Summary

See also "Skeletons, Scenes, and Snippets" Chapter 9 - the one where Asgard's magic users go on strike and quietly evacuate Asgard, after Odin passes sentence on Loki post-Avengers. Some of them turn up on Earth, and SHIELD has to assess whether or not this is another invasion.

or:

SHIELD is called to Iceland to investigate a village that appeared out of nowhere, and discovers that Asgard's magic users have quietly gone on strike and left their realm completely. The reasons are unsettling, and the potential consequences could shake the Nine Realms before all is said and done.

Notes
For those of you who wondered where I went over November, and why Grievance did not update for a while, it is because I was working on this instead as my first ever NaNoWriMo entry. The idea is to write 50,000 words in 30 days, and I did that, but the fic is not complete yet by any stretch, and the writing style in NaNo is a lot more about slapping the words onto the page than what I usually do, which is both slower and more careful. So this will update a bit slowly as I go through and polish it, and also try not to neglect Grievance any further.

For those who expressed interest in the skeleton idea over on "Skeletons, Scenes, and Snippets," I hope I've done the concept justice.

For Shi_Toyu, you rock. Thanks so much.
"Iceland?" The look on Tony's face was... well, it was pretty funny, like he couldn't decide whether to laugh or be offended at the absurdity. He kept looking back and forth between his tablet and Director Fury like there was some kind of practical joke hidden here, if only he could find it. "Just— Iceland? Really?"

"What about it?"

"Just doesn't seem like the kind of place to stage an invasion. I mean, it's Iceland."

"That's actually what has us most concerned," said Fury, as the others collected their gear. "Not that long ago we had a couple of aliens show up who were regarded by the ancient Vikings as gods. Now the old Viking stomping grounds are reporting seeing an entire village full of people, that did not exist two weeks ago, and I can't help but wonder if the two things are connected."

"You think Thor is setting up a vacation home?"

"Or a base. And not Thor. For all we know, the flash and drama over New York was a distraction, and this is the real invasion—already established while we weren't looking."

And Steve didn't say anything in response to that, but privately he had to admit it would be a much smarter strategy, if that were the case.

They all trooped onto the plane and settled in for takeoff; Fury wanted to brief them on the way, so Nat and Clint weren't piloting this time. Tony had put up a token fuss about not being allowed to just fly there in his armor, but had taken a seat the same as the rest of them. Maybe because it would be about a six-hour flight and the jet had its own bathroom and snacks.

Fury had tablets waiting for all of them once they were settled, loaded with the information they'd gathered so far. There was also a larger display for better detail on some of the images.

"That... doesn't look like an invasion," said Hawkeye. The satellite photos had shown a compound consisting of several buildings on the shore of Lake Alftavatn, which the report assured them translated to "Swan Lake". The lake was located near a pair of mostly-dormant volcanoes whose names Steve couldn't even hope to pronounce, one of which had apparently blown its top just a little bit before Steve had come out of the ice. And those were located just southwest of the biggest glacier on the island, which supposedly covered two more mostly-dormant volcanoes. The village, or whatever it was, was the kind of thing that should have taken months to build, yet Iceland's government—and Iceland's hikers, bikers, and tourists—were all insisting it had appeared virtually overnight. There had been a couple of cold, rainy days where travel in the area was way down, and when the weather cleared and people started passing through again, there was the compound.

Fury eyed his agent, appraising. "Explain."

Clint just shrugged, and gestured at the images. "Where are the vehicles? They got what looks like a couple of boats down on the lakeshore, but they're not big enough to be troop transports. I don't see any trucks or even like the Chitauri gliders, and nothing big enough to be a hangar or a garage for them either. How are they gonna invade if they don't have any movement?"

"They got here easily enough," Natasha pointed out.

Steve leaned in for a closer look. "The buildings aren't obviously fortified," he said. "Look, they
"Could be advanced tech," said Tony. "Force fields and flying cars. If they can just appear on our planet from nowhere, they can probably get where they need to be for an attack without too much difficulty. Protect their base, too."

"Advanced tech? Hmm, yeah. They'd just about have to have something like that, because strategically this base isn't positioned well at all. It's not close enough to roads for any kind of vehicular assault, there's no airstrip or landing pad, and if they were going for stealth, they're not succeeding. I mean, 'poof, instant village' is not very covert." Clint leaned back in his seat.

"Not to mention being on a major fault line, surrounded by volcanoes." Bruce looked up from his tablet, showing a map of the area with lots of little red dots and circles on it. "The place gets seismic activity to one degree or another almost daily," said Bruce. "I mean, granted, most of it's really low-level, but I wouldn't call the place stable by any stretch."

Hawkeye shook his head again. "I don't get it."

"Yeah, but are they attacking, though?" asked Natasha absently. She stroked her fingers across her own tablet, back to one of the intelligence reports. "From the sound of things they've already had first contact with some of the locals, and every account says they've been peaceful. Sheltered a couple of hikers, came into town for supplies."

"There's women and children," said Barton suddenly, and they all looked up at the flat tone of his voice. "They got kids on site."

Steve drummed his fingers on his knee for a second. "Our goal is just recon for now?" he asked the director.

"We need a better assessment of what they have, yes."

"Nat, Bruce, and I could pose as tourists whose car broke down a little ways up the road —"

She shook her head immediately. "Too easy to verify. Fix the car and send us on our way before we've learned anything."

"Hikers, maybe," suggested Steve. "One of us didn't take the climb too well and we need a break. Maybe first aid."

"That'd be me," said Bruce. "The two of you look… ridiculously fit and healthy, for that."

Nat grinned, as Steve had expected. "We dragged our poor, unsuspecting friend along on this trip, because he works too hard and needs to get out of the office more often. We didn't pay attention to his complaining and we pushed him too hard, and now we're very sorry."

"So, just another Tuesday," said Tony, and Bruce chuckled. "You've got me and Bird-Brain on perimeter duty, long-distance monitoring, all that good stuff?"

"That was the plan," said Steve.

Tony tipped his head back and forth, weighing the idea. "Good plan," he said finally.

"We're all very glad you approve," said the director. "Finish going through those packets and let me know if you come up with anything else. We've got another five hours before we hit Iceland airspace."
None of them really bothered to ask why Fury was on the flight with them; they all knew that if this were just a routine reconnaissance mission, most of the team would not be along, much less the director himself. Steve just hoped they wouldn't really be needed.

Upon landing the larger craft, the Avengers split up and converged on the village from three directions; Nat, piloting the quinjet, had brought Bruce and Steve up from the south, along the hiking trail marked on the map. They had already landed and were making decent time on foot. Clint and the director had been dropped off to approach by car, along the road to the west of the lake, and Tony was up high, ready to come in from the northeast if they needed him.

"I can see why this trek is so popular," remarked Bruce, panting a little as they topped a rise. "The views are incredible."

"You holding up okay?" asked Steve.

"Fine, fine. Most of the places I've been have been flat and tropical. This is a nice change of pace."

In their ears, their comm units came to life and Clint's voice came through. "We're in position; I can confirm the presence of children on site."

"Hostages?"

"If they are, they don't realize it," he said. "Bunch of 'em are kicking a ball around right now. Seems pretty calm."

It was only another twenty minutes or so before they came in sight of the village themselves; immediately Steve could see what had the locals so… bemused. There was simply no way that the buildings were only two weeks old, to look at them; and the overall shape of them was pretty clearly not the typical architecture for Iceland, and possibly not even for Earth. The shape of them tended toward smooth curves and domes, or clustered hexagonal towers, tall and thin.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," he said, "but isn't it considered unwise to build anything over a couple stories high in an earthquake zone?"

"No, you're right," said Tony over the comms, "unless they have some kind of earthquake-proofing that we don't know about. Although granted, like Bruce said, more than half the earthquakes around here aren't even detectable without specialized instruments, and the ones that people can actually feel are really minor. But still. Jarvis and I still can't figure out what material they used to even build this stuff."

Steve could see what he was getting at; the roofs looked metallic, their shine a bit redder than polished copper and a bit richer than gold, in the afternoon sun. The walls of the buildings were a golden cream color with… Steve almost wanted to call it embroidery, around the door and window frames—fine lines and curls of bright metal, inset into the walls and gleaming when the light hit them right.

The architecture wasn't the only thing alien about the place.

The kids were playing with a ball, as Clint described, but instead of kicking it around, the ball was floating over their heads, and they all were clustered around it and giggling as they took turns tapping it. The ball would change shape, opening out like a blossom, then it would close again, change color, shift shape, and then open once more. The thing was like nothing Steve had ever seen in his life, and he found himself smiling in amazement.
There were other people outdoors too, as the three of them approached, mostly women with baskets on their heads or bustling from one building to the next. Steve spotted a few men, who greeted the women respectfully.

"That's a good sign," Natasha remarked.

"How so?"

"Extremists tend toward hyper-masculine behavior, and subjugate the women and children as much as possible. A more egalitarian society tends to be more likely to be nonviolent."

"That's been my experience," put in Bruce. Steve decided to take their word for it, and not ask about Bruce's experience.

Another good sign: in the village, everyone was colorfully dressed and, more to the point, Steve couldn't identify anything that looked like a uniform, or military gear, or weapons among any of them.

"What's that sound?" asked Bruce. Somewhere in the cluster of buildings, it sounded like someone was hammering on metal.

"Blacksmith's forge," said Tony.

"Seriously?"

"Sounds exactly like it, Cap. Trust me on this."

Steve wouldn't really know what a smithy was supposed to sound like, but… "Shouldn't there be smoke?" he asked. "You know, from the chimney or whatever?" The air over the little village was perfectly clear, with only the faintest hint of sulfur, which Natasha had said likely came from the volcanoes or nearby hot springs.

"I just know what I hear," said Tony.

The three of them kept walking.

"So… do we just go in?" Bruce asked, a little helplessly.

"Stick to the plan," said Nat, "although we might be able to get away with skipping the injury part."

They put their binoculars away, trusting Clint and Tony to let them know if anything changed on their hike in. At maybe a half-mile out, only a few minutes later, they watched as one of the women called to the children and they all gathered around her, collecting their floating ball and going back to kicking it across the ground, which was black where the bright green-and-pink moss had worn away. The woman picked up one of the smaller children on her hip, and they all leisurely made their way inside, the kids chattering happily. There was no sense of urgency or alarm in their movement, but Steve still couldn't shake the feeling that they'd been made.

"What do you think?" he asked the others.

Natasha shrugged. "We've probably been spotted. Keeping kids away from strangers is just good sense, or there might be some kind of school that they need to get back to."

"Doesn't look very military," said Bruce, echoing Steve's thoughts from earlier.

"Best to stay cautious," she reminded them both, and from the look on her face she was making sure
Steve got it too.

By the time they were maybe a block away from the nearest building, there was no longer any doubt
that they'd been spotted. A pair of women, and one of the few men on site, had gathered and were
watching their approach, waiting serenely with the women's hands tucked into their sleeves and the
man hooking his thumbs into his belt. The man was big, nearly Thor's height, with a short scruff of
beard and his hair pulled back, except for a pair of braids that framed his face, one hanging at each
temple.

"Definitely getting that Viking vibe from him," muttered Bruce. Steve had to agree. At least the guy
wasn't carrying a giant hammer or anything.

"Greetings, travelers," said one of the women, possibly younger than the other, with red-brown hair.
"Do you require aid?"

"Oh good, you speak English!" Natasha put on her best hi-I'm-harmless smile and let out a tired, self-
derecrating little huff. "Sorry, I know that makes us sound like the worst kind of tourists…"

"Think nothing of it," said the other woman, possibly older. It was… disconcertingly hard to tell,
with these two. There was something almost unnerving about their stillness, to Steve's mind. They
weren't staring, or unnaturally still, or doing anything else that Steve had gotten to see from the
horror movies Tony insisted he watch. They just had this, this deep well of quieter inside them, like
they were halfway into one of Bruce's meditations, even when they were standing right there and
talking to you.

"Oh, thanks. Well, anyway, I don't know about aid, but if there's somewhere we could stop and rest
our feet for a bit, that'd sure be great. And maybe something to eat, right, honey?" She turned and
batted her eyelashes up at him. Oh. Apparently they were doing the boyfriend-girlfriend routine
again.

"I could use a snack, sure." He shared a quick glance with Bruce. "You?"

"I, uh, I've been starving since breakfast," said Bruce. "I didn't want to say anything, but…"

"I am sure we can accommodate you," said the maybe-older woman. Her hair was the palest blond
Steve had ever seen without it going straight over into white, and hung in a long braid down her
shoulder and onto one breast. She had the faintest of laugh lines at the corners of her eyes, but Steve
really could not for the life of him tell whether she was actually the older of the two or not.

The three villagers led the three Avengers into an unassuming, oval building with a low roof—still
with the metallic roof and decorations set into the walls, but not quite as fancy as some of the others
they'd noticed—and sat them down at a long, curved table that wrapped around a central fireplace.
Given that it was Iceland, and seemingly perpetually windy, even the summer days had a bit of bite
to them; Steve scooted closer and let the heat sink into his bones.

"This is nice, thank you," he said. Sure, they might be here to spy, but they could still be polite. And
it was nice, especially when the big man with them passed around mugs of something hot. Natasha
watched and waited until the guy took a drink from his own mug before sipping from her own. It
was good; thick like cocoa, but flavored more like tea with a hint of nuts to it.

The redhead sat down next to them. "Will you invite your friends to join us?" she asked, casual as
you please, and Natasha froze.

"We've been aware of you since your flying machine landed," said the blonde. "And really, it was a
matter of time before your people came to us with your questions.”

Well. At least they weren't trying to pretend they were just regular people. Steve wasn't quite sure how they would manage to cover up something like that, but he'd seen SHIELD try to spin some pretty weird stuff before.

"There are three," said the redhead. "Two in a wheeled vehicle, and one observing from the air. His armor is most ingenious." She and the blonde both poured themselves mugs of their own, while Steve and Natasha stared. Bruce mostly looked sheepish as she continued. "The devices you are wearing, in your ears; are they not for communication? Will you not ask them to join us?"

"We're a little concerned about your intentions," said Natasha, after a moment. "Strategically it would be safer to leave them outside, if things take a turn for the worse here, for us."

The man with them smirked, but still didn't speak.

"Were our intentions hostile," said the blonde one calmly, "you would know it. But perhaps it is a matter of custom: We permitted you to pass inside our boundary, and offered you hospitality. To violate hospitality is… there is no honor in such a thing."

"Besides, we have no more than a handful of people here with any sort of training as warriors. Our business here is only peaceful, and our intention, as you put it, is to be left alone."

Natasha tilted her head at them. "You'll forgive us for not taking that at face value," she said.

"Of course. But invite your companions to join us, and we will answer whatever questions you wish to ask."

It took a bit of argument, but eventually Clint, Fury, and Tony agreed to come in and join the talk. "I am called Ingirun," said the blonde one, once the rest of the Avengers were on site. "I lead this village, insofar as we have leadership here. We are generally more communal, but the council of aldermen recognize me as their chief."

"And I am called Herkja," said the redhead. "This is my husband, Ottar."

Ottar still didn't speak, but he nodded at them amiably enough and rested a hand on Herkja's shoulder.

"I am Nicholas Fury, director of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division; we're an international organization dedicated to managing threats to this world that other groups cannot."

"And if the groups you encounter are not a threat to you, Nicholas Fury, what then?" asked Ingirun, her eyes narrowing.

"That's what we're here to find out," said the director. "By all accounts, your compound here—"

"Community," said Ingirun.

"—appeared out of literally nowhere. A collection of buildings that should have taken weeks or even months to build appeared in the span of a few days. Admittedly, we've dealt with a far more hostile incursion than what you appear to be, but it was recent enough that we think it wise to err on the side of caution, where your group is concerned."
"You wish to know where we are from and why we have come, then," said Ingirun.

"That's about the sum of it, yes."

"We are of Asgard, as I think you already suspected. And we are here because our king has proven himself to be a maddened tyrant, whom we no longer trust with our safety."

They all blinked at that. "Your king," said Bruce. "Just to be clear… Thor's father?"

Herkja sniffed disdainfully. "Indeed. And much is explained as regards the crown prince's behavior over the years, now that we know how cruel his father truly is."

The Avengers all shifted in their seats, taking that in. "I think we may need a bit of background information," said Natasha.

Ingirun nodded. "Of course."

"Before we get to that, though," said Fury, "let's be clear. Odin seemed to have no problem using Earth as a dumping ground for Thor when he misbehaved back home. And more recently Loki decided our world would be a perfect playground to go on a rampaging temper tantrum, endangering millions of innocent lives. Now you're here, and I have to wonder what it is about our planet that makes slumming it here sound like such a good idea."

"It is as we have said," said Herkja. "We chose to depart Asgard because our king has revealed that he does not care equally for the welfare of all his subjects. Many of us left, a far greater number than what you have seen here, and traveled across the realms seeking sanctuary where we might. Only a fraction of those who left chose to come to Midgard; the others are elsewhere, scattered throughout Yggdrasil. We desire only to be permitted to dwell here in peace, to raise our children without fear for their safety, and possibly, if conditions in Asgard change for the better, to be permitted to return without hindrance."

"And if we must offer something in trade for that," put in Ingirun, "then perhaps we might aid your realm in small matters from time to time. Our research before coming here showed that you are not as primitive as we were led to believe, but still there is the possibility that we have knowledge which could be useful to you."

Steve could practically see Stark's ears perk up, along with Bruce's and Fury's.

Natasha, thankfully, was able to keep her head. "What happened to cause you all to flee Asgard? And given that you thought we were primitive, and you had other… realms to choose from, why come here at all?"

Ingirun and Herkja traded a glance, before Ingirun spoke. "Our prince Loki was brought before Odin for sentencing for his crimes. Not for trial. Not to speak in his own defense, nor even to be examined for signs of mental instability or defect. Only to be sentenced. And the sentence…" She actually cut off and swallowed hard, blinking rapidly as she glanced away for a moment.

"His Highness is dying," said Herkja. "Slowly, in agony, and worst of all, unintentionally. All because Odin was too wrapped up in his own hubris and wounded pride to consider the difference between his two sons. He proved to us all that he never understood or even properly saw his younger son, and was willing to lash out in his blindness and subject him to a cruel fate—and in doing so he revealed himself to be a hypocrite of the first order, for he was ostensibly punishing Loki for that very thing."

"Loki is here." That was Clint, and Steve could see the way his face went pale, but it wasn't from
fear. Hawkeye looked very much like he wanted to kill somebody, the sooner the better.

Ottar crossed his arms and looked menacingly down at them all. The two women did not look any less stubborn than he did.

"He is here," said Ingirun. "We brought him to Midgard in an attempt to save his life, and every single one of us—man, woman, and child—would die to defend him. Respectfully, we would ask that you not require us to prove it."

Surprisingly, it didn't take too much to convince Ingirun and Herkja to let them see Loki. From the looks they exchanged, Steve figured the others had either been expecting a fight or were now wondering if they weren't walking into a trap. Even so, when Fury and the others had drawn weapons, the only thing that the Aesir did was look indulgently amused: Ingirun had raised her eyebrows tolerantly, while Herkja had rolled her eyes and Ottar had merely smirked.

This was not exactly reassuring, and the Avengers had traded a few more looks back and forth because of it.

"I don't get why you all would defend him," said Steve carefully, as they walked down the central pathway in the village. It couldn't properly be called a road; it was unpaved, there were no ruts, and even the moss from the surrounding countryside was mostly undisturbed, brightening up the dark earth around them. "I mean, no offense, maybe you just… don't care much about us primitive humans, but from what Thor told us before he took Loki back, he usurped the throne and tried to kill a lot of people before Thor stopped him."

"Thor." Herkja's voice fairly dripped disgust. "The bloodthirsty idiot of the pair, who was already banished when all of that took place. He has no idea what truly happened. He will believe whatever Odin tells him, and not bother to look further for truth."

"Herkja, calm yourself," said Ingirun. "These humans have no way to know any of what we know, and can only trust what they have been told."

"I know that," the redhead responded, pressing her lips together as she took a deep breath. "I do know that. But I am very angry with him, nonetheless. He failed his brother as surely as their so-called father did; his ignorance was as great, even if his malice was not. For that matter, I am not best pleased with the woman they call mother, either."

"How much of this story is relevant for us to know?" asked Clint. His fist was clenched around his bow.

"We shall tell you all of it, once you have satisfied your curiosity as to the state of His Highness's health," said Herkja. She was still pretty miffed at them, or else feeling protective of Loki. Steve had to wonder what he had done to inspire that kind of loyalty… but then again, Thor had said more than once that he still did not entirely understand why his beloved brother had changed so drastically. So maybe Steve ought to wonder instead what sort of person Loki had been before he went off the deep end and started thinking that invading other worlds was a good idea.

They came to a cluster of hexagonal buildings, arranged in a tidy group about two-thirds of the way down the path. Ottar held the door for them, still looking amused at their drawn weapons, and they all stepped into an open lobby sort of space, with women—it seemed there were more women here than men, from what Steve could see—moving about busily and otherwise completely ignoring the humans in the room. Two or three were standing at displays, almost like Tony's flat screens except there didn't seem to be a screen at all, just light; they spoke quietly to one another and occasionally
swept their fingers through the glow, watching it change and then commenting on it some more.

"I want one," said Tony. No surprise there.

"Focus, Stark," said Natasha drily, and Steve held back a smile.

Through one doorway, Steve could see what looked like a classroom, maybe; older students, again nearly all women, gathered around an instructor who moved her hands gracefully as she spoke. They didn't get to see much more than that, however, because Ingirun led them through a different doorway, down a short passage, and into another room entirely.

The sound from the lobby area cut off completely; it was nearly as silent as a church here. Ingirun turned to them and spoke in hushed tones:

"You may enter and observe, so long as you keep your voices down. I will have no difficulty ejecting you forcibly if need be; I trust that will not be necessary."

"We are armed," muttered Clint in the back.

"Your weapons are of no import to me," said Ingirun. From the look on Clint's face, he hadn't expected to be overheard. "Nor to anyone else here, I would expect."

Armed or not, they stepped through a curtained alcove, and there was Loki.

The afternoon sunlight filtered through a high window, slanting across the bed where he lay. The bed itself was long and narrow, curved along the sides and raised at either end like a boat, with what looked like some kind of instrument panels along the frame and at the head and foot. A glimmering gold dome of energy encased the entire frame, making Steve think of Snow White in the glass coffin.

Loki himself didn't really detract from that impression. He lay utterly still, the blankets pulled up to his chest and his hands folded across his stomach. He was dressed in a robe of thick, quilted fabric in white or cream—it was hard to tell through the dome—that wrapped around his torso like a bathrobe. There was gold embroidery at the cuffs of the wide sleeves and along the hem, disappearing beneath the blanket.

Steve had to look closely to be certain he was even breathing.

There was another woman sitting at his side who looked up, wide-eyed, as they all trooped in. She started to rise, but Ingirun waved her down.

"The mortals have come, as we knew they would," she said quietly. "How fares the prince?"

"His session for the day is nearly finished," said the other. Her robe was similar to Loki's, but a rich brown; the gold embroidery on it was accented in pale blue and green, and it had a high collar. Her brown hair was braided and wrapped around her head like a crown. "He seemed to tolerate it a little better, but the change is barely noticeable."

"May we wait while you end it?" asked Ingirun.

The woman—Loki's doctor, maybe?—looked them all over. She, too, seemed to take in their weapons and dismiss them utterly. "If you feel you must," she said after a moment.

"The mortals only know that Loki did great harm upon this world; they wish to satisfy their curiosity that he has been truly punished by the All-Father for his crimes."
At this, the doctor scowled. "Then they do not know enough, and in addition come only to entertain themselves with the prince's suffering."

"I am aware," said Ingirun. "And once they have looked upon His Highness, we shall remove to the gathering hall and make certain they understand the entirety of the tale."

"You're wrong about us," said Bruce. "We're not... whatever you might have heard about humans in general, we're not that sadistic. We came to see how a village could appear out of nowhere, and why, and now that we know Loki is here, we just need to be sure he isn't leading another invasion to hurt our people."

The woman eyed him suspiciously for a long moment before nodding. "Very well," she said. "Give me..." she took a quick look at something on the bed frame, "...two minutes and twenty seconds, and then you may look your fill."

"Can I ask what this 'session' is that you're talking about?" Bruce asked.

"This is a healing stasis bed," said the doctor. "The patient is placed in a trance and healing energies are directed through the body. A badly injured warrior, or someone who has been poisoned—truly, any person near death—may reside in a stasis bed, sometimes for months at a time. Unfortunately, because of the nature of His Highness's injuries, he can only tolerate the energy flow for perhaps an hour at a time before it becomes painful rather than soothing, and begins to damage the very structures it is meant to heal."

She leaned forward, and brushed her fingertips across different areas of the bed, along the side and up over Loki's head. "He will not wake. He has not woken since his punishment was inflicted upon him. You will not be able to interrogate him, or whatever other nonsense you wished to achieve here. But he will come out of the trance and you will see what he must endure, without respite—indeed, what he has endured for several months now, thanks to the All-Father's cruelty. I hope you will be satisfied."

The doctor paused and closed her eyes, taking a few deep breaths in and out. Once she was calm, she touched another control, and the gold field over Loki's body flickered and vanished.

Nothing happened at first; then Loki's mouth opened and his head tilted back, and they heard him take a weak, wheezing inhale, visibly struggling for what breath he could get. His fingers twitched on the blanket, his brow furrowed, and he rolled his head slightly to the side. On the exhale, he made a soft, pained little noise.

It was a long time before the next inhale.

With the field gone, they could get a better look at Loki's face, as well; the gold light of the energy had lent him color that he didn't really have. His face was gaunt, his eyes sunken. His mouth hung open so that they could see the edges of his teeth, against lips with only the faintest blue color to them. Steve, remembering his days of pneumonia and asthma and all the rest, checked Loki's fingers again and saw that the nail beds and fingertips had the same blueish-purple tinge.

The doctor did something with her hands, not touching any of the bed controls, and Steve felt the hair on his arms stand up. She stroked Loki's face, and another field, greenish orange this time, wrapped around Loki's mouth and nose like a mask. They heard him inhale again, still too slow and weak and rasping, and again the expression of pain even in his sleep as he exhaled, but as Steve watched the color in his fingernails improved with every breath.

The doctor looked up from her work, and oh boy did Steve recognize that expression. That was the
step-away-from-my-patient-before-I-deck-you face. Sure enough, the next words out of her mouth were only, "You have seen all there is to see, mortals. You are done here. Now get out."
The Gathering Hall

Chapter Summary

The people of the village explain to the Avengers just what they're doing, and what happened to Loki.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"So, she was kinda cranky," said Tony, as they headed back up the "street" to the gathering hall, led by Ingirun, Herkja, and Ottar.

"She is a healer, whose patient lingers on the very threshold of death despite all her efforts," said Ingirun. "The prince's chief healer is Lady Eir herself, the very best in all of Asgard; she and Runa are at his bedside night and day, so that he is never unattended for even a moment. They rarely sleep, and have an entire staff dedicated simply to making sure they take the time to eat, bathe, and speak with the rest of us. Their work is exhausting, and shows little sign of relenting anytime soon."

"He's really in that bad of shape?" asked Bruce.

"Yes," said Herkja shortly.

"We will explain momentarily," added Ingirun.

It turned out that the gathering hall was the same building they'd started in, with the central fireplace and curved benches; the front room was something like a rest stop for workers during the day, almost like a pub but not quite, which took up only a quarter of the overall length of the building. There were a couple of people inside when they arrived, who stared curiously at the humans until Herkja led them into the back room. This space was, of course, much bigger, revealing the long, oval shape of the building. Here, the benches were arranged around long tables, with three more fireplaces running down the center between them and clerestory windows to brighten the space further. There were a few people already here as well; a group of men and women bent over what looked like an open scroll, another pair playing some sort of chess-like game while a few companions watched. A woman was setting down plates of food in front of a couple of giggling kids; next to her, a man looked to be knitting a pair of socks. From the look of things, the partition between front and back was mainly to keep the larger space warmer for those who would be staying awhile, compared to the front room where people came and went pretty frequently.

It was all pretty domestic, and Steve found himself relaxing at the sight of it. If these people were really going to invade Earth or cause harm to the Avengers, would they go to the trouble of inviting them to hang out in their mess hall? Because that was what this looked like to him.

Plates of bread and fruit and cheese were brought, and more pitchers full of the thick, nut-flavored hot tea they'd had earlier. Their hosts refused to answer any questions until they'd all gotten something to eat.

"First," said Ingirun, "are you aware that Loki is a sorcerer? A seidmadr, we call it—one who utilizes magical energies to accomplish various tasks. Did you know that about him?"
"We saw him use some illusions, and seem to be in one place while he was really in another place." Tony gestured with a piece of bread. "But that could have just been tech-related, some kind of machinery he had."

"It was not," said Herkja. "Loki, before everything fell apart, was easily the strongest seidmadr in the Nine Realms. He learned many specialties with ease, and discovered a few more besides. Knowing and working alongside him was an honor; alas, that he may never have realized we felt that way about him."

"Okay…" Steve took that in, while the others looked skeptical or carefully neutral, or in Clint's case, contemptuous. "Okay, so what happened?"

Ingrirun wrapped her hands around her mug. "That is a long story, which cannot be explained without some background. You humans may find the information useful in general."

"Go on," said Fury.

"The first thing you must understand is that there are two basic types of sorcerers in Asgard and the other realms. The simplest way to describe them would be those whose seidr is inherent, a part of them from birth, and those whose seidr is acquired, whether it is bestowed upon them as a gift or carried in some object they utilize. Whether inborn or acquired, once the seidr is obtained, the seidmadr or seidkona may work with the energies, honing their skill and utilizing it in different ways." Ingrirun paused and looked them over.

"Makes sense so far," said Bruce.

"The differences may not seem to be so great, viewing them from the outside," said Herkja. "Whether inherent or acquired, the seidkona uses the energy. And to you, who have no seidr of your own, they may appear identical. However, those with an inherent gift are more versatile in what they can do with the energy, and naturally they are more sensitive to its flow. They can accomplish more delicate, precise work, and can combine the skills from different disciplines to achieve truly marvelous results."

"Question." Tony leaned forward in his seat. "Seid… kuna? Kona? And then the other one. What's the difference?"

"A seidkona is a woman who utilizes seidr; a seidmadr is a male. Among Aesir, the ability to manipulate seidr is inherited along the female lines; very few men have an inborn affinity for it, and those who do are often… strange, in other ways."

"Like Loki?" Tony raised his eyebrow, and Herkja bristled.

"He is an exception to the general rule, for several reasons," she said, "not least among them that he is not Aesir by blood. But he was raised among us, and suffered the scorn of those who did not know his heritage, or would not have cared about the difference it made."

"You're all seidkonas," said Natasha, realizing. "Here, in this village."

"The correct plural, if you care for such details, is seidkonur," said Ingrirun, "and seidmenn for the males. But you are essentially correct. Some nine out of every ten of us, here, are wielders of seidr and students of the art. Those who do not have the ability are generally spouses or children of those who do."

Fury leaned back in his seat, folding his arms slowly. "And you still want us to believe you're not a threat to our people."
"Believe what you will," said Herkja, irritably. "You will do so anyway, regardless of what we tell you. We are not unfamiliar with the behavior of the prejudiced."

"Herkja, enough," said Ingirun. Ottar sat down beside her and collected her hands in his own. "It is true that Asgard has a rather… conflicted view, of those who can utilize seidr. It is considered women's work, after a fashion, for obvious reasons; thus, no matter how essential to the day-to-day running of the kingdom, it is nevertheless looked down upon by men and warriors, who disdain it as frivolous outside of battle, and dishonorable upon the field. Men who possess the ability are treated as unnatural or freakish."

"Yet the others are quick enough to come running to us for healing, or when a machine breaks down, or to aid the crops to grow, or when they need someone to look afar and find lost objects or report on enemy troop movements." Herkja's mouth twisted. "Even so, you are human, and have none of the experiences with magic that we do. It follows that you would have none of the prejudices which I have projected onto you. My apologies."

"You were telling us about the differences between inherent magic ability and acquired," prompted Natasha.

Herkja nodded. "The princes, Thor and Loki, are themselves perfect examples of a user of acquired seidr and one with inherent ability. Really, many Aesir have at least a little acquired seidr, simply due to having been raised in Asgard; the ambient seidr there is quite high, and long ago a working was accomplished to bestow a little of it onto everyone, gifting us our long life and good health, among other things. Beyond that, if the person is capable of absorbing more seidr, it tends to manifest as a focus, as we call it; a specific skill of greater or lesser power. Thor, for instance, controls the storm, channelled through Mjolnir, and is exceptionally strong even for an Aesir warrior. As the crown prince, he has become something of a physical manifestation of Asgard's ideal: forthright, strong, fierce in battle, and unafraid. Quick to fight, but also quick to laugh and to trust, and to make merry with his companions.

"There was a time, however, not too long ago, when he overstepped his authority, and in punishment the All-Father banished him. As it turned out, his exile was temporary, but what is relevant here is that, before he was cast out, Odin stripped him of his power. Without it, he was effectively mortal; still big and strong, of course, but no longer as mighty as any among the Aesir."

"I remember a little of that," said Fury. "Our division became concerned when an immovable hammer-shaped object fell from the sky and landed in the desert. Our first encounter with Thor was when he attacked my men, trying to get it back."

Herkja and Ingirun looked at each other, wryly amused. "Of course he did."

"The point," Ingirun continued, "is that while your ancestors knew Thor as a god of thunder, legendary in might, that is his only capacity for the use of seidr. He cannot twist the energies to obey him in any other fashion, and let us be honest, the ability to throw lightning bolts at an enemy is not exactly subtle or delicate work."

"Heh. No, not really." Steve couldn't help but speak up. He remembered their first encounter all too well.

"We have a saying here on Earth," said Tony: "To the guy with only a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail."

Their three hosts relaxed at that, clearly amused. Even Ottar chuckled quietly.
Ingirun nodded. "Loki, on the other hand, is every bit as powerful as Thor, more so in fact, but no one without seidr of their own can tell. Where Thor is loud, roaring and stomping his way through all obstacles, victorious in battle, Loki is quiet, slipping through shadows, using his skills to stop the battle before it even begins. Where Thor is the man with a hammer in your proverb, Loki is a man with… a knife, and a pen, and a harp; a fast horse, a purse of gold, and many other metaphorical tools besides. The things he can do with seidr are virtually limitless." Her face fell for a moment, before she regained her composure. "Or at least, they were."

"The most important difference between them, for our tale," said Herkja, "is that acquired magic can be taken away, and inherent magic cannot."

"You mean like Thor's banishment," said Natasha.

"Yes, precisely. Without his powers, Thor was nearly as weak as a mortal. The storm might have responded to his emotional states, but would not answer his call. And of course, Mjolnir was useless to him. But while this was no doubt humbling for Thor, and perhaps frightening, it did not harm him. When he passed the All-Father's tests, his abilities were returned to him in a dazzling display, and he was as he always has been."

"This is the part where you tell us Odin tried the same thing on Loki and it didn't work," said Clint.

"Oh no." Herkja scowled. "It worked. But removing magic from Thor, or anyone whose seidr is acquired, is as simple as taking away a coat that they wear, or a tool they wield. Taking magic away from a seidmadr like Loki, on the other hand, is akin to taking hold of all of his blood vessels and then trying to rip them out of him with little barbed hooks, every vein and artery simultaneously."

The humans at the table, even Fury, grimaced at the gruesome image.

Ingirun spoke up next. "While his magic was being pulled out of him, it was influenced and shaped by his agony, with the result that, even though he was deep inside the palace, every man, woman, and child could hear his screams for miles in all directions. Every inborn seidkona in Asgard, and some even in other realms, felt echoes of his pain. There were healers who were sick for days afterward, and seers who could not sleep for the nightmares."

Steve shared a glance with the other Avengers. Sure, they'd sent Loki home to face justice, but torture was never supposed to be part of it. Even an execution was supposed to be swift and as humane as possible… but then, those were human conventions, and not even all humans followed them. Steve wasn't quite sure how they'd managed to just assume that Asgard would be the same, without asking them any questions about it first.

"That… maybe we're misunderstanding the description, but that sounds like it should have killed him. Right? But he's still alive." Steve winced; he probably could have phrased that better.

"No, you are correct." Herkja took a deep breath, nostrils flaring, clearly still angry on Loki's behalf. "If the All-Father had persisted for even a moment longer, Loki would have died. With inborn mages, the energy permeates them, blood and bone, and in a very real sense holds them together. Loki could very well have disintegrated into pink mist. Or the matter of his body would have converted to energy, and there would have been a conflagration sufficient to burn the palace to the ground."

"Herkja's anger causes her to favor the more vividly dire outcomes," said Ingirun. "My own opinion, and that of several of the healers, is that without any seidr in his body, there would have been nothing to anchor Loki's soul, and the All-Father would have been left with an unresponsive, living corpse. Medical intervention might have kept the body alive, but the person inside it would have
been gone forever." She pressed her lips together, shaking her head.

"It would be horrible enough if this were what the All-Father called justice," said Herkja. "But that is not the reason I am so angry. No, I am angry because the All-Father was horrified when his younger son began screaming and writhing on the ground in agony, blood pouring from his nose and ears while he clawed at his own body in terror and revulsion. It was unintentional that he do such a vile thing as this."

"But wouldn't that make it a little better?" asked Bruce. "I mean, he wasn't actually sadistic enough to do it on purpose."

"No. You do not understand. The All-Father, thanks to his age and his position as king, has been imbued with powerful seidr of his own. He has ruled for so long that many no longer stop to think that all of that power was acquired, not inborn—most of it will leave him once he steps down and names Thor king—and that means that he and much of Asgard no longer actually have an understanding of what it means to be an inborn seidmadr, nor to make much distinction between the two types." Herkja shook her head, pulling herself back on topic. "He uses that power daily, yet clearly he does not respect it, merely takes for granted that it is his due as king. At any point during his reign, it would have been a matter of moments to command a seidr instructor to come and tutor him in the basics of the use of his seidr. As a father, it would have taken virtually no effort at all to listen to the princes' tutors describe Thor's and Loki's unique abilities, and see how they were different. The All-Father had centuries to have the conversation that we are having this very moment, centuries to see that Loki is not like Thor and never will be, and to accept that and embrace the differences between them. Instead, he acted in complete ignorance of what Loki was, and nearly killed him. Such ignorance is inexcusable, as a king and as a father. How could he have raised Loki, called him his son, and still had so little understanding of him?"

It was a good point. It also sounded like there was some family drama there that Steve wasn't sure he wanted or needed to hear about.

"I'm, I'm sorry," said Natasha, "did you say 'centuries'? Hundreds of years?"

