing for - you didn’t know. I thought - he is just saying the words. Mouthing the right sounds to appease me.”

“I meant it,” Thor said. “I did not know why you were attacking me. I did not understand what could have gone so wrong. But it was clear that something had, and I wanted to set it to rights.”

“I really did think that you would kill me,” Loki said quietly. “If you came back, if you knew. For what I was. For the first time in my life, I was afraid of you.” He looked down at his left hand. “You’ve seen, now.”

“I have,” Thor said.

“And?”

“It is as I said,” Thor said. “I would still call you my brother. And I would never - never - harm you.”

Loki looked up, finally. “I believe you,” he said. Thor’s expression was raw, naked of pretense. How, Loki wondered, did he do that? Exposing all he felt with such ease.

“Thank you,” he said. Loki kept himself from lowering his eyes again.
“I love you, Thor,” he said. “That has always been part of the problem.” He saw Thor flinch, slightly, and went on. “But perhaps it can be part of...a resolution, as well.”

“I would like it to be,” Thor said softly. Loki smiled very faintly.

“Drink your coffee,” he said. “It’ll get cold.” He paused, and pushed the slightly shredded croissant between them. “And try this. It’s good.”

Thor must know that he was changing the subject. Steering it back to shallow waters. But to Loki’s relief, he didn’t comment - just let it go with one of his warm smiles.

It was a start.

Loki had been ready for Odin to protest his claim, but he had not. For the first days, Loki ignored it - ignored the hovering question of what he was going to do with it.

The Casket of Ancient Winters. The heart of Jotunheim, taken along with an abandoned babe from its beaten people. Loki could feel its power, close as a heartbeat, resonating with his blood.

Its magic was strong. Added to his own, it made a fearsome weapon - and did he not have a right to it, as he’d said to Odin? He was Laufey’s son. Perhaps there were others, but his blood was still royal. There were reasons aplenty to keep it, and use it for Midgard’s defense. Or not. Simply to keep it for his own, away from Asgard and Jotunheim both.

But he didn’t truly want it.

He thought about bringing Thor, in case - in case, but decided against it. Too much risk for different reasons. So he waited until the middle of the night before slipping out.

He hesitated, his heart pounding a little before taking the step out onto Yggdrasil’s branches, but it was quiet. No tremors, just the familiar song of the universe. He wasn’t going to dawdle, though - his magic might be healed but he was still weakened. He didn’t know what would happen if he exhausted his strength here, between worlds, but he did not want to find out.

The path to Jotunheim was easy from Midgard. He made his way along it, trying to ignore the fear churning in his stomach, the pulsing beat that urged him to turn back, that he was making a mistake.

Maybe, he thought. Or maybe not.

Once upon a time, a few mortals had given him a chance to rise above what he thought he could be. He could not be easy with this - thing, about himself, this truth, but...but. The Casket had been used once to try to conquer Midgard; this time, it had helped save it. Maybe it was time for Jotunheim’s heart to come home.

Loki stepped out onto the ice and held still, for a moment. He didn’t recognize where he was standing, but then the terrain all looked more or less the same to him. But he could feel the ice stir under his feet, something waking up, sensing the power he held hidden away.

Last chance, Loki thought. Last chance to change your mind.

He reached within himself and pulled the Casket out with a twist of his wrists. He watched the blue bleed up from his hands, spreading over his skin. Nausea washed through him and he tried to look at it, feel it, let it go.
The last did not work very well. But he didn’t want to carve open his own arms, either, so that was a sort of progress.

Loki took a deep breath and bent to set the Casket down, weaving a light spell that would hold it in place until someone claimed it. Maybe they would recognize the magic, or maybe they wouldn’t. That wasn’t really the point.

He took one step back, then another. Briefly, he thought he ought to say something, but he would be the only one to hear it.

So he simply turned and walked back out of the world, retracing his steps back to Stark’s tower.

How long would it take for someone to find it? A few hours? A day? A week? What would they do then?

Could it be used to mend the damage the Bifrost had done?