Herkja smirked. "We did say that Asgard's ambient seidr granted us health and long life. The All-Father approaches the end of his life, at roughly five thousand years old." She paused while the humans choked on their drinks or made exclamations or whatever. "He has reigned for over thirty-five hundred of those. Loki and Thor, themselves, are between one thousand and eleven hundred years of age, as you measure such things here on Midgard."

"A discussion for another time," Fury said firmly. "So what happened next?" Whether it was the family drama or the longevity, it looked like he didn't want to go into all that and get sidetracked, either.

"The All-Father made it worse." They all turned to see who had interrupted them, and the three Aesir actually stood and bowed to her. Steve had thought Ingirun had said she was the leader here.

"May I present the Lady Eir, Chief Healer of Asgard and royal physician to the princes and their parents throughout their lives. She is one of the most skilled healers in all the realms. There is no one better equipped to save Loki from what was done to him."

Herkja and Ottar moved down on their bench and made space for Eir in between them and Ingirun. She was a stocky woman with iron-gray hair, and strong hands. The look on her face, and her movements, suggested impatience or annoyance with all of them. She pulled the tray of food closer to her and collected her share of bread and cheese with brisk efficiency as she spoke.
"What the All-Father did first was like a botched surgery with a dull blade, ripping Loki apart from the inside. You mortals may not be able to detect the damage with physical instruments, but if you had any awareness of seidr at all, the injuries would be plain to see. But Odin made it worse when he, in his astonishment, attempted to let go of the working and release Loki's seidr back into his body. Instead of letting it flow back in gently, repairing Loki's channels—channels," she said, seeing the look of confusion on their faces, "think of blood vessels, but they, hmm, regulate the flow of seidr. It's an oversimplification, but you are mortal and I'm sure you've little interest in the details of such things."

"Maybe later," said Bruce. "But you were saying?"

Eir nodded. "The seidr itself, Loki's own energies, could have repaired the channels that Odin had damaged, if they were handled correctly and released gradually back into him. Instead Odin panicked and let go of the working all at once, and the energy, stretched and pulled from Loki's body, snapped back into place and reverberated through him, ripping him apart still further. With his channels so damaged, his seidr now flows through his body unchecked, overwhelming his system. From a magical point of view, Loki is drowning and burning, all at once."

They all paused a minute to process that. It didn't sound fun, but Steve was having a hard time wrapping his brain around it. The whole magic thing was just so strange to process.

"So you're trying to heal him now?" asked Natasha.

"We are." Eir sighed, and Steve suddenly realized how tired she looked, when she wasn't covering it with her brisk demeanor. Her hair was up in a bun with little wisps floating free, and her eyes had a hint of red around the edges. "He yet lives. That is promising. Whether or not we can do more for him, I cannot yet say. If he is condemned to suffer in pain for the rest of his existence, it might…"

She looked away, pinching the bridge of her nose. "I am not yet ready to enact the final tenet of the healer's oath. But I think about it more than I ought."

Ingirun gently laid one hand on Eir's arm, for a brief moment before the healer shrugged it off with a nod of acknowledgment.

"Why bring him back to Earth?" Clint spoke up for the first time. "He isn't exactly welcome here after what he did."

"And why establish an entire village around him?" Fury added. "You said there were a lot more of you, dispersed on different planets."

Ingirun nodded. "That is true, but I will let Lady Eir answer your first question, before I respond to the second."

"Midgard has relatively calm levels of ambient seidr," said Eir. "With few if any seidkonur here—or seidmenn, I suppose—the ambient energies are not often disturbed, whereas in Asgard the energies are in constant motion from all that we do there. Ordinarily this does not present difficulties for anyone, but we have discovered that for Loki's case, the comparative calm is soothing to his damaged channels. Since coming to Midgard, while he does still suffer, he has been in noticeably less pain, and is able to rest for longer periods of time. We have hope that the continued peace and quiet, magically speaking, will aid in his recovery."

"Oh sure. That makes sense." Steve nodded, even while the rest of them looked at him incredulously. "What? When I was a kid, people with asthma and allergies and stuff were sent out West where the air was clearer. Rich people went to Switzerland, up into the mountains. If you were sick with something else, you might go to the seaside for the salt air instead." He shrugged. "I mean,
I don't know anything about magic, but what they're saying makes sense."

As their expressions all went thoughtful and they started nodding, Steve made sure to sit on the little upwelling of pride he felt. He couldn't really afford to be distracted right now.

"As for why we all are here with him, why so many of us departed Asgard," said Herkja, "consider: we seidkonur are vital to the continued function of our realm, indispensable—yet overlooked, for the most part, or even looked down upon in many subtle ways. We are 'only' women, after all." She rolled her eyes, then continued, "When Odin All-Father attempted to strip the seidr from an inborn mage, thinking he could simply tuck it away somewhere or dispose of it, he demonstrated beyond doubt that he is not the wise king Asgard likes to believe he is. He clearly has no understanding of the difference between acquired power and inborn seidr, does not respect the power that he himself possesses, and had so little understanding of his own son that he would nearly murder him out of ignorance, hubris, and a misplaced desire to put an unruly child in his place."

"More to the point," said Ingirun, "if he could do that to his own son, and later try to justify it—which he did—then it was clear that he would have no qualms about committing such a horrible deed against any of us. You must understand, for those of us with an inborn gift… what Odin tried to do amounted to a kind of rape, one that reached even deeper than a violation of the physical body. The very thought…" she broke off with a shudder.

"And for all that Odin and the warriors and nobility may have mocked or scorned Loki," Herkja interjected while Eir nodded emphatically, "we understood him better. We saw a man possessed of the greatest strength the Nine Realms have ever seen, magically, where they saw only an effeminate weakling. Never mind that even without his magic, he was the equal of any of them in the training ring, including Thor if he ever put down that damned toy of his; no, they saw only what they wished to see, and nothing more. We respected him; we liked him. He was a delightful, inquisitive student, and a patient instructor, when he had the time to share what he learned. Loki was and is one of our own."

"Just so," Ingirun continued, nodding. "And seeing what Odin did to one of our own, we seidkonur conferred on the matter, and came to the conclusion that Asgard, our home, was not a safe place for any of us to remain."

She shrugged her shoulders, reaching for a piece of fruit. "And so we left," she said simply; "quietly, without fanfare—a few at a time at first, and later in greater numbers. The Bifrost remains broken, so for a long time no one even realized we were leaving; when our absence became noticeable, it did not occur to anyone in power to search for us outside of Asgard. The very last of us to escape removed Loki from his secluded healing chamber—"

"Where despite his condition and how sorry Odin claimed to be, he was nevertheless held restrained and under guard," said Eir.

"—we protected him from the energies of travel as best we could, and came here. And while we intend no threat or harm to any on Midgard, here is where we intend to remain, for as long as necessary. Either Loki will recover, and we will depart for some other realm, or Asgard will become safe for us once more, and we will return home. But I think it more likely that we will be here until Loki is healthy enough to leave."

"That assumes Loki survives his injuries, of course," said Eir, "yet I will not be so rude, Ingirun, as to dismiss your faith in our abilities and the prince's strength."

"The Bifrost…" Fury said. "That's the bridge that Thor told us about, that your people use to travel from one world to another?"
"That's correct," said Ingirun.

"If that's broken, how did you travel here?"

And Steve blinked in realization, because nobody had reported any big portals opening up in the sky or whatever. No one had seen any sign of the Tesseract. The town had just… appeared.

Herkja smirked at them. "Are you thinking of the Tesseract? It remains in Asgard, untouched. We need no machines to go where we wish—not all of us have the skill, but those who do can simply walk from one world to the next." Her smirk widened. "There is a reason one of the prince's names is Sky Walker: Loki was the one to discover the ability, centuries ago, and teach it to those few of us who could learn it. Even now, the very best of them cannot begin to approach Loki's skill in the art. It is truly his gift, unique among all seidkonur and seidmenn throughout the Nine."

Chapter End Notes

If you've been following Grievance, you might have seen in one chapter that I've invited people to come and join me in a Google Hangout, which I just recently named "Keeping PeaceHeather Company". I work from home and don't get a lot of socializing in during the day, so having people to chat with really helps my sanity. I've actually been more productive at my regular job just for having people to talk to!

It's pretty laid back; there are only four or five of us in there right now, and we chat about various and sundry from almost the moment we wake up till the moment we go to bed, most days. And unlike the chat room I tried to create awhile back, I actually am connected to the hangout constantly and can't forget to check in. So, if you were interested in joining in the conversation, you'd be welcome. Drop me a private message via Tumblr or FFnet (same username both places) with your email address and I'll add you in.
"Hold the phone," said Tony suddenly. "Loki doesn't need the Tesseract to get from place to place? Loki? The guy who needed it to open a portal and let an army through?"

It was Ottar who spoke for the first time, in a deep bass, his grin flashing under his mustache. "Perhaps what actually occurred here on Midgard is not what you perceived at the time."

"Now, what do you mean by that?" asked Fury, tilting his head in challenge.

"Odin did not bother even to check, nor to ask," said Eir, "but when I first began to try to save His Highness's life, I found evidence of torture. Judging from the age of the injuries, they were inflicted after he left Asgard but before he arrived on your world."

"Correct us if our information is wrong," said Ottar. "We learned from Thor that Loki arrived in your world where he could be seen, announced his name and his purpose, and proceeded to attack almost immediately. Is this accurate?"

"In essence, yes," said Fury.

Ottar grinned again, wider this time. "How very Thor-like of him."

"What are you getting at?"

"Loki is derided in Asgard by many of the warriors, because he often refuses direct confrontation," said Ottar; "however, those who do not mock him recognize that he is actually a supremely skilled tactician. It is not his way to make a bold frontal assault, when he can slip behind enemy lines and assassinate a leader, or falsify orders and throw the opponent's forces into chaos. Or he could simply talk to the leaders and convince them that a battle is not in their best interests. Yet when he arrives here, on Midgard, he announces his every move, speaks to you often and gives grandiose speeches wherein he hides clues to his intentions; stands where you can see him, and waits for you to come and confront him?" Ottar folded his arms with an amused huff. "He virtually handed you engraved invitations to attend his performance."

"And that's what it was," said Tony, in the voice of someone having a major epiphany. "That was
his plan, I pointed out that what he was doing was stupid and he said outright, 'That was the plan'! Holy shit, how did I not see this before…"

"See what, Stark?" Natasha asked the question, but from the look on her face, she had already figured it out too.

"He was planning to lose all along," said Tony. "It was a performance, start to finish." He ran his hands through his hair, making it stand up in all directions. "We know that scepter thing can influence minds, so maybe it can also monitor people from long distance—"

"It can," said Clint sourly.

"—so he ends up wherever, is tortured into compliance, and then he's monitored when they send him back to us. He has to go through with the invasion, maybe, I bet that was part of the deal that got him out of there, but nothing says he has to succeed at it. Fuck. That's my gambit."

"Stark?" Steve frowned in confusion, trying to remember if he'd read anything about this in the man's file when Coulson had first brought him in.

"Afghanistan, long story, they wanted one thing and I gave 'em something else. But, so, Loki. They want an invasion, he'll give them one. But if he plays his cards right, he can warn Earth that there's trouble, give us time to assemble the forces we'll need to fight him off, make sure to put the portal where we can reach it, and keep it small enough that—my god, what kind of so-called genius tactician would set up a bottleneck like that on purpose, unless he was trying to fail?"

"With the amount of iridium he stole, that portal could have opened a lot wider," Bruce confirmed.

"Holy shit, the whole thing was a sham." Tony sat back hard, wiping his hand across his mouth.

Steve risked a look at Director Fury. He, too, was leaning back in his seat, with a thoughtful, faraway expression on his face. Steve could virtually watch him slot the pieces into place, but it was impossible, as always, to tell how the director might have felt about this new information.

"As far as we can tell," said Herkja, "the only failure in His Highness's plan was that he was foolish enough to trust the All-Father to interrogate him, or to have him examined for signs of duress. Thor was famous for his tantrums when someone wounded his pride; clearly he learned that from his father. After Loki was brought back, Odin did not care what had happened on Midgard. He thought only to make an example of Loki for his actions before his fall."

"And that itself was further proof that Odin did not understand or respect the seidkonur of his kingdom," said Eir, "for if he had, he would have realized that Loki could not possibly be held accountable for the things he did before his attempted suicide."

"We're not too concerned with what happened before he came here," said Fury, "although if his sending a giant robot to obliterate a small town was part of it, then I'm not inclined to be too forgiving, here. If this is some kind of legal technicality…"

"It is not," said Eir and Ingirun together. Eir nodded for Ingirun to continue.

"This is another aspect of inborn mages like Loki that Odin ought to have known, and which will benefit you to be aware of. For a person whose seidr is acquired, all that is needed to wield the energies—or I should say, to wield them safely—is sufficient focus and concentration. For those whose seidr is inborn, setting aside the need to train in shaping the raw power, that is also true. But, in order to access their power and control it fully, they must operate from a foundation best called 'identity'. It is crucial for a seidkona to know herself, inside and out, her flaws and weaknesses as
well as her strengths. She cannot afford to delude herself or tell herself pretty lies to cover up her faults. She must know herself and her purpose in order to know and make use of her power. Do you understand so far?"

"Seems reasonable," said Bruce.

"Very well," said Ingirun, "but the reverse of this is that the seidkona's sense of identity is so crucial that if somehow she should face a sudden, drastic revision of her ideas of 'self', then she can lose control of her power. It may disappear until she is able to recover from the mental and emotional shock. Or it may flare unpredictably, and render her a danger to herself and others. In the most severe cases, or in the event that the magic user is also an innate shapeshifter, it can cause a literal loss of cohesion, similar to what Herkja described as a possibility during Loki's punishment— their magical energy is so much a part of them that when it dissipates, it takes the body with it. Only tremendous strength of will can bring them back together into a solid form again; historically, most mages to suffer such a deep shock do not recover without aid. They convert to energy, and without someone present who knows how to contain it, that energy will diffuse either quietly, or violently."

"You're saying someone like Loki could literally get so stressed out that they go nuclear." Tony's voice, his expression, his entire posture radiated skepticism.

"We do not care whether you believe this or not," sniffed Herkja. "It is true. We could show you historical records if it would satisfy you, but even if it wouldn't, the facts would still remain."

"Okay, okay." Tony held his hands up while Herkja gave him a dirty look. She subsided once Ottar put his hands on her shoulders again, and squeezed gently.

"What is relevant here," said Ingirun, "is that around the same time as Thor's banishment, Loki discovered that he was Odin's adopted son, and not even the same species as he had been led to believe. His Highness learned that his father had decreed that this secret would be kept from him, and that his mother had acquiesced despite disagreeing with Odin's decision. While he was trying to confront his father on the matter, Odin collapsed into the Odin-Sleep—"

"—which, with Thor banished, left Loki next in line to the throne, to sit as regent while Odin recovered; a position which he was almost entirely unprepared to take, given that he was not yet of age as Thor was, received no advance notice of the change, had no brother on hand for support, and a mother who, so far as we have been able to determine, offered her son only platitudes for reassurance while imparting to him the command to 'make his father proud'. Later his supposed friends all defied royal commands and departed to attend to Thor, leaving His Highness even further destabilized."

"Destabilized," snorted Eir. "There are laws that state that any adopted child with inborn magical ability is to be told from an early age where they truly come from, so that secrets like this do not damage their sense of self later in life. Why Odin ignored such common-sense precautions, I do not know. What I do know is that Loki's identity was shattered, and it was all he could do to maintain his own coherence and try to rebuild his psyche. He should never have been handed additional responsibilities beyond that, much less been expected to rule an entire kingdom with his own friends betraying him out of childish spite."

"I don't… I don't quite understand," said Bruce hesitantly. "He learned he was adopted, and that— that broke him?"

"He learned," said Herkja, "that everything he thought he knew about himself was a lie. He no
longer had a firm foundation on which to base his identity, and no concrete answer to the question 'Who is Loki?' Do you not see the blow that this was to his sense of self? For a seidmadr, that uncertainty is devastating, and potentially deadly."

"Asgard has its prejudices," said Ingirun, "as we have already described. The species to which His Highness belongs is one which he had grown up believing to be a race of monsters. Savages, supposedly; little better than beasts, according to popular wisdom and tales. His parents may have tried to mitigate such biases, to protect him from hating his own people, but we know not whether that is the case, and in any event, they failed. You can imagine the depth of such a shock, to have it revealed not only that you are not the son of a man you've always admired, but that you are instead one of a race of vile creatures with whom no one would wish to keep company, unless it were in preparation for slaughter."

Bruce winced, and even the other Avengers looked uncomfortable to one degree or another.

"As a seidmadr," Eir added, "Loki's sanity was concretely, measurably damaged by these revelations; this is not a legal pleasantness or technicality, but medical and magical fact. I have seen it before, and assisted in treating it. And in cleaning up the mess afterward when treatments failed."

"Overburdened and barely sane," said Ingirun, "His Highness committed several questionable acts, and one atrocity—"

"Atrocity?" Clint leaned forward, like this was confirming what he'd always suspected about Loki.

"Bear in mind that any magical examination would have shown he was no longer sane when he committed it," said Eir with a glare.

"From what we have been able to determine," said Ottar, "his rationale was to try and stop a war which his brother had started, and for which he was banished. This does not make it right; we do not claim that. Many innocent people were destroyed with his act. But he was most certainly not in his right mind at the time, and his intentions even then were to protect Asgard."

"When his father and brother returned to him, he appealed to them to understand why—to make them see that he needed their approval and understanding, Odin's especially. I suspect that he was so desperate for that acceptance because he could have used it as a cornerstone to rebuild his sense of self."

"And instead," said Herkja, with a sneer of disgust on her face, "instead, Odin denied him. He was hanging over a precipice—and that is not metaphorical, there had been a battle and His Highness ended up clinging one-handed to safety, with a howling abyss below him—and that was the moment when his so-called father chose to express his disappointment in what Loki had done. He couldn't have hauled the boy to safety first, couldn't have attempted something akin to understanding—"

"Couldn't have paused to realize that he himself had undermined his son's identity and was therefore the one responsible for everything that happened afterwards," added Eir.

"And so His Highness," finished Ingirun, "already shattered and now dealt a final blow, let go his handhold and fell. He thought, and so did all of Asgard, that he was falling to his death." She tapped her fingers along her mug of tea. "The kingdom mourned his loss, and in quiet moments, those who had respected him began to quietly wonder what had gone so wrong, so quickly. It was during that mourning period that we obtained all the information we could about the events that led up to his choosing to die."

Steve couldn't help the shiver that chased up his spine. Suicide. That was... that was one of those
things people just didn't talk about, back in his day. It was tragic, and awful, and frightening to contemplate.

Natasha hummed thoughtfully. "With his identity… broken, I suppose you would say…" She paused as the other women nodded. "It might have been even easier for whoever found him to brainwash him into being their puppet general for an invading army."

"Probably wouldn't have had much time to rebuild himself, either," said Tony soberly.

"He had enough of a sense of self to botch the invasion, though," pointed out Bruce.

"Yeah, I get that, but how much time has he really had to put himself back together?"

Bruce grimaced, and the others all shared a look.

"Not enough," said Ottar.

"So what do we have now?" asked Fury.

It was Natasha who answered. "Smart, sensitive kid, not yet of legal age, mentally broken to a state of insanity; committed acts that he probably would not have in his right mind—"

"He would not have," said Eir. "I have known him from infancy, and this was not his typical behavior or thought pattern."

"—okay, so then he commits suicide, or tries to. Ends up somewhere where they think he's valuable, probably for his ability to travel without the Tesseract. They break him down further… or, ironically, they help him recrystallize his sense of self, despite torture."

"How do you figure?" asked Bruce.

"He might not know who he is anymore," said Tony quietly, "but he's got a damn good idea of who he's not."

"So, still compromised, but a little closer to… coherence, I guess… he comes to Earth. Launches a performance where he plays the part of a would-be conqueror, a dictator, but leaves enough clues that we're able to stop him without his handlers figuring out that he's managed so sabotage his own invasion.

"He ends up being taken back to Asgard, which really is probably the safest place for him after turning on his handlers. He's hoping for a chance to recover from everything, but instead gets… violated, probably worse than anything his original captors did to him, since he survived that long enough to come to Earth in the first place."

Natasha finished with a shrug, and reached toward the snacks on the table. "Now he's here; still probably half-broken, assuming he wakes up, but no longer necessarily with a vested interest in hurting any of us. He's also surrounded by people who actively want to and are working to help him recover."

"And that assumes he ever awakens," said Eir tiredly. "And if he does, it assumes he is in any condition to speak and feed himself, much less undertake the complex, intricate work of restoring his own sense of identity and magical selfhood."

Steve winced, and so did a couple of other people at the table. Even Clint looked uncomfortable; the
thought of a guy that intimidating and powerful being reduced to a, a vegetable, had to be hard to contemplate.

After Natasha's assessment, there was a lull in the conversation, and then Fury leaned forward in his seat a little.

"Ladies, on behalf of SHIELD, I'd like to thank you for the information you've given us, concerning both your patient and your reasons for coming to our world. Unfortunately, we cannot make a decision on how to respond based only on your word, and we also cannot simply walk away, knowing that Loki is here."

"You accuse us of lying?" asked Herkja, while Natasha raised an eyebrow; Fury held up a hand to placate them both.

"No, I do not. But proper procedure for these things demands that we verify your testimony with an assessment of our own—not only to make certain that Loki is not a threat to our world any longer, but also that this village you've constructed does not constitute a foothold in a long-term invasion plan."

Eir raised an eyebrow at that. "And how convenient will it be when you 'discover' something that confirms the conclusion you already want to reach?"

"Ma'am, as I said before you joined us, our organization is dedicated to managing the threats to this world that others cannot. We very much prefer not to divide our attentions or waste our time focusing on non-hostile entities. But first we need to be satisfied that those entities truly are non-hostile."

"It's also important to know whether allowing you to remain on Earth will attract the wrong sort of attention from Asgard," said Natasha. "I can't imagine that they're happy you've all fled the country, as it were." She tipped her head, inviting them to acknowledge her point. "The last thing we humans need is Asgard's political upheaval spilling over to hurt people who have nothing to do with your conflict."

Ingirun bowed her head in agreement, tucking her hands into her sleeves. "You make a fair point. And as we have said, our only wish while we are on Midgard is to be left in peace. We have no way to know how long we will remain here, but we hope it to be a temporary stay." She studied Fury's face for a long moment, then drew in a slow, deep breath. "What sort of assessment did you have in mind?"

"I believe I can answer that for you in just a moment. Would you mind allowing my team and me to confer privately?"

The three women and Ottar traded glances between them before Herkja lifted one shoulder, and Ingirun nodded. "Very well."

"I must prepare to relieve Runa at sundown, in any case," said Eir, standing. She gave a quick bow to the other Aesir. "Keep me informed."

"Of course, Lady Eir."

"Ingirun, Herkja. Ottar." Eir turned and sketched another bow toward Fury and the rest of them. "Mortals." Then she turned on her heel and left, moving as briskly as she had come in.

The others stood as well. "We will be in the front chamber when you have reached your decisions," said Ingirun. "I trust you will act in all our best interests."
Once they were alone, the director sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose tiredly. "Just once, somebody give me a black-and-white, cut-and-dried problem to solve that I can kick its ass and be home in time for dinner," he muttered.

"Standard inspection tour?" asked Natasha, and Steve hoped somebody would fill him in once all was said and done.

"We're not exactly the UN," said Barton.

"Eh, they wouldn't know what to look for here anyway," said Tony.

"Oh, and you would?"

Tony sighed exaggeratedly. "As the engineering genius who knows more about alternate forms of energy than anyone else on the planet, and has the patents on more advanced tech than literally anyone, I'd say I have a better chance than most of figuring stuff out. Plus if they're weaponizing anything and trying to conceal it, I guaran-damn-tee I've got the experience to be able to spot it. The UN would spend too much time tripping over their own red tape and bullshit to accomplish anything here."

"They talked about being willing to share some information with us," said Bruce. "If it's more advanced than Earth is used to, then I'd like to be on hand to try and parse the physics of it." He shrugged. "But, you know, apart from their hospital bed, so far we haven't seen much in the way of alien technology. And this is essentially a… really well-off refugee camp. There might not be a lot here for us to find."

"Somebody needs to evaluate Loki's condition and tell us whether or not he really was a victim in all this," said Fury. "And frankly, I'd prefer it be someone who can stand up to him if this is all a ploy."

"For what it's worth, I don't think it is," said Steve, thinking of Natasha's assessment.

"Your opinion is noted," said Fury. "Dr. Banner?"

"Ah, no, I'm… not that kind of doctor."

"Yeah, but if you don't do it, SHIELD will bring in some goon who just wants the chance to dissect an alien," said Tony.

"Actually I was thinking more a mobile MRI unit and trained technicians," Fury glared at him. "Believe it or not, Stark, we're the good guys, and we do know how to conduct ethical research."

"Sure you know how, you just don't actually do it." Tony's smile was as wide, and as sincere, as a snake's.

"Try to remember I can bar you from getting anywhere near this village and all its shiny tech toys." Fury dismissed him with a look, so he didn't see the defiant smirk that crept across Tony's face at that statement. "Dr. Banner?"

"Mobile hospital, and I'll supervise everything," said Bruce, and there was the spine of steel that hid under the unassuming, rumpled guy they usually hung out with. "Like it or not, Tony has a valid point and you know it. I won't see any of these people put into one of your cages and have you claiming it's for the greater good."
"Understood," said Fury, and if he looked a little tired or chagrined as he said it, well… he deserved it, but Steve couldn't be completely sure it wasn't an act. The whole Phase II thing had made it hard to go anywhere near SHIELD except in an Avengers capacity, and even then, well. There was a reason Steve didn't lecture Tony about breaking into their systems to see what they were really up to.

"All right," he said. "Stark on tech inspections, with a team of—"

"Nope."

"Stark…"

"No. I'm here to see what they have, not to turn it over to you so you can find a way to set up another Phase II program with it. If I bring a team with me, they'll either be UN and harmless, or SI and trustworthy."

"SHIELD is—"

"Nope, not listening. Moving on. I'm on tech, who's next?"

Fury rubbed the bridge of his nose again; Steve was a little surprised that he just dropped the subject like that, but that could mean either that he had something up his sleeve, or that the people he was arguing with were right and he knew it.

"Banner will assist on tech, with a specific emphasis on medical tech, while examining Loki. And like it or not, you do get a team, to help with the assessment. Besides looking Loki over, you can interview people, find out what they're like when they're healthy. Hell, figure out what the aliens eat and it'll be a goddamn scientific breakthrough, Dr. Banner."

"I'm aware," said Bruce, one corner of his mouth lifting in a smile.

"Romanov, Barton, lay of the land. You know what to do."

"You got it, boss."

Stark raised his hand. "And for the rest of the class?"

Natasha rolled her eyes. "Talk to people, case the town to figure out the layout, learn what we can from casual conversation. Basically, we make friends."

"Uh-huh, and speaking of making friends," Fury dropped his head and looked up at Steve, eyebrows raised. "Rogers, these people are as unfamiliar with 21st-century Earth as you are. And you're nearly as strong as they are, based on what we saw when Thor was here."

"Okay, I, uh…” Steve paused, then shook his head. "I don't really see your point."

"Common ground," said Nat. "It's a good place to start a conversation, and if they're really non-hostile, an open dialogue is something they'll want. You're the most honest person here, and we all know it; they will most probably respond to that."

"Question," said Bruce. "Logistics? When do we start? Is SHIELD covering hotel expenses in… whatever the nearest town is?"

"Ideally you'd start immediately, and stay here, but I recognize you don't have even a change of clothes with you so that might be difficult."

"Also rude…” muttered Bruce.
"Practical," Fury corrected him. "So far this settlement is relatively unknown, even to the rest of Iceland. We take a chopper or a quinjet out here every single morning, people will start to notice."

"There's that hostel, they call it a hut, along the hiking trail about another hour or so that way," said Bruce. "We could borrow that."

"Look," said Clint, "it's a nice idea but it isn't going to work. Those two," he jerked his chin toward Tony and Steve, "are city slickers, through and through."

"Hey!"

Clint ignored Tony. "And we're operatives. When we go in to gather intel, we stay where we're put until an extraction is arranged. No, stop, I see your face, we're not treating this like hostile territory—much—but we're also not going to ignore training. If this were a war zone, if we're going to get caught, it's almost always as we're entering or leaving a town, and there's no way in hell we're going to risk that twice a day, every day."

"Which reminds me, Director," said Bruce. "These people aren't your captives now—this is their home, not your research base. Your little comment about barring Stark from this place; you don't get to be the one to decide who can come here and who can't."

At first, Fury looked like he wanted to argue that point, and with the way Natasha and Clint looked at each other, Steve had to wonder if there wasn't some… creepy superspy authority that he had to actually do that.

"Technically, they're trespassing. On Iceland, and on Earth. They have no legal rights to be here."

But Bruce folded his arms and stared at the director, unsmiling, until Fury visibly relented.

"It'll still depend on what the people here decide," said Steve. "If they're willing to let us stay here, great, but if not…"

Everybody nodded, and Fury looked them all over before accepting their decision. Ordinarily, Steve knew, he'd try harder to shoot them down or order them to comply; however, the whole point of the Avengers was that they were a little more independent, a little more equipped to make their own decisions, and SHIELD was willing to back them up even if those decisions were sometimes pretty unorthodox.

After the whole nuclear-bomb-over-Manhattan incident, they sort of owed the Avengers at least that much leeway. Of course, Tony never let them forget it, but Steve was fine with that.

When they got back out to the front room, their three hosts were still there, but they'd been joined by a handful of others, sharing a meal or warming themselves in front of the fire.

"You need not trouble yourselves to remain discreet," said Herkja. "Our people were curious, and a bit concerned by your presence. We took the liberty of reassuring them as to your reasons for being here."

Steve wasn't quite sure what to make of that, although he suspected that Herkja was enjoying the look of discomfort on the faces of Barton and Fury. They covered it quickly enough, but it was obvious they'd been hoping to be a little more undercover than what they'd be able to get away with.

"Well, I imagine you've probably had a little more contact with humans than we have with, uh, Aesir," said Bruce.
"Not at all," Ingirun replied. "Asgard largely removed itself from the affairs of the other realms, trusting them for the most part to govern themselves and manage their own affairs. Asgard's warriors still respond to threats as the All-Father deems appropriate, but Midgard is generally considered off-limits. We noncombatants may make the occasional scholarly journey to Vanaheim or Alfheim, or perhaps a trade expedition to Nidavellir, but even those are infrequent."

"Is that going to cause trouble for your people that have relocated to those places?" asked Steve.

"No," she reassured him. "We may not travel much, but we do communicate often, and have many amiable contacts among our colleagues on other realms. But your concern is appreciated." Ingirun turned to Fury. "Have you reached a decision as to how you will reassure yourselves of our intentions here?"

It only took a minute to explain their plan, with Tony and Bruce filling in some of the technical vocabulary around the scanning machinery in the mobile hospital. Their hosts made certain requests of their own—no harassing the children, for example, although they could be interviewed in the presence of their parents or teachers; no trespassing wherever they wanted without a guide—but all in all, everything seemed to go pretty smoothly.

"The only question is where you would prefer my team to stay," said Fury. "We can make arrangements in the nearby city—"

"But of course you will reside with us," said Ingirun calmly, cutting him off. "We have offered you hospitality."

Steve just sort of blinked at her, feeling like an idiot, before Bruce spoke up. "This must be a local custom we're not as familiar with," he said, "but honestly, those are the kinds of things we'd like to learn while we're here."

"Just so," said Ingirun. "I am sure we have much to learn from one another. I can only request that you be forgiving of any seeming rudeness on our parts, just as we will do our best to be forgiving of yours."

Which was a little blunt, maybe, but Steve was Brooklyn born and raised. He kinda liked a little bit of bluntness. Heaven knew it would be a nice change of pace from all the careful dancing around the subject that SHIELD liked to get up to sometimes.

"Hospitality is … complex," said Ottar. "The obligations of host to guest, and guest to host, have many layers. But we offered guest-rights to you when you first arrived, and we offered you food and shelter. You accepted. This means you will stay here with us, and we will do what we can to provide for you. If you have aught to share with us as your hosts, as a gesture of reciprocation, it will be appreciated. Above all, we have agreed not to be hostile to one another for as long as you remain here."

"That's something I can definitely get behind," said Steve, and he and Ottar shared a smile of understanding.
Frigga's Loom

Chapter Summary

Meanwhile, back in Asgard...

Chapter Notes

A somewhat disjointed chapter, perhaps, but I did the best I could with it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The weights on the loom swung and clinked against one another as Frigga wove, the familiar, repetitive steps soothing to her when she most needed comfort. One simply opened a shed, passed the weft through, and packed it tight, and one made fabric—strong, whole cloth, to serve as blanket or raiment or decorative tapestry—where before there was only a collection of string. "Why are you here, husband?" she asked calmly, not looking away from her work.

Just because he had invaded her sanctuary to rant and pace did not mean she was obligated to attend him.

"These disappearances. My subjects are vanishing from Asgard," he said. "You know this."

"Mm. As you know perfectly well why."

He spun on his heel to glare at her, but she simply closed one shed and opened the next. The weights on the loom swung back and forth. The tapestry was wide enough that Frigga needed to step from side to side to pass the weft through. It was the perfect excuse to keep her back to Odin, for another few seconds at least.

Pass the weft. Pack it tight.

"You claim this has something to do with Loki, yet you also claim he is not the culprit." Odin paced a few more steps, turned, and stopped.

"And you claim deliberate blindness if you cannot see the connection." She turned toward him finally, but only glanced his way before closing the shed and opening the next. It wouldn't do to disrupt the pattern of the weave.

"Civilians. Women, mostly. Some entire families have disappeared. They leave no trace. A search of their homes shows them either untouched, or completely emptied of all belongings. No one in Asgard will admit to having seen a single one of these women reappear, neither in migration nor arriving elsewhere to settle."

"And you have found no pattern, husband? Nothing these people have in common?"

"You know I have not. The women are mainly seidkonur, but I do not see what difference that makes."
"Hm. Of course. Even now, after what you have done to Loki, you fail to see the distinction between your power and his. And theirs."

"And you refuse to tell me, wife."

"The healers could have told you, had you but listened. Now I understand they are nearly all gone, too."

He turned to glare at her again, and this time she paused her weave to look back at him. Her serene expression began to fade, revealing the hidden, implacable anger that she had carried in Odin’s presence for weeks now.

"You refuse to share your wisdom with me, and now he appears to be orchestrating some sort of revenge scheme against all Asgard."

"Revenge. Hm. I think not. Frigga tucked her hands into her sleeves. "I have refused to tell you what you ought to have learned centuries ago. At the time Loki began his lessons, if not at the beginning of your reign when you first received your powers. Or what you ought to have realized the moment you brought our second son home." The anger began to bleed through into her voice as she added, "Perhaps if you might bend your stubborn pride, since you have not yet opened your eyes to the obvious, I could be persuaded to share after all."

Odin lifted his chin, thinking to look down his nose at her. Frigga's eyes narrowed. That he should condescend to her here, of all places! "And what is it I ought to have realized, wife?"

She stepped toward him finally, clenching her fists, and her voice shook with rage. "Loki is not Thor. He will never be Thor. It was utterly ridiculous to expect to be able to shape him into a second version of Thor. And there is nothing wrong with him for being Loki, instead."

"And what does that have to do with his punishment?"

"Their seidr is not the same! Thor's is acquired power, as is yours. Loki's is inborn, as is mine. How can you not have grasped this, after all these centuries?" Frigga threw her arms into the air; a rare display of emotion, from the queen, but this was her sanctuary. Her space, where she did not need to be queen. "You removed Thor's power like removing a cloak, and gave it back to him just as easily. Just as harmlessly. Trying to take Loki's power was like trying to rip the very blood from his veins, and you ought to have known that long before you nearly killed him!"

Odin stood stock still, clinging to his dignity now as always. Even here, he felt he had to be the king before he could be a father.

"Do not look so surprised, my husband," said Frigga coldly. "Or should I say, so uncaring?"

"I am not uncaring!" snarled Odin, and she cut him off with a slash of her hand through the air.

"And yet, your priority is ever to appearances, Odin," she said. "You wished to make an example of Loki the way you could not with Thor. Or perhaps the way you would not, since you successfully made of him a living, breathing extension of your massive ego. Thor's banishment was private—so private even their friends did not believe Loki when he told them, and found a way to blame him for it, just as you do now. Loki, however, you heap public scorn upon, again, just as you always have. And you wonder why he was so resentful." She shook her head contemptuously. "You wonder, yet you never ask. You never stop to see. You are willfully blind, and proud to the point of foolishness, yet you claim yourself to be the wisest ruler of the Nine. Now your son lies dying—dying, Odin—and you have not unbent enough even to visit him in the healing wing. If you had, you would know
why he is so afflicted. You would go to say your goodbyes before it is too late, and he succumbs to his injuries, injuries which you caused him out of your own ignorance, and by which you claim to be horrified. And you would not be thinking of ways to blame him for the disappearing seidkonur and their families!"

Odin took a sharp breath in, blinking rapidly as he began to make the connection.

"He ought to have said—"

"What, Odin? Said what? Should he have come to you as a toddler and explained that his magic was not like yours? Was that his responsibility to convey to you, or your responsibility to learn?"

Odin did not answer.

"I know the real reason you have not been to see him, Odin Borrson," said Frigga turning her back on him once more. "If you so much as looked upon him as he is now, you would have to humble yourself for a split second, and you will not ever do that. If you went, you would have to face the guilt you are pretending to be above feeling. If you went, you would have to confront the absolutely abhorrent, repugnant, unforgivable thing you have done."

"Frigga…"

"Go be king, husband," she said. Pass the weft through the shed, pack it tight. Close the shed and open the next. "It is what you are good at, after all."

"Frigga!" There was genuine hurt in his voice, at long last.

She looked at him with tears in her eyes then, though she did not step away from her loom. "I speak the truth. What you have done… you cannot make right, not with me. What forgiveness you might hope to seek, you must beg from Loki. You will not find it here. I have quite finished with making excuses to my sons, and especially to Loki, for your unequal treatment of them. I am sickened by the knowledge of how many years I have spent, reassuring him with platitudes that, truly, his father did care for him. Truly, he meant only the best even when he erred. Truly, Odin did not despise his own son. I am sickened, husband. And if I could find a way to vanish as the other siedkonur have, I would do so in a heartbeat, for I can no longer bear to look upon your face and know what you have done to our children."

Three days later

"The school is down to only one-quarter of its teachers, and those who remain either do not know or refuse to say where the others have gone." Fandral dropped his report onto the stack on the table. "Many of the students are missing as well; just like the other schools we've checked throughout the capital."

"Add that to the list of artificers who have vanished, then," said Volstagg.

"You said if things got bad enough you were going to ask at the temple for word from the Norns…"

"Ho! I did! Or I tried to." The servants had just begun setting out luncheon in the great hall; Volstagg dragged a platter closer and began pulling the drumsticks off both the roasted ducks on it. "Temple is down to three priestesses. Three! One so ancient she's gone half-mad with the mysteries of the universe, one acolyte who was terrified when a grown man came stomping into the holy places, and one I couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. Never took off her veil—his veil—whatever. Just stood there swaying and mumbling about who knows what."
"You did at least ask, though, yes?"

"Yes, yes. The old woman muttered about chickens come home to roost, and the whatever-it-was talked about the memories of magpies. At least, that was the only coherent thing I could hear."

"The acolyte?"

Volstagg glared, and took a huge bite of his drumstick. "Was an acolyte, nitwit. Still an adolescent. Chaste. Scared speechless at the sight of me."

Hogun sat down across from them, and took a long pull from his mug. "What of Heimdall?" he asked finally.

The other two looked at each other somberly.

"He's… not best pleased with us," said Fandral finally. "It's been nearly two years, you'd think he'd —"

"What, get over it?" Volstagg huffed. "Our foolishness led to disaster and ruin, he's not like to forget that anytime soon."

Fandral spotted Sif over by the entrance and waved to her. She nodded back as she gave her greetings here and there. "I suppose not, given he still stands watch at the end of a broken Bifrost."

Sif sat down beside Hogun and tugged the platter of roast duck away from Volstagg's reach. "Greetings, shield brothers."

Muttered greetings all around as they tucked into their meals. "How fares Ginna?" asked Hogun after a moment.

"She is recovering well," said Sif between bites. "Still embarrassed over the accident. I've told her every trainee has at least one stupid injury to their name. May this be her first and last."

"Heh! Aye, I still remember when I tripped over my own glaive," recalled Volstagg. "That was an entertaining day for my cohort, I'm sure."

"Any idea when the healers will release her?"

Sif slowed her chewing, swallowed, and licked her lips. "Hard to say," she replied thoughtfully. "No one has seen Lady Eir recently. When I inquired, the last anybody could recall speaking with her definitively was about about eight days ago, give or take."

"What?!" Volstagg pounded his fist on the table. "The healers now, too?"

"What do you mean now?" Sif frowned at him. "They've been disappearing for months. Where have you been, sleeping with trolls?"

"Come, Sif, it doesn't do to insult perfectly respectable trolls," laughed Fandral.

"You know about the disappearances," said Hogun.

She rolled her eyes. "Well, it's not as if it's any great secret."

"But have you investigated? Have you come up with any clue as to what is truly happening?" pressed Fandral.
"Aye, or why?" added Volstagg.

Sif paused and looked back and forth between them both; her eyebrows lifted briefly before she settled her face into a completely deadpan expression. "If you haven't figured it out by now, I'm certainly not going to tell you," she said finally. "You're unbelievable. Both of you. Truly."

"Are you saying it's something obvious?"

"What could we have overlooked?"

She rolled her eyes at them. "I have already said: I shall not tell you. Try using your brains for once. It will build character."

"Well, we've worked out that very few of them are warriors," said Fandral. "So whatever is taking them, it only attacks civilians…" He trailed off at the sound of Sif snorting into her mug. "Oh, come, how is that—this is no laughing matter!"

"I agree, the disappearances are serious, but your logic is ridiculous."

They were still bickering good-naturedly over their meals when Thor came into the room, looking somber and dejected. It was a bit of a strange combination for him; somber, Sif supposed, meant something to do with the disappearing citizens, a case the Warriors and he had apparently been investigating for nearly a month now. Dejected, for the past two years, usually meant something to do with Loki. It wasn't as if Thor didn't have good cause; Loki's death, the period of mourning, his return as a madman… the All-Father's punishment that had nearly killed him. Sif was neither a seidkona nor a healer, so she still wasn't completely clear on the finer details, but what had happened was undeniable.

They'd been friends, before all this. Thor and Loki had been inseparable, before all this.

"Ah, Thor, my friend. Come, sit." Volstagg shifted his heavy bulk down the bench and nudged Fandral the other way. "What troubles you this day?"

"It is Loki," said Thor, sitting heavily. "He…"

Sif could watch the color drain from Fandral's face, and felt a little sickened, herself. "He hasn't… died, has he?"

Thor shook his head. "He's escaped."

The others exclaimed, and Sif fought the urge to roll her eyes yet again. She was absolutely certain that if she did that as often as these idiots warranted it, she'd either give herself a headache or go completely blind.

"Escaped. Really." The others fell silent and turned to stare at her. "And who has gifted you with that load of nonsense?"

Thor drew himself up, offended. "My father declared—"

Sif took a breath. "Perhaps the All-Father has been distracted by these other reports, for what he declares in this case is impossible."

"And how can you know such a thing," Thor began, but Sif had dealt with his condescension more than enough over the years to allow him to wield it against her now.
"Easily." She cut him off with a glare. "As you or the All-Father would know as well, if either of you were to have visited Loki in the healing wing, or come to the healing wing for any other purpose and spoken to the healers. And then listened to what they had to say."

"You… you visited my brother?"

"Does that surprise you? We may not always have gotten along, but I did count him as a friend, Thor. And I do not abandon my friends without cause."

That made the prince's face go red, but Sif could not bring herself to care. In her opinion… well. Best not to distract herself.

"And in any case, yes, I did visit Loki, in a manner of speaking. I looked in on him, from time to time, while I was there to see Ginna. He's not exactly allowed visitors, even though he would be completely unaware of them should they come. And in looking in on him, I did listen to the healers. Your brother could not have done this thing."

Left unsaid: the All-Father's pride was once again causing him to leap to accuse Loki of wrongdoing, so that he would not have to admit to wrongdoing of his own. Thor was possibly the only one among them who still saw his papa as infallible and perfect, while she and the Warriors Three had seen firsthand that he was as flawed as any man. More so, perhaps, because the flaws in his behavior carried far greater consequences for those around him to endure, when he misjudged a situation, or acted rashly.

Sif did not abandon her friends easily, but there were times when she found herself wondering—quietly, in the back of her head—why she remained friends with Thor. He was too much like his father, and despite his protestations, did not learn easily from his mistakes.

Like his father, he would first have to admit to a mistake before he could hope to learn anything from it.

"What did the healers say?" asked Fandral. Sif turned her gaze away from Thor with relief.

"That it will be a miracle if Loki ever wakes up," she said soberly, watching the others' faces fall. "And even if he does, the odds are good he'll have to be taught how to feed and care for himself again."

"You jest!" Thor, of course, blustering rather than allowing himself to face the truth.

"Jest?" Sif set her mug down forcefully, splashing a bit of the mead onto the table as she fought for calm. "You have no idea, none of you, how severe the damage was that the All-Father wrought. It has to do with Loki's magic and the way it belonged to him: inborn, the healers said, like the color of his eyes. Trying to remove it was like trying to carve out his eyes with a wooden spoon. Loki may not survive, do you understand what I am saying? If he survives, he may never be the same. He has yet to wake and the healers do not even know if he will, much less when. So I think the odds of him masterminding some cunning escape, as the All-Father claims, are a little slim."

"This—you—which healer told you this? Surely that is the opinion of only one, or a few…"

"All of them, Thor," she said quietly, watching him go pale. His breath left him in a rush as if he'd been struck in the stomach. "Every single healer I spoke to, every conversation between them that I overheard, every time anyone mentioned Loki, it was with somber expressions and head-shaking. I heard more than one suggest it might be best to end his suffering, because even unconscious as he is, he is in constant pain, which they cannot treat because it would only injure him further." Sif
narrowed her eyes, her anger at this entire mess coming to the surface: anger at what was done to Loki, anger at the All-Father, anger at Thor and the Warriors for their stupidity. Anger at herself for being unable to change a thing about it. "You would know this, if you had bothered to go see him, rather than hiding in the sparring ring like a coward."

"I am no coward!" Just like that, Thor was on his feet, and the Warriors were grimacing and backing away.

Sif stood too, more slowly, straddling the bench and folding her arms to hide her fists. "No? Is that why you refuse to talk about your part in the entire debacle? Is that why you have not gone to see him or even ask after his wellbeing? If you feel no guilt, after delivering up your own brother to that, then I have to wonder what you do feel. I only know that the All-Father crippled his son, and you, Thor, you stand there willing to defend him anyway, leaping to accuse Loki whom you have never even bothered to ask after that I've heard."

"Do not dare to imply—I love my brother, Sif, do not dare to imply that I don't."

"Do you? Because you talk about him like you talk about a favorite possession, a delight when you take it off the shelf and not worth thinking about when it isn't in use." She hid a wince at that, because it was exactly what she'd wanted to avoid saying a minute ago. She had not Loki's skill with words, that was for certain.

Thor growled and started to come around the table; Volstagg reached toward his arm at first, then seemed to recall that drawing Thor's temper was never a good idea. Of course not, because Thor never could control his temper and had never been made to, growing up. Sif was embarrassed for herself at how many times she had simply gone along with his recklessness, or rolled over to his intimidation tactics, before now, and called it loyalty.

How many times she had been disloyal to Loki, who was just as much her friend, as a result.

"You tell us all that you love your brother, but you do not consider him, Thor," she said, and he stopped in his tracks. "You do not put him first. When he died, or we thought he had, all you could talk about was how it made you feel, or your parents, and never once did I hear you stop to consider what he felt, what could have driven him to such a pass. You say love, but your love does not move you away from the center of your own world. You approach him—you've always approached him—on your terms and never on his. And we've all been guilty of that, in our turn, for following your lead.

"And as for calling him a possession: When you love him, you expect us all to love him even when he has wronged us. When you are angry with him, you expect us all to be angry too, even when he has not involved us in whatever prank, even when we are on good terms, even when all he has done is try to make you see reason. You are defensive now because I have gone to see him without speaking to you about it first. You treat him as if he belongs to you, and only you can decide how we shall approach him, as if we may only be friends with him through you."

Thor looked, again, as though he'd been punched, hard enough to actually wind him. "That… that is not true…"

Sif sighed. "No. Not completely, I suppose. You are actually defensive because I am disagreeing with an accusation you have leaped to embrace, when I have facts on my side and you have not bothered to inquire before coming to your own conclusions. But, all the rest of it, I stand behind." She shook her head tiredly. "You claim that your banishment changed you, but I don't think it has made you stop to think, or to see what happens around you. Grief for Loki's presumed death sobered you a little, but it still did not make you wise, Thor."
"...I am not my father, it is true—"

"Oh, Thor." She pinched the bridge of her nose, exasperated. Why must she be the one to spell this out for him? "Your father did the same thing—refused to ask questions, let his anger and pride blind him to reality, and is now letting an easy accusation cover his own guilt in what happened. And what happened is that your brother suffered, because your father decided that what Loki had done reflected poorly on him." She shook her head at him again. "Are you ever going to stop just blindly following along with every damn thing he tells you? One day you will be king. You're going to have to grow up and learn to think for yourself before then, if you don't want all of Asgard to suffer as Loki has suffered. You're going to have to learn about consequences beyond just getting a stern look and a lecture from your father when the people around you get hurt."

"I have learned!"

"No, Thor. No, I really don't think you have." Sif took a step back so she was no longer straddling the bench, and looked at the Warriors Three, who were gaping as if they'd never really seen her before. Perhaps they hadn't. "The disappearances are all magic-users of Asgard, like Loki. And they all began disappearing after the All-Father nearly murdered his son. Will that be enough for you to put the pieces together? I really thought it was obvious."

And she turned and left the hall. Servants and others had stopped and were staring at her; it had always been a good idea for one's safety, if one was not a warrior, to pay very careful attention when Thor seemed on the verge of losing his temper, and they no doubt were uncertain whether or not to be appalled that Sif had dared to provoke it.

Only Loki had been able to do so safely in the past, but Loki wasn't here anymore.

"First the seidkonur, and now Loki himself! And still you claim that he is not behind this."

"We have spoken on this matter once, husband, and I will not speak on it further when it is clear that you will not listen."

Again Frigga was at her loom, again seeking peace in her sanctuary, and again Odin had violated it so that he could rant and look for a sympathetic audience. He ought to have learned better three days ago; she'd not spoken a word to him since, and they had slept in separate beds.

"He has not escaped, husband. He was carried off, by those who care for him more truly than we ever have."

"You think the seidkonur are leaving deliberately."

"Although I have not inquired of any of them, I am quite certain of it, yes. You sought to make an example of your son, Odin. You succeeded. Now reap the rewards, as the seidkonur have seen what you are capable of, and fear it too much to remain in Asgard for a moment longer."

Odin began to pace again, but this time, his head was bowed and he rubbed at his forehead with one hand. She knew he had not intended this, but his own unwillingness to consider Loki on his own terms was to blame, and she would not let him ignore that.

Not anymore.

"And do you still refuse to forgive me?" he asked after a long moment of strained silence.

Frigga closed her eyes, but only for a moment; she had been just as blind, in trusting her husband to
do right by her son. "It is as I have already said. If I knew the secret paths and could walk them as
Loki could, or if I could find anyone who knew such techniques as Loki taught, if they yet remained
here, I would beg them on my knees to take me with them when they go, and search for him on
Vanaheim. But there is the answer to your accusations, husband. He has not escaped. He is not
responsible for the disappearances among our populace. He has been taken from here, whether to
live or die we will probably never know. With luck, he will heal under their care. But I would be
very surprised if we saw him, or any of the other seidkonur, ever again."

"Do you truly think he is so lost to us?"

A single tear slipped down the queen's cheek. "He was lost to us the day you gave him cause to let
go and fall into the Void, husband. Whether or not you can entice him to return, all my arts cannot
say."

"Could you not entice him yourself, then?"

She shook her had at him, and smiled tremulously. "Why would I do that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, Odin. Are you still so unwilling to look for yourself, and see? Why would I convince him to
return, when he has suffered so much betrayal here? How could I, when I cannot promise him that
Asgard is still his home? When telling him that he is safe here is a lie, when telling him he is loved
will not be believed, and even if true, would not be sufficient to protect him? Why would I do such a
thing as that, truly?"

She turned from him then, and stroked a hand over the woven portion of her tapestry. "Our son is
gone, Odin. You may have killed him, or he may yet survive, but thanks to your cruelty, he is taken
from us and now we may never know which. I had not imagined that certain knowledge of a son's
death could be considered a luxury, yet now that it has been taken from us, I keenly feel its lack."

Odin left her, then, but Frigga could not find peace. He had violated her sanctuary, twice in less than
a week, as surely as he had violated their son, and she could not settle her thoughts.

But she was a seidkona and shield maiden of Vanaheim, and she had faced greater hardship than this
—not the loss of her son, no, that was a pain almost too great to bear, but she could certainly
overcome a momentary feeling of distraction. Frigga took three deep breaths to center herself and tap
into her personal reserves of seidr, then she turned and faced the loom once more.

The weights along the bottom of the loom swung back and forth, clinking against each other as she
opened and closed each shed. Pass the weft through, and pack it tight. Follow the pattern. Breathe in,
breathe out, reach, and tap into the energies of Yggdrasil, bit by bit.

Search for her son.

Search for his future.

A single tear slipped down her cheek, but she wove on.

Sif stopped in her tracks just outside the hall. Odin stood there, watching her, just out of sight of the
entrance, his expression inscrutable.

"My king!" Sif made to kneel, but the All-Father waved off the gesture.
"Murder, Lady Sif?" he asked, and Sif could feel the blood drain from her face. "Such words could be considered treason, were they heard by the wrong ears. Or in the wrong context."

Sif swallowed, the taste metallic on her dry tongue.

"Or sedition, perhaps," said Odin.

Sif took a breath and let her shoulders drop as she drew herself up to her full height. "I think that would depend on the perspective, my king," she said. "Is it sedition to explain to the prince, who is my boon companion, that he makes an error in judgment?"

"When it involves accusing the king of murdering his son?"

"When I looked in on His Highness yesterday, he yet lived, my king. No murder has been committed."

"To execute a criminal is justice, is it not?"

Sif's lips thinned. "My king. To commit a planned, intentional execution on a criminal sentenced to death is, indeed, justice. To… to botch a sentencing, and nearly kill a criminal whose sentence was not death, is not." She took another breath, greatly daring, "And to execute a prince—if a prince Loki still is—is itself treason, were it committed by anyone but the king."

Odin looked her over appraisingly. "Always so bold, Lady Sif. Are you truly without fear, speaking to me thusly?"

"Only a fool is truly fearless, my king," said Sif, "or one who has never known defeat. But I have grown up as a prince's companion, and not always deferred to him when he was wrong, and I have never been found guilty of disobedience to my superiors for it. Moreover, Thor has benefited from the presence of friends, true friends, who will not cater to his every whim. If I overstep myself now, my king, it is because I have grown used to honesty, even in the presence of royalty, for I have found it to be to their own benefit."

The All-Father might have smiled, hidden behind his beard, but it was difficult to tell. "You may go, Lady Sif."

"My king." She saluted, backed away three steps, then turned and continued up the corridor. Before she turned the corner, she glanced back.

Odin stood, still out of sight of the entrance, with his head bowed; one hand was upon Gungnir, and the other covered his face, and he looked to Sif's eye old, and tired, and stricken with grief… or regret.

Uncomfortable at the glimpse beneath Odin's royal persona, Sif took herself away, and did not look back again.

Chapter End Notes

Here's a mini-rant:

Marvel made sure to give Thor four relatively undeveloped companions in Sif and the Warriors Three. I found it interesting, and disheartening, that the two least sympathetic
of them in the first movie were The Girl and The Colored Guy. That and the fact that Sif is the most developed of the four, making her a better target for anger at the W4 in general, have caused a lot of people to absolutely despise Sif. But that is also the reason I refuse to do so. She has the most potential to be a fascinating, interesting character, and Marvel has reduced her either to The Girl or The Other Woman (in TDW). They want her to be a target for fan scorn, so that the Happy-Go-Lucky White Guys can get away with being liked by all, no matter how stupid or shitty they may be. I'm not going to play along. And I'm not sorry.
Settling In

Chapter Summary

World building. Lots and lots of world-building. Oh, and also maybe Natasha has magic.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took a couple days, actually, to get the Avengers and various SHIELD agents settled in. Logistics, thought Bruce. But they needed to requisition and lay out a mobile hospital—an actual, full-service hospital, almost, the only things missing were a burn unit and cancer care center, it seemed like—assign the various people, hold briefings, all that stuff. And then, you know, the more mundane business of packing clothes and making arrangements for someone to water the plants and feed the cats, that sort of thing.

Tony could only pop in and out a couple days a week, since he did also have a life as a billionaire and business mogul, but the rest of them settled in to stay. Bruce had to admit, the setup was actually pretty nice.

There were three hexagonal towers clustered together that turned out to be something not too different from apartment buildings. There were six rooms to each floor, around a central column of… a lot of stairs… so the Avengers ended up with an entire floor to themselves, and one spare suite for Tony or Fury or whoever else needed to stop in temporarily. Ingirun explained to them that they had always planned for other magic users to come and visit from the other refugee colonies, so they had plenty of space for guests. The rooms also had been built as part of a standing contingency plan in every colony, in the event that one of the other settlements had to disband and send its people elsewhere.

"It seems like these villages would have taken a lot of planning," said Bruce. "I mean, they're laid out efficiently, it's clear you've thought of… practically everything."

"Yes," said Ingirun. "It helps, of course, that we are often tasked with such logistical details in Asgard, but when Loki was injured, almost within the hour we had begun planning our exodus."

"Well, that's a bit of an exaggeration, of course," said their other guide, a man—well, probably a man—named Kisping. It was hard to tell, and Bruce wasn't going to ask. "But the word spread very quickly among all the seidmenn and seidkonur, and by sunset we were in consensus that we would leave. Some of the first to go packed their things that very night, and went in search of suitable locations for us all. The rest of us began planning for as efficient, and more importantly as unobtrusive, a move as possible."

"You were worried about being stopped?" asked Bruce.

"After what the All-Father did," said Kisping, dropping his usual light, fluttery sort of mannerisms, "we were worried about being tortured to death if we did something that he did not approve of. Even now, we work night and day to conceal ourselves from any efforts Asgard might make to trace our steps, locate our camps, or watch our activities."
While Kisping had been talking, Natasha and Clint had joined them. "They can do that?" Nat wanted to know.

"The All-Father has a watchman, a gatekeeper, who is gifted with the ability to see all that comes to pass throughout the Nine Realms. I will not speak his name, lest it draw his attention to us. But yes, the All-Father relies upon him to watch over his kingdom and all the Nine Realms. If we did not put forth deliberate effort to thwart him, there is no doubt that we would already have been found."

"On the other hand," said Ingirun, "without us in Asgard, they cannot travel to reach our settlements on the various realms. Without us, it will take them much longer to repair the Bifrost and send anyone after us. Perhaps by then things will have changed in the realm, and we will be safe."

"How so?"

"Well, for one thing, they might decide they value us too much to allow Odin to rip the magic from us whenever he's annoyed at something," said Kisping, back to more stereotypically feminine gestures and vocal patterns. With his, or her, loose robes and smooth face, Bruce honestly could not tell what Kisping's gender might be. Maybe this was what Ingirun had been talking about when she said that males with seidr often ended up a little different.

"How likely is it that Odin would really use this as a routine punishment, though?" asked Natasha. "From the way you're talking, this is the first time he's ever done it and the entire community of seidkonur and seidmenn has responded very strongly."

"And Herkja did say he was horrified by what happened, once he realized," Bruce pointed out.

"It is our hope that the All-Father would learn from his mistake," said Ingirun.

"But we weren't going to stay around and find out whether we were wrong," added Kisping.

The mobile hospital arrived in segments, and then SHIELD had to get permission from Iceland's government before they could set up their own encampment. This entire area was one of the country’s most popular hiking regions, and people came from all over the world to make the trek from one end to the other, through several different environments from lava field to lakeside.

(A few had actually passed through while the Avengers were visiting; the Aesir had offered them food and water, or a place to spend the night, and then seen them on their way. They had politely refused all requests to take selfies with the hikers, and Bruce had finally invented "religious restrictions" as an excuse for them to use.)

So Iceland was understandably concerned about anything that might disrupt the area's natural beauty. The Aesir settlement was completely constructed and inhabited before anyone knew to stop it, but from what Bruce could tell, the local officials would be damned if they let that happen a second time with the temporary hospital.

And of course, the area technically shouldn't have been inhabited at all, given that it was right on the rift that ran through the island, with volcanoes and vents, geysers, and almost daily earthquakes, minuscule though they were. Bruce still wasn't completely sure how the Aesir had decided to park themselves here of all places, but maybe they were looking to compromise between the habitable areas and the completely empty interior of the country. Heck, maybe they had truly earthquake-proof
buildings, for all he knew. Or magic. Probably there was magic involved.

Actually, it helped, Bruce thought, that the area apart from the famous hiking trail was considered wasteland; no farms or pastures were in the area, and while there were population centers nearby, they were far enough out that the settlement didn't appear to directly threaten them. The Aesir didn't seem to be dipping into Iceland's power grid, and certainly hadn't used any of the nation's resources to construct their buildings. Some officials even had admitted, according to the reports Fury kept uploading to their tablets, that the settlement did not seem to negatively impact the environment from an aesthetic viewpoint either; "It looks like it belongs there," read one comment.

It did, too —the buildings seemed in some areas almost to grow out of rocky outcroppings, or to cluster in ways that accented and enhanced the look of the natural landscape. Bruce still wasn't sure how they were keeping the moss from getting scrubbed off the ground with all the foot traffic, but the fact that it was still there added to the effect.

Compare that to the plastic blisters used to build a temporary sterile environment for the hospital, and one could see why Iceland was feeling a little cranky. The machines were ugly; the lights were glaring halogens with no shades to direct them; the plastic rattled in the slightest breeze; the construction equipment included diesel vehicles that roared and stank, and half the equipment inside the hospital itself was run on generators. The ground was a raw scar in and around the entire area.

Bruce kind of got a kick out of watching the Aesir frown at the little establishment, and glance at each other sidelong.

"It may not look like much," he tried to reassure them, "but I'm familiar with all the machinery they've brought. The medical scanning equipment, that kind of thing. I promise there's nothing in there that is intended to harm him."

"We know well how easily the mechanisms of healing can be converted to harm," warned Eir.

"I wouldn't expect anything less," said Bruce respectfully. "But at least one of you will be with Loki at all times; I will be, too. I'll be happy to explain what everything does, and how it all works, as best I can."

Bruce could only hope that the whole thing with scanning Loki and running their tests on him would be over quickly. Partly he felt the entire setup was overkill; a doctor could just as easily have come into the guy's room and performed a physical exam to get most of the information they were after. Set up some kind of internal scanning machine, sure, but the rest? What was the point? It set Bruce on edge.

The other concern was the attention they were drawing to the little settlement. Sure, it was out of the way, but Clint and Fury had been right when they'd said that flying choppers out here would only make people curious.

"What will you do if the word gets out that you're here, and people start coming to see you?" he asked Kisping.

"You mean more than have already come? Welcome them, so long as they are worthy of welcome," he said. Or she.

"Can I… can I ask you something? I don't want to be rude, and it might be a little personal."

Kisping laughed airily. "Biologically male, but seidr is feminine and so am I. I have the parts to father a child but I'm honestly not sure they work. I'm not interested, in any case." With a trailing
glance and a wink at Bruce, Kisping added, "I'm something in between, if your language has words for that. We do, but *erg* is generally considered an insult to all the *manly* men of Asgard."

"Oh. Well, uh. I suppose we'd say 'transgender', or maybe 'gender-fluid'. Some of our languages have names for a third gender, or pronouns that are neither 'he' nor 'she', but not every language does. And those languages that do, not everyone knows them or uses them."

"Fluid..." said Kisping. "As in, something that flows and shifts rather than being trapped in one form. I rather like that... and your pronouns?"

"Well, in English sometimes we just say 'they' when we're not sure, or especially if we're talking about someone and want to keep them anonymous by not revealing whether we're discussing a man or a woman. There are also some invented terms, like 'ze' or 'zey'."

"Ze. Zzzeee." Kisping smiled brightly and tucked a lock of hair behind his... zir... ear. "I like it." Ze rested a hand on Bruce's shoulder and fluttered zir eyelashes. "You're so clever."

"And you're flirting outrageously to see if you can make me uncomfortable," said Bruce, amused. "Is it working?"

"Let me introduce you to Tony Stark, and you'll see why I'm more or less immune by now."

Kisping laughed, and delicately touched zir fingertips to zir chest. "Ooh! He sounds positively delightful."

"That's one word for him, sure," said Bruce dryly, and Kisping laughed again as they headed up the street. "Are all the men who have seidr like you?"

"Ah, you force me to resist the tired joke that 'there is no one quite like me'," Kisping said, affecting a little pout while Bruce rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "In seriousness, however, the answer is yes. Among Aesir, the capacity for seidr is inherited along the female line."

"I remember someone telling us that when we first got here," agreed Bruce.

"Well, because of that, those of us who are biologically male, but have seidr, inevitably exhibit some other so-called feminine traits as well. Some appear ordinary enough, except that they prefer intimacy to be only with men, rather than that being an occasional entertaining dalliance while cleaving mainly to woman's bosom. Some are like me, female in spirit or with a spirit that, hm, fluctuates. A handful are physically hermaphrodites and carry the organs of both sexes. A few of those are even fertile, though they tend to keep very quiet about it." Ze waved a hand dismissively. "Asgard and its biases. The men shall be *manly* and the women shall be *womanly*, and never shall there be any blending between them. Save the blending which creates a child, of course."

"Of course," said Bruce. It wasn't as if he were a stranger to bullying. "And Loki? I mean, I'm not trying to pry. Ingirun had said he was a different species from Aesir."

"That is correct, so he is not physically subject to those limitations that we Aesir seidmenn have. But again, Asgard and its prejudices... he was assumed to be erg almost from the day his magic manifested, and was often treated accordingly by those strapping *manly* men. Such honor among them," ze added bitterly. "Even though he is not like us, we erg and the other seidkonur came to his rescue many times. More so than his precious brother, to be sure."

Bruce winced, and dropped the subject. Family drama was not what he'd signed up to learn about. Leave that kind of thing to Natasha. "But you were saying something about us humans finding out
about your village," he said. Not the smoothest way to steer clear of the topic, to be sure. "You're not concerned?"

"Well, with respect, you are only mortal," said Kisping. "And we are not merely Aesir, though that would be enough to render you nearly harmless to us without your machinery and weapons. We are also seidmenn, almost every one of us. We can defend ourselves if need be, though as I'm sure Ingirun has said, we hope it will not ever come to that."

"I know that the government of Iceland—that's this island that we're on right now—the government is trying to keep it quiet that you're here, but they've been reluctant to take some of the more obvious steps to do that."

"Like what?"

"Well, this area is popular for hikers—um," Bruce paused, seeing Kisping's look of confusion, "sort of like people who go on adventures, like what Thor used to tell us about, but without killing things. Those are the people you've met who were just passing through. They like to just get out, away from the cities and their regular lives, and enjoy nature. The views and landscape here are considered especially beautiful."

"Ah, I see. And we placed ourselves along what we thought was a quiet road, for commerce, but it was actually…"

"No, no, that's a road, it's how a couple of us got close enough to walk the rest of the way, but yeah, you're on a major hiking trail called Laugavegur. I think officials are concerned that they'll draw more attention for closing the trail down than they will from just letting the handful of tourists come through and pretending like you've always been here."

Kisping snorted a little, then covered zir mouth delicately. "I was not aware that our village resembled the architecture of Midgard overmuch," ze said.

"Maybe not, but it's true that you don't look like you just sprang up overnight or anything," said Bruce. "How, uh… how did that happen anyway?"

"Magic, of course," said Kisping, then laughed at the flat look Bruce leveled at zem in return. "We don't intend to construct any more buildings, our plan and our perimeter are complete, but if it becomes necessary to erect something else, we can certainly let you see how it is done."

"That's fair, I suppose."

"But come, this is boring talk, and you wished to actually see our fair settlement!" Kisping linked elbows with Bruce and turned him toward the far corner of the village. As they walked, Bruce spotted Natasha and waved her over to join them. She looked completely amused with the way Kisping was towing him all over the place, and he rolled his eyes in response.

"What are we doing, boys?" she asked as she approached.

"Tour of the city," said Bruce.

"City. Hah!" Kisping held zir free elbow out for Natasha to take. "We are but four hundred souls, cast adrift from the Realm Eternal, here to suffer in our exile."


"Does your settlement have a name?" Bruce asked.
Kisping brought them to a dome-shaped building with a door they had to take three steps down in order to enter. "Each of our little villages is named simply 'Shelter' in the local tongue on each realm, wherever we have placed ourselves. This one, I believe, is called 'Skýli'."

The air inside the dome was damp and smelled of green growing things; Kisping brought them through an archway into a space that was more brightly lit than anything they'd seen so far, with floating, glowing orbs instead of torches providing the illumination. Rows of plants grew in beds at hip-height around the room, but more interesting were the tracks hanging from the ceiling, in which bundles of plants hung with their roots exposed, while roughly a dozen Aesir moved among them, spraying them with liquid or waving their hands over the plants. Sometimes Bruce could see flickers of light in the air; he thought they were just afterimages or something at first, but then he watched one plant burst into flower like something out of time-lapse photography.

He shared a glance with Natasha, whose eyes were wide. "You're using magic to speed up their growth?" she asked.

"Just so. We have no wish to place an unnecessary strain on the worlds we have come to inhabit," said Kisping. "So we have our own crops, which of course we will supplement by purchasing from local farmers where necessary. We would have been willing to trade plants, but after some discussion in the planning stages we realized that it might not be wise to introduce foreign strains to a planet that is not able to regulate their growth."

"Sounds like you guys really did think of everything," said Natasha.

"We certainly tried."

Outside the hydroponic farm, Kisping pointed down the hillside to the lake where they had seen the boats, that first day; they were intended for fishing, and while the people of Skýli had originally hoped to hunt to supplement their supply, now they planned to just purchase meat, once they figured out how currency worked on Earth and what they could exchange in order to get money. Apparently one of their big goals for the near future was to get hold of some chickens.

"Not exactly a nefarious scheme," as Natasha said later in her report.

The towers where the Avengers were quartered actually housed nearly everyone in the village; there were sleeping quarters in their infirmary for the healers and staff, and sometimes the fishermen slept on their boats, but those were the only exceptions.

"Are all the, uh, the bathrooms that small?" asked Bruce. Because they barely had even a shower stall in each apartment; it was more like a space where a person could dump a bucket of water over their head, and little else.

"Bathe? Oh! Well, those are for emergency use, mainly, for example if you must clean yourselves very quickly to be presentable for one reason or another. But we usually use the hot springs."

"There are hot springs?" Now Natasha sounded eager, and Bruce couldn't blame her. It sounded luxurious.

Kisping laughed. "Apparently this island is riddled with them. And geysers and volcanoes, as well. But how foolish of us! We thought that perhaps you preferred your privacy when you settled in yesterday, or did not trust us to join us at the springs. Surely you will come tonight? It is very social. Everyone bathes, some bring light snacks or drinks, there is often singing, and of course we share the gossip of the day. It is not unheard of for the bathing hour to turn into an impromptu village meeting!"
"Iceland uses a lot of geothermal energy to meet their needs," said Natasha. "Is that the case here?"

"Hmm, some of it, probably. Herkja would know more about that. Mainly, though, we rely on the ambient seidr."

"You mean magic."

"Of course." Kisping smirked. "We are all sorcerers here, after all." Ze wiggled zir fingers dramatically.

"I know we're all pretty curious about that energy source," said Bruce; "I mean, we're trying to convert to more renewable sources for our electricity, but most of the world is still stuck with burning fossil fuels."

"'Fossil fuels', what an interesting term," said Kisping. "Perhaps Herkja and other specialists in that field can help your world move away from dependence on such things. Every realm with life on it has seidr in plenty, even if the people do not know how to utilize it; we simply direct the seidr and place containment fields, something like conduits, to encourage it to flow where we wish." Ze spun in place and stopped to make eye contact with them both. "It is very important, however, to plan the conduits carefully, so that they do not interfere with one another. You mortals cannot expect simply to play with the seidr haphazardly and hope for harmless results."

"We'll keep that in mind," said Natasha. Haphazardly. Yeah, that was something he was a little too familiar with, and would be sure to avoid in future.

Ze dimpled sweetly and resumed zir easy stroll. "Skýli is planned a little more thoroughly than most, since it was built all at once, but also because we wanted to be certain the energy flows would not harm His Highness."

"That really makes a difference?" Natasha asked.

"It seems to, for him," said Kisping. "He was always quite strong, and quite sensitive to seidr flows before this; now with his channels so badly damaged, he seems even more so. His Highness was in a lot of pain before we came to Midgard."

"He seems like he's still in pain now," Bruce pointed out.

"Well, yes, but he's better than he was. At least, according to Lady Eir. I wouldn't know personally; I was never in His Highness's confidence enough to really justify disturbing his rest now."

"You have a lot of respect for him, though," said Natasha.

As he had done once earlier, Kisping dropped zir more stereotypically feminine mannerisms as zir expression grew serious. Even zir voice dropped into a lower register. "I understand that you have a singular impression of His Highness and the sort of person he is, based on a few days' worth of interaction with him here on your world. But we here, all of us save the children, have known him for centuries, and I tell you now, what you saw was not the prince with whom we are acquainted. You may have little cause to trust him, or us; so be it. But consider how many witnesses to His Highness's character are here assembled, and consider that we are unanimous in our regard for him, and ponder why that may be before you leap to accuse him of having some inherently monstrous nature."

Bruce and Natasha both paused and shared a glance, equally taken aback by Kisping's tone. It had been easy to forget that ze was an alien, practically immortal by human standards, with access to powers the people of Earth could not yet comprehend.
Kisping did not speak while he led them to another building, though ze didn't seem angry with them, but as soon as the door opened they heard the voices of children, reciting something as a group, laughing, asking questions. The hair on Bruce's arms and the back of his neck stood on end, and he shivered involuntarily.

"Are you cold?" Kisping asked—quietly, but not unkindly.

"No," said Bruce. "Something just…"

"It's the magic," said Natasha with awe. Bruce looked at her, and she was staring at the empty air with wide eyes. "They're using a lot of it and we can feel it sometimes."

Kisping tilted zir head. "And you can see it, can't you?"

"Not… not outdoors," said Natasha, and Bruce felt his eyebrows go up. "Not the ambient stuff. But when it's being… moved around, I guess, by you guys… then sometimes I can see… like streamers or ribbons. Or ink dropped in water."

"You're kidding." The implications were huge. If Nat could see the energies, if she could use them… they would have a human on their team who could help them understand how the whole thing worked. They wouldn't be dependent on the Aesir to teach them how.

Natasha blinked and shook her head quickly, and refocused on Bruce. "That look on your face? I know that look, and you can stop now."

"No, I mean, okay, but you know how useful this would be —"

"And I'm not interested in being useful to SHIELD or anyone else, any more than I already am."

Bruce paused; blinked. "That… that's not what I meant. I would — Natasha, Agent Romanov, you have to know… I mean, SHIELD likes to think I'm useful too, do you really think I'd go there? Over this?" He shook his head and took a step back.

It was Natasha's turn to look remorseful, but she quickly got herself back under control, with a sideways glance to Kisping, who was just watching their byplay with zir eyebrows raised in curiosity. "No. No, of course you wouldn't. I just…" she sighed. "I don't look forward to reporting this to Fury."

"So don't," Bruce shrugged. "So you can see light streamers sometimes. There's supposedly plenty of this seidr energy floating around on Earth, but you can only see it when other people are using it. That's… probably helpful for you, you know, if you can see it coming maybe you can dodge it, if it's harmful, right? But other than that…" He shrugged again, watching as she began to relax.

"Your friend speaks correctly," said Kisping. "The ability to see seidr does not necessarily translate to an ability to utilize it. And a mortal lifespan does not grant much time to learn the art. If your superiors have some notion that you might become a sorceress for their cause," ze said with a smirk, "they will have to accustom themselves to disappointment."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry I've been neglecting this story for a bit while I worked on Grievance. That one is far enough along that I mostly know where it's going and the plot is nice and snug and
moves along nicely. And then there's this one, which is still in the establishing stages and feels sort of floppy and floundering, and makes me less excited to work with it. I'm sure it will shape up, but taking such a different approach to the writing style has definitely affected it.

But here's a chapter now, with my wishes for a Happy New Year to one and all. Cheers!
Examinations

Chapter Summary

SHIELD is foolish; other visitors to the village examine Loki.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eir was not impressed.