Loki sat down on his bed and closed his eyes, counting his breaths and searching his heart for regrets.

To his surprise, he found none. For once, even if he was wrong, even if it turned out poorly - he still thought he’d made the right decision.

There was one more thing.

Loki realized belatedly that he might have the wrong place - that he couldn’t be sure she was still here. He briefly considered leaving, doing more research, but he knew himself - if he backed away now, it would be a long time before he returned. If he did.

What are you afraid of? He thought harshly, and walked up to the front door, rapping lightly against it.

“Just a moment!” He heard from within, and waited, trying not to fidget. Looking up and down the street.

The door opened. Loki blinked at the girl looking up at him. She looked...taller. It hadn’t been that long, had it?

“Angela,” he said, surprised. Her eyes widened.

“Luke?” For a moment, Loki tensed - he hadn’t seen her since he’d pulled her blood-spattered and trembling out of the slaughterhouse he’d made - but then her smile bloomed and she flung herself forward, hugging his legs. “You came back! Grandmama! It’s Luke!”

To his shame, Loki’s eyes stung. He bit the inside of his cheek and rested his hand lightly, briefly, on the top of Angela’s head. “Well, hello,” he said. “It’s...good to see you, too.”

Margaret Fairfax came slowly down the stairs. Her eyes widened when she saw him, too.


“I’m sorry for stopping by without notice,” Loki said. “But I wanted to...personally thank you.”

Margaret’s eyebrows furrowed. “Thank me?”
“Yes,” Loki said. He looked down at Angela, who was staring up at him with an expression of near hero-worship on her face. “I…” He took a deep breath. “When I met you, I was...at a very difficult point in my life. Perhaps the worst. And you...your kindness was a source of strength, however poorly I returned it.”


“Loki,” Loki said. “My true name is - Loki.”

“Like the…” She did a bit of a double-take, and he saw her put it together. Or at least something of it. “Oh,” she said. “Oh.”

She put a hand on the handrail. Loki readied himself to be told to leave. Or else for fear, or...something.

She straightened. “Loki, then,” she said. “You didn’t return anything poorly at all. You were a very nice houseguest. Certainly better than that man who came in after. Hmph.”

Loki blinked at her. “That’s...all?”

“I told you,” Margaret said. “I always knew you were different. But you were good to me, and to Angela. And that’s what matters.”

“You’re my hero,” Angela said, and Loki felt his face get almost unbearably warm.

“I was trying to thank you,” he protested. “All you did for me-”

“I was happy to do.” Margaret smiled, crinkling the lines around her mouth and eyes.

Loki swallowed hard, past the lump in his throat. “I brought you something,” he managed to say, and summoned the basket he’d prepared. “It isn’t much, but…”

Angela snatched it when he held it out, and pulled back the cover. Her eyes turned into circles. “Cookies!” She said delightedly. “Are they chocolate?”

“Some of them,” Loki said. “Not - handmade, I’m afraid. From a bakery in New York. It came highly recommended.”

“Oh Luke,” Margaret said, and corrected, “Loki. You didn’t need to do that.”

“I wanted to,” Loki said, with a crooked smile. He’d thought about it. There were things he could do - larger gestures, grander gestures. But ultimately, this seemed better. More appropriate.

“Well,” she said after a moment. “Thank you. You are a sweet young man.” She paused. “I’d say there’s enough cookies in here for three, you know.”

“Pardon?” Loki said blankly. She smiled at him again.

“Would you like to come inside and join us? I can put on some tea, and you can tell me what you’ve been up to since you went away.”

“I couldn’t,” Loki started to say, but Angela had already grabbed his arm and was trying to pull him inside.

“Are you in New York now?” She asked. “What’s it like? What are you doing there? Have you been to the top of the Empire State Building?”
Loki let out a helpless laugh. “I can only answer one question at a time.”

“You had better come in to answer the rest,” Margaret said, her eyes twinkling. Loki glanced over his shoulder at the street like something was going to be there, looking over his shoulder. Like someone was going to say no, Loki.

“Why not,” Loki said. He let Angela pull him over the threshold.

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