She generally wasn't, granted; she knew the things people said about her, that she seemed to think everyone around her was some sort of idiot. That wasn't the case, but it was certainly true that she had no patience for stupidity or for anything that frivolously wasted time she could be using to save the lives of her patients.

The humans were, very definitely, wasting her time.

"Yes, yes, I understand how the machinery works, we were utilizing magnetic resonance imaging systems while your people were still discovering the alphabet. Get on with it, if you please; the longer your examination takes, the more my patient suffers away from proper care. Make your scans and be done."

The humans, of course, were offended. Arrogant little creatures, but she had it on authority from one or two of them that the arrogance had as much to do with which Midgarder faction they belonged to as anything else. Apparently the ones called "Americans" had a tendency toward overweening pride—even when their feelings might be justified, they would still take it too far and become positively obnoxious, according to the ones who explained this—and there were several such in the team of human healers on site.

Their building was ugly, their machines were primitive, and they were convinced to a man—because they were mostly men, of course they were—that Loki was some sort of horrific threat to the safety of their realm. Hmph. His Highness, since his punishment, had yet to do more than whimper in the past few months. They'd known him for all of five days and were convinced they knew him better than the Aesir did; that assumed, of course, that they'd ever met him at all and were not simply allowing rumors and gossip to tell them what to think.

She could see the weaponry that at least half of them thought to be concealed beneath their white coats; perhaps they thought their projectiles would be sufficient to subdue a typical Aesir warrior should their settlement prove threatening. Pity for them that almost none of the inhabitants of Skýli were mere warriors, with no seidr in their veins.

On the other hand, Eir was almost looking forward to the moment that one of them became impertinent toward her, or disrespectful toward His Highness; she would very much enjoy putting them in their place if needed.

Unlike Thor, or likely Odin, she and her colleagues had done their research before coming to Midgard. There would be very few surprises awaiting them, should these Midgard "inspectors" or whatever they called themselves choose to turn on the Aesir refugees.
They loaded Loki onto the thin bed which they would insert into the imaging machine. Pillows were placed to brace His Highness's head and neck; someone began to place soft restraints on his wrists, but all Eir needed to do at that point was step forward with a glare on her face that had terrified centuries of apprentices, and they were quickly set aside without a word.

At the last second, Eir removed the seidr-crafted aids she'd placed to help Loki breathe, and to block some of the pain he was in. She was unhappy to do even that much, but did not wish for their scans to be impeded by conflicting energies.

"If you could come this way, ma'am…"

"Why?"

"Ah, well, ah, it's standard practice to vacate the room while the machine is running. Dr. Eir."

"Am I in any danger if I remain?" asked Eir, one eyebrow climbing.

"No, no of course not, ma'am, although if you're wearing any metal it would be best to leave the space. But we have an observation area, see? You can keep an eye on the—on your patient, from there."

Eir wondered what they had been about to call His Highness. "Very well."

The scan proceeded; Eir kept a discreet seidr monitor on Loki's vital signs, feeling his breath labor as his fingers twitched, the only motion he was capable of in his deeply unconscious state. The fact that he could move even that much, when he was so far under, spoke to pain she could hardly stand to see in her patients, and it probably made her even more brusque than usual with the mortals.

Not that she cared much about their feelings when one of them tried to keep her from entering the chamber after the scan was complete.

"You are standing between me and my patient," she snapped. "I suggest for your sake that you step aside."

"Of course, Dr. Eir, if you could just give us a moment…"

"A moment to do what?" And of course, that was when she felt a disruption in her seidr monitor. "Stand aside."

"Ma'am, I'm afraid I really can't—"

"I wasn't asking permission," said Eir, as she pushed him out of her way as easily as nudging a wayward house cat. She stepped back into the chamber to find a quartet of white-coated humans standing over her charge.

"Touching him."

"You will unhand my patient immediately, or I will permit you to live only barely long enough to regret it, mortals," she said icily, striding forward with barely-contained rage. A quick dart of her seidr flew to alert her staff in Skýli, about half of whom were waiting just outside the ugly little building to transport Loki back to their own infirmary. Within seconds, she heard raised voices, muffled but still audible through the crackling, tissue-like walls of the place.

The four humans positively leaped backward, eyes wide, while one of them reached for the weapon she had seen before.
Eir rolled her eyes. "I wouldn't." Swiftly, she examined her patient, barging right through and shoving the humans out of the way when they didn't move quickly enough. His breathing was still labored, so she replaced the seidr mask that was helping him, and restored the pain blocks. There was a tiny patch of tissue missing from the inside of his mouth, a bleeding circle of flesh the size of her fingertip missing from his chest over his pectoral muscle, and a puncture in the bend of his arm. Looking up quickly, she caught one of the humans trying to slip a vial of blood—Loki's blood, the signature was unmistakable—into the pocket of his coat.

With one sharp gesture, she isolated Loki from the rest of the room, so her magic would not disturb him; with another, she cast her sterilization spell… essentially causing the tissue samples they had stolen to ignite in blue-hot flame.

With yelps of pain, the mortals all flung vials and bottles and needles away from themselves, ripping off coats and leaping back further to get away from the brilliant flames. The mortal with the weapon fired it at her, and she watched as the projectile struck her defensive shield and dropped to the floor.

"I am a qualified battlefield physician, you fool, did you really think me incapable of protecting myself from your ridiculous toys?"

Just then the door, little better than a curtain really, ripped open and their leader, the one-eyed man, came stalking through, flanked by two other humans, weapons drawn. "What the hell is going on in here?" he demanded, stopping short when he spotted Loki and Eir. "What is the meaning of this?"

"I should ask you the same thing, and have more right to the answer than you," retorted Eir. Behind her there was a slashing noise as the humans startled, and her staff stepped through the rip in the wall one of them had just made. A quick glance over her shoulder showed her Ottar with his hunting knife in hand, one or two of the other battle-trained seidkonur, and her own staff, a full dozen Aesir scowling and ready for a fight. "Hold," she called, and they all stopped, arms folded over chests or fists planted on hips, glaring like demons at the mortals in the room.

"Again I'll ask," said the man called Fury, "what is happening here? Why did you attack my people?"

"I?" Eir laughed derisively. "I was not the one who decided it would be appropriate to steal bits of His Highness's flesh while I was kept out of the room. Sneaking about like weasels in a henhouse to get what you want? Is this the honor of Midgard?" There were murmurs behind Eir, and none of them sounded pleased.

Fury frowned. "My understanding was that you would permit us to satisfy ourselves that your story was true, that Loki had been tortured prior to coming to Earth."

"Your scans corroborate that story as much as you need, unless your mortal healers are too incompetent to read the images and see the indicators of poorly-healed bones, or the remains of scar tissue and lesions on his internal organs. You do not require vials of His Highness's blood to determine that, and I think your people knew damn well that was the case given that they tried to separate me from my patient." She narrowed her eyes as Fury's expression went carefully blank. "Perhaps Midgard custom does not think such an affront is terribly serious. On Asgard, I am his chief healer, and here on Midgard I am the only one with permission to make medical decisions in His Highness's stead. For you to attempt to violate my consent is a grave offense and very nearly a crime punishable by war, given that the man whose consent I hold is a prince of Asgard."

"Lady Eir, I assure you that I did not authorize any such samples to be taken." He leveled his own glare at the assembled humans. "Care to explain yourselves?"
"The 0-8-4—"

"The what?" Eir interrupted.

The man who had begun talking blanched. "The, uh, the alien life form…"

Eir saw red. "His name is Loki, and he is not your test animal!" She stepped forward, fists clenched, only to feel Ottar's hands on her shoulders, as the other humans scrambled backward or reached once again for their meager weaponry. With an effort, she controlled her rage; she may not be a warrior but she was still Aesir, and bloodlust was part of her makeup. She was near to vibrating with seidr, ready to lash out at the nearest target, when she turned back to Fury. "If this is how you see us, you may take your underlings and depart, and we will defend ourselves if you dare to approach us again."

"That won't be necessary, Lady Eir," said Fury calmly. Without moving his head, he shifted his eye to fall on the other mortals. "The hell are your names, Agents?"

One by one, they gave them.

"Uh-huh. And your immediate supervisor?"

One of them swallowed. "D-doctor… Doctor Dupree, sir."

Fury glanced over his shoulder. "Find Dupree and tell her to get her ass in here, posthaste." He turned back to the four, who had begun to look positively frightened. "Do you have any idea how fucking stupid you were, just now? You wanted tissue samples from goddamn space aliens, you had an entire village full of them you could have just asked nicely, and probably gotten as many samples as your creepy-ass mad-scientist hearts could have wished for. Notice I said had, past tense, because instead, you geniuses decided to break from procedure and violate a patient's consent in a way that sure as hell wouldn't fly for any human in the civilized world, and apparently you thought that the fact your test subject there has a personal physician on call wasn't relevant information."

He shook his head in disgust just as another mortal walked into the room, a woman this time, with olive skin and thick spectacles covering her eyes. Her hair was pulled back into a single braid, and she looked to Eir's eyes like she was only barely awake and aware of her surroundings; admittedly, that could have been Eir's bias talking.

"You're Dupree?" asked Fury.

"Yes sir." The woman's hands tangled together nervously.

"Did you authorize these clowns of yours to take tissue samples without asking permission of the patient or his advocate?"

"Ah… not, not explicitly, sir, but standard 0-8-4 procedure—"

"Standard 0-8-4 procedure assumes you're collecting samples from the corpses of non-sentient creatures, or sentient ones who wouldn't communicate with us except to try and shoot us, whether they consent or not. Not beings who are still alive and capable of granting or withholding consent," said Fury. "Standard procedure also assumes that the lab techs in question understand basic medical and lab ethics, which yes, as a matter of fact I did take a moment to memorize before we shipped all this nice expensive equipment out here for you to play with. We are not going to violate Icelandic, American, or international law, not to mention risking a war with another goddamn planet, just so you can get your hands on a few cells to look at under a microscope a little quicker than you would if you had actually asked permission."
Dupree blinked at him as if she were having difficulty grasping what he was saying, and Eir resisted the urge to slap her. If his was the sort of control she kept over her underlings, or the level of awareness she had of their activities, she did not deserve her post.

On this, Eir and Fury apparently agreed. "You and your team, pack your shit, and surrender your weapons," he said. "You'll be strip searched before you get into your civvies, and then you'll be escorted out of this facility and shipped back to Washington. You can expect reassignment by the end of the week. Do I make myself clear?"

Most of the humans nodded, either too shocked or too embarrassed to argue, but one of them sputtered, pointing at Eir, "What about the 0-8-4 setting our things on fire? We could have been killed!"

"Lady Eir?"

"I opted to sterilize the stolen tissues and render them useless to the thieves," said Eir. "It is not my fault they were attempting to hide such things in their clothing, and as far as I am concerned, if they had been killed for daring to violate His Highness's royal person, that would be only just, and no more than they would have received in Asgard for the same crime." She leveled the human who had accused her with a flat stare. "You were injured because you were in possession of stolen property. Take responsibility for your deeds and do not blame me for your misfortune."

There was a moment more of squawking and sputtering, which Eir ignored in favor of staring down the idiots who had dared presume they could get away with something like this. Finally they were gone, escorted out by some of the director's guard, and he waited for Eir to look at him before he spoke.

"Your people seem to have ruined our facility," he said mildly, nodding at the rent in the transparent wall behind her, around which her people still stood gathered.

Eir shrugged. "Have we harmed any of your people?" she asked.

"Not that I'm aware of, no," said Fury. He paused to touch his ear for a moment; Herkja had said that many of the humans wore or carried little communication devices. "No," he repeated. "None of our people were harmed. Your patient?"

"He does not appear to have lost enough blood to be in any danger," said Eir, "and I can heal these smaller wounds once we have returned to Skýli. I would do so here, but I no longer trust your people not to gawk at us like animals, and try to contain us when we perform tricks beyond your understanding."

"We'd like to complete our scans so we can verify your claims."

"I care nothing for your verification, Director," said Eir. "If your underlings had been capable of treating His Highness with respect, I would have no difficulty in allowing them to continue their tests. As it is, well." She tucked her hands into her sleeves. "I think we have quite finished here."

"Would it—" one of the humans began; when everyone turned to face him, he seemed to shrink. "We do have the MRIs, they're good, so that's something. But I was wondering, would it be possible to, maybe, observe while you did your own scans, with your technology? I mean, if you have the kind of equipment here in your settlement that you would need for that."

"We have crafted a soul forge, yes," said Eir, noting the furrowed brows and exchanged looks at the strange term. "Whether I will permit any of you near it is another story. Perhaps if you can
demonstrate basic courtesy over the next several days, I might be persuaded to allow one or two of you access. But I would not stay awake by the hearth if I were you."

"That's reasonable," said Fury, "and for what it may be worth, you have my formal apology for what just happened."

"Your apology will be accepted when your words are demonstrated in your deeds," said Eir. "It may seem to you that we are slow to forgive, but the gravity of this insult will not be appeased with mere talk."

"Of course." He looked down at Loki, still unconscious and oblivious to all that had taken place. "Do you need any assistance getting him back to your village?"

"Not from you," Eir replied, lips thinning. At a gesture, three of her staff members appeared by her side, and between them they materialized Loki's float. It was not a full healing bed by any means, but it would be sufficient to transport Loki without undue discomfort. Ignoring the startled reaction from the mortals, she and her staff lifted Loki off the scanning machine's narrow bed and into the float, covered him with a light blanket, and adjusted the seidr aids that would keep him relatively comfortable. Finally, her assistants closed the seidr dome over the float, and began pushing it—not toward the doorway where all the humans stood, but back toward the rip in the wall that Ottar had cut for them.

"We can clear a path for you to leave, if you like, without slicing more walls open," said Fury mildly. Ottar spoke up, startling them. "This way was shorter," he said, one corner of his mouth turning up in amusement.

And with that, one by one the Aesir departed, holding the sides of the wall open like a curtain for Loki's float to pass through. Eir heard Fury sigh as they pulled the tear wider, but he said nothing, and they left the ugly little building unopposed.

After the disaster with the SHIELD field hospital (and really, they should have known better), the healers in the village were not in much of a mood to listen to anything the humans had to say. There were profuse apologies for about two weeks, interspersed with offers to assist in their own way with Loki's case—which, no one present was stupid enough to miss, meant that they wanted a second chance to scan and test and poke and prod.

Pretty much all of the Avengers rolled their eyes in disgust when they heard.

"Yeah, the guy might be a war criminal here on Earth, but he's got four hundred followers here that would tear the place apart if anybody were to try screwing with him," said Tony.

"I don't know why I was even surprised," Bruce put in.

"It was sloppy," said Natasha, and they all turned to look at her. "I know, you take the moral approach; SHIELD takes the expedient approach, always, and this was sloppy. As both Tony and Director Fury said, if they wanted to get samples and learn more about an alien species, they have an entire village of people here they could have asked. They should have established trust first, before approaching them about tissue samples, either from the villagers or from Loki. They failed their mission because they got impatient."

Which… was a fair point, when Steve thought about it. Ugly, given that Steve had once had faith
that SHIELD was an organization trying to do the right thing, but still fair.

"You said 'mission'," he spoke up after a moment's thought. "You think there was any official sanction to this?"

Natasha shrugged. "If Fury thought he could get away with it, he might give official permission. Or he might have given unofficial permission to agents who were expendable in the grand scheme. It would have been worth a try, and if they failed he could be seen to reprimand them and keep his own reputation, and ours by extension, intact."

Steve just shook his head. Ugly, ugly business.

Eventually, someone must have gotten through to Lady Eir and Lady Runa, because they agreed to allow no more than two human doctors to come and examine Loki, in their hospital, in his own bed, without resorting to any human technology and with full, continuous supervision by a round dozen Aesir.

Yeah, they really weren't happy with that whole debacle.

They were kind enough to allow Bruce to observe. They must have decided he was mostly harmless, or something.

"Conclusion? Loki is in a coma," he told them later. "By human standards, anyway. Lowered heartbeat and breathing, non-responsive to the usual stimuli… the Aesir did allow them to hook up an EEG—"

"Wait, they did?"

"Well, first I let them demonstrate it on me. They decided it was quaint but harmless," he said with a little smile. "Anyway, Loki's brain wave patterns are so low it's unnerving. Like, if he were a human he couldn't physically be in that state without actually being on a downhill slide into brain death. Except Loki's apparently been in that state for months."

"You're saying if he were human, he'd be dead," said Clint.

"Well, yeah, but we knew that before," put in Stark. "I mean, this whole magic mumbo-jumbo."

"Well, it has to be the seidr that's doing it," Bruce shrugged, "because physically, our doctors couldn't find anything wrong with him to explain why he's so deep under. They did find the evidence of past injuries, but all that stuff is mostly healed and he shouldn't still be unconscious for any physical reason."

"What kind of injuries?" Clint asked, and they could all hear the reluctance in his voice.

Bruce sighed. "They said it was consistent with systematic torture," he answered, rubbing his forehead tiredly. "I mean, the SHIELD doctors said that. Both our MRI and the other exams showed it. There was kind of a lot… everything from internal damage consistent with severe beatings to mostly-healed burn scars, applied in nice careful patterns. And tomorrow they're going to let us see how their scanning technology works, and we should be able to pick up the traces of his injuries there, too."

"So what kind of things are they doing for treatment?" asked Steve. "Or is that kind of thing outside our grasp?"

"Some of it is." Bruce leaned forward and reached for another serving of roast vegetables. "The big
thing that they can't seem to do anything for is the pain he's in—and he is; as far into the coma as he is there shouldn't be any way he's reacting or moving at all, but you can see it on his face. So our doctors offered to try various painkillers, you know, morphine or what have you, but the Aesir all decided it wasn't worth the risk. I mean, we're different species from each other, and supposedly Loki is a different species even from both of us. There's no way to tell how his system would react to our drugs."

"That sucks," said Tony, his expression sober for once. One hand was tapping absently at the arc reactor embedded in his chest.

"Yeah."

The human doctors weren't the only visitors to the settlement interested in Loki. It turned out that all the refugee villages on the different realms were in communication with each other somehow, and the means by which they'd traveled here continued to allow visitors to come and go.

This, not surprisingly, drove SHIELD nuts. No amount of questioning would reveal the tech they used; Ingirun and the others would just smile and say, "We use seidr," which of course no one could even detect no matter what kind of high tech scanners SHIELD or Tony came up with.

"Of course not," laughed the gay guy, Kisping. "Our physical bodies exist in three dimensions, and move in the fourth, which we call 'time'. Both seidr and the channels that regulate its flow exist in different dimensions entirely. You cannot measure seidr with your machines until you figure out a way to see in those other dimensions."

Drove Tony right up the wall.

So yeah, visitors. From other planets. The borders were not closed no matter what SHIELD might want, and there was literally no way on earth to figure out when the people were coming or where they were coming from. Nine times out of ten, Tony was willing to bet, the only time they even knew there were travelers stopping by the settlement at all was when there were new faces down at the hot springs in the evening.

Did Tony mention, this was driving him up the wall? In the good way, because, challenge, but still. Natashalie was laughing at him, he was sure of it. She said his hair was going to fall out if he kept tugging on it while he tried to think of how to approach the problem.

If there was anything that helped calm SHIELD back down, it was that the majority of the visitors were just there to carry news and gossip back and forth between the different refugee groups; brought toys for the kids, the occasional exotic snack, that kind of thing. And they never let the village boundaries, so it wasn't exactly an invasion. But even so, close to a third of them were there for Loki only. Healers with different specialties, researchers trying to figure out treatment options, archivists who had found something in old records that they thought might be promising; they ran the gamut.

Listening in down at the hot springs, because why not and they let him get away with it, Tony discovered that quite a few of the people stopping in had locals back on their various planets wondering and commenting about how the All-Father could really have been either this cruel, or this clueless. There was talk of sending emissaries to look Loki over and see if any of the body of knowledge from their worlds could be of use. And then that always devolved into political discussions of whether or not to allow them to see Loki in a vulnerable state, or what they might demand in return for their help, and so on and so forth.
Some of the discussion suggested that there were people willing to take advantage of the fact that
Asgard currently had no sorcerer types on staff, and were thinking of maybe making moves to take
Asgard down a peg.

It was all very fascinating, and Tony dutifully (mostly) reported what he was hearing to SHIELD…
okay, actually, he told Bruce about it when they got together to talk science, and trusted Bruce to
pass on the info to whomever if he thought it was important enough, and then got on with his life. As
long as nobody tried to invade Earth, and stayed in their own damn sandbox, they could play
whatever games they wanted.

Then one day an honest-to-god elf came by.

Tony had gotten used to the idea that most of the aliens out there were pretty much human-shaped
and human proportioned. Like, the Aesir were big, but not bigger than an especially hefty, strapping
human. Even the Chitauri had had roughly the same proportions with not too much variation from
the human template.

Elves, though… elves were weird.

This one was seven feet tall if she was an inch, with two-tone skin that seemed to glimmer in dim
light, shifting through pink and blue and purple highlights like some kind of glow-in-the-dark fish.
She even had rows of dots on her arms that flickered in different patterns. Underneath the glimmers,
she was a dark ruddy brown on the backs of her arms, her cheekbones and forehead, and what they
could see of her back through her clothing, but completely ghost white on her throat, the insides of
her arms, and the rest of her face. Her hair was absolutely gossamer, like literal spider-silk, floating
in the air where it wasn't pulled back into dozens of tiny braids, each one weighted down with bells
and crystals and who knew what else was in there. Her head had more decorations than a Christmas
tree, was all Tony knew.

Her eyes had slit pupils and reflected the light.

Also, she was inhumanly thin. Like, not "starving supermodel" thin, more like "possibly related to
stick insects" thin. Or "Pixar animation" thin. She looked, for all her height, like Tony could pick her
up with one hand and throw her, and she'd float a ways before landing.

She had drifted down the central "street" of Skýli to the healing wing, and Tony hadn't been able to
resist following her and her escort in. Lady Eir spotted him, of course, but other than a mildly
irritated frown she didn't react. Natasha joined them only a second later.

The elf bent from the waist, nearly folding herself double over Loki's inert form, the loose part of her
hair drifting in a cloud around her while the braided bits chimed and sparkled. She placed a hand on
his forehead, then on his heart; then she seemed to sniff at him, a long, slow inhale at Loki's throat
and behind his ears, her eyes fluttering closed. Finally she stood, turned to Lady Eir, and bent down
—way down—until their foreheads touched.

And that was it. That was the entire exam and diagnosis. Consultation, whatever. The two of them
closed their eyes for a second, eyelashes fluttering as they processed the whatever, then opened their
eyes and stood apart again. Lady Eir placed both hands over her heart and curved her body around
them in a weird sort of bow, which the elf mimicked, and then she and her escort turned and walked
out.

"Wait, that's it?"

"To mortal eyes, yes," said Eir. "Also, you were not invited to attend this meeting, so now that it is
over you can get out."

So Tony stepped out. The elf and her escort, who looked like a tubby munchkin in comparison even though she was a regular Aesir like the rest of them, stepped into the gathering hall.

Tony shrugged at Natasha. "Want to go see if she speaks English?" he asked.

"You're not allowed to hit on her," said Natasha. Tony put on his best "emotionally wounded" expression. "For all you know, that wasn't even a female."

"...yeah, point."

But when they got to the gathering hall, she and her escort were no longer there.

"What—wait. What just happened?"

"Asgerd took Miss Elf Lady back home," piped up a little kid whose gapped teeth whistled with every "s" she spoke.

"Just like that?" asked Natasha.

"Yess!" said the girl, and then giggled at the whistle.

"Okay, but seriously, how," Tony wanted to know, it was killing him.

"Sshe used her sseidr, ssilly!" said the girl, and then split apart into peals of laughter. Yeah, yeah, cute kid. Totally whistling on purpose. Or else making fun of them; Tony wasn't sure.

Natasha patted the kid on the head, and they stepped back outside. "I don't think you're going to find any tech," she said after a few paces.

Tony sighed. "Yeah, I'm gettin' that."

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to warn people that this story is going to update much more slowly than Grievance will, because it's in the process of being mentally overhauled and then possibly rewritten. I have a few chapters already written that need to be redone, and then of course continuing on, the story will head in a different direction.

Basically, this story isn't about the Avengers, and trying to include them makes the story feel flat to me, and difficult to write, not because it is challenging but because it is becoming boring. So I need to take a step back, reevaluate, think things through, and then come at this story from another angle.

I won't be taking down any chapters, because I want people to be able to see how the writing process can evolve over time, but you can start looking for things to move in a different direction after about Chapter 8 or so. Thanks for sticking with the story this long, and I hope you'll continue to follow it.
Perspectives

Chapter Summary

Natasha, Tony, and Clint have different perspectives on life in the little village.

Chapter Notes

It's been over a month since this updated, I know. That's because the story seems to have backed itself into a corner and I have no idea how to get back out while still keeping.... any of the words I've written up to this point. I have a few more chapters written, but I don't like most of them right now. I'm sorry. Hopefully what is here is still satisfying for you all.

The days stretched into weeks, living in Skýli surrounded by Aesir, and before Natasha knew it, two months had gone by. Iceland was still beautiful; the days had gotten much shorter, much faster than anyone was used to who hadn't lived in Siberia, but the trade-off in seeing the aurora borealis almost every night was worth it. The hiking trail had closed for the season, too, so there were no other humans passing through for SHIELD to worry about. It was almost like taking a vacation from field work. Natasha was somewhat disappointed not to be working in any other capacity, but at the same time… aliens, wow. And magic. "Nothing we were ever trained for," as she'd told Clint, back when Loki was still the villain.

He wasn't, anymore. The scan results had come back pretty conclusively that Loki, physically speaking, was not well. The experts claimed they could see evidence of both recent and old injuries, which Lady Eir and her assistant, Runa, explained as signs from the battle on Earth, and wounds he could only have sustained in what they called "the Void" — the place Loki had fallen into when he'd tried to commit suicide.

There had, of course, been that incident early on, back when they were getting that MRI and who knew what else from Loki, and the entire village had gone a little chilly for about two weeks afterward. But then one day Lady Eir had (irritably, it must be said) invited a few people to check out their scanning technology, and with it she not only did a compare-and-contrast on the injuries in Loki’s body, she also proved pretty conclusively that Loki had had his mind tampered with at some point.

Mind control, magic, and aliens.

Natasha wouldn't have believed it, except that Lady Eir had made a point of scanning healthy humans, non-magical Aesir, magical Aesir, Clint, and finally Loki, and the results had been clear enough that even the least tech-minded person in the room could figure them out. Clint and Loki both had matching traces of energy that the Aesir healers insisted meant interference with a person's thoughts and normal behaviors.

Stark had refused to be scanned, claiming that with the arc reactor in his chest he couldn't serve as a baseline for anybody. Steve had shown hints of magic tampering as well, but everyone figured that
had to do with the serum that had made him into Captain America.

In secret, Natasha had gone back to the infirmary after sunset that day, and asked to be scanned privately. She'd been thwarted, though; first they told her she would have to wait her turn, and while she was metaphorically twiddling her thumbs, Bruce had been the one to come out of the chamber.

He had stopped short when he'd spotted her. "Curious, too, huh?" he asked with a wry smile.

Natasha couldn't help but return it. "Guess so."

"Tell me yours if I tell you mine?"

She'd studied his face for a second, but saw only an honest need to share… something. "We'll see."

As it turned out, she and Bruce had both shown traces of magical ability. She'd made Bruce spill his secret first.

"The serum I took, messed up as it was, was close enough to Steve's that it had traces of magic in it somehow, too. Plus they saw potential for an aptitude in shape shifting." He shrugged, smiled a little bitterly. "No surprises, there, I guess."

"You were hoping they could find you a cure," Natasha guessed.

"Yeah. No surprises there, either, right? Except they think I should, uh, let the Other Guy come out and… explore his surroundings. Sometime when there isn't a fight or a reason to run away."

Natasha had to suppress the sudden rush of fear, remembering the Helicarrier and how the Hulk had reacted to her. "You think you'll do it?" she asked, her voice perfectly calm.

Bruce was quiet for a while as they walked back to their quarters. "I dunno. I mean, middle of Iceland, no one around for miles; if there was ever a safe place on Earth to let him out… but I also get the impression that they'd try to talk to him—"

"—or Ottar would want to get in a wrestling match with him."

"Heh, yeah, or that. Either way, risks I don't want to take." They walked in silence back to their building and up the stairs to their floor before Bruce spoke up again. "So, what about yours?"

"Oh. Same thing," she lied. "The, uh, the program that I was part of, my training regimen, included some experimental medical stuff. Nothing like you or Steve, though." That part was true enough, at least.

She just left out the part where she'd been seeing streaks and sparks of seidr energy, intermittently, ever since that day at the school.

So now, in addition to embedding herself in the local population, and reporting to Fury, and keeping her skills sharp, and hiding the fact that she was a honed killer from the Aesir, Natasha was also trying to learn the basics of magic.

She passed it off as observation and interviews of the children about the culture of Asgard. They would finish their lessons, and then she would convince them to come and tell her what they'd learned, and show off for her what they could do. The adults who supervised them were not stupid, and did not want to endanger their offspring just in the name of friendship with the humans, but they seemed willing enough to indulge the little ones while they made bubbles of light, or told Natasha
how they could feel the energy around them, and so forth.

Natasha wasn't sure if she was making progress or not. The healers who had examined her knew what she was up to, of course, but they'd also told her that grasping the art fully took decades, and mortals simply didn't live long enough to do much with their ability. They were more likely than not simply to get themselves killed, trying to use powers that overwhelmed their systems.

She didn't feel the need to mention the existence of at least one known human magic-user that SHIELD had been known to consult with from time to time. Maybe she could look him up after they were finished here.

There was one thing that seemed different, maybe. Around the perimeter of Skýli, the people had placed these smooth, rounded standing stones, polished to have no sharp edges, and only about two feet high by less than one foot diameter. Some of them had smaller stones arranged around their bases, generally the size of her fist, and maybe a handful of those had some kind of insignia carved on them. They were nothing special to look at, really, just some kind of boundary marker… except Natasha could feel them, the way she could see some of the energy that the kids used in their lessons.

She hadn't been able to detect seidr by feel before, so maybe she was making progress, or maybe whatever those stones were was especially powerful. She'd keep an eye on it, and included the boundary markers in her weekly report to Fury, but other than that there was little that she could do.

Skýli was actually a pretty neat place, as far as Tony was concerned. Clean, and a little too prissy and tidy on the surface, but underneath the people understood how to party. Naked in the hot tub, every night? Women outnumbering the men something like twenty-to-one? And over half of the men were pretty and fluttery and looked at him the way he was used to seeing from women.

Okay, granted, there were a few too many kids around for the kind of partying that Tony was used to, but it was still enough hedonism to keep him happy. The horns of mead they shared around didn't hurt, either, but there was something else.

The place felt peaceful, in a way Tony couldn't have described even if he'd wanted to talk about it. Relaxing. This was a place where absolutely no one knew the first damn thing about him. He wasn't a celebrity billionaire here, and even better, he wasn't a famous former warmonger. He wasn't even Iron Man, unless he wanted to be.

Here were just over four hundred people who Tony could definitively say had never had their lives affected by Tony's shit, or Howard's legacy, or any of it. God, it was refreshing.

Which was not to say the town was defenseless, hell no. Ninety percent of these people were wizards, or whatever they called themselves. Seidkonur, yes, he remembered, shut up. He was learning, mainly from Bruce, that there were different specialties that they had, so they couldn't all blow stuff up or whatever, but Tony could still see how they would all be priceless in a crisis situation. People who could see into the future, kinda; people who could eavesdrop on enemy communications regardless of almost any countermeasures the enemy took; people who could communicate instantly, without tech to jam, and with the right tweaks, couldn't be eavesdropped on in their turn.

People who could just drop in, defying all the laws of physics, to show up when you needed them.

And of course the healers, who all insisted they didn't fight even if some of them were the equivalent
of combat medics. Tony wasn't buying it. Doctors didn't learn how to heal people without also learning how to put them into a world of pain and suffering. Or drug them into a vegetative state and let someone else kill them. Doctors and nurses both. There was a reason Tony avoided hospitals.

And the non-magic people were just as badass. The Vikings had worshiped these guys as gods, and they were a warrior culture, and Tony could see where they'd gotten it from. Ottar and Steve got into friendly wrestling matches nearly every day, which the other men sometimes joined in on and which the fairy types would gather around and coo over good-naturedly, until they were just as good-naturedly told to fuck off someplace else and quit distracting the manly men. Oddly enough, no one on either side really seemed to be upset by the exchanges; Tony couldn't quite tell where the … trans, fairy, gender-fluid… whatever they called themselves, fit in; or, it would be more accurate to say, the Aesir culture did have a place for them, it was just that that place didn't quite equate to anything in Tony's experience.

It probably helped that the manly men were all married to magic-using women and didn't see a need to be prejudiced about it. Tony had kind of gotten the impression that the rest of Asgard wasn't as cool about that kind of thing.

But whatever, he wasn't an anthropologist. Bruce could ask them that stuff, if SHIELD decided they just had to know.

Clint, meanwhile, seemed happy as a clam with his throwing knives and his bow and the target practice the guys would engage in. Actually, he was probably happier over the "friendly wagers" he continued to win, no matter how drunk they got him that one time, and that had been a truly apocalyptic hangover the next day for both of them. A human who could do something better than an Aesir was, admittedly, impressive. And hilarious, because the Aesir guys just couldn't leave him alone over it, always demanding a rematch and always losing.

At least they didn't complain he was cheating, when surrounded by women who could supposedly spot that kind of thing. Thor, in the brief time they'd had with him before he hauled his brother back home, had damn near pouted when Clint had beaten him that one time. In retrospect, maybe that should have been a tipoff for them that Thor might not be the shiny ideal he presented himself as.

But anyway, yeah. No. As peaceful as this place was, Tony didn't doubt that they could turn on a dime and convert themselves into a military base with ease. It'd been two months, and the Aesir seemed to like them well enough, but there were still one or two places that had been declared off-limits to the humans. They'd talk about it—this is the high-level magic testing lab, dangerous for the puny mortals; that is a meditation area, do not disturb—but they wouldn't let the humans anywhere near.

Tony wondered if Natasha had managed to sneak in and look around those places. They were the only things left to explore.

He also had to wonder if Skýli had defensive capabilities tucked away that they hadn't shared with the class. It was what he would do, if he were designing his own personalized refugee camp from scratch and could include all the amenities.

And this place did have all the amenities. There was the school, which Natasha had sort of adopted as her observation post, and which came with its own library. There was the hospital, which might only have a population of one right now but was equipped to handle more; Tony could tell that Bruce practically wanted to move in and live there, still searching for that cure. Kinda made him grimace in sympathy.

But yeah, what else did the town have? There were the hot springs and the gathering hall for
socializing and keeping in touch with the latest news; in the past few days everyone had noticed that the healers had begun walking with a little more bounce to their step, and the gossip was beginning to fly. Every once in awhile there would be an announcement of some communication from one of the other enclaves, and Tony had no idea how they did that, either. Still. Somehow, they were conveying messages across galaxies, which meant faster-than-light signal systems, which meant they were breaking the laws of physics again, which made Tony's brain hurt.

Unless it was just all down to the travel thing they had going on, which was entirely possible, but sometimes they got news without any new faces to go with it. For all Tony knew, there was a comms post in one of those off-limits areas. Or, and Tony really hated to put this on the list, they were talking to each other in their sleep. Yes. In their actual… Bruce said there was a specialty some of them had learned called "dream walking", which was pretty much exactly what it sounded like.

Astral projection now, along with all the other New Age crap; it was killing Tony to have to just nod and accept that this was a thing.

But anyway, yeah, there was very little about this place that said "refugee camp", that was for sure. The kids had toys (the kids had awesome toys), the adults played board games in the gathering hall. Down at the hot springs, there was at least one person every night with a musical instrument, and they weren't unskilled—in fact they sort of looked pityingly at the Avengers when it was revealed that only Tony could play the piano, and not even all that well. It turned out Natashalie had been a ballet dancer as part of her training, but that wasn't something she wanted to do naked at the hot springs, no matter how often Clint suggested it. (Eventually she'd half-drowned him, and he'd stopped.)

They even had their own village government; Ingirun was head of a council of aldermen, or something like it, made up of the heads of various skills or departments according to some criteria Tony hadn't ironed out yet. Herkja was head of energy, which included seidr but also machinery. They had a work roster, and rotated some of the more menial tasks so that no one got stuck, say, cooking in the gathering hall for everybody, night after night. And yet there was still a head of the cooks on the council, and a head of labor. Herkja's husband Ottar was some kind of general handyman, builder of things, repairer of other things; Tony was pretty sure he'd seen the guy doing something like plumbing down by the hot springs once, during the daytime when it was mostly empty. But Ottar wasn't the head of anything.

Meh. Whatever their system was, it seemed to work for them, and it wasn't like SHIELD was relying on Tony Stark to report on much of anything. They'd probably just ignore him if he did, which, their loss.

One night the women were all excited when it was announced that they'd arranged for a supply of wool to be imported from local farmers in Iceland, and the next day they'd set up an entire dyeing and spinning shop. A couple honest-to-god looms had appeared out of nowhere in the larger end of the gathering hall—okay, like, eight, seriously, where did they all come from, did this place have a storage facility they hadn't spotted yet or were people's apartments loaded up with cool stuff—and suddenly the place had a cottage industry going, making blankets and tapestries by hand and selling them back to the people in Iceland. Tony wasn't sure how they'd arranged that, since he'd thought nobody ever really left the village, but okay.

Added to the work roster: weaving, spinning, dyeing. Not added to the work roster: embroidery, because they all did it in their spare time. Added to the council: the head of the weavers and the head of finance, because damned if they weren't making a little bit of real Earth money.

Tony was tempted to fund something for them just to see what would happen, but they seemed
happy enough just buying their own chickens to add to the hydroponic farm. Something about eggs, plus chicken shit for fertilizer. Tony didn't want to know.

But anyway, yeah. Peaceful little village. Serene in ways that were good for Tony, in ways that he hadn't expected. It was tempting, sometimes, to skip the vacation in Malibu or sell the place in Dubai, and just see if he could set up something here.

And then, of course, the day came when the healers announced that Loki was going to wake up.

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Runa put the word out at the hot springs one night: Loki was improving steadily, and might wake within a matter of days. The cheers echoed through the village and down the hillside to the lake, Clint was sure.

God damn it.

After a respectable period—no, he wasn't throwing a tantrum and stomping off, fuck you very much, stop looking at him like that, Tasha—Clint pulled himself out of the water and towed off. Got dressed. Walked up the way to the hospital building, whatever they called it.

He liked these people. He had wanted to stay objective, but getting embedded always meant you got attached. Maybe Tasha could forget to care, but he doubted it; it was just that she was professional enough to do the job despite how she might feel about the job. But Clint liked these people, and they all plainly adored and fucking hero-worshipped the guy who'd turned Clint's brain inside out. The guy who'd slaughtered people at Project Pegasus, ripped out a guy's eyeball, and never forget this, turned Clint against his own professional colleagues. Fucked with Agent Barton's credibility to the point that it was a miracle Fury hadn't just had him quietly disposed of in some backwater "mission-gone-wrong" scenario.

Killed Coulson.

Yeah. They all adored that guy.

This was the guy who also, according to every single one of the four hundred space Vikings living here, just plain wasn't like that, it was entirely out of character for His Highness, they were all convinced that our beloved prince would never, and so on and so on until Clint wasn't sure what to think anymore.

This was the guy who'd stabbed Coulson in the back with a smile on his face.

This was the guy whose scans showed signs of past mind control—little blue flecks hovering around the head region, signs that it was gone but had been there recently—that were an identical match to the signs on Clint's own scans when he'd volunteered to be their vanilla human Exhibit A for how they did things with their tech.

It'd been easy to ignore the guy while he was basically impersonating a piece of furniture. Now he'd be awake, and Clint would have to deal with him, or at the very least see him, up and moving around, and he really was not sure he'd be able to deal.

"Good evening, Hawkeye," said the healer. Christ. Clint had wandered all the way back to Loki's room without even realizing it. Here was Lady Eir sitting at the bastard's bedside with an embroidery hoop in her hands, looking at Clint like…
...like she'd expected him to come.

"Fare you well, this evening?" she asked, and Clint blew out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, scrubbing a hand through his hair.

"Good question, ma'am," he said finally. He couldn't not look at the asshole on the bed.

"Yet you are not entirely sure how to answer."

"No. I guess not." He shook his head after a second. "Sorry to bother you," he muttered, and turned to go.

"No. Stay," she invited. Well. Ordered, really. Clint turned around, eyebrow raised. "You have questions. Or concerns. It is better to speak them and be done, than to waste time dithering." She raised an eyebrow of her own and added, "I would have thought this to be especially true for people with such short lifespans as yours."

"You've got a great bedside manner, y'know, such a way with people," said Clint, and she snorted in amusement.

"I have little patience for foolishness, it is true. I do not say your concerns are foolish, only that your reluctance to gain answers is."

Clint sighed, and propped his shoulder against the window sill. Thing was deep enough to climb into, and comfortably high up off the ground, too, but he was trying not to give in to the temptation to hide like a complete coward. "What was... what was Loki actually like?" he asked finally. "I get that everyone here thinks the sun shines out his ass, but that's not the guy we met. And no one seems to want to give concrete answers about him, like it'd be invading his privacy or something. Or else they don't really know him that well and are just being good little royal subjects."

"Hm." Eir nodded. "I have tended to His Highness, and the rest of the royal family, for a very long time," she said. "I helped to change his diapers, to clean up after him and His Highness Thor when they were infants and still spitting up milk. I've set broken bones and helped soothe skinned knees. Scolded the both of them for engaging in the sort of reckless stupidity that threatens to deprive the kingdom of one of its heirs. Allowed him to confide in me when he felt he could not speak to any other adult safely. Does it satisfy you that I know His Highness well enough to tell you about him?"

"Yeah, I guess," said Clint.

"Good." Eir leaned back and set her embroidery in her lap, propping her elbows on the arms of the chair and lacing her fingers together. "First, in order to understand Loki, you must understand Thor. I am told that you fought at his side, briefly."

"I didn't as much as the others, but yeah."

"So you know he is brash, straightforward, and fearless?"

"I guess so. To be honest, I know the guys here in Skyli better than I do him."

"Very well; then consider Thor as having the strength of Ottar, the honesty of Forseti, and the overall brash fearlessness and sunny disposition of any of the children in our village."

"Heh. Kids?"

"Oh, very much so," said Eir. "Thor is crown prince, set to inherit unless some tragedy befalls him."
He is the epitome of the Aesir ideal—fearless in battle, charismatic, always ready either to laugh or to avenge his slighted honor. He was also, however, the doted-upon son of the All-Father, and was treated as though he could do no wrong. This did not allow or require much in the way of maturity from him, do you understand?"

"I guess so, sure."

"Mm. Thor grew to believe himself entitled to everything that was given him. He was arrogant, and his much-vaunted honor so fragile that he would engage in slaughter at the merest excuse. Greedy, or at least he was before his banishment."

"I was around for that."

"Were you? Then you know he was only on your world for a handful of days, and was expected to learn there the centuries' worth of lessons that had somehow passed him by the first time, when he ought properly to have learned them. After his banishment, he was… he believed himself much changed, I am sure, but it was Loki's supposed death that truly sobered him. Made him realize that his actions carried weight and had consequences. He is a better person for it, but still young, and foolish at times."

"Okay, what's this got to do with Loki? I mean, no offense, I didn't come here to learn about his big brother."

"No, I know you didn't, boy, but hush. The two of them were like twins as children and later in life. Inseparable, and in many ways they were each other's opposite. The other's complement, more like. Where Thor was brash, Loki was quiet. When Thor grew angry, he would challenge and bluster and fight, while Loki would simply give the one who had offended him cause to regret the insult. Where Thor claimed loyalty to his friends, but would ignore their peril in the midst of a good fight, Loki would watch and protect them all, even if they failed to notice or to thank him for it. Where Thor rushed in heedless of danger, Loki paused to think, and to weigh his options.

"Do you see?" Eir asked. "They were not the good son and the evil son; they were the loud and the quiet, perhaps, or the sun and the moon. Thor had many lovers, and discarded them easily; Loki had few, and could not seem to help giving his heart to each one. Thor excelled on the battlefield, Loki in the council halls. One fought with blades before he was given a hammer, the other fought with magic before he was made to learn blades. And so on.

"The few things they had in common were a quick temper, though Loki had a better grip on his, and later in life, in some circumstances, the sense of arrogant entitlement that comes with being raised as royalty. With Thor, that sense revealed itself as an expectation that he would be obeyed in all things, and given whatever he desired simply because he desired it. With Loki, it usually only manifested as resentment of all that his brother received without earning."

Eir shifted in her seat, glancing up and out the window briefly. "You see, Thor's bold outgoing nature attracted attention, and from their parents more of it, in unequal fashion. Reward when he did not necessarily earn it. Lenience in punishment, when he did not necessarily deserve it." She tsked irritably. "Praise for stupidity that could have gotten him killed. By contrast, his brother was not given much acclaim, sometimes even passed over entirely. In punishment, his quiet nature was treated as a sort of sullen defiance, and he was disciplined more severely as a result—again, whether or not he deserved it. Odin tended not to look too deeply into what his children had truly earned, more concerned with the ruling of the kingdom than with the raising of his sons."

"Sounds like you have opinions on that," said Clint.
Eir glared at him, but Clint was getting the idea by now that impatient glares were her default expression. "I've had opinions on that for decades, boy, but valued my position and my hide too much to voice them. Perhaps I ought to have risked my career and spoken out sooner; perhaps Odin would have listened, who knows? But I doubt it. He's a proud, stubborn man and always has been.

"Apart from all that, though, what I remember most about Loki was that he was kind. Thoughtful. Sensitive, especially to the moods of others around him. Disciplined; you can't be a seidmadr without discipline. He understood how to work for what he wanted, in ways that I think Thor still does not fully grasp. Yes, the elder brother is a warrior and had to earn his skill at arms, but that was a skill that came easily to him. Even those with a great gift for seidr, like Loki, still must struggle to tame it, to know themselves in order to know their power. Self-possessed. Patient, which again comes with the discipline." Lady Eir eyed Clint carefully. "Not one for mayhem and slaughter. Mayhem, yes, sometimes, but not if he would be caught at it. Slaughter, no. He never took joy in battle like those of Aesir blood can, myself included."

Eir leaned forward in her seat, never letting Clint look away from her. "Does that satisfy your curiosity, archer of the hawk's eye?"

Clint thought about it.

"Some, but not completely," he said finally. "Runa said he could wake up soon."

"It is likely, yes. He has recovered better than expected, these past months, though he is not healed fully by any means."

"Okay, so, what will he be like when he does? How messed up will he be—in the head, I mean. Is he likely to still be the lunatic we met, or d'you think he'll go back to being that sweet kid you remember?"

"You fear that he will be a threat to you and those you care for," Eir guessed.

"Well, yeah." He laughed tiredly. "Can you blame me?"

"I cannot say that I do, no." She glanced over at Loki’s bed; reached out and adjusted something along the side. "The soul forge suggests that he will not be as badly damaged as we had feared," she said finally. "There had been concern, early on, that we would need to reteach him how to function, like an infant. That he would need to relearn how to feed and dress himself, and so forth. The scans from the soul forge strongly suggest otherwise, but his memory may be spotty. His personality?" She took a slow, deep breath, and let it out in a long sigh. "It is hard to say. Depending on what he remembers or forgets, he may be a different person after this.

"Of course, even if he remembers all, after enduring such torment at the hands of his own father, he will still be a different person than he was."

"Yeah. I can speak to that," said Clint. God knew he wasn't the same person he'd been before New York. And if Loki had been tortured, the way even the SHIELD scientists swore they could see in his medical workup, then yeah.

"Does this satisfy you, then, archer?" asked Eir.

"There's still a lot we don't know, but we won't be able to find out until he's up and moving," said Clint. "So yeah, I'm satisfied, I guess. As much as I can be, anyway."

"I am happy to hear it," said Eir. "Now, off with you. This is a healing room, not a gathering hall."
Awakening

Chapter Summary

Loki wakes; the Avengers confer; the villagers celebrate.

Chapter Notes

Here, have a longer chapter than usual, and enjoy some hurt-comforty goodness.

"So what have they been saying?" Fury asked, via video call.

"That he's still unconscious and still in pain, but he's not comatose anymore," Bruce replied. "It could be tomorrow, it could be a week from now, but odds are good he's going to wake up."

"They don't know yet if he'll be coherent though," Clint was quick to point out. "Like, at one point they thought he'd be like an Alzheimer's patient, or someone who had a stroke. Relearning everything from motor skills on up. Now they're saying he'll probably be mostly okay but his memory might be spotty, and they're still not sure what his personality will be like."

Fury nodded. "Is that rumor, Agent Barton?"

"Interview with the chief healer, sir. About two hours ago."

The director steepled his fingers in front of his face for a moment of thought, then shook his head. "Everybody except the World Security Council is convinced he's a victim in this," he said finally.

"Right, because they still need a scapegoat for that whole nuking Manhattan thing," said Stark.

Fury only sighed, rather than rising to the obvious bait. "Luckily they haven't decided to move against the entire village yet."

"They were going to?" asked Natasha, eyebrows raised.

"I managed to persuade them that destroying hundreds of Asgard's citizens, including civilians and children, might draw a response that Earth was not prepared to meet, given how even those civilians seem to feel about our puny human firearms." Fury shook his head tiredly. "So everyone else is safe, but your boy Loki will want to stay inside the village where he can't be set up and framed for a nice public incursion that we'd be tasked to 'save' the people of Iceland from."

There were various reactions to that, but only Natasha and Fury saw the way Tony Stark narrowed his eyes... and Fury made sure to catch his gaze, then nodded at him quietly in a way that thoroughly intrigued Natasha.

Maybe the Council, or at least the current membership on it, wouldn't be a threat for too much longer.
Everything…

Everything *hurt*.

He'd been hurting for a long time. He wasn't sure how he knew that.

He hurt less than he had *before*, but he wasn't sure how he knew that, either.

He felt around him to see whether he was alone, or tried to; the seidr screamed in his veins and he had to catch his breath against the pain, a searing burn different from the ache he'd endured so far. He felt like the skin had been ripped off his flesh and he lay exposed to the air, nerves quivering.

The world stopped.

He wasn't sure how long it took for the pain to subside, back to that ache he had awakened with, but at least it did subside. That had to mean something.

Without reaching for his seidr, then, he *listened*, and could hear only the heavy breathing of someone asleep nearby. One person.

One *person*. Not the other creatures, the… *them*. There were no screams or sound of machinery, no stench of filthy alien bodies or even the sewage-and-blood smell of his own body.

Cautiously, slowly, Loki opened his eyes.

He was lying on his back, in a healing bed. He was *clean*; he was dressed in a patient's robe. His hands rested on his stomach, atop a gold coverlet. He was comfortable, apart from the ache in his joints, and neither too warm nor too cold.

He recognized these things, slowly, as his awareness grew… but the circumstances were impossible. What he was experiencing could not be.

He turned his head, again cautiously, hoping not to wake whomever was in the room with him.

This room… he didn't recognize it. The walls were bare, a pale gold, but not polished marble. No balconies, but a high window, out of which he could see only darkness. Only one healing bed, only one person at his bedside.

Not Thor.

*Thor.*

Memory came flooding back, and Loki nearly wept at the anguish, the love/hate/despair he'd felt upon last seeing Thor. It had been so long, and he missed him so desperately. They had fought, because Loki was a monster and monsters needed to be punished, or because Loki was a son desperate for his father's acceptance, or… but they had fought, and then Thor had tried so hard to save him…

Hadn't he? Or did he remember something else? Something… another fight, perhaps. Thor didn't save Loki, he defeated him. Which memory was real?
Where was his brother? His oafish, generous brother?

The person at his bedside at least looked somewhat familiar; Lady Runa, Eir's assistant. But why would she be here, with him? Why not Frigga? Why not Thor?

Why was this room so unfamiliar?

Loki listened, but could hear no one else in the vicinity, not in the corridor outside nor beyond the window. But then, he had no idea how high up he was. At least it was above ground and not a dungeon.

He had no idea how long it had last been since he'd seen the sky.

With that realization, along with the confusion, Loki could not bear to stay in bed a moment longer. Quietly, his joints feeling as though they'd been filled with ground glass, he dragged the coverlet off his body and hoisted himself up to sit. Lady Runa slept on, and he wondered how long she had been awake in order to drift off at a patient's bedside.

Which of course begged the question, how badly injured had he been? The way his seidr burned in his channels, he must have overextended himself badly. It could be weeks before he had full use of it again, based on how he felt now. What battle had he fought? Who had been endangered, besides him?

Was that why Thor wasn't here?

Leaning heavily on the bed frame, Loki stood… and then his legs buckled and he nearly collapsed all the way to the floor.

Slowly, then. Slow deep breaths, ignore the trembling in his arms, brace carefully…

He stood, finally, and with a last look over his shoulder to see that Lady Runa was still asleep, he stumbled toward the door. The floor was pleasantly cold against his bare feet, but it still made him shiver involuntarily.

There were no guards in the corridor, nor servants. Nor statuary or other hints to tell him where he was. To his right, the hall continued only a little way, with two or three doors on either side but no more than that before reaching an end. To his left, a larger entryway, a likely candidate for an exit. It was not far, which was good. Loki thought he might be able to walk that distance, if he were careful.

He had to lean heavily against the wall, working hard not to drag his feet and make too much noise. His knees kept threatening to give out, and he caught himself more than once on the verge of sliding to the floor.

It didn't matter. To see the sky, even if it were blackest night, he would crawl if he had to.

Loki made it to the doorway, gritting his teeth against the pain of moving, taking far longer than he would have thought. What had happened, that would bring him to such a state? It occurred to him then that perhaps he ought to have woken the healer and asked her, but it was too late for that now. She would only order him back to bed and refuse to speak to him, no doubt on the All-Father's orders…

…strange. Where had that thought come from?

Peering through the doorway, he found a larger entry chamber, and the door that would lead to the outside. More windows, showing weak light and a sky… streaked with green?
Was he even on Asgard?

He ducked back, leaning his head against the wall and closing his eyes, struggling not to pant for breath, as a woman stepped inside bearing a stack of folded fabric with a bundle of scrolls carefully balanced on top. She did not spot Loki, merely continued off through a side doorway that he had not noticed before. Leaning around the door frame, he could see glimpses of her moving back and forth in the room beyond, distributing her supplies.

It… almost looked like one of Asgard's classrooms, perhaps at the temple. But the temple did not have a healing wing attached.

The woman, whoever she was, finished her task and departed, not a moment too soon. The longer Loki stood there, the more the ache in his joints began to make itself known, and he was becoming dizzy and lightheaded, besides. If he wanted to make it to the doorway before he collapsed, he couldn't afford to wait around much longer.

Stepping carefully, Loki managed to stagger the seven steps across the entry chamber, weaving like a drunkard and nearly falling twice. The second time he was able to catch himself against the doorway opposite, and he bared his teeth in triumph.

He could feel fresh air on his face; his eyes fell shut in pleasure, but he forced them open again when he felt his entire body begin to droop in exhaustion.

Only a few more steps, and then he could collapse if he had to. Guards could drag him back to his bed, or to a cell—though he'd fight them as much as he could if they were truly to take him away from even the hope of seeing the sky again.

…again, why was he so convinced…? What was he missing?

It was because he was jotun; that must be. It seemed plausible, in any case. Cage the monsters before they can hurt you. Or maybe they thought he'd become one of them.

No matter. He could panic later. For now, he just needed to see.

On shaking legs, Loki stepped through the entrance and outside; the icy breeze struck his face and he once again had to close his eyes at the wave of almost desperate bliss that swept over him. The air smelled clean, with a hint of sulfur and what might have been rain or snow, and despite the darkness carried the sound of birds, twittering back and forth to one another.

One was quite close by, and Loki opened his eyes to see a pair of them only a few feet away in the light of a floating globe, one in bright feathers and the other a dull gray-and-brown, but with identical markings on their faces and across their wings. They hopped and pecked at something hidden in the bright moss, and chirped back and forth without a care for predators or danger.

There was cold on his cheeks, and Loki realized he had begun to shed tears without noticing. He lifted a shaking hand to scrub them away, and looked around him in wonder.

This was no village he had ever been in, although the buildings he could see under the floating lamps were a somewhat simplistic version of the Aesir architecture he'd grown up with. He recognized general quarters and a gathering hall by their shape, and guessed that one building might be a temple or school, or both, but the other buildings were a mystery to him, hidden in the darkness or simply too far for him to make out beyond the glow of their lamps. The layout, such as he could make of it, was not quite what he was accustomed to, and it was so small. Fewer than a thousand people must live here, he thought.
The sky was not the sky of Asgard, with its riot of color, star clusters and nebulae and galaxies visible even by day, which made it even stranger to see Aesir buildings here, on whatever realm this was. The sky here was brilliant with stars, and he could even make out the arm of a galaxy, dim beyond the lamps; stranger still were the glowing green ribbons that trailed and swirled in a slow, elegant dance across the sky, though as he watched they shifted to pink and even gold in a mesmerizing display. The earth at his feet was black, where it showed through the brightly colored moss and a light dusting of snow.

There were no soldiers, nor anyone else about that Loki could see, but after a moment of standing and taking in the view, he heard men's voices, approaching from one end of the double row of buildings. As quickly as he could, Loki staggered to the corner of the healing hall and ducked out of sight.

The men walked past him without looking, hauling dripping baskets on their backs and talking about a gap they'd found in one of the nets. Fishermen, then; which implied a body of water nearby, but Loki could not see it from here. One man hoped that someone named Ottar would be able to repair it soon; the other laughed and said something about taking it up with Ottar's wife, and implied that the reason the net was still torn was because she kept him too long abed in her company.

What was this place? How had he come to be here, away from Asgard yet still with Healer Runa and other Aesir? Where was Thor?

Thor.

Loki was a fool. He had been so eager to feel the fresh air, of all things, that he had forgotten to search the other healing rooms for his brother. He had to go back.

His legs wouldn't hold him up.

Loki collapsed against the wall of the healing hall, still in his hiding spot, his arms and legs shaking with the effort to haul himself back to an upright position. He was panting and lightheaded once he finally succeeded, his knees and shins damp with melting snow. The pain in his joints, now that he could no longer ignore it, throbbed through his body in an excruciating rhythm.

There was a cry nearby, a woman's voice, and Loki's heart sank. His absence had been discovered. There would be a search, and of course he was barely twenty steps away, so they would find him. His tracks would be easy to spot, even in the dim light of the globes. They would take him back to his room, or to a cell, and refuse to tell him what had happened to Thor. The All-Father would be angry…

…no. The All-Father had already been angry. Furious. With Loki.

How did he know that? Why couldn't he remember?

It was getting hard to breathe, and the cold which had seemed so pleasant before was beginning to sink into his bones. He shivered, and the motion ached in every joint. He needed to go back.

Perhaps if he went back now he would not be… what? Something terrible. Whatever it was he feared, perhaps it wouldn't happen.

His patient's robe dragged and snagged on the wall, he was leaning against it so heavily. With immense effort, he pushed himself away to stand more or less upright. *Never look weak. Never show weakness,* repeated in his head like an acolyte's chant.

Loki stepped around the corner, still with one hand on the wall because it had a tendency to fall
Two steps. Three. Everything was spinning… and on the fourth step, the wall spun away from him as his knees buckled.

"Easy, there! Easy, easy."

Strong arms caught Loki from behind, before he could fall, and he heard a man calling out cheerfully that he'd been found. Loki startled, lashing out with defensive magic—or, at least, he tried to, but the searing agony ripped through him once again and he cried out and arched back, rigid and unable to breathe with the pain.

Everything went red and dark for an immeasurable moment.

"…ness? Your Highness? Can you hear me?"

Loki opened his eyes, still gasping for breath, shivering now with the cold in his bones, and fought to focus on whoever was talking to him. A man who looked familiar, but Loki couldn't think where from; he was having a hard time thinking at all.

"Can you hear me, Your Highness?"

Loki nodded weakly, and the man smiled in relief. "Couldn't resist an adventure, hmm? Perhaps give yourself another hour before you tackle a bilgesnipe with your bare hands, yes?"

This was… not the reaction Loki had been expecting. He was still outside, seated against the wall of the healing hall, though someone, he noticed after a moment, had placed their cloak around his shoulders. The man was crouched next to him, one hand on Loki's shoulder keeping him upright, the other cushioning the back of his head. It was…

When was the last time he had been touched in kindness?

He could feel his eyes welling up again, and tried to blink them away, but a tear slipped down his cheek despite that.

"Your Highness?"

Loki's head rolled, left to right, as he tried to indicate the little village. "What is this place?" he tried to ask, but his voice was a breathy rasp and he could scarcely hear himself.

"This place?" When Loki nodded, the man replied, "We call it Skýli, Your Highness. You are safe here. We all are."

"Where…?"

"Midgard, Your Highness." He searched Loki's face as if expecting some sort of reaction, but Loki couldn't think why that would be important to him. Strange, yes. Confusing.

He wanted to ask why, but wasn't sure he had the energy to listen to a long story. He swallowed once, twice, trying to wet his throat. "Thor?" he asked instead.

"He remains in Asgard, Your Highness."
It was Loki’s turn to search the other’s face for clues. "He is well?"

"He was in perfect health when last we were in Asgard, Your Highness."

Loki processed that, frowning. "How long?"

"Let us save the storytelling for when you are back in your bed and resting, Your Highness," said a familiar voice, and Loki looked up to see Lady Eir pushing her way toward them through a gathering crowd.

She knelt beside him, just as the realization sank in.

A crowd. Staring at him, like he was some sort of beast… because he was. Any second now, they would begin screaming and throwing stones, or haul him up to face the Chitauri, or—

Loki huffed out a rasping cry and threw one arm up to cover his face, grasping at his hair and trying to curl up in a ball. Never appear weak, chanted in his head, but he couldn't bear it, he couldn't, he was no Aesir and they would kill him.

"Loki, look at me," said Eir, taking his wrist gently but firmly. She tried to pull his arm down and he twisted away from her. "None of that, please, Your Highness."

"Don't look at me," he tried to command her, but he was having difficulty catching his breath, quaking with the cold, and his voice was still so weak.

"Loki." Lady Eir took hold of his face in her hands and he squeezed his eyes shut. He could feel her seidr, soothing at the same time as it burned, and his face crumpled, another pair of tears escaping to drip down his cheeks. "Damn."

"Lady Eir?" asked the man.

"It's all right," she said. To Loki or to the other man, he wasn't sure. "He's only just awakened, and he's not entirely rational. I had a feeling this might happen."

He wasn't rational? Of course not, he was only Loki, nothing he said was ever to be taken seriously. He growled and tried to yank his face away from her grip, but she stopped him, so much stronger than him right now.

"Loki, look at me," she said, and this time the words were laced with seidr, and he couldn't fight it, couldn't find his own seidr without it burning, and what did they do to him—"Look at me, please, my prince."

He had no choice; he looked, and was trapped in her eyes. At least her gaze was kind, for all that it held him captive. Terrifying and safe, all at once. He gasped for breath and began to shake harder, his teeth chattering in his head.

"You're safe, my prince. Nothing and no one here will harm you. No one wishes you anything but good health and long life."

"Let me go," he begged. She stroked one hand along the side of his face, brushing his hair back, and when had it gotten so long? His teeth were chattering so hard now he could barely speak, and it wasn't all from the cold. "P-p-please let me g-go."

"Will you talk with me, my prince? Answer my questions?"
She could have ordered him to, but she hadn't. "Let me go, let me go..." He wheezed and gasped. A wisp of seidr brushed across his face and chest, and he could breathe a little easier. "Lemmego lemmego lemmego," he whispered, panting.

"A bargain, my prince," said the healer. Loki swallowed, trembling. "I shall release you, and you shall let me examine you as I must. You will answer my questions as honestly as you can."

He trembled, felt himself curling up his arms and legs to protect himself, even though he could not look away from Eir's gaze.

"Hush now, my prince. You have nothing to fear. I only wish to know how best to help you, do you understand? I swear, I will ask you nothing I have not asked you before."

He swallowed again, convulsively. "You swear it."

"I do, my prince. Will you answer my questions?"

Never show weakness was clanging inside his head, yet he nodded. Now she would betray him, now she would mock and control him...

She looked away, and the grip of her seidr eased and vanished.

It was too much, and he buried his face in his hands and wept.

His tears spent themselves quickly, his mind leaping too erratically from one thought to the next for him to hang onto any one emotional state for long. Now he was only tired.

And confused.

Which made him angry.

Which meant he would be punished for defiance, so he became hyperaware and paranoid.

Then he realized he was acting like a madman and fear, or despair, threatened to overwhelm him, so that he wished to weep again.

"My prince, can you focus on me, for just a moment?" Lady Eir asked him. Reluctantly, he looked up, eyes swollen. "Good, that's very good. I wish to walk you back to your bed, where you can rest and be safe. Will you allow us to help you?"

Help. He'd needed help and no one had come. But he didn't need help from anyone, he was a god...

Which made no sense. What was the matter with him?

"You've had an injury to your seidr, and to your mind. It's normal that you would have difficulty focusing."

He blinked up at her. "You can't read my thoughts."

Lady Eir smiled and patted his cheek fondly. "No, not generally, my prince, but sometimes you speak them aloud."

Which was humiliating; Loki could feel his cheeks burning, and clapped his hands over his mouth to
make sure he did not say anything more. His hands were shaking, though, and he was so tired.

"This is Ottar, my prince. He is Herkja's husband, whom you may remember from your studies?"

Herkja. No, no he didn't remem—or wait. Did he? Loki shivered again, terrified. "I'm a madman," he said, muffled behind his hands.

"You are most certainly not, my prince," said Lady Eir. "Only injured, and already you have recovered much. Now, let us get you back to your bed, and I shall ask you questions, and then you will rest, and recover some more."

Yes. Yes, that sounded… that should be wise. Loki could not think of a reason why he should not follow that plan. Perhaps Lady Eir's plans were better than his own.

"Perhaps they are, my prince, but I am sure once you have recovered fully you will be almost as wise as I."

"Did I say that aloud again?" he asked.

"I am afraid so. Come. Can you stand?"

It took the help of the man—Ottar—and another man, just as tall as Loki but with strangely short hair, but they got Loki to his feet and steered in the right direction. Loki helped as best he could, but he was tired from his exertions, and apparently as weak as a kitten. As a half-drowned kitten. The man next to him, the one whose name he didn't know, chuckled.

"I'm sure it isn't that bad."

"Did I say that aloud? Or can you read thoughts? Lady Eir claims she cannot, but I am not certain I believe her. She never failed to catch me in a lie as a child, when I tried to tell her my injuries were not serious, or were my own fault, or were…" He paused to catch his breath and lost his train of thought. "I f-forget. I cannot forget, I… this is terrifying."

"I can't read your thoughts, no," said the man. "And Lady Eir said you would remember after you rested for a while. I'm sure you'll be fine."

"Do you think so?"

"I do."

"All right then. If you think so. You seem… honest." Come to think of it, the man with the short hair looked familiar. Loki frowned, trying to remember where from, as he fell into Ottar with a moan as his joints protested, and the man hauled him upright once again. "Have we met?"

The man paused, and looked thoughtful. "We have," he said finally, "but it's all right if you don't remember."

"I'm sorry."

"No, it's fine."

That was almost the all the conversation that Loki had strength for; it seemed he could either speak or concentrate on walking, and even when he concentrated his legs buckled every few paces or so. The dizziness was getting worse, as well, given the way he lurched into his companions without meaning to.
"Lady Eir, everything is spinning," he said petulantly. Maybe she could make it stop. Or Thor. "Tell Thor to make it stop."

"I shall do so as soon as I speak to him, my prince," she said. Something about her tone…

"You're indulging me," he said, disgusted. "Ottar told me Thor is not here."

"That is true, my prince; nevertheless if things are still spinning when next I speak to Thor, I will be sure to mention it." Strangely, there was a bit of steel in her voice that time.

He closed his eyes, fatigued, but that made the spinning worse. "All right."

Without Loki noticing, they had arrived at his bedside. The next time his legs buckled, him biting back a cry, the men holding him up simply guided him down, then Ottar cupped the back of his neck and let him tilt back, pulling the cloak Loki had forgotten about from his shoulders.

There were voices, but he couldn't be bothered to listen to them. He had promised to answer Lady Eir's questions, he knew, but fatigue was creeping up on him faster than he could combat it.

"My prince?" she heard him say, but he was too far gone to answer.

Everything was still spinning, and Loki let himself spin away with it.

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"And you're sure he's not a threat?" asked Fury. For about the thousandth time.

"He didn't even recognize me," said Steve, "and I was holding him up and helping him walk back to his hospital bed."

"Cap and I were up jogging when people found him wandering around," said Clint. "I saw the whole thing. The people he did recognize, he wasn't aggressive toward." He'd decided to leave out the part where Loki was crying like a scared little boy, freely mentioning his memory loss and showing every emotion on his face. "Guy was out of it."

"Any chance of us making our own threat assessment?" Fury wanted to know, and Clint snorted, while Steve and the rest just looked at him with varying expressions of disgust.

"You maybe should have thought of that before the whole tissue sample thing, when we first got here," said Bruce.

"Plus we already established—exhaustively—that Loki was a victim same as anyone on Earth. Why are you suddenly back to wanting to treat him as the enemy?" Steve wanted to know.

"Because scapegoats are a great way to cover your own ass," said Tony. "Like I said a couple days ago: they need someone to blame for launching a nuke at Manhattan." SHIELD and the Pentagon both were still trying to suppress that little tidbit, but people had smart phones nowadays and filmed everything. The missile, with Iron Man directing it into the portal, was impossible to miss, and so was the white flash that had come through seconds later. It didn't take much for people to connect the dots, and it was only a matter of time before some retired military whistleblower put the word out.

Fury just leveled a glare at Tony, and refused to dignify that with an answer.

"Because the man went insane and attacked Earth, and it would be good to know that he's not still insane now that he's awake," he said to Steve.
"In my experience, the people who are crazy are usually convinced they're sane," said Bruce. "From what Clint and Steve are saying, Loki is petrified that he's lost his mind, because there are gaps in his memory."

"I can talk to him," offered Natasha.

"You'll all talk to him sooner or later," said Fury, "but it will depend on when those damn healers of his let us get close. From what we've seen these past few months, they've got him guarded better than Fort Fucking Knox."

"Can you blame 'em?" asked Clint. "Even supervised, he still wandered off on his own. Give it time," he said with a shrug.

"We have a man who led one invasion of Earth while conscious, and inspired a second invasion while he was in a motherfucking coma," said Fury heatedly. "We cannot convince these aliens to go back where they came from, we have no ability to control them if they decide their intentions here are no longer peaceful, and we can neither monitor nor curtail their comings and goings. According to your reports, yet another species of alien stopped by a few weeks ago for a motherfucking consult. They are appearing and disappearing right out from under our goddamn noses, so you'll excuse me for wanting to make sure they are not a goddamn threat!"

"Does that vein in your forehead hurt when it does that?" asked Tony blithely. "Because you should maybe get that looked at—"

"Get the fuck outta here, Stark," said Fury, and Tony smiled triumphantly and disconnected from the call. Not that it mattered, since he was still in the same room with everyone else on their own tablets.

"We'll keep an eye on him and talk to him when we can," Natasha said, trying to reassure him. "In the meantime, if you can convince the rest of SHIELD not to get sloppy again, I'd appreciate it." Her eyes narrowed just slightly. "You know how I feel when someone blunders in and throws off one of my missions."

"Understood, Agent Romanov." Fury rubbed at the bridge of his nose tiredly, and dismissed them all.

"So what do we think?" asked Tony, once everyone had set their tablets aside and started to stretch, or rub their eyes, or reach for coffee.

"I think these five hours of daylight before the sun sets again are goddamn ridiculous," said Clint with a yawn. "It's not like it's even that early, we were just headed to breakfast when Loki did his thing, why is it still fucking dark?"

"To give you something to whine about, you big baby," said Natasha with a smile.

"Okay, but Loki?"

Steve sighed. "I can't tell you anything more than what I saw," he said, standing up.

"Me neither," said Clint, "plus I'm starving. The whole sideshow kept us from getting anything to eat."

"The Council is leaning on the Director," said Natasha. "That's almost the only thing that would get him to change his tune like this."

"Yeah, well, they can keep leaning. Be interesting to see what happens if someone kicks their prop
out from under them."

Natasha eyed Tony. "You have something planned."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Ms. Rushman," said Tony, with his press-conference smile.

They made their way to the gathering hall, still bickering good-naturedly, and eventually came to a consensus that the best they could do was keep their ears open and see if they would be allowed a chance to speak with Loki themselves.

"Okay, next question, what about SHIELD?" asked Tony. "I mean, I get you two are agents and think the sun shines out Fury's ass, and Steve probably still trusts them even after that debacle—"

"No, I don't," said Steve. "And you're usually more subtle when you try to pick a fight with me, so knock it off."

"I'll never say this again, Stark, but you have a point," said Natasha. "Can we trust SHIELD to keep away from here?"

"Do they care about harming children?" asked Bruce.

"They should care that nearly every person in this place can mop the floor with any ten agents," said Clint. "Even the kids are probably bulletproof."

"And I can just imagine what they would do if they were actually angry," added Steve.

"Okay, so what does that mean for Loki? And the rest of the inhabitants?" Tony put in. "I mean, do we seriously want to go from hating the guy to protecting him?"

"It's possible to do both, you know," said Natasha.

"It's so cute when you look at me like that," said Tony.

"She has a point, too," said Clint. "We don't want SHIELD to come after Loki and start a war with the people here. They haven't been hostile so far, except when we've given them a reason to be. And this? Would be like stirring up a hornet's nest."

The gathering hall was a madhouse.

"What the hell?" said Bruce, barely audible over the din.

"Place looks like a circus," shouted Steve.

"Don't insult the circus," said Clint, "it's way more organized than this."

"Hey, there's Ingirun and Kisping." Tony pointed, and Natasha began eeling her way through the crowd. It looked like the entire town had turned out for an impromptu, indoor street fair maybe? The food was plentiful and the drinks were flowing freely. Kids were dancing in a circle off in one corner, surrounded by musicians who were themselves surrounded by pairs and trios of adults.
Whatever the celebration was about, it was in full swing.

"Seriously, you guys haven't figured it out yet?" asked Tony, just as Ingirun came up to them. Her usually serene countenance was split with a beautiful smile. Kisping was right behind her, and ze threw zirself into a faintly lascivious hug with Tony and tried to plant a kiss on him.

"His Highness awoke today," explained Ingirun. "We had feared he would be helpless, or permanently damaged, and instead he walked, and spoke. The healers give him very good odds for a full recovery, long though the road may be for him to arrive there."

"Wasn't he… I mean, he seemed pretty confused to me," said Steve, but Ingirun only shook her head at him and laughed.

"Wouldn't you be, darling?" asked Kisping. "Your mind tampered with, and then moved while you were unconscious so that you woke in an unfamiliar place?"

"Sounds like my college years," said Tony, and Bruce rolled his eyes at him.

"All this just for him waking up?" he asked over the din.

Ingirun merely shook her head at them. "He is a prince of Asgard, the future of our realm."

"More than that," crowed Kisping, "he is our prince. Thor is beloved of the warriors and nobility. Golden and shining, and shallow and thuggish. Loki is ours. Brilliant and inquisitive and the true power behind all those swinging swords and manly battle-cries. Where Thor and his ilk mocked us, Loki supported us. Loki is one of us. And now he wakes, and will be ours once more."

Bruce looked at the other Avengers a little helplessly. There wasn't, after all, a whole lot they could say to that.

"Power behind the throne?" asked Natasha.

Well, okay. They could say that.

"Please," said Kisping, throwing an arm across her shoulders (and ignoring the threat of death she leveled at zem in her gaze). "Warriors are a valued part of society. But when we are not at war, what then? What use the sword-swingers and hammer-throwers? What use their thirst for blood? We are the ones who build the homes, and keep Asgard's far-flung reaches in communication with one another. We are the ones who teach the children, and write the books that add to our realm's body of knowledge. What do the warriors do besides kill and then glory in it? Boast over mead of the same victories, over and over again, that is what!"

"So you're not talking about usurping the throne," Natasha pressed, and ze laughed again.

"We cannot usurp what is already ours," ze said. "Who do you think sits on the council and decides the laws in Asgard? Not the thugs off slaughtering one another for glory."

"I thought Thor was supposed to inherit the throne," Clint spoke up.

"Oh, aye, and look how well that went—for him, for Odin, for Asgard!"

"For Loki," said Ingirun more quietly, and Kisping sobered suddenly.

"For Loki." Ze had been gradually guiding them all to a table off to the side of the chaos, and now ze sat and poured drinks for them all. "None of this would have happened if Odin had not listened to his
pride and put his oafish firstborn on the throne, without pausing to consider whether or not he deserved the honor. It was Loki, over the centuries, who attended the council meetings and listened to the words of the people. Loki who talked Thor out of some of his more monumentally stupid ideas. Loki who protected both Asgard and Asgard's heir!" Ze took a large gulp from zir mug and then looked at them all, one by one, with a sober expression. "We are celebrating because Asgard's future is once again secure. And not just for that; we are celebrating because His Highness is truly beloved by all of us. Have you not yet learned that, in your months living with us? Have you not heard all the stories, from the elders down to the children themselves, of what Loki means to us?"

"No, we have," Steve assured zem. "We just… weren't expecting a celebration quite this big."

Kisping laughed. "Then you don't know Aesir as well as you think you do! We have been quiet for His Highness's sake, while he recovered. Now that he is awake…"

"Kisping exaggerates," said Ingirun, though even her cheeks were flushed. "The warriors are prone to celebrations like this nearly every night, it is true, but we seidkonur are more sedate. Besides, His Highness himself does not appreciate such raucous displays. But this celebration will last throughout the day and go long into the night, to be sure. Once people are in the mood for something quieter, you may expect the hot springs to become quite crowded indeed."
Asgard

Chapter Summary

Asgard struggles to cope with the loss of its magic users; Frigga expresses her displeasure to her remaining family.

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the length of time between the last chapter and this one. I'm still not sure where to take the story. There are maybe two chapters already written before I'll have to try and create new material for it, but I'm discouraged enough that it's making me not want to post what I already have. Sorry for that.

“What do you mean the new swords are not ready?” Thor could hear Fandral ranting as he approached. “The training ground commissioned these weeks ago! They ought to have been finished within a handful of days!”

Fjorgyn the smith glared at the man with enough fire that Thor could see it halfway up the street. “You seem to forget, my lord, that the crafters who make such things are nowhere to be found anywhere in Asgard. Without them to imbue the blades with seidr, your commission may as well be for a handful of soup spoons.”

“You take that tone with me?” Fandral drew himself up, affronted.

“If you demand the impossible from me, aye, I take that damned tone!”

Fandral looked ready to draw his blade, which was unlike him. “Enough, Fandral,” said Thor, drawing up alongside the pair. “Good day to you, good Fjorgyn. Is all well?”

The smith sighed and wiped a hand across his bald forehead. “Your boon companion here is complaining because the training swords commissioned for the barracks are behind schedule. We’re imbuing the blades the old way, as fast as we can, but we can still only craft one at a time. The seidkonur we had working here could do three blades apiece with their seidr, and there were five of them in our shop. You can do the math and see why things are behind now.”

“Indeed, Fjorgyn, I can see. And I am sure Fandral agrees that you are working as quickly and as honestly as you can.”

“Hmph,” said Fandral under his breath, but he pasted on a mostly-civil smile and held his arm out to the smith. “My apologies, friend, that we are all so inconvenienced by your loss.”

“ ‘Tis your loss as well, friend,” said the smith, not returning the gesture, “and perhaps if you and yours in the palace had shown them proper respect before this, they would not be missing now.”

Fandral’s face fell. “Oh, come, that is not—”
“I think it is.” Fjorgyn dusted his palms together. “Now if you’ll excuse me, those blades you’re so impatient for won’t imbue themselves,” he declared, and with the most perfunctory of bows toward Thor, he turned his back on them both and stalked back into his smithy.

Thor raised his eyebrows, but couldn’t bring himself to be offended. Fjorgyn, he knew, was gruff but a good man, who genuinely cared for those who worked in his smithy. His temper had grown progressively shorter since the first of the seidkonur had begun disappearing. Now the disappearances had stopped, but there were barely a handful of natural-born seidr-users left in the whole of Asgard, and most of them were either not strong enough to perform the day-to-day tasks that kept the kingdom running, were so old that they were exempt from such service (and had laughed in the faces of the royal messengers who had come to ask if they were willing to reinstate themselves), or were too… strange, from delving too deeply into the mysteries of their art.

Asgard, with neither fuss nor fanfare nor battlefield defeat, had been virtually crippled. The healers who remained had their machines, and their training, but could perform no accelerated healing nor instantaneous patching of dire wounds. Thor had not thought of it until he heard his parents talking, but now he dreaded the possibility that an illness might sweep the kingdom while the seidkonur were gone.

The crafters, enchanters, and imbuer were gone, so that materials production had ground to a virtual halt. Those who maintained the ambient energy resources were gone, too, which meant that occasionally, parts of Asgard would suddenly lose power, sometimes for hours at a time. The grid was efficient, but in a city the size of Asgard’s capital, sometimes the power flows needed to be manually directed and managed.

Communications were falling apart across the realm, as well; Thor had never even realized that they relied so heavily on summoners and senders (which were evidently not the same thing, based on the council members’ ranting), nor travelers and dream walkers, to send messages and objects across the realm or sometimes even between realms.

That last was odd, because Thor had always thought that Loki was the only person with the ability to travel between realms. They called him Sky Walker, after all.

Thor wasn’t one for visits to the temple, but he found himself wishing now that he could burn some incense, ask questions of the volur, and have an answer for what to do. Unfortunately, as Volstagg had said, nearly all the volur had departed too, and that more than anything frightened the common people, who looked to them for reassurance on a more frequent basis.

According to the council members from the more rural areas, even the crops and livestock were suffering, because there had been seidkonur who actually spoke to the animals to ensure their optimal health, and others who helped accelerate the growth of plants and enhanced the health of the earth with seidr. Apparently the uses to which seidr could be put were far broader than Thor could ever have guessed.

“What can we not look for other ways to do these things?” he’d asked one night at council.

“How?” demanded Folkmar, slapping his hands on the table in frustration. “Even the theoreticians are gone, along with half the archivists. Simply looking up how Asgard operated in the ancient days could take weeks!”

“Weeks that we would do well to spend,” Odin reminded them, “given that the seidkonur are gone for the foreseeable future. There is every possibility that they may never return.”

“They were so offended by the prince’s punishment?” scoffed one man from the northern provinces.
“They were terrified,” said Odin warningly, “no doubt asking themselves, since I could commit such an atrocity against my own son, what I might do to one of them, if I were displeased by their work or their words.”

The council had fallen silent at that, and Odin had taken his leave.

“What news, Heimdall?”

“Something stirs within the void, my king.”

Odin sighed. “The other realms prepare to move against us?”

“They do, sire, but that is not what I see.”

“Explain.”

“When I look to the other realms, my vision is clear. They mobilize, and they speak in council, but they do not yet prepare for the attack. Each realm still hosts Aesir seidkonur and seidmenn, in encampments that are spoken of even as they are veiled from my sight. The rulers of the other realms seem reluctant either to anger them or to capture them to prevent their retaliation, should they truly move against Asgard. For now, the realms confer internally and with one another, but no more than that.”

“Working up the courage to attack,” said Odin, and Heimdall did not reply. “What else do you see, then, if not the realms moving against us?”

“I know not, my king. But it is a malevolent force, and it comes from the same region of space into which Loki fell.”

“His allies,” growled Odin.

“Or his captors,” said Heimdall.

Odin paused. “What do you mean?”

“Only that we do not know what truly befell Loki, when he was believed dead. He was not in ideal health when he was returned to us.”

“Hmph. Because he was rightfully defeated, even if it was by mortals,” said Odin.

It was Heimdall’s turn to pause. “I take partial responsibility for Loki’s fall, my king,” he said after a moment. “Our prince chose to end his life, in part because we—because I—leapt to my own conclusions about his motives and his deeds, without asking even once whether my conclusions were correct.”

“He would only have lied to you, had you asked,” said Odin.

“Would he have?”

“Speak plainly, gatekeeper.”

Heimdall sighed. “Loki was rightful king of Asgard, and had no reason to lie to any of us about his motives. He also had the right not to be questioned as to his deeds. We learned too late that he intended to stop the war Thor had begun in his recklessness. Perhaps if we had asked, rather than being so swift to leap to Thor’s aid when he neither needed nor deserved it, matters might have
played out differently.”

“You sound like my wife,” muttered Odin.

“Hardly,” retorted Heimdall. “She refuses to forgive you. I, on the other hand, question whether I deserve to forgive myself.”

Odin turned to stare at his servant, who only gazed out at the cosmos and said nothing.

“What is your opinion of my deed, good Heimdall?” he asked finally.

“It is not my place to say.”

“You have said much today already, surely you can answer this question.”

Heimdall sighed. “You and I see much, thanks to the powers Asgard has bestowed upon us. When I cannot see, I grow suspicious, whether I have cause to do so or not. But never have I refused to see what was clear—or so I believed, until I realized how set my opinions were of Loki, without cause.”

“That does not answer my question, good Heimdall.”

“It does, my king. Because you also have refused to see your son clearly—both your sons, in truth. One was an arrogant warmonger. The other was desperate for the attention you refused to bestow unless he misbehaved to draw your ire. Better that, he must have believed, than no attention at all. I suspect he believed that you would at least demand to know why he chose to invade Midgard. That you would at least question how your son could change so drastically. Instead, you did not ask, and nearly murdered him out of a sense of wounded pride. How dare he reflect badly upon your name, was your only thought.”

Odin sighed, and for the first time sounded less sure of himself. “I am king…”

“Kings are not infallible. That is why they have advisors. And queens. Were Loki not your son, you would have tried him as any other criminal, and the truth would have been revealed.”

“What truth?”

“We have no way of knowing, do we, my king? We never sought to ask before moving to stop him, both while you slept and after he was returned to us from Midgard.”

Odin nodded, taking that in. Heimdall waited, watching what stirred in the void, until his king spoke again. “My queen refuses to speak to me, she claims, until I gain Loki’s forgiveness. Which is of course impossible to attain, given that he is not here.”

“I think perhaps she wishes for you to dwell upon how you might earn that forgiveness, should the prince ever return.”

“I have begun that very task, good Heimdall.”

“And what have you learned, thus far?”

“That with all my failings, it will be a very long time indeed before my son would wish to return home. And that wish assumes that he will recover from what I have done, and be capable of returning at all.”

Frigga left orders with the servants not to be disturbed for any reason save the death of the king, and
locked the door of her weaving studio behind her. She pulled the curtains, lit the incense and the candles, and began to weave at her loom, chanting under her breath as she did so.

Open the shed, pass the weft, pack it tight. Close the shed and open the next one. The weights at the bottom of the loom swung and rang against one another.

The air grew hot and still; signs for her that the seidr was rising to her call. She wove, and chanted, and gradually shaped the energy, until she was able to place her consciousness in it and send her thoughts to Vanaheim.

—Sister, hear me.

After an immeasurable moment, the threads of seidr vibrated with a response.

—Frigga. Long has it been since you called us.

—Only a month, dear sister. The threads quivered with their shared amusement. What news on Vanaheim?

There was an unexpected stillness, then came the question, What do you wish to know?

—I seek my son, said Frigga. He has gone from us, taken by other seidkonur.

—Abducted, dear sister? asked Freya, and the threads glittered with sardonic humor. Loki?

—Not abducted, precisely. He was injured. They took him somewhere safe to recover, but did not leave word as to where.

—Hmm. I think that is not the entire story, said Freya. Given the sudden weight of seidkonur crossing the branches of Yggdrasil to every realm except Asgard.

—Have they come to Vanaheim? Eagerness nearly caused Frigga to lose her grip on the working, and she had to pause to breathe, and chant a little further.

—Some have, yes, said Freya. Not all, I think.

—And Loki?

The threads between them quivered and began to thin, and Frigga fought to hang onto them. Now why would I tell you such a thing as that, dear sister? asked Freya. What might you do with such information, and what might you pay to have it?

—If you wish to know whether Odin would be informed, the answer is no, said Frigga. He has not yet earned my forgiveness, and will not until he has earned Loki’s. I have already told him that if I could vanish under my own power, as these other seidkonur have, I would do so in a heartbeat, and never return until our son could come home safely. As for what I would pay... name it, sister. Loki is my son.

Again, the silence, which stretched until Frigga began to fear that she had lost the connection with her sister’s mind. He is not here, Freya said finally, or at least, not so far as I know. But know this, sister: for his sake, if he were here, I am still not certain I would have told you. For the only way Odin can earn Loki’s forgiveness for this heinous crime is for them to speak in person, and you would surely give his location away to your husband in an instant if you thought it would facilitate that reconciliation.
—You know about what happened between them?

—Sister, your son’s agony was felt across the realms, came the grave reply, and Frigga gasped. Seidkonur and volur here were rendered ill for days afterward. Did you truly not know how powerful Loki is? Or, perhaps I should say ‘was’. She paused, then seemed to feel Frigga’s pain, for she went on. Yes, all the realms know what happened between Loki and his false father. The high councils of many lands have debated long into the night about whether or not it is safe to allow Odin to continue to sit his throne. If Loki does not recover, if there is not reconciliation between them, then I tell you truly, sister: war may well come to Asgard’s doorstep.

Frigga allowed her heart to calm before she spoke again, thanking her sister and engaging in a little perfunctory gossip. From the feel of the threads, Freya was well aware that she was only continuing the conversation for form’s sake, and allowed her to say her goodbyes mercifully early.

When her thoughts had finally returned to her body, she opened her eyes, sticky with tears and fatigue, and stepped away from the loom. The scent of incense was cloying now instead of calming, and she crossed on wobbly legs to throw the curtains back open. A moment later, she had unlocked the door and called for a maid to prepare her bath.

In the water, sipping iced fruit wine, Frigga pondered what she had learned. Freya could only say where Loki was not, and of course politics meant that she could well be lying. As an enemy of Asgard, Loki would make a valuable ally; as a son of Asgard, he would make a valuable hostage. It was in Vanaheim’s best interests not to reveal his whereabouts, even if they knew them.

No, Freya would only reveal what was valuable for Asgard to know, and Frigga could not blame her for it. Especially not when she had been generous enough to warn Frigga of the sudden fragility of Odin’s hold on his throne.

“I received word that you would dine with me this evening,” said Odin as Frigga entered. “Are we on speaking terms once more, then?”

“Do you mean have I forgiven you?” said Frigga tartly. “The answer is no. You already know the conditions under which I will allow myself to forget what you have done.”

Odin sighed, and sat at the table, empty save for the two of them. “Then why do you join me? Not that I do not welcome your company, wife,” he added quickly. “It has been… wearisome, spending these past weeks without you.”

“I am pleased to hear that I was missed, if nothing else,” said Frigga. “But I come to speak to you and your heir of a threat to the realm. Where is Thor?”

“Dining in his chambers, most likely. Or moping. The Lady Sif gave him some information, around the time Loki vanished, which he did not wish to hear.”

“Uncomfortable truths, I take it.” Frigga sipped at her mead.

“It seems to be the season for them, yes,” said Odin.

“Send for him, husband. And if he is still moping, as you say, after all this time, then order him to set aside his childish petulance for the good of Asgard. With luck that still means something to him, beyond the lip service he has always paid it.”

Odin blinked, even as he waved a servant over to give the order. “You are angry with Thor as well?”
“Thor delivered Loki to you. He participated, if indirectly, in nearly killing the brother he claims to love so very much. He acted in ignorance rather than malice, but I am not yet ready to forgive him, either. Between the two of you, you drove…” She stopped, and looked away, not yet ready to reopen that wound.

Odin clearly heard the words she did not say, though: *You drove Loki away; you drove him to suicide.*

They sat in tense silence while they waited for Thor to join them. When the doors opened, their son seemed to burst into the room, his presence seeming to overwhelm the intimate space as always.

It was no wonder, Frigga thought, that she and Odin had forgiven him so much through his youth. Perhaps it was part of his power, to completely subsume everyone else into the aura he cast.

“Mother. Father,” Thor greeted as he came in. “You sent for me?”

“Sit down, my son,” Frigga gestured at his empty seat. “I bring news that will be of value to you both.”

“Word of the missing seidkonur?”

“Are you not also curious as to the fate of your brother?” Frigga asked, tilting her head in mock curiosity.

Thor turned red, and for the first time his presence seemed to diminish until he was almost a normal man. “I… I have tried not to think about what he might have orchestrated. Lady Sif says otherwise, but—”

“Lady Sif is correct, and you would do well to heed her.” Frigga dropped the pretense of sweetness and glared at her son coldly. “Orchestrated? Do you seek even now to lay blame upon your brother’s shoulders without asking first whether he has earned it?”

Thor turned redder as he scowled, but said nothing.

“What have you learned, my wife?” Odin asked. Rescuing Thor, once again.

“I have sent my thoughts far afield,” said Frigga, “and was able to reach and speak with my sister on Vanaheim.”

Odin’s expression darkened. Frigga ignored it; he could have whatever opinion he liked of their vassal realm, and the sisters he could never separate despite all his efforts as a conquering warlord.

“Has she news of Loki?” asked Thor.

“She tells me that the seidkonur have traveled throughout Yggdrasil to every realm save Asgard, and that Loki must be among them somewhere. She does not, however, claim to know on what realm he may be found.”

“So you have summoned me for nothing,” Thor began, and Frigga silenced him with a look.

“I thought you wiser than this, my son,” she said. “You have claimed to many that your banishment brought with it a new degree of enlightenment and understanding.”

Again, he turned red, and mumbled something under his breath about the Lady Sif. Frigga resolved to speak with her at some point. If she could keep her shield brother in check during the worst of his
stupidity and recklessness, she might well be the queen Asgard needed.

“Forgive me, Mother,” Thor said finally. “What other tidings do you have for us?”

“My sister tells me that Loki’s agony was felt throughout the realms,” Frigga intoned, watching as Odin’s eye grew wide. “And with the exodus of the seidkonur from Asgard, all now know what vile thing Odin inflicted upon him. There is talk now that Asgard has relinquished its right to sit at the top of the World Tree, talk that Odin no longer deserves his golden throne.”

Odin’s eye now narrowed into a furious scowl, but Frigga kept speaking and he, at least, was wise enough not to interrupt.

“The councils on many realms have considered that Asgard is without many of the seidr wielders that make her strong. That now may be a good time for them to strike, and topple Asgard from her vaunted pedestal.”

“You speak of war,” said Thor, sitting up straight in his seat.

“I speak of whispers, my son,” said Frigga. “But they are whispers that I think we would do well to heed.”

“All this for punishing my son?” growled Odin.

“All this for committing an abomination, my husband,” spat Frigga.

Neither Thor nor Odin had anything to say in response.

“You have ignored the seidkonur as mere women for so long,” she went on, “and mocked the seidmenn as weak and effeminate. Now they are gone, and Asgard begins to realize their true worth. I pray for Asgard’s sake that you do not learn this lesson too late for it to do any good.”

“What would you have me do?” asked Thor.

“Why, speak to the seidkonur, of course,” said Frigga. “Apologize to them, beg them to return home and aid Asgard in her hour of need.”

“And how is he to do that?” demanded Odin irritably. “The Bifrost is broken, and no one save Loki knew the paths to reach the other realms without it.”

“None save those he taught.”

“But they are gone also!” said Thor. “Unless we use the Tesseract—”

“Absolutely not,” growled Odin. “And you know perfectly well why.”

“—then what you ask, Mother, is impossible.”

“Is it,” said Frigga, standing smoothly and looking between them both. “How interesting, that you cannot do without them and you only realize it when they are gone.”

Thor continued to scowl at his plate after his mother left them, gliding serenely out of the room as though she had not just punctured his pride with a dagger and a smile. There were days when the resemblance between her and Loki made itself felt more keenly than others.

“There is a puzzle in your mother’s words,” said Odin solemnly.
Thor looked up to see his father studying his face, for what, he did not know. “What does she mean by it, Father?” he asked irritably. “She asks the impossible, and knows it, and does so with a smile as though she enjoys our discomfort.”

“She does,” said Odin. “After all, we have more than earned it.”

“But what purpose does it serve to torment us!”

Odin leaned back in his seat, and picked up his goblet of wine. “Your mother is fond of saying that everything I do has a purpose, when it vexes you,” he said. “Does it not occur to you that she has the same purpose when she does something similar?”

“It only occurs to me that she is like Loki,” grumbled Thor, and then stopped cold. He looked up to see his father with the same stunned, grieving expression on his face.

“Indeed,” said Odin, then cleared his throat when his voice faltered. “But my advice to you was going to be to search for the clues in her speech. Nothing she has set before you has ever been impossible, and I doubt that this is, either.”

Both of them paused, letting the realization sink in that Loki had been exactly the same, and they had never once stopped to notice it.

“She suggested I speak to the seidkonur,” said Thor eventually. “It was I who said it was impossible.”

“And why do you think so?” pressed Odin.

“Because the seidkonur are all gone! There are but a handful—oh.”

“Just so, my son. If there are any who remain, then it cannot be true that all are gone. This is the simplest of logic.”

“Then I should speak to them,” said Thor. “Volstagg said he had gone to the temple, but the few priests who were left were… strange.”

“Dealing with that strangeness will be a burden you must bear, my son.”

“And why not you?” Thor asked, then stopped himself as Odin’s eye narrowed. “I only meant… do we not share in the responsibility? Mother blames us both equally.”

“So she does,” agreed Odin, “yet I have other tasks to accomplish. Preventing a war, while yet preparing for one, just for one example.” He sighed, and his voice dropped tiredly. “Reassuring the people that their king is not a maddened tyrant, for another.”

Thor nodded solemnly.

They finished their dinner in silence, then when all was finished, Thor took his leave. As he was standing in the doorway, he turned back.

“Do you think Loki will ever forgive us, Father?” he asked. “Assuming he survives what… what was done to him?”

Odin sighed, and shook his head. “I know not, my son. I see much, but I cannot see this.”
Eavesdropping

Chapter Summary

Loki wakes again, and has a conversation with Lady Eir. Natasha overhears.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The second time Loki awoke, he felt… more solid. More real. Still confused, but at least this time nothing seemed quite so much like he was halfway caught in someone else's dream.

"Good waking, my prince," said a familiar voice; he looked over and recognized Lady Eir. Loki blinked and brought a shaking hand up to wipe his eyes. He was still so weak.

"Healer," he said, then winced at the rasp in his throat. Eir obligingly helped him sit up, then held a bowl of liquid to his lips. It was a medicinal tea of some kind, but Loki still drank thirstily.

"How long?"

"Six months," she said solemnly, and he felt his eyes go wide.

"What?" He couldn't even think to form words for a moment, then the only one that came to him was, "How?"

Eir frowned at him. "What do you remember?"

Loki thought back… and back… and felt himself grow cold. "There is a haze," he said, voice trembling, "blocking my thoughts. I don't… I can't—"

"It's all right, my prince." Eir sat at his bedside and took his hand. "We suspected from your injury that your memory might be affected. Do not fear; it is nearly certain that you will recover most of your recollection of what happened."

"I… took a blow to the head?" he asked, but that didn't seem quite right. "No… it was… I don't think that was it."

"It was not."

"Will you not tell me?"

"I shall, my prince, after you have recovered somewhat. Partially I wish for you to recover your memories on your own. And partly…" She sighed, and tried again. "You were… you were betrayed, and I do not wish you to distress yourself over the details of the attack you suffered."

Betrayed… "The Warriors Three. And Lady Sif. When I sat the throne they ignored the All-Father's commands and my own, and went to Midgard to retrieve Thor and break his banishment." He paused. "But that… they never attacked me physically."

"No, my prince, you are correct, they did not. But that gives us a good baseline from which to try
and recover your memories."

"How long ago did that take place?" he asked.

Lady Eir shook her head, and he frowned. "I will not tell you that, my prince. I wish you to approach what you remember without preconceptions."

He sighed. "You did this to me when I was thrown from my horse, once."

She smiled. "I did indeed, and I am glad that you recall that. It seems that your memory loss only goes back so far from the present day."

When she put it like that, yes, it was indeed a relief. If there had been other gaps in his memory… he shivered once, involuntarily.

"Are you cold, my prince?"

"I… no, I feel fine." Eir raised her eyebrow and he continued, "I am not cold, nor especially hungry or thirsty. I… ache. All the way to my bones. My joints…” He flexed his fingers, and winced at the stiffness in them. He reached for his seidr to try and soothe them, and the ache became searing agony, burning through him. He cried out at the pain and folded over on himself, bringing his forehead to his knees.

"Ah, my prince. You reached for your seidr, I take it?"

He nodded, forehead still pressed against his bent legs. When he could breathe again, he managed to say, "I have overextended myself before, but I have never felt such a thing. It burns," he added, knowing she would ask. It took a couple of deep breaths before the pain subsided; he turned his head so that his temple rested against his knee. "You said I was betrayed and attacked; did I fight? Were there too many of them?"

"You know I will not answer that."

His eyebrows twitched in wry amusement. "I had hoped you might, nevertheless."

"It pleases me to see you have lost none of your cleverness," she said, resting a hand on his cheek for a moment. Loki closed his eyes, suddenly overwhelmed. He had not been touched in kindness in…

"My prince?" she asked, and he could hear the concern in her voice.

"It has been a long time since anyone was… gentle… toward me, Healer," he said carefully. He opened his eyes, frowning. "I do not know how I know that."

Eir nodded, a little sadly it seemed. "That does not surprise me. Why not tell me what you do know? Even if they are only vague impressions; the information will prove valuable, and perhaps you will trigger other memories as well."

"All right," replied Loki. "I can but hope, in any case."

"Now, you were speaking of the Warriors Three, and Lady Sif," said the healer, Lady Eir, "and you seemed to have a clear memory of their treachery."

Outside the healing hall, under Loki's window, Natasha sat pretending to eat an apple, wondering
who these people were.

"Why not continue from there, and go forward as best you can?"

"I…" Loki sounded tentative all of a sudden, and she perked up her ears. "There are things I would prefer not to reveal."

"Loki, my prince," said Eir tolerantly, "do try to remember that I have known you a very long time. Since infancy, my prince," and Natasha heard Loki's gasp.

"You know?" he demanded brokenly. "You know and you kept it secret, too? Was everyone in Asgard except me aware of what I was? What I am?"

Natasha heard his breathing, harsh and quick; she thought he might be trying to hold back a sob. Certainly there were tears in his voice.

"Absolutely not!" snapped Eir, and Loki's breath went silent. "My prince, whatever and whenever your father the king decided to tell you of your heritage, I know not. I myself believed that you always knew, and I did not once consider it important enough to bring up."

"What, that I-I'm some sort of beast?!" Loki yelped, and then Natasha heard the snarl sneak into his voice that she remembered from New York. "You never considered it important to tell me you knew I was a monster?"

"That is quite enough." Lady Eir's voice had gone hard and flat. "I have no idea who taught you such nonsense about the jotnar, but you are speaking of the people whose blood flows through at least half of Asgard's finest warriors, seidkonur, volur, and yes, healers. Including people I know for a fact you look up to. Odin himself is half-jotun, on his mother's side."

There was a long, long pause, and Natasha wished very much she could see the look on Loki's face. Then he spoke, and she wished even more, because he sounded like a little boy, scared and small.

"You… this is truth?"

"I have never lied to you, my prince, and I would not over this." Eir's voice was gentle. "And before you ask, I am one-quarter jotun. As is your brother, Thor, if you pause to think about it."

"I-I don't… this is—"

Natasha heard a heavy sigh. "I apologize, my prince. This is a far greater shock than I wished to give you while you are still recovering. Would you be willing to put it aside for now?"

"I… yes. Yes, I think so."

"Very well, then. Here. Drink. Compose yourself."

There was another long silence.

"The Warriors," Eir said finally. "You were about to speak of how they turned against their king, before we got distracted. You said that there were things you did not wish to reveal, and I trust I have reassured you?"

The breath Natasha heard was shaky, in and out. "Y-yes, Healer."

And he continued with a tale that sounded like it was straight out of Shakespeare. She knew a little of it, the part where Thor had been banished to Earth, but she'd missed the part where he'd started a
war because someone called him a princess; probably Loki was being a slightly biased narrator there. But he'd discovered in that skirmish that his skin would change color to match these jotnar, whoever they were, rather than being burned (file that capability away for later), and in a later confrontation with his father, learned that he himself was a jotun as Eir had called them; had been stolen from the planet of the jotnar, raised in ignorance of his own heritage, and apparently brought up on stories of jotnar as the bogeymen in his nightmares.

That much, Ingirun and Eir had given the Avengers a little of when they'd first come here, two months ago. But apparently when Loki tried to get more answers from his father about the big family secret, Odin collapsed into some sort of magical coma—apparently that was something that ran in the family—and his mother, rather than taking the throne herself, decided to give the honor to Loki. Unprepared, mentally unbalanced Loki.

Natasha spared a moment to wonder what the hell the woman had been thinking.

Thor's friends apparently didn't trust Loki any farther than they could throw him, which Natasha could relate to, but their father had been the one to banish Thor, and when Loki, as was only right and sensible, refused to rescind Odin's command, they promptly turned their backs on him and went to Earth anyway to try and bring Thor back.

This part, again, was somewhat corroborated by what Ingirun and Eir had said when they first met. Loki was left utterly alone, and if the story about magic users and their sense of self-identity was to be believed, he was already dangerously unbalanced by the time they abandoned him.

"After that, I thought… I thought I could prove myself to Father—the All-Father," said Loki. "I thought I could end the war that Thor had started. So I arranged to bring Laufey to Asgard, where I assassinated him before he could kill Odin, and I…" his voice dipped, ashamed. "I made sure Mother would see it, and know me for a hero." He sniffled, and added, "But of course Heimdall broke free and brought Thor home; he'd sacrificed himself for his mortal friends and that was apparently sufficient to fulfill the All-Father's conditions. I don't understand," he went on, the tone of his voice changing. "Why would protecting someone, the way he nearly always protected his shield-brothers in battle, be sufficient to render him worthy? And worthy of what? I don't—I still don't understand."

"Perhaps it was that he humbled himself to defend a mortal instead of an Aesir," suggested Eir. "Or that he defended someone who was unable to defend themselves."

"I suppose," said Loki, though he sounded doubtful. "He never really did that before. But he's—do I remember right, that he still enjoys a fight as much as he always did? I remember… I think I remember, that he still is easy to lead. To manipulate. That he does not pause to consider consequences before he acts. He…" Loki fell silent.

"What is it, my prince?"

"Did he… I was a captive, I think. He struck my captors, but instead of rescuing me, he flung me to the earth and heaped accusations upon my head. I… I think. I don't remember the circumstances. And… it's hazy, I'm sorry. On one hand, I remember I was falling and he was trying so hard to reach me. But on another, I remember that he did—that. I don't know which is true."

"Why not go on with your story?"

Natasha heard a cup being picked up and set back down onto a table. "I thought…" He sighed miserably. "I thought I was a monster. I thought, somehow, I could prove myself a son of Odin if I destroyed the monsters. It… I risked Yggdrasil, I know that now, but at the time it—why did it make so much sense?"
"Your identity had been deeply wounded, my prince," said Eir. "I would even go so far as to say it was shattered. I still cannot believe that Odin kept such a thing from you. There are laws, my prince, intended to protect children from such things. That you use seidr should have had him telling you the truth as soon as you were old enough to understand it. You must know, by the law, Odin is at least as much to blame as you, for what you did after that shocking discovery."

"If you say so, Healer," said Loki.

"I'll have you know that I have spent a good bit of the past few months struggling to save your life, while you lacked a solid foundation to attach that life to. As far as I am concerned, Odin has much to answer for."

Again, Loki was silent for a long time, and Natasha wondered if the conversation was over.

"I fell," he said finally. "I remember what I tried to do… at the Bifrost. Thor and I fought, and it was broken. I remember that Odin appeared, when Thor and I were falling, and caught us. Caught Thor. And I… I tried to make him understand. Tried to make him see." His voice shrunk, became a small, faraway thing as he added, "But he said no, and I let go, and I fell.

"Is that right, Healer? Do I remember that correctly?"

"So far as anyone knows, yes, my prince. We were not there, of course, but we learned the story afterward. We seidkonur mourned your death, or what we thought was your death."

"I'm sorry." Natasha felt her own surprise and pushed it back down, the better to listen, but she never would have suspected the madman behind the attacks on New York to apologize for anything.

"It was not your fault, my prince. And I do not know if it comforts you to know this or not, but we searched for you, to no avail. And while we searched, while we mourned, we asked questions. The seidkonur and seidmenn of Asgard were… disturbed… to learn that Odin had kept such a secret from you. We wondered in what other ways he might have failed you, as a king to his prince and as a father to his son."

"I…” Loki sighed heavily. "I suppose I could probably name ways, but they are not part of my memories from that time. Not really."

"That is all right, my prince. But if you can… do you remember anything after you fell? Were you—were you conscious?"

Another long silence, and then Loki whispered, "Yes," in such an anguished voice that Natasha was immediately ready to believe the reports of his torture. Not that she needed his testimony to confirm it, the evidence was there in his body, but hearing it in his voice made it all the more real.

"I fell for so long," he said, voice trembling. "It was cold, and dark, and so silent, I screamed just to fill it, and my screams were not enough. I feared I would go mad. Perhaps I did. I know I prayed wholeheartedly for an ending. Prayed that anyone might find me, and then…” Natasha could hear the tears in his voice. "And then they did."

"I am so sorry, my prince."

"Why?" His voice sharpened again. "Why, what do you know of it?"

"I only know the evidence that we found in your own flesh and bone, my prince. The scars you bear that were not there before your fall. I know not how you received them, though of course I can guess, based on the wounds themselves."
"Ah. I… I see. My apologies, Healer."

"We searched, my prince. If we had but found you, we would have moved Yggdrasil itself to bring you home."

"…Thank you."

"Can you go on? I do not ask for details; you know I only wish to confirm your memory, and see where the gaps begin."

"I can. I do not… you are right, I will not give details, but I assure you I remember them all too clearly. Except…"

"Yes, my prince?"

"You need to know this," said Loki, and his voice went suddenly ragged with fear. "You need to prepare. It was—it was…" He took a breath that was so shaky Natasha almost thought he was going to lose all coherence and just sob.

"My prince, you do not need to—"

"The Titan," said Loki, and Natasha heard Eir gasp in outright shock. "The Mad Titan. Please don't make me say his name. But it was he… his lieutenants, who found me."

"Oh my prince," said Eir, and Natasha really really wanted to be able to ask who this was. "I will not ask whether you are certain, I will not patronize you that way. You would never say such a thing if it were not so."

"I wish it were not," said Loki, almost whimpering. Natasha heard him swallow heavily, and take a deep breath. "I wish it were not," he repeated, more calmly.

"I can only ask how it is you managed to survive," said Eir, in tones of awe.

"The luck of the Norns," said Loki in careful tones. "Whether it was good luck or bad I cannot say. More specifically, I survived because he had a use for me. He is… he was… interested in my ability to sky walk. I was unique, in his experience. He had never seen such a thing as what I could do, and he wished to steal the ability and put it to use for himself."

"Ohh, my prince. I am so sorry that you had to endure even a moment in the presence of such an awful being."

Loki said nothing.

"I must wonder, however, after being held captive by such a monster as that, how you could possibly see yourself in the same light."

Loki still said nothing at first, but then Natasha heard him mumble, "It made sense at the time…" More clearly, though with desperate sadness, he went on, "You said my identity was harmed; perhaps I was still too unbalanced to think rationally. I saw myself as, as a beast in its proper place, among beasts, ruled by a beast."

"Oh, Loki."

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "It made sense at the time. In a way I suppose it still does."

There was a rustle of fabric, and a long silence. Natasha almost wished she could peer in through the
window, but had a feeling she'd only be spying on an embrace meant to reassure them both.

"I'm all right," Loki said finally, his voice muffled.

"I am not certain I am," said Eir, and Loki managed a laugh at that. "Can you go on, my prince? I will not ask for specifics of what you endured, but I do still need to assess your memory."

"I understand." He took another deep breath and let it out shakily. "And thank you. My memory of that time is all too clear, until… hm."

"Yes?"

"There was pain, and torment, and there were of course attempts to persuade me to give up my secrets. The leader… I will speak with the diviners and the archivists about him. Perhaps they will know more of his objectives. But he wanted me to retrieve an Infinity Gem. Hidden on Midgard. I believe it was the Space Gem."

"Did you agree?"

"…not at first. I don't think I agreed at all. I was nearly ready to break, but I still had not given in, and then… I remember a weapon, a bladed staff, with a glowing blue gem caught between its blades. I thought he was going to stab me, to kill me for my refusal, but … after that, all I remember is blue. And… and peace. Everything seemed to make sense."

Natasha sat up straighter.

"What sorts of things, my prince?"

"What he wanted. My… my purpose. I felt—I felt whole, in a way I hadn't since I discovered I was not Aesir. It all seemed so clear, and perfect and beautiful. Of course I would—oh."

"My prince?"

"I came to Midgard, didn't I? It's what he had wanted. For me to sky walk, or teach them how to do so, so that I or they could find the Space Gem and retrieve it for him. I remember that weapon, but I also recall wielding it. I don't… I must have come to Midgard. Did I succeed?"

"You did not, my prince. The gem, if that is what you found, is safe now. It no longer resides on Midgard."

"I remember… I-I think I remember… even though it seemed so perfect, and so clear, it was as though there was a part of me that knew that he must not get the Space Gem. The things he could do with it… the mortals would have had not even the faintest inkling of its true capabilities. They could not possibly have defended themselves from one who could truly master it. I… I do not know that I… but I think I attempted to—to fail. To perform the tasks he set for me, but to perform them badly. I don't… I can't remember, why can't I remember?"

"If the weapon was what we speculate it to be, then you were compromised by no less than the Mind Gem itself."

Natasha heard Loki gasp, sharply through his nose. "Th-that… that would explain it, I suppose, yes."

Lady Eir gave him a moment to compose himself, or take a drink, or something similar. "Is there anything else from that time that you do remember?" she asked finally.
"Well… glimpses, I suppose. Words, here and there. Nothing with any context. A battle in a cavern, someone offering me a drink. I… may have hallucinated an opponent—he was dark of skin like Heimdall, but one-eyed like Odin, if ever I were to manufacture someone to intimidate me and whom I might despise…"

"No, that one is real, my prince." Eir sounded amused, and Natasha couldn't blame her. She suspected even Fury would get a kick out of that description.

"Is he?"

"I have met and spoken with him, myself."

"Yes, well, I also remember a creature the size of a jotun but broader, with green skin, and we… how odd. I remember him… quite clearly. I—there isn't any blue, in my memory, after."

Natasha blinked. Cognitive recalibration, on a guy who could take a hit harder than any human could dish out? That was definitely going into her report.

"I could not say whether such a being were real or not, my prince," said Lady Eir. "I can say that the mortals are capable of wonders, these days. They have advanced much in the past few centuries. I would suggest that perhaps you ask the humans, should you choose to speak with them. After you have recovered a bit more, of course."

"I could, but. But if what you say is true… these people would hate me for whatever I did here, surely; they would not wish to speak to me except to arrange a punishment. How—did you present yourselves as my captors, that they would not be your enemies as well?" It would have been a valid strategy, Natasha had to admit, if it hadn't been for the children present when SHIELD arrived. Loki had only just woken up, though; he might not even be aware that there were any kids on site, or how many people lived here.

"We did not," said Eir.

"And how did you come to be on Midgard, in any case? I must have sky walked here to obtain the Space Gem, but if I were defeated as you say…"

"You were defeated, my prince. If you intended to fail, then you failed quite well indeed. You were brought back to Asgard for a time, and then you were attacked, as I mentioned." Eir sighed, then continued, "We returned with you to Midgard in hopes that the quieter seidr here would aid in your recovery."

"But the mortals allowed this?"

"We did not exactly ask their permission," said Eir, sounding amused again. "But when they found us, we presented our proofs that you were as much a victim as they were, of the depredations of one whom they had not yet met. We presented evidence that you were— forgive me, my prince—that you were a puppet, in a similar manner to what happened with some of their own warriors, though of course we had no way to know who it was manipulating your words and deeds. It took time, but they were convinced."

"Surely not."

"I will tell you what Herkja told them, my prince: you may believe me or not as you wish, but that will not change the facts. They may yet be wary of you, and with good cause given their experiences with you, but they cannot argue the evidence they have seen and tested with their own eyes." There was a rustling of fabric, and Natasha imagined Eir leaning forward to put her hand on Loki's
shoulder, or some other comforting gesture. "They recognize that, at the very least, you were coerced to attack their world."

"I attacked… their world? The entire realm?" Loki actually sounded distressed over this.

"I am afraid I do not have all the details on that, my prince. It would be best in any case for you to remember what you can on your own before we fill your head with stories, when none of us were there."

"I suppose I could speak to the humans, if need be," said Loki dubiously. "But what you say is probably true. I've become a monster, after Jotunheim."

"No, my prince," Eir soothed. "No, I am certain that is not the case."

"Everything I believed about myself—if Odin could lie to me about being his own son, how can I trust anything else of what I believe?"

"You know that we will all assist you in regaining your center, my prince. The identity of a seidmadr is a powerful, precious thing. For what it is worth, I don't believe you have lost it, but it will have been altered by circumstances."

Loki huffed, what might have been a tired, sad little laugh. "Is this where you reassure me that I am who I have always been?"

"Not entirely, my prince," said Eir. "Although in some ways that is true. It appalls me that you did not know you were jotun, for example, yet you have always been. Your work with your identity there will consist mainly in accepting what has always been the case. On the other hand," she went on, overriding whatever Loki had been about to say, "it is also true that your experiences have shaped and changed you. You will need to revise what you know of yourself, and come to a new understanding."

"Perhaps by the time I have done that my seidr will have healed," said Loki.

"We can but hope, my prince."

The talk shifted to inanities after that, and before long Eir said her farewells and left Loki to his rest. Natasha heard nothing from Loki's chamber other than a few sighs and the rustle of fabric, until finally all fell quiet. She stood quietly, made sure she hadn't left her apple behind, and prepared to head back to her apartment to make her report.

"I trust you heard everything you needed to?" Eir's voice startled her, and Natasha instinctively reached for her weapon, a split second before her brain caught up and reminded her that Eir, if no one else in the encampment, was immune to bullets. The healer, for her part, did not do anything except tuck her hands into her sleeves and raise an eyebrow at Natasha.

"Lady Eir," she said, pasting on a smile and moving closer. "I didn't expect to see you—"

"Save your words, mortal; we both know you were eavesdropping on what was meant to be a confidential talk with my patient." Eir sighed, and dropped some of her irritation. "And we both know why. Your superiors are not easily satisfied, are they?"

"We're here to learn everything we can," said Natasha.

"Including things that are not your business to know."
Natasha smiled again, a bit more genuine this time. "You've met SHIELD, Lady Eir; as far as they're concerned, everything is their business to know."

"Hmph." Eir stepped past her, but indicated with a nod that Natasha was to follow. "And do they plan to further violate my patient's security, the way they did when they first came? Their eagerness to treat us like especially interesting animals did them no favors."

"No, it didn't," said Natasha frankly. "They got impatient, and it made them sloppy. I've been recommending a slower approach ever since, and it seems to have been working. They've backed off and let us make our own assessments."

"You and the other mortals in your group. Our guests."

Natasha nodded in acknowledgment. "We do know how important that is to your people, and we've worked hard not to violate hospitality. But Loki is still an unknown quantity to us. Yes, he was a victim, but now that he is awake, will he be dangerous? Does he have information that is of value to us? Those are the kinds of answers my superiors are after."

"Then I suggest that the next time you go for one of your lessons—again, save your breath, we've not stopped you because you are not harming anyone, including yourself—you ought to speak to Vigdis about a being named Thanos. Also called the Mad Titan."

"That's the person Loki named earlier? The real mastermind behind the attacks?"

Eir eyed her up and down, seeming to guess what she was thinking. "I assure you, Lady Natasha, no one who knows that name speaks it falsely. Thanos is a being who inspires terror in even the most powerful circles in Yggdrasil. You may have noticed, Loki was too afraid even to speak his name, lest he draw the Titan's attention here." Eir stopped, and turned to face Natasha fully. "If His Highness says that he was held captive by that one, I shall believe his every word and not question. I suggest you do the same."

Chapter End Notes

This story continues to give me trouble, but I'm still working on it when the mood strikes. Thank you all for your patience with the slow updates.
Thor and the Seidkonur

Chapter Summary

Thor goes around Asgard trying to get information from those few seidkonur who haven't fled the realm. It does not go as he expects.

Chapter Notes

Okay, folks, I still am not sure about this chapter. Things got weird, but the words flowed really quickly. So, this is either the point where this damn fic finally finds its feet, or the point where it goes completely off the rails. I'm still not quite sure which. I am positive that you all will let me know what you think. :) You're pretty wonderful that way.

The first people Thor approached were visibly afraid of him.

"No, Your Highness, we do not know where he has gone," they would say, or something like it:

"No, Your Highness, we do not know how to speak with him. That lies outside our area of skill."

"No, Your Highness, we do not know what would convince him to return."

And those were the ones who spoke to him at all. The few seidr users left in Asgard, perhaps two or three dozen in all the realm, were in fact more eager to hide from their crown prince than to speak with him. More than one servant insisted that their master or mistress was not at home, and would not return for the foreseeable future. Some did not open their doors to him at all, which was insulting and bordering on criminal, yet for once Thor was trying to be less demanding; less forceful.

More like his mother or his brother, since these were ostensibly their people more than they were Thor's.

Still, when Thor looked over his shoulder as he was walking away from the fifth such, and spotted someone in an upper window twitching their curtain closed as soon as he spotted them, well. He may have lost his temper just a little.

Yes, yes, the servant was pale and visibly shaking when he ordered him to fetch his mistress, but Thor could not find it in him to feel sorry.

Seidr users. If they weren't women, they would all be cowards.

"Is that what you think of us, truly, Your Highness?" asked the woman who stood at the top of the stair, while he paced at its foot.

He turned to glare up at her. If she was going to read his thoughts, she could find her own way to deal with what she found there. "You certainly hide like cowards. I wish only to speak to you."
"No," she said, descending the steps one by one. At least she didn't act scared as a rabbit when he looked at her. "You wish to speak at us, and make demands of us, and force us to listen and obey."

"I am your prince!"

"Loki was our prince."

"And I am as well, just as much. More so, witch, for I will one day be your king. It would be wise for you to speak with me now."

"I care not that you are the get of Odin's loins," spat the woman, eyes wide with rage. "Loki was our prince, for he was a seidmadr like us. He cared for us and had dealings with us on a daily basis. He showed us the respect we deserve. Do you even know my name, hammer-carrier? Or is 'witch' sufficient title for your interests?"

Thor stopped, and felt the red rising to his cheeks. Once again he had let his temper control him. Had he learned nothing from his banishment? If only these women weren't so difficult to deal with!

"I… apologize, lady," he said, the words bitter on his tongue. "I am… frustrated. I wish to speak to anyone who might aid me, yet you all hide as though I am some terrible threat to you. I have spent the day trying to find someone to answer my questions, to no avail, and my… my displeasure got the better of me. I am your prince. I, I should be welcome in every home in Asgard—"

"And it pains you that you are not. In fact, it surprises you that you are not. Doesn't it?"

"Well, yes. What could I possibly have done—"

He was cut off by the sound of her scoff, as she looked down at him, still several steps above him on the stair. "If you do not know the answer to that question, then there is not a seidkona left in all Asgard who will help you."

"I have never harmed a single magic user in this entire realm!"

"No? You lie to yourself, then. What of your brother?"

"That was an accident." And moreover, none of that had been Thor's doing. He'd brought his brother back to face justice for his crimes, no more. He'd done as his father commanded—no more, and no less. Was that not the duty of any citizen of Asgard?

"An accident, you say," growled the woman, approaching another couple of steps with her eyes narrowed. "An accident, that his own father and brother did not realize that trying to rip his seidr from his body would be harmful. That it could very well kill him, as slowly and as painfully as any torturer could hope for. An accident, that having been his family for centuries, neither one of you took even a moment to learn this much about him?" She stopped again, still above him and out of his reach, and her hands sparkled with rose-and-blue energy. "Norns save us all from the sort of willful ignorance that leads to such accidents."

"Lady, I—"

"No, I will not speak with you. Even if I knew where they had taken Loki, I would not tell you, for you would only drag him back here to appease your own conscience, uncaring of whether or not you made his suffering worse thereby."

"I would not do such a thing!"
"You already have, Your Highness," she said, and Thor felt a pang as he realized she truly believed that. "And I will not be a party to it happening again." She waved a hand, and the doors behind him opened wide. "One piece of advice I will give you: go to the temple."

"Lady—"

"You trespass in my home, prince; I did not offer you hospitality after you forced your way inside. You have outstayed your welcome, and I would have you leave now, under your own volition."

Thor's eyes narrowed, his temper beginning to rise again. "You say that as if you could make me leave yourself. As if mere seidr would be enough to move a warrior of Asgard."

"I could." She smiled sourly. "But for courtesy's sake I would prefer not to."

"Do you threaten me?"

"No more so than you threatened me," the woman said, "when you tried to remind me that you will be king one day and that my obedience is all that matters to you." She shook her head at him. "You still believe that we are only drafters or healers, and incapable of any feats of strength. You still believe we are nothing compared to the 'might of Asgard', forgetting that without us, the realm is collapsing. We are the might of Asgard, Your Highness, and though Loki's punishment was too high a price to pay for this knowledge, I look forward to the day that you and the rest of the kingdom finally begin to realize it."

The seidkona—Thor never did learn her name—directed him to the houses of two other women, as well as to the temple, and suggested he start with the priests and volur who remained.

The priestess he spoke to first also refused to give her name.

"Names have power, young prince," she said, "and your kind have exercised quite enough power over us lately, I should think."

"My kind?"

"The dead-veined thugs. The lumbering bodies who think themselves powerful, when they merely wear a coat of seidr or carry toys imbued with it." She closed her eyes and began to sway back and forth, reciting, "The half-blind wolves who snarl and snap, and lunge against leashes they wot not they wore."

"The warriors, the people who aren't seidkonur," Thor managed to puzzle out.

"Very good, Highness," said the priestess with false sweetness. "Why, it's almost as if you've a brain in your head."

Thor frowned at her, irritation giving way to tired resentment. "Is it my lot to be insulted by every last one of you I try to speak with today?"

"That depends; have you earned it?"

"Well, I thought not!"

"Hm. How quaint. His brother he brings to brutality, who treads now the track between hearth and Hel; the purity of his pain wrenches and rends his suffering soul... yet woman's words wound the
warrior." She glanced up at him and crooned, shaping an exaggerated pout. "Poor baby."

"What will it take to convince you all that I did not know what would happen to him?!"

"What makes you think we care?" she retorted, eyes snapping back into focus with a flash of gold. "You have no excuse. Your ignorance means only that you are your father's son. His ignorance is reprehensible; that he taught you never to think or question does not absolve you of what you aided him to do." She tilted her head, her entire demeanor changing. "Are you not your mother's son as well?"

Thor looked away. "I thought I was."

"Hm. And what of her teachings have you carried with you, throughout your life?"

He could not answer.

The next priest was worse. Thor was pretty sure he was a seidmadr and not a real woman, but he (or she) refused to take off her (or his) veil the entire time.

"Have you ever seen what happens when a magpie dies?" asked the priest.

"What does that have to do with my brother?"

"Magpies are corvids, you see. Intelligent and social. Ravens will kill each other but refuse to eat one another, did you know that?"

Thor gritted his teeth and tried to tease meaning out of the priest's words. Assuming there was any to be found and he wasn't being led on yet another useless chase.

"You were talking of magpies, not ravens," he said, pleased that he'd at least managed to force the words out in a nearly-civil tone.

"They hold funerals for each other," said the priest. "When one bird is found dead, the others surround it and call out, sometimes for an hour or more. If the bird had a mate, the mate will stand by the body and push at it, trying to revive it, and will lead the others in their calling and crying." The priest looked him up and down. "If too many birds are found dead in the same area, the whole flock will leave, never to return. They even teach the hatchlings to stay away."

Well, that metaphor at least was easy enough to decipher. "Is there a way to entice them to return?"

"They like bright, shiny things," said the priest. He, or she, smiled brightly, a flash of teeth visible through the veil. "But of course, if they are not here to see them, your baubles will be useless."

Thor sighed. "I know that. That is one of the reasons I must find him—so I can apologize and convince him to return!"

"Convince whom? I was talking about magpies."

The last person Thor sought out was the völva, partly because she lived the farthest away, and partly because the volur were… strange. Like the priests, they consulted the forces of Yggdrasil, trying to
determine what a person's wyrd—their path, their fated journey through life—might be. Unlike the priests, they tended to keep the information they found to themselves. They were less teachers and more seekers of the deep mysteries. One asked for their aid at one's peril, because it was impossible to predict what price they might demand in return.

Volur delved into energies that were strong enough to warp reality, so it only made sense that they ended up warped in turn. Thor had saved visiting her for last because he thought he might need to brace himself to handle her, but after dealing with the two priests and the lady, he was starting to think he should have seen the völva first, while he was still fresh. Instead he came to her at nearly the end of the day, frustrated and tired.

Perhaps she would take pity on him, and tell him what he needed to know. Or perhaps she would decide she was too much of a hermit to deal with him, and send him on his way. Thor was fairly certain, by this point, that he would almost welcome it if she did refuse to speak to him.

Instead, when he arrived at the little shrine, an ancient, tiny structure on the other side of Asgard that was said to have been built by Buri's own hands, he found the door standing open and the völva herself sitting on an overturned bucket just outside, her hands tucked inside the sleeves of her black robe. Her eyes were shut, and Thor could not tell if she were asleep or merely sunning herself in the final rays before nightfall.

He climbed down from the saddle a respectful distance away and called softly, so as not to disturb her rest if she were truly asleep. "Greetings, lady."

"Greetings, Thor Odinson. Have you a gift?"

Thor blinked for a moment in confusion, before remembering the tradition. At this particular shrine, it was customary to bring a small token, out of respect for the Norns. He'd forgotten.

He hid a grimace and thought quickly, then pulled a dagger and its sheath from out of his boot. Another idea occurred to him, and he unclasped the amber necklace he was wearing; the pendant was carved exquisitely, and had been a gift from his friends at the previous Yule celebration.

Finally, remembering something his mother had said once, he knelt before the woman and held out his gifts, one in each hand. "You may choose, good völva," he said.

"Choose?" She seemed amused, and still hadn't opened her eyes. "The warlike gift that is most like your personality, or the shiny bauble that you think might appease me. Are those my only options?"

He lowered his hands, feeling his face turn red once again. "I apologize, völva. I had forgotten the custom, and did not think to bring anything else."

"Ah. Truth, and something approaching humility. Those are better." As she sat up, finally glancing his way, she made a little gesture, and both Thor's hands were suddenly grasping empty air. "As is sacrifice."

The völva moved to stand, slowly, as if her joints ached. Thor stood as well, but resisted the instinct to reach out and help her. Volur were considered so sacred that touching them was strictly forbidden.

"Well, you're courteous enough to me, at least," she said, "even if you did think to bully your way through your meetings with the other seidkonur of the realm."

Thor grimaced. "You know of such things?"

"The magpies told me," she said cheerfully, and he bit back a sigh of exasperation. "You took your
time getting here, didn't you?"

"I had hoped to have my answers before now, and thus have no need to disturb your meditations," he replied, and she smiled indulgently and led him inside.

The shrine was little more than a two-room stone hut, with the front space containing an altar to the Norns and a depiction of the Three Sisters that was so ancient, it consisted only of three stones set into the surface of the altar, rather than a statue of the Sisters themselves: one white, one black, and one red, arranged in a triangle. As she passed it, the völva reached out and yanked on one of the stones, and Thor discovered that they were all resting on a revolving plate in the altar, making the trio spin in a blur. Thor wasn't sure he wanted to know which Norn would end up facing the entryway or what that might mean.

Behind the altar was a second doorway, which Thor had to duck under, leading to what must be the völva's living quarters.

There wasn't much: a haphazard collection of blankets and furs in one corner, all mismatched; a table and two stools near the central firepit, beside which was one crate filled with wood scraps and another filled with dishes; a beautifully-etched copper basin and pitcher, incongruous with the poverty of the rest of the hut; and a series of pegs and hooks along the walls and ceiling, from which hung a collection of dried herbs and trinkets, everything from gauzy scarves to children's dolls, to jewelry and daggers like Thor's. In fact, after waving him to a seat on one of the creaking stools, she reached up to one of the hooks and gestured, and Thor's own gifts materialized out of nowhere, joining the clutter as if they had always been part of it.

"Sacrifice," she said quietly. "Hm. Yes. Perhaps."

There was no one else in the little hut, but Thor was still certain she was not speaking to him.

Dropping to a seat on the other stool, the völva leaned forward and plucked a bowl and a ladle out of the crate of dishes beside the fire. She dipped the ladle into the pot, filled the bowl, then took a sip as if testing its flavor.

"Why have you come, Thor Odinson?"

He blinked, nonplussed. "I… Forgive me, völva, I thought you already knew that."

"Consider it tradition," she replied. "You have to tell me what you want, before I can decide to give it to you."

"Well… Mother wishes me to speak to the seidkonur who have left Asgard, and see if we might find a way to persuade them to return. Asgard will have need of them; there are rumors that the other realms know we are weakened by their loss, and move to make war upon us."

She passed him the bowl and waited until he drank. It tasted strange; salty, and a little bitter. There was an odd aftertaste that got up into his nose and reminded him of flowers, somehow.

"That is what your mother wishes," said the völva. "I asked why you had come."

"I… Father sent me—"

"I care not for the errand he set for you. Those are their reasons for sending you, but not your reason for coming. Is it only that you are an obedient little errand boy, with no will of your own, or is there something else you desire?"
Thor frowned, annoyed. "I have my own will."

"Yet you ever obey your father's—well, except when your temper is roused; then you are a spoiled boy who does as he pleases."

"That is not—that is no longer true," said Thor carefully. "Though it is true that I am not best pleased today."

"Because?"

"Because no one will answer my questions directly! I wish to find my brother and bring him home."

He took another swallow of the broth, or tea, or whatever it was. As strange and unpleasant as it tasted, he found himself thirsty for more of it.

"Mm. Why?" Thor growled. "What do you mean why? He is my brother, and I wish him to come home."

"And what does he wish?"

"Well I hardly know that, do I—he is gone and I cannot simply ask him! I wish to find him so that I can ask."

"And what would you wish to know of him, young prince?"

At that, Thor quieted. "Whether he could forgive us, for what happened to him."

"Why should he wish to do that?"

"What?" Again he took a mouthful from his bowl. It was nearly half gone now.

"After what you did, why should Loki wish to forgive you? Why do you crave his forgiveness so much?"

"Because he is my brother, and I wish to have him at my side once more."

"Hmph." The völva narrowed her eyes and looked him up and down, disgusted. "You offered me sacrifice, truth, and humility. Do you now take them away?"

"I… I don't understand."

"You speak of what you want, and why I should aid you. You speak of how you demand that Loki forgive you and return home, and then you claim that his place is by your side." The witch's eyes seemed to glow as she leaned toward him, over the fire. "When was he ever at your side, young prince? When did you ever stop yourself from shoving him into the shadows, so that you could claim the sun and the glory for yourself?" She sat back again, clearly displeased. "And when have you ever paused to think of what he might want, or need, from you?"

Thor finished his drink, and with a gesture, she made the bowl vanish. It was a little perturbing, partly because of the constant seidr use (it had taken ages, but Father had finally made Loki stop doing that, claiming it was rude), and partly because Thor was still thirsty for more.

Humility. Humility. It would be rude to demand more of the drink, no matter how thirsty he was. He was a guest here, and he would honor that.

Truth… "I was… I was banished for starting a war with the jotnar," he said slowly. The memory
burned in his gut. "After I returned, I thought I had learned much. But a few weeks ago, the Lady Sif—an old friend of mine, a shield-sister—claimed that I have not learned anything. She accused me of believing my father to be infallible. Of not thinking for myself."

"Her voice dropped to a whisper, the burn in his stomach growing stronger. "She said I claim to love Loki but I treat him like a possession. She has not spoken with me since."

Now the völva's eyes glowed with something like satisfaction. "I see. Truth. Now we are getting somewhere, young prince. So tell me—what is it that you want?"

"I want… I want my brother to return to me, but… I… Lady Sif says he was crippled so badly he may never be himself again, if he survives. I wish to be by his side and help him recover, if I can. I wish to beg on my knees for him to forgive my part in all this—I did not know, truly, I thought the punishment would be identical to mine own, I would never have wished such grave harm upon him! I wish for him to come home, and be my brother again."

"Humility," said the völva, nodding as if in agreement.

Tears welled up in Thor's eyes, and he brushed them away with an arm that moved stiffly, aching. "But I don't… everyone keeps alluding to it, I suppose it must be true… I do not know what Loki would wish. Nor do I know, as everyone keeps asking, why he would want to return here. Except… except this is his home. We are his family, and we love him and—"

He cut off with a grunt, as the pain in his stomach flared, and began to spread.

"Sacrifice," whispered the völva, and Thor looked up at her in confusion. "Tell me, young prince. Have you ever been betrayed?"

"I—w—what?" His tongue was dry, and he felt parched with thirst for more of that drink.

"You heard me: have you ever been betrayed? Has someone you trusted, someone you cared for, ever turned on you and hurt you deeply?"

"I—suppose Loki, perhaps, when I was banished, but—but I still want him to…nngh!" His gut burned, and now so did his wrists, his elbows, his knees, and his ankles. His hips felt broken as they ground into the hard wood of the stool he sat on. He took a breath and his ribs felt tight, as if they were healing after a bad break. His lungs ached as though he had been running in frigid weather. "Völva, forgive me… I fear something is wrong with—"

"Have you ever been raped?"

Thor looked up, eyes wide. "W—what sort of question—?"

"Have you ever had your body violated? Had what was most precious, what belonged to you most deeply, ripped from you when you had always thought it to be an intrinsic part of you, inextricable? Have you ever felt as though your own soul might not fit in your body anymore, because you had been violated so deeply that the two might have been sundered, one from the other? As though you might never be whole again?"

"I—n—no—völva—"

"It hurts, doesn't it?" The witch's eyes glowed as she stared him down across the fire, her expression eager. Thor's own eyes widened in realization, and horror.

"You? Why—"
"So that you understand, young prince, how very angry we are with you. And with your father, but he is too much a coward to come and speak to us himself, so he will have to witness your suffering from Hlidskjalf."

The pain spread until Thor could barely focus, and it was all he could do not to scream.

"Heim—Heimdall—"

"Pff. He cannot see you, boy," said the witch cheerfully. She reached up as if to pat his cheek affectionately, and when she touched the sensation ripped through him like fire. Thor fell off the stool, convulsing in agony, and landing on the stone floor of the hut only made it worse.

He screamed.

"Odin can see us, though," she said; he could barely hear her through the haze of his own pain. "I made sure of it. He will not reach you in time. You offered me gifts, you see, and you came on his behalf, so I will take them from him:

"Truth.

"Humility.

"Sacrifice."
"Ah, Lady Natasha. Welcome back, and good day to you," said the archivist. Her name was Vigdis, and she was the most delicate-looking woman Natasha had ever seen; slight of build, fine-featured, and by appearances no more than fifteen, though she had laughed when Natasha had mentioned it.

"I am older than the Lady Eir," she had said in amusement, "but care ages her prematurely and a life of contentment keeps me young. Yet I thank you."

Today, however, after they exchanged greetings, Vigdis tilted her head and looked at Natasha thoughtfully. "You have something to ask me, I think," she said. "More than your usual questions about lessons and theory."

"I do," said Natasha, sliding into a seat beside Vigdis’s desk. "If you have time to answer it."

"Ask, and we shall see."

"It was something Eir told me," said Natasha, bending the truth only a little. "I think she was talking with Loki. She said that we humans might want to know more about someone called Thanos."

Vigdis... swallowed heavily and blinked rapidly two or three times. "A-are you—are you quite certain that was the name she gave you?" she asked, in a voice that had gone thready with shock.

Natasha nodded, and as she watched, Vigdis went noticeably pale. In fact, she turned nearly green, and swayed on her seat. Natasha started forward to catch her before she could fall over. "Vigdis?"
It was a moment before the librarian could speak again. "Did—did Lady Eir indicate whether or not she thought His Highness had been… ha-had encountered that being, during his travails?"

"Vigdis, are you all right?"

"I am well enough. Please, just answer my question, Lady Natasha."

"If I understood correctly,‘ and she certainly had, she'd eavesdropped the whole thing after all, "Loki gave her that name himself. That after he fell through the… you call it the Void? After he fell, Thanos was the one who found him."

Vigdis brought her hands to her mouth and actually whimpered.

"Vigdis? Please, what is it? You're really beginning to worry me."

"I…” She blinked again, then shook herself as if waking from a nightmare. "Just a moment."

With a complicated gesture, she materialized a scroll in front of her, in an ancient-looking metal case. She passed her hands over the case, down and then up, and Natasha watched as light spread out and shaped itself into filaments and letters that sank into the case and vanished.

Finally, Vigdis opened the scroll case a little way and turned it so that Natasha could see it. "Tell me whether or not you can read this," she said.

It was Natasha's turn to look up in surprise. "You haven't done that even for the children's magic books I've been looking at."

"This is more important," insisted Vigdis. "You mortals will need to know of the information contained here." She pushed the scroll toward Natasha again. "Please."

So Natasha reached out and pulled the scroll closer, opening it a little wider. A History of Titan, Its Downfall, and the Rise of Thanos, she read, in perfect Russian.

"Yes, I can understand this," she said.

"Good. Any of you who read this scroll, so long as it remains here in Skýli, should be able to grasp its contents."

"Is it all right if we make copies of it?"

"Your machines will only collect an exact copy of the original text, not what you read in your own languages," said Vigdis, "but if you wish to take the time to transcribe it in your tongue, then you may do so. This is not information to be hidden. The Nine Realms may well be at risk."

Natasha's eyebrows rose at that. "Is there anything else you can tell me?" she asked.

"Everything that is relevant will be contained there. What else you may need to know, only His Highness could tell you. For now—forgive me, but our conversation must wait. For now, I must confirm what you have suggested, and then carry out a rather important errand." Vigdis stood and sketched a hasty bow before walking past Natasha to the exit.

Wha—Vigdis, wait!"

But the other woman vanished into thin air, leaving Natasha in an empty library.
"Hey, you gonna come down to the hot springs?" Clint was asking; Natasha had gotten so absorbed in her work that she actually hadn't heard him approach; not consciously, anyway, because the knife was out of her hand and quivering in the wall before she registered that he was speaking. "Whoa, hey! Bad mood?"

"No, uh—sorry, I was distracted." Only around Clint would she ever show embarrassment like this.

"Yeah, I can tell." Now that it was safe, he leaned in over her shoulder to peer at the scroll. "What have you got there, anyway?"

"Vigdis gave it to me. To us, really."

"You mean you didn't steal it?"

Natasha rolled her eyes. "You're hilarious."

"No, I just meant, they've been pretty serious about not letting you look at much, or take it out of the library."

"They seemed to think this was pretty important."

"A History of Titan..." Clint read off the case, tipping his head to the side. "As in, 'Clash of'?"

"Not exactly." Natasha leaned back in her seat and ran her hands through her hair. "We're going to want to get the team together. And possibly Fury."

"And you're absolutely sure this Thanos guy is for real?" asked Fury, after she gave her report.

"Director, I said the name to Vigdis and I thought she was going to pass out. None of the Aesir here are afraid of us, or even all that concerned about the rest of Asgard finding them—but they're petrified of him."

"And what are we supposed to do about him?" asked Bruce. "Some big, space alien overlord that scares the Aesir? How are we going to handle something like that?"

"That's what I'm still trying to find out," sighed Natasha. "I'm transcribing as fast as I can, but it would be easier if I weren't translating from Russian to English."

"Russian?"

Clint spoke up, "Apparently Vigdis put a spell on the scroll so we could all read it easily. Nat's native language ain't English, so..."

"We probably all ought to take a look at it," suggested Steve. "Maybe we'll each catch details that other people would miss."

"If there's anything technical there, sure," said Tony.

"Congratulations, Avengers," said Fury; "it looks like you've gotten your first collective homework assignment."

"Planets? This guy has destroyed entire planets?"

"He's telepathic, too, apparently," said Steve, "so that thing where no one around here says his name
too often is apparently actually a good idea for self-defense."

Three days had passed, and the team had spent each of those days indoors, all of them tapping away on their tablets and laptops or scribbling in spiral-bound notebooks, with the scroll itself laid out almost completely unrolled down the floor in front of their seats. Each of them had taken a section for themselves, copied it, then moved to a new section; the idea was to create several copies and compare them to see if there were any variations in how the magic translator spell worked for each person.

"He can't actually have a range that huge…" said Clint. Looking up, Tony thought he looked scared; with good reason, all things considered.

"The scroll says he still has possession of the Mind Stone, but Eir and Loki are pretty confident that we have that now," said Natasha. "So his range is probably a lot smaller now."

"But still ridiculous," said Tony. "Damn telepathy mumbo-jumbo."

"His army, if this was accurate when it was written, should be much smaller now than it was," said Steve. "If that was all the Chitauri, then they're gone."

"It wasn't," said Bruce; "the numbers don't add up. But we still put a good dent in them anyway."

"They're not his only forces," said Clint.

"No, but they were the only ones in the vicinity of the Nine Realms," said Steve, "which I guess means us."

"But how would that matter?" asked Bruce. "He needed the Tesseract to open a portal and move those troops."

"No, he just needed it to open the shortcut," said Tony. "If he had to, the guy could still get them to come the long way around."

"Which would be worse," said Steve slowly, working it through. "No portal means no way to keep them out if they come."

"You think they will?" asked Clint.

"I think the guy doesn't like to share his toys, and has a dim view of insubordination," said Natasha. "Loki didn't bring him the Tesseract, took this Mind Gem from him if the scepter is what we think it is, and is still alive. Given the supposed obsession with collecting the gems—whatever they are, whatever they do—I have a pretty strong feeling that he'll be back sooner or later."

"Which will be just peachy for Earth," said Tony. He scrubbed his hands over his face and through his hair, making it stand on end. "I'm still a little pissed off at Loki for drawing this guy's attention to us."

"No, it was the Tesseract that did that," said Steve. "And probably SHIELD messing with it."

"Doors open both ways," said Clint quietly, appearing lost in thought.

"What do you mean?" asked Natasha.

Clint blinked, and came back to himself. "Selvig and the rest of the Pegasus team were trying to open a doorway to another dimension. I remember warning Fury when it started acting up, right before
Loki got here—doors open both ways. Makes sense that whatever was on the other side could see us rattling the doorknob."

"Another dimension… hang on, I just saw—" Bruce leaned forward, scanning the scroll on the floor. He’d placed himself down toward the tail end of the thing this afternoon, transcribing the most recent events or the end of the story, or whatever they wanted to call it. "Yeah, here it is. At the end of the last war with him, they couldn't kill, uh, him, but they managed to banish him. To another dimension."

There was a general reaction through the room, groans and facepalms and the rest. "Should have left the damn thing at the bottom of the ocean," growled Steve, standing up.

"Wait, where are you going?" asked Tony.

"I need to go hit things until I calm down."

By the time Steve left his little apartment, it was late afternoon by the sun, and everyone in the village that he would usually spar with was working at some task or other. Which was fine, except that it meant he couldn't find anyone to work out his anger with, like he would ordinarily have preferred to do; so instead, with a sigh, he turned toward Skyli’s outskirts and went for a run. There were patches of ice here and there to dodge, and of course the path itself was little more than a narrow hiking trail, but that was all to the good; it meant the activity was able to actually command Steve's attention rather allowing his thoughts to wander.

As a result, he had no idea how long he ran, but given his mood he didn't especially care. Steve ran out, away from the village and into the wilderness, until he felt his anger began to cool; then he turned around and began working his way back. The days were still incredibly short here in Iceland, and the sun was already setting by the time he returned.

Steve managed to make it back to his apartment without running into any of the other Avengers; probably they were still working on that scroll. Steve winced, though there was no one to see him. He should go back and assist them, he knew, but at the same time… every time he thought about the Tesseract he wanted to destroy things all over again.

He grabbed a towel and change of clothes and went to the hot springs.

The place was virtually deserted at this time of day, which suited Steve's mood just fine; he nodded to the handful of people who spotted him, mostly mothers with small children, but took himself to an unoccupied grotto and got to work, disrobing quickly and slipping into the water to scrub and then soak.

One by one, the other people left, and before too long Steve was able to just rest his head on the edge of the pool and think. What were humans supposed to do about this Thanos person anyway? Did Earth have a responsibility to step up, since they were the ones messing with the Tesseract in the first place? Steve didn't know, but he didn't really like Earth's chances if it were to come to a fight. A single Aesir had nearly kicked their butts last time, and he'd had his mind controlled by someone else. And whoever Thanos was, the Aesir themselves were terrified of him, so it stood to reason he was a lot more powerful than they were. How could humanity stand against that?

His musings were interrupted—not that they were really going anywhere in the first place—by the sound of quiet voices at the other end of the springs. The Aesir had built or found these springs, then expanded the pools to be large enough to bathe in, and roofed over them in a large echoing dome, with a central porthole that let in light and allowed reflections from the water to play across the
ceiling. The acoustics were great, as Steve had noticed on more than one occasion when the Aesir brought their musical instruments down to the water and turned a night of bathing into a more social occasion than the humans were used to. The main thing he'd noticed was that it was easy to hear voices clear on the opposite side of the dome, if one focused a little.

"That's it, my prince. Almost there."

Loki.

They hadn't heard anything about him in the past few days since he'd woken up, other than that he was recovering. Was he really able to get out of bed already, after having spent months near death?

Steve sat upright, but then at the last second decided not to lean forward and see. It didn't really seem right to hide and eavesdrop, but he didn't want to intrude on them by making himself known, either.

There was the soft splashing sound of someone stepping into the water, then a pause. A man's voice—Ottar's, perhaps—said something just a little too indistinct over the sound of the splashing.

Someone hissed. "Hot."

"Too much, my prince?"

"N-no. Just a contrast… from the snow outside."

"Take your time."

More water moved, much more quietly than before. "Will you give me your arm, my prince?"

Finally too curious not to look, Steve leaned forward. Ottar was standing, still clothed, waist-deep in the hot springs, with his back to Steve and facing Loki, who was propped between one of the healers and another sturdy-looking man. Loki was only about shin-deep into the water, halfway through peeling off the cream-colored robe he wore. Steve had not seen clothing like that on anyone else in the village, but he couldn't say whether that was because Loki was royalty, or because he was a patient in Skýli's hospital.

The healer calmly removed Loki's robe for him and draped it over one shoulder. Steve looked away as Loki, now completely naked and pale as a fish, stepped further into the water, assisted by Ottar and his other two attendants. After a moment, he glanced back cautiously; then, when he saw that Loki was in up to his waist, continued to watch.

"What would you like to do first, my prince?"

Loki shook his head, eyes falling shut. "Rest, I think." He sounded exhausted, and Steve wondered if he'd managed to walk the entire way here from the hospital, or if they'd had to carry him for part of it.

They got him further into the water, and as two of them watched from the edge, Ottar helped him wade over to the edge where benches had been carved into the stone. Steve watched as he sat, sighing in relief… then frowned as the sigh turned into a little moan before Loki visibly bit it back.

"My prince?"

"It doesn't hurt. Or, not as much as before." He opened weary eyes and looked up at his three helpers. "The water is acting as you thought it might. It doesn't," he sighed again, tipping his head back to rest against the edge of the pool, "I feel as though I have been in pain forever, and it has
"That is wonderful news, my prince," said the healer, kneeling down beside his head. "I shall be certain to tell Lady Eir and Lady Runa."

"In the meantime, I've no objection to staying here as long as possible," said Loki, and the others laughed quietly. Ottar waded back to the entrance to the pools and climbed out, sloshing and splattering water across the paving stones. The healer was saying something to Loki, but Steve couldn't hear it over the water noises; he could only see Loki frown in thought and then shake his head, lifting one hand out of the water to wave off whatever it was. The healer bowed a little from her spot on her knees, then offered Loki a little salute and rose gracefully to her feet. She didn't move far, Steve noticed, only to another bench back out of the "splash zone", where people often changed in and out of their clothing. She picked up a basket that was resting there and rummaged through it, and before long she was spinning wool into yarn.

The two men left completely, and the sounds of splashing died away until there was again only Steve, and now Loki, soaking in silence. Steve winced; the longer he stayed, the more it looked like he was spying on them.

Steve was nearly ready to take a page out of Tony's book, just climb on out of the water as bold as brass and completely unrepentant, when another woman came in and greeted both Loki and the healer who was monitoring him. Steve thought she might be one of the schoolteachers.

"Ottar said you are not in pain, my prince," she said; the inflection made it sound almost like a question.

"Not as much, no."

"May I join you?"

Loki smiled tiredly, and rolled his head to get a better look at her. "If I might have the honor of your name."

The teacher smiled back. "I am called Sibbe, my prince. I teach the ways of seidr to the youngest students. Lady Eir thought that perhaps my sensitivity and awareness of channels might be of use to you as you recover."

"I see." Loki sat a bit more upright, moving with a wince and a little grunt. "Then certainly, you may join me."

"I am honored, my prince," said Sibbe. She stood and without a hint of embarrassment began to undo the fastenings on her clothes. Steve looked away with a blush; he didn't think he'd ever quite get used to how casually the Aesir treated nudity. Here they were, talking about something like physical therapy if he understood the terms correctly, only they were both going to be completely naked and, and in a hot bath together.

There was the sound of water moving as Sibbe stepped into the water and took a seat at Loki's side; Steve waited until it stilled and they began talking before he looked back.

"You have practiced your meditations, my prince?"

"I have. It has been difficult, however. I find it a challenge not to reach for seidr, as I have always done, and then it burns."

"Of course, my prince," said Sibbe. "That makes perfect sense. The first thing we learn as children is..."
to feel the seidr, and the second is to reach for it. You are instead learning to feel the *channels* where your seidr dwells, and after centuries of reaching must train yourself not to do so—at least, temporarily."

"I wish someone would tell me what happened to *cause* this," Loki complained.

Sibbe paused. "You know why we do not…"

"I do." Loki sighed. "Lady Eir insists that she wants nothing to unduly influence my thoughts while I regain the memory of what happened. However, I should not be at all surprised to discover that I never recover this one; is it not uncommon with a severe injury for the mind to block it out?"

"I am afraid you would have to speak to the healers about that," said Sibbe, "as it is not my area of expertise. But come, my prince. Let us begin, shall we?"

Loki didn’t look too thrilled, but he acquiesced with a regal-looking nod.

Whatever they were doing, Steve could not make it out from his spot; all it looked like to him was a man and a woman sitting facing one another, with their eyes either closed or only half-open. Every now and again Loki would grimace and hiss a little; whenever that happened, Sibbe spoke quietly to him until he settled, and then they closed their eyes and kept going.

"Enough," Loki said finally, sagging back against the side of the pool. "I fear I have reached my limit, for the time being."

"Of course, my prince," said Sibbe, as the healer set down her spinning and approached them. "The fine control needed for this sort of exercise is quite demanding. You did well."

"I should hope I did well, I've been a seidmadr for hundreds of years," Loki groused, but he shook his head when Sibbe started to respond. "Pay no attention. I am merely frustrated at this *weakness.*" The healer rested a hand on the top of Loki's head and frowned briefly. "You have done yourself no further harm," she said, "and as for weakness, I am sure either Lady Runa or Lady Eir herself could remind you that you have lain near death for many months. You are recovering remarkably well, all things considered."

Loki frowned. "It is not in me to be content with my lot." He looked, to Steve, as if he wanted to say something more, but instead he shook his head again and sighed. "I shall endure as best I can, but I may go mad before I am able to walk more than twenty steps without exhaustion."

"Do you wish to remain here awhile?" asked the healer. "Perhaps you could swim a little, to strengthen your limbs."

"I am too worn even for that, today," said Loki. "Perhaps tomorrow. But I do wish to remain here for a little longer."

"Of course, my prince."

"Would that I could remain as well," said Sibbe, "but I must return to the school. Shall we meet again tomorrow, my prince?"

Loki nodded, still regal despite his obvious fatigue; the teacher gave Loki a little bow, then got up and waded to the pool’s entrance and climbed out, water sheeting off her naked form before Steve forced himself to look away.
Visions and Conversation

Chapter Summary

Thor, poisoned by the völva, has strange visions. Afterward, he and the völva discuss what he has learned.

Thor writhed, and screamed, and wept; he pissed and shat himself in the extremity of his agony, and the humiliation of it only added to his pain. He was going to die, and it would be an ugly, ignoble death… and he didn’t understand what he had done to earn it.

He fell backward, then, or seemed to, falling out of his body and back into memory.

He was a child, had just been given his first practice weapon, and was so excited to show his father… who sneered at him coldly and told him to stop wasting his time.

That … that’s not how it happened…

He was older, standing with his brother, being lectured for some mischief they both had done. Only Father looked at Loki with mild exasperation, and Thor with an expression of pure disgust.

He was in the marketplace, and Loki was greeted by the shopkeepers cheerfully, while Thor got polite nods, and when he looked over his shoulder, whispers and stares and smirks from the populace.

He was with his brother, and they were arguing about something, and Loki’s temper turned dark. Magic glowed at his fingertips, and Thor was afraid of him, for the briefest of moments.

He was with the Warriors Three, and Sif, and Loki, and they would not listen to him when he suggested a plan for their next adventure. Eventually Loki suggested the same plan, almost verbatim, and suddenly it was a grand idea. When Thor brought up that it was his idea first, they teased him for the next three hours about being so jealous.

He was with his family, eating dinner, and their mother smiled at him at least, but it seemed… condescending. As if she were merely humoring him to keep his temper at bay. Meanwhile their father ignored him entirely, and Loki only looked his way when he wanted confirmation or agreement with what he’d just said.

Did I do something to earn this from them?

He sought comfort from his mother after an especially trying day, but for the first time realized that most of what she offered him were useless platitudes and empty reassurance. For the first time he realized that her support was in name only, not in deed. She would not lift a finger to counter any of Odin’s hurtful behavior, only find comfortable-sounding ways to justify it.

What did I do to deserve this?

This is not how it happened …

I was …
Thor gasped for breath, every inch of him aching and cold. For an eternity, he struggled to remember whether he was Thor or Loki. Whether he had had Father’s favor or his ire. Whether his mother had supported him or only claimed to. Whether he could trust his friends.

Slowly, slowly, his mind came back to itself… and after that, he came back to his body.

He was naked, shivering with cold and the aftermath of his visions, nauseous and stiff with pain. There was a stench around him that he recognized after a moment as vomit; he was lying in a pool of it, as well as his own excrement. He gagged and nearly vomited again, but his stomach felt entirely empty of whatever it had once held.

“Have you returned, young prince?”

Thor jolted in fear, then flinched again at the pain in his joints, at the sound of the völva’s voice. He was lying, he realized, on the floor of her hut, facing a fire pit gone dark and covered in ash. Outside, he could hear faint birdsong.

He looked up to see her sitting on her stool as if she had never moved, watching him calmly and with… something else in her expression. It took a long moment before Thor was able to recognize it as compassion.

He didn’t trust it.

“Have you returned? From the look on your face, I think you have.”

Thor swallowed around a dry throat and the taste of something rotten, and did not answer. He struggled to sit up, but the stones were slippery with his own filth and he ached, head to toe.

The witch waved her arm slowly, and Thor flinched again, but only found himself cleaned with a tingle of seidr, and the floor around him too. He shivered still, was naked still, and had no idea whatsoever how to respond to the woman when she rose, walked over to him, and knelt painfully.

She held a bowl out to him, and he shied away. “It’s only water this time,” she said.

He just stared at her incredulously.

The völva sighed, but did not seem surprised. “Believe it or not, young prince, I mean you no harm, not now nor when I gave you that potion. You came seeking answers, and I have given them to you; once your head has cleared a bit, I think you will understand that.” She held the bowl out again. “Go on, drink.”

He was about to refuse, but his mouth tasted like something had died in it, and the water itself looked so pure he could hardly stand it. So with a shaking hand, he took the bowl, and took a cautious sip.

And then another, rolling the water across his tongue and rinsing his mouth.

“What did you do to me?” he asked, and, “How long have I been here?”

“Only overnight, young prince,” said the völva. “It’s barely dawn. As for what I did… every novice, every girl with a trace of seidr in her veins, every would-be acolyte, takes that potion before they are even admitted for study. And then a stronger version of it before they are permitted to speak the vows that bind them to the priesthood or to the life of a völva. It hurts, and it’s terrifying, and I first drank it when I was still a girl, not yet budding into maidenhood.”
“Why would you…? I-I don’t…”

She sighed again. “You’re not yet ready for this conversation, I see,” she said. “Finish that water, then go lie on my furs and rest for a bit. You can break your fast once you awake.”

After what she had done to him, Thor couldn’t imagine trusting her enough to follow her instructions, and yet… The compassion in her face, and in her voice, was real. That eager gleam in her eye that he’d seen before she’d poisoned him was gone, and this seemed as real and sincere as that.

He was too shaky to walk, after he handed back the empty bowl, so he crawled across the floor on hands and knees; crawled into the witch’s bedroll, collapsed on the mismatched pile of furs and blankets, and slept.

The smell of eggs cooking woke Thor, some undetermined time later; his sense of time was completely thrown off by whatever had been in that potion the witch had given him. He sat up, surprised to see his clothing, clean and neatly folded at the foot of the bedroll, and equally surprised to find that the ache in his joints was almost completely gone.

“There you are,” said the völva. She sat with her back to him, poking at a skillet sitting on a little grill over the fire. Her hair was pulled back into a neat bun, silver at the nape of her neck. “These are nearly ready, and then once you’ve eaten you’ll hopefully be coherent enough we can talk. Although you not having much seidr of your own, maybe you’ll still be addled from the potion, I know not.”

“I feel… well enough,” said Thor cautiously.

“I am glad to hear it,” she replied.

Once he was dressed, Thor pushed himself up to stand, and found he was only a little wobbly. He came around to the other side of the fire, where he’d sat… was it really only the night before?

She pulled a plate out of the crate beside the fire, set it on the table, and scraped a mound of cooked eggs onto it. They’d been seasoned with something, but it at least smelled like kitchen herbs and not some strange witches’ concoction.

“You needn’t be rude, young prince.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“…Hm. So you didn’t. My mistake.”

Thor eyed the plate dubiously. “Do you really expect me to simply take whatever you put in front of me, after last night?”

The völva smiled at that, with far better humor than Thor really thought the question deserved. “You begin to understand.”

“You needn’t be rude, young prince.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“…Hm. So you didn’t. My mistake.”

Thor eyed the plate dubiously. “Do you really expect me to simply take whatever you put in front of me, after last night?”

The völva smiled at that, with far better humor than Thor really thought the question deserved. “You begin to understand.”

“No, I really don’t!”

She rolled her eyes at him, still good-naturedly. “You cannot be this dense without willfully trying to be,” she said; “therefore I can only assume that you are refusing to see the parallels between your experience and that of your brother.”
Thor blinked, beginning to put the pieces together.

“Were I any other seidkona, what you saw would be private, between you and the Norns. However, my gift is to follow you on such journeys, whether I want to or not.”

“What I saw was not real,” said Thor.

“took you awhile to figure that out, though. And it felt real, didn’t it? Most importantly, let me ask you: what if it had been?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t be dense,” she snapped at him. “You came to me seeking answers. You tromped and stomped all over the capital, intimidating seidkonur who have damned good reason to be afraid of you, seeking answers. Now here I am, giving them to you, but you have to open your eyes and your hands and take them, boy. I’m not going to cram them down your throat.”

“Not anymore,” Thor muttered, and she laughed at him.

“So hard done by,” she said, and giggled again. “You poor little boy. So mistreated.”

Thor scowled, and said nothing.

“The pain you felt last night,” she said, sobering, “endured for perhaps an hour—or two, at most—before the potion did its work and you fell into the visions. Loki endured that for months.”

The eggs suddenly tasted like slime in his mouth. Thor swallowed the last bite with difficulty, staring at the völva in growing horror. “He was unconscious,” he said, his voice rasping.

“Hm. So were you. Didn’t make much difference, did it?” A bowl appeared from nowhere and she dipped it into the bucket beside the fire, took a long, slow sip. “A woman you barely know and had little cause to trust gave you something unexpected, and you suffered for it. Now, imagine if the same thing had happened, but I had been your own mother.”

Thor tried, but it was unfathomable to him; he found himself shaking his head without even intending to. The thought that his parents could turn on him in that fashion was… well, it was unthinkable.

And yet.

“Loki really felt what I did last night?” he asked.

“Or worse. You don’t have any seidr, so you don’t have any channels to affect with that potion. Everything you felt would have been in your body; Loki would have felt all of that, and more besides, but that on a level closer to his soul.”

Thor swallowed. Odin, their father, had done that to Loki. And nearly killed him.

“It’s been hard for you to even look at me without discomfort and trepidation, after what I did to you,” said the völva. “Imagine if I had been someone you trusted. Someone you loved. Someone whose regard you had always sought.”

Thor remembered the hallucinations, the false memories he had experienced. “Was it really like that for Loki? Like what I—what I saw?”

She wrapped her hands around her bowl and looked into its depths. Her voice was sad as she
answered. “Sometimes, yes. Often enough that it became harder for him to see the moments when he was held in true regard. Often enough that those negative experiences began to color his perceptions toward all of Asgard.” The völva caught his eye and held it, making sure he heard her words. “As far as he believed, though it be not true, only you and Frigga truly cared for him, out of all the people in this realm. And your care was conditional, your support inconsistent. He fell expecting to die, and likely believed that no one would look for him. When you did finally locate and go to him, he probably thought that it was only because your father was in pursuit of the Tesseract, seeking to remove yet another powerful artifact from a foreign realm—just as he removed the Casket, just as he removed Loki as an infant. He was dragged back here in chains like an animal, and no one even bothered to ask where he had been and what he had seen. And then his father—his father the king, the man with a reputation for great wisdom, though I do wonder how he earned it—his father toward whom he still held out a sliver of trust and hope and love—did to him what I did to you, only on a deeper level than you will ever be capable of feeling, young prince. He violated your brother, and nearly killed him, and did it out of ignorance.

“Even now, Odin refuses to accept the true magnitude of his misdeed. He regrets it, yes, for I believe he does care for Loki in some fashion or another, but he will not humble himself to admit he was truly capable of such an immense failure, nor fully recognize how horrible it was. Rather than humbling himself, he sends you on errands throughout the kingdom, hoping he can simply demand of his subjects that they fall into obedience and return in the hour of Asgard’s need.”

“Will they?” asked Thor. “I… I don’t mean to ignore what happened to my brother. Truly. But, with them gone, Asgard is weakened. We are beginning to see that, but—”

“Are you? As far as you warriors are concerned, Asgard has been inconvenienced by the loss of the seidkonur. Some of you still doubt that we would really be in any danger if the other realms were to mobilize against us. Pah!, they scoff, our shields are strong and our swords are sharp. We will stand forth to fight, and our fortress fast against foes will hold. They need no mere women to aid them, no puling ergi. Is that not so? Your friends are irritated, but they are not yet afraid.”

“And is that what will satisfy the seidkonur and seidmenn, and convince them to return? I thought they left out of fear, that what was done to Loki might be done to them also if they displeased the All-Father.”

“Fear, yes. But anger also. Loki may not have understood his own worth to this kingdom, and much of the people around him did not understand his worth either, because he was surrounded too often by mere warriors; but those with seidr in our veins do see him, and value him. And what was done to him may as well have been done to us, young prince.”

She rapped her drinking bowl against the table, then continued as she refilled it. “The flow of seidr connects us all, you see. That is not mere philosophy, or poetry; it is magical fact. And when Loki’s seidr was ripped from his body, there were other seidkonur who felt his pain and suffered alongside him. Nearly every seidkona and seidmadr in Asgard, and many others in multiple realms, young prince. Throughout Yggdrasil, people were rendered ill, or insensible from pain, or wracked by horrific nightmares. His screams were heard for miles beyond the palace, did you know that? The earth trembled with Loki’s pain. All because of what Odin did.”

Thor took a breath, but could think of nothing he could possibly say in response.

“Do you see now,” asked the völva, “why your simple goal to make them forgive you, to persuade them to come home, will be more difficult than you first perceived? They want satisfaction, young prince. They want to know that they and their families may still sleep safe in their own homes, and they want to see Asgard pay a price—though perhaps not too steep—for the tremendous injustice
done to Loki, and to them by proxy.”

“I do understand, völva,” said Thor after a moment’s thought. “Thank you. I cannot say I appreciate
the manner in which you instructed me…”

“…but you may never have truly understood otherwise. Yes.” She nodded, and drank more from her
bowl.

“May I ask you another question?”

“Heh. You may always ask.” Thor narrowed his eyes at her. She really did sound like Loki in that
moment.

“Our mother says she will not forgive Father or me until Loki forgives us. But now… now I am not
sure I deserve such forgiveness, not enough to demand it as I had first thought to do. And that
assumes that he will wake, and be capable of…” His face fell. “Be able to grasp even the concept of
forgiveness, in order to give it. That he will not be… crippled in his mind.”

“What is your question, young prince?”

“I cannot ask his forgiveness if he is damaged, nor if I cannot find him to ask at all. Do you know if
he will survive—survive intact? And where I might find him?”

“You speak of asking his forgiveness, but what would you do to earn it? Truth, humility, sacrifice:
what would you give in order to have your brother returned to you?”

“Anyth—”

“Ah, ah, ah! Don’t say that. The Norns would surely hold you to it. And you must ask what price
you might refuse to pay, what sacrifice would be too painful for you to give in exchange for your
brother.”

“But he is my brother, good völva. I love him. And I cannot guess what price the Norns would
demand, therefore I cannot tell you whether or not I would pay it. I can only say that I love him, and
would give much.”

“And you will not demand that he forgive you?”

“…No,” said Thor. “It is as I told you earlier. I no longer think I deserve such a thing. I will ask, and
if there is a way to earn my brother’s regard once more, I will endeavor to do so. But if… if he
wishes never to see me again…” He had to stop for a moment and compose himself against the tears
that threatened at the very thought. “He had done great harm, but has paid for it. And we did him
great harm in return. If after this, he no longer wishes to see me again… I shall do my best to respect his
wishes.”

“Humility,” said the völva, approving. “I like that. You have learned something, then.”

“But not what I came here to find out,” Thor retorted, then stopped himself in dawning horror. The
witch had already poisoned him with the intent to answer his questions. What might she do to him if
he angered her?

“I will not tell you where he is,” she said. “I will tell you he lives, and needs an interval of true peace
in order to recover fully. But recover he shall.”

Relief, and hope, washed over Thor like a tidal wave, and he beamed at the old woman, helpless to
stop himself.

“He is safe, then.”

“For now.”

“And the other seidkonur?”

She sighed, and stood, taking Thor’s plate and making it vanish. “All will be well, young prince. Asgard’s seidkonur are exactly where they need to be to protect the realm. They may fear Odin or loathe him, but they will not forsake their homes when the time comes.”

“Then it remains to be seen whether or not we can communicate with them, or find them, in order to persuade them to return.”

“And how would you do that, young prince?” asked the völva. “Your Bifrost is broken, after all.”

“There are other paths. I will find a way,” said Thor, drawing himself up in his seat. “The Bifrost does remain broken, but work had begun to repair it, using the Tesseract. And… we have the Tesseract itself, now. And even before I retrieved it, Father was able to send me to Midgard before.”

“Determination. Also a valuable trait.” She tucked her hands into her sleeves and smiled up at him. “You will need it.”

“What do you mean?”

Now she smirked, and walked him to the door of the shrine without speaking.

“Völva, what do you mean?”

“You have the means to find your answers, young prince,” she said. “Now go and find them.”

And before he could protest, she turned into a flock of magpies; they swirled around him, screaming raucously as he ducked and flung his arms up for protection, and then they all flew away.
Thor was halfway across the Idavoll plain, feeling worn to the bone even if he was no longer in any pain, when he spotted the incoming skiff heading straight for him.

That was odd; horses hated the skiffs, so they were generally reserved for emergency or military use only. Thor dismounted, the better to control his horse, and waited as the skiff's trajectory curved around him before slowing and sinking gracefully to the ground.

"Thor!" It was Sif, leaping from the vehicle before it had even fully touched down, and running toward him. Fandral was not far behind. "Thor, are you all right? Where have you been?"

"I went seeking the seidkonur for answers," he said. "You knew that."

"Yes, but you disappeared from Heimdall's sight," explained Fandral. "He alerted the All-Father, who said he could see you but not find you. He sent us to search, but…" The other man shrugged. "It was as if you had fallen off the edge of the world," he finished.

"Do not jest of such things," said Sif sharply. She turned back to Thor, worry written into every feature. "Are you well? The All-Father claimed he saw you being tortured."

Thor sighed. "I asked a question with a painful answer," he said after a moment. "The völva I spoke to gave me a potion which caused… visions. Among other effects."

"What did you see?" asked Fandral, but Sif frowned at him and Thor only shook his head.

"That is for me to discuss with my father," he said. "And even he will not hear everything of what I saw. Suffice to say that I understand now why the seidkonur left, and how slim our chances are to entice them to return."

"Entice? Come, are they really so stubborn—"

"You heard Loki's screams, when Odin tried to take his power," said Thor coldly, as Fandral's face fell. "I know you did, for you were waiting in the palace for me while his sentence was carried out, and the sounds of Loki's agony were heard for miles around throughout the capital. The seidkonur, however, they felt it. They felt it as far away as other realms, Fandral."

"I understand," said Sif, but Thor only shook his head. "An argument which they could easily have pondered even had they only witnessed Loki's agony," said Thor. "But instead, they felt it for themselves, some of them, and they knew without doubt just how terrible the All-Father was willing to be in his wrath. It was…" He shuddered, remembering the
ache in every joint, the certainty that he was about to die. "Terrifying."

"And so they left," said Sif. Her tone was matter-of-fact, but then, she had figured out all of this long before Thor himself had.

"And so they left," agreed Thor.

"They fear their king?" asked Fandral. At least he seemed to have lost some of his bluster, as he no doubt realized the implications. A king could command obedience through respect, or through fear. But a king who was respected could be assured of a long and prosperous reign, while one who was feared could quickly be deposed if the people turned against his tyranny.

"Fear enough to leave Asgard entirely, and to hide themselves from being found," said Thor.

"Many of the missing took their families with them," added Sif. "Husbands; children."

Fandral opened his mouth, then paused. "I had not realized things were as serious as that," he said finally, quietly.

"It was implied to me by the völva that we who have no seidr in our veins have been blind to much that goes on in Asgard. Including, as you say, just how serious this matter truly is for Asgard. For all of us."

"She hid you from me!" said Odin, pacing in his study. "She could have murdered you and I would have been unable to reach you to stop it!"

"I am fine, Father," assured Thor, but the king was having none of it.

"I watched you suffer!" Odin raised a fist, weathered but made of iron. "I thought…" His voice trailed off and he looked away.

It had not occurred to Thor what it must have been like for his father, seeing both his sons ripped apart by agony while he could do nothing but watch. "Truly, Father, I am well. The völva saw to it that I would be."

Odin nodded, but his fists were still clenched. "I want you to give me her name, where you last saw her. I will—"

"You'll what, Father?" Thor's voice was harder now. "Punish her? As you punished Loki? This is exactly what the seidkonur feared! This is why they left."

"I was going to say that I would find her, and speak to her in person," said Odin tiredly. "However, that even you believe I would do such a thing speaks much to the grievous error I have made."

"A grievous error." Thor folded his arms, glad that he had not chosen to sit while he explained how he had spent his night. "Is Loki your son still? Or is he merely the pawn he accused you of making him? Are you grieved for what you did to him, or only for making a strategic misstep?"

"You know nothing of how I feel about that boy—"

"Because you refuse to tell me," said the prince. "You refuse to show him, or me, anything other than your anger toward him. After what you have done, I would not at all be surprised to learn that he believes you hate him. That you take pleasure in his suffering."
Odin stopped at that, and sighed heavily. "I do not." He moved wearily, now, no longer pacing, and sat behind his desk. "I am angry that he should have misunderstood my expectations for him so completely that he would believe trying to destroy the planet of his birth would be a wise choice. And then this Midgard nonsense," he added, tossing one hand in the air. "And I am… angry with myself, for having erred with him, in many ways. And now my errors affect not only him, but all of Asgard."

"You are not accustomed to making mistakes," guessed Thor.

"Hm. No. I am merely unaccustomed to admitting them. Frigga can usually draw a confession out of me, eventually. But you will be king after me, my son; it is important that you see that the decisions a king must make are often difficult, and that the options presented may none of them be palatable. Mistakes are all too easy to make, and the lives of your citizens depend upon you making as few as possible, and learning how to correct them when you can."

Thor nodded, and finally moved to sit. He and his father were silent for a time, while Thor thought back to his visions. How miserable Loki must have been, to perceive the world the way that he had. Even if only a fraction of the things Thor had seen had really happened, he was guilty of dismissing his brother's legitimate complaints as "imagined slights"… in the first conversation they'd had since discovering he was not dead. He was a fool.

"You say that the seidkonur felt what Loki felt?" Odin asked eventually.

"Many of them, yes," said Thor. "Others were rendered ill, or suffered nightmares, according to the völfva."

Odin closed his eye and put a hand to his forehead. "And what will convince them to return?"

The All-Father was asking him? "I… I do not know, Father."

The king waved that away tiredly. "I was asking myself as much as you, my son," he said. "There must be a way to reassure them, to ease their fears. And likely to appease their justified anger at what was done to one of their own. But we cannot provide them that reassurance if we cannot find them, first."

"The völfva said something strange, before we parted ways," said Thor. "She said that the missing seidkonur were exactly where they needed to be, in order to defend the realm. What do you think she might have meant?"

But Odin only shook his head, frowning. After a moment, he sat straighter in his seat. "Heimdall. I come to confer with you soon. Look for threats to Asgard from beyond the Nine Realms."

It was a couple of days later before the healers declared Loki healthy enough to manage an interview with the entire team present. Once that was agreed on, they picked a day when Tony could be on site, and convinced Ingirun and Herkja to allow one or two other SHIELD agents into the village to be part of the conference as well.

The whole thing was set up in the gathering hall; the Avengers were already present, talking amongst themselves aimlessly, when the door opened and more people began to file in.

"What's this?" asked Bruce.
"Our prince is going to speak," said one woman, looking at the humans like they were idiots. "We have come to hear him."

"This was meant to be a private interview," began one of the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, but the woman scoffed, and several others echoed her.

"He is not your prince, nor your prisoner. He is ours, and you speak to him at our sufferance. And his."

"Indeed," added a girl who looked barely old enough to drive. "Do not think you may dictate the terms of this discussion." She eyed the man's uniform with disdain. "We have not forgotten how you attempted to treat him the last time you were permitted entry here."

At least it wasn't the entire village who showed up; they kept the kids out, and roughly a third of the adults by extension. Still, the room ended up a lot more crowded than any of the humans had been expecting.

Finally the gathering hall was full, and after a few minutes' wait, the door opened once more and Loki came in. He was preceded by Inginrun and Herkja, making a little procession out of his entrance. At Loki's side, he was escorted by Ottar, who walked near enough to be able to catch Loki or provide him a strong arm to lean on if he needed it. They were followed by three burly Aesir who looked more than able to use the swords and spears they carried.

"Looks like those aren't just for sparring," said Natasha quietly. Indeed, they were the first weapons any of the humans could remember seeing outside of the friendly competition Steve and Clint had engaged in.

"Guy always did know how to make an entrance," muttered Steve. Tony frowned, and made to respond, but at that moment every Aesir in the place rose to their feet, a sussurus of rustling fabric and scraping of benches that overwhelmed whatever he'd been about to say.

Bruce turned at the sound, a little startled, but the Aesir did not even spare him a glance. All eyes were on Loki, who had stopped in his tracks, looking briefly as if he were just as startled as the Avengers were. After a moment, he inclined his head regally, formally acknowledging the gesture, and moved forward once more.

It was hard to remember, sometimes, that the man who had led an attack on their world, the man who'd been comatose for the entire time the Avengers had been in Iceland, was in fact a prince of his homeland and was regarded as such by every single Aesir in this village. More than that, he was a beloved prince, for whom the people assembled here would do nearly anything.

Even dressed in the same outfit he'd been wearing for months while he lay unconscious in a hospital bed—a cream-colored robe with barely-noticeable embroidery—the man carried himself with a level of dignity that was unmistakable. He moved slowly, but Bruce couldn't tell if that was an extension of his royal mannerisms or just a factor of his long illness.

Finally Loki reached his seat, and Ottar unobtrusively held out an arm for him to grip for balance as he sat down. Ottar and the other three took up positions behind his seat, Inginrun and Herkja flanked him on either side, and only then did Bruce hear everyone else in the hall take their seats too.

He shared a glance with Steve, both of them raising their eyebrows a little. Wow.
So these were the mortals who had been assigned by their leaders to watch Skýli; Herkja and Ingirun had spoken with Loki for a little while before the meeting, giving him some idea of what to expect. They would have questions for him, as the man who had attacked their world. Loki doubted they would believe his answers.

Of course, Loki had no idea whether or not he would even be able to answer them. His memory was still spotty, starting after the Titan had gifted him with the scepter. These humans, most of them at least, looked vaguely familiar to him, but there was little else he could recall of his interactions with them.

"You wished to speak with me," he said quietly. The humans all exchanged a glance, as if something he'd said had surprised them.

"Do you remember us, at all?" asked one of them, and Loki suppressed a grimace.

"In vague terms only, I am afraid," he replied, "and some of you not at all. Whatever was done to reduce me to this state, it has affected my memories; in addition, I have learned that my mind was not entirely my own when I was last here."

"What do you remember?" asked a man in the second row. There was something insolent in his manner, though it seemed more a facet of his character than anything directed toward Loki specifically. He had oddly-cut facial hair, meticulously kept, which contrasted with the tousled mess on his head.

Loki narrowed his eyes. "You offered me a drink, I believe," he said.

"Yeah, that's right."

He fought for more, but the haze that clouded that period remained impenetrable. "Were we friends?"

The other man blinked. "Um. Not exactly."

Loki offered him a half-smile. "I have glimpses from that time, but little else. Nothing with context, for the most part. I remember, for instance, that I respected you," he nodded toward the woman with red hair, "but I cannot say why that may have been. I believe you and I did battle," he added with a glance to the young man who reminded him of Thor, "but where, under what circumstances, is lost to me."

Then he spotted the one sitting next to that warrior, a short, compactly built man with lines on his face that suggested a lifetime spent in the sun, and caught his breath.

"I… I know you," he said.

The other man looked at him with a hooded expression, and sucked on his teeth for a moment. "Yeah, you probably do," he said at last.

"You have heart," he said, and the other man… Clint, his name was Clint Barton, he was an archer—Loki remembered everything about him, knew far, far too much—inhaled sharply through his nose. "I remember," said Loki, stricken.

"What is it that you remember?" asked the woman.

"Pieces," he said, tearing his glance away from Barton. "The nature of my injury, how it happened, is lost to me. I remember everything up until shortly before I came to Midgard; I've only been able to
deduce that I did so from fragments, all of which are tinged with blue. But he—Agent Barton—he was inside the blue with me." Loki frowned then, uncertain. "Weren't you?"

"Assuming you were actually in there and not in charge of it," said Clint. Loki looked away, still frowning, and brought his fingertips to his lips in thought.

"They tried to break me," he said quietly, ignoring the restless murmur of the gathered populace at his words. "They tried, and I resisted, and then I only remember blue. And other glimpses, as I've mentioned, but the details… I know you, but I know not what we did together." He fought not to grimace in frustration, struggling to keep his royal composure for this interview, but he had a feeling he wasn't succeeding very well.

"You attacked our world," said one of the humans, another woman whom he did not recognize. "You used the Tesseract and opened a portal for the aliens known as Chitauri to come through, and you expressed a desire to rule us."

Rule? The notion was so bizarre that it pulled Loki away from the nausea that was rising at the thought of having aided his captors to such an extent. "Why would I… that makes no sense. You are human; you are notoriously difficult to unify toward any purpose, even one that is demonstrated to be in your own best interests. You are chaotic, which may exasperate orderly realms like Alfheim or Asgard, but…" He shook his head, a little helplessly. "I don't suppose you know much of me other than the impression I must have given when I was last here—"

"According to our myths, you were regarded as a god of mischief, lies, and chaos," said the first woman. She pulled a lock of red hair back over her shoulder. "Some people would say god of evil, but those are mostly post-Christian accounts."

"Superior though we may be, we are not gods, as I think you've surmised by now," said Loki. "But my love for… hm, unpredictable behaviors, is likely well-documented. As is my penchant for unorthodox solutions to problems; or at least, it is well known on Asgard."

At this, a ripple of knowing laughter moved through the gathered seidkonur. Loki glanced up, but there was not a single face he could find which appeared to be mocking him, which was… a pleasant surprise.

"In any case," he went on, "I personally would be the least likely candidate in all Asgard to be sent to rule you. Or anywhere else, really," he added, a bit bitterly. "If I were to live here permanently, I would find a different way to move your world forward, and it would not be through rule. I am not—well-suited to the role." And that was galling to admit, but these mortals need never know how much. He had never wanted Asgard's throne, but that did not change how much he would have appreciated being considered worthy of it. Still.

"That's not what you were trying to convince us of the last time," said the woman, and Loki shrugged.

"I am at heart a wanderer and a scholar," he replied. "The thought of being trapped in the role of king, of being confined to the palace and the council chamber, never to leave except in time of war, is deeply unsettling to me. There are other ways to guide a realm that are infinitely more satisfying."

The questions continued, never openly hostile, but Loki could detect the thread of suspicion under every one of them. He did not have much memory of what had happened on Earth, and had to confirm that at least four different times as they rephrased the question in different ways. It was a bit tedious. The only interesting reaction came when they asked how he would take over the world, given the resources that he'd had when he first arrived on Midgard.
"To be clear… a weapon which suborns the will of those whom I choose, making them loyal to me alone, yes? And the Tesseract itself, with the capacity to open a portal to the region of space were my army waits. And my own wits and skill, nothing more?"

"That's right," said the man who had offered him a drink once. "Let's hear whatcha got."

Hmm. "If no one on Midgard knew who I was, then when I first arrived, I would have pretended to be harmless; injured, perhaps, or fleeing a great threat. I would have begged sanctuary with your people, and asked to speak to your leaders about this threat so that I could warn you. Then when the moment was right, I would have taken their loyalty without a fight. From there, your leaders would hand me the Tesseract itself, and we would begin our journey to accomplish the next stage quietly, with no one the wiser. The Tesseract and its accompanying machinery would best be deployed near one of your planet's poles, where atmospheric interference would make its action difficult to detect. I would open the portal, bring the army in all at once, out of sight of your surveillance, and once gathered, I would strike simultaneously at two or three of your world's most populous centers. You have several, and with over a hundred different governing bodies, it is unlikely that you would coordinate your planetary forces until the conquest was complete." Loki paused, and licked his lips. "I am sorry for however many casualties this caused your world," he said quietly.

The humans were silent for a moment, but they seemed surprised. Loki was not sure how to take that, and so he said nothing. Perhaps they had not expected his apology.

"What if you weren't completely under the control of the scepter?" asked another man, a rumpled sort with a serene energy and an aura of tamped-down magic about him. "What if you were more interested in fighting against that control?"

Hmm. "An interesting question," Loki said. He paused to think. "Sabotage, most likely," he mused. "Trickery; a skill at which I excel. Again, assuming no one having any prior impressions of who I was, I would be able to put on a show to draw attention. Most likely some ostentatious threat, with minimal loss of life, if it could not be avoided. Some people would still need to be brought under my control in order to facilitate the plan, but also to make sure I was taken seriously as a danger to your world. The machine would have to be deployed somewhere that would attract attention, somewhere easy to trace, but as an added precaution I would arrange for the portal itself to serve as a bottleneck; the army could only trickle through and be dealt with relatively easily, even by human forces.

"Let me see, what else…" This was an interesting question, indeed. "I am playing a role, at this point, alerting your world to the threat and placing myself directly in front of the real target so that I might duck out of the way at the last moment. So in my conversations, or my speeches I suppose, I would leave clues, hints to draw the humans toward me. Despite that, with my captors' eyes upon me, I could not be too blatant, I could not rebel against them outright, but I could set myself up as a parody of a villain, and perform just badly enough that the invasion could not help but fail. The Tesseract would be locked away, afterward, and I likely would be as well, but humans in general are not capable of the sorts of things I endured at—at his hands, before."

He did not bother to say that this plan was likely to get him killed if he misstepped even the slightest amount; that didn't matter. It wasn't part of the question, and in any case, after everything that Thanos had done to him, death likely would have been a mercy.

"If I were captured, I would at least have time to recover," he said instead, "possibly to break free of the control I was under, and eventually I would escape. Whether or not I could then convince the humans of my sincerity when it came time to reveal the truth, I cannot say. But even if I were not able to do so, I would find another way to prepare them for what is coming."

The humans were staring at him now, saying nothing, for so long that it was becoming awkward and
uncomfortable. Still, Loki was a prince, not one to be swayed by such things, so he raised his chin and waited them out.

"That's, uh… that's an interesting scenario," said the rumpled man who had asked the question in the first place.

Loki nodded. "It was an interesting question."

"And you really have no memory of the events of your attack on this world?" asked the anonymous woman. The audience behind her shifted restlessly.

"For the last time," said Loki, not bothering to hide his exasperation, "no, I do not." He wasn't sure he wanted any, by this point, except that not having those memories meant that Thanos' control had been too complete, and Loki was not sure he could stomach that awareness.

"Why not talk about what you do remember," said one of the uniformed men.

"The Mad Titan," said Loki lowly, and several people in the assembly gasped.

"My prince." One of the healers stood, and the rest turned toward her. "Is it wise to threaten your recovery by reliving those memories?"

"It is not," said Lady Eir, and Loki frowned at her.

"I should think I would be the judge of what I can and cannot discuss," he began, but she shook her head at him.

"And as your healer, I am the judge of whether or not it is beneficial to your health to do so. And I say that it is not. With your permission, I can speak to them of some of what you've told me, but I strongly advise against your reliving those memories while you are not yet strong enough to be shielded against their worst effects."

He didn't like it, but Lady Eir was probably correct. After a moment, he inclined his head. "Very well. You may speak to them of our prior conversation, Healer."

Eir nodded, and turned to address the humans. "If there is nothing more? My patient grows weary."

It would have been nice if she had not called attention to that fact, but it was true. Loki's strength was flagging, and the ache in his joints was increasing with every passing moment.

"I think we have everything for now," said the red-haired woman. She glanced toward Loki with something like amusement in her eyes. "Thank you for your cooperation."

Something about that phrase seemed familiar, but once again, Loki couldn't place it. "You are welcome," he replied, and wondered at her look of consternation.

Chapter End Notes

Credit where it's due: Ideas about how and why Loki did what he did were lifted from popular fanon, but especially from the works of Kadorienne. Because let's face it, that was a stupid invasion plan, and Loki isn't an idiot. He could have done a number of things differently.
I haven't updated in eight months. I haven't thought much about the fic in at least six. So if this chapter is a bit disjointed, I'm sorry. BUT, here it is for you, and I hope you enjoy it all the same.

"So you think he was telling the truth?" They were escorting the SHIELD agents out of the settlement before returning to their quarters, and one of the agents was still feeling a little huffy, in Tony's opinion.

"We know he was tortured," said Natasha. "We have the physical evidence from both our scans and theirs. We know his memories were compromised. We didn't learn anything new from this conversation. I don't know why you're acting so surprised."

"We learned Loki really was playing to lose," said Bruce.

"We already suspected that. All Loki did was confirm it." They reached the parked cars waiting to take the agents back to wherever they were staying that wasn't Skýli. "I'm sure Director Fury will be interested in your report."

As if this flunky would have Fury's ear any more than the Avengers did. Still, the reminder seemed to mollify the agent, and they both climbed into the car along without much fuss. Natasha waited until the car was out of sight before tapping her ear. "Did you get all that, Director?"

Heh.

The walk back to their apartments was quiet; Iceland was far enough north that at this time of year they only got about five or six hours of sunlight, so their footsteps crunched on snow in the dark while the aurora gleamed overhead.

"So what do we do about that bastard, anyway?" asked Clint. He looked over his shoulder as a pair of kids ran giggling past. "Make nice? Be friends?"

"Observe and report, same as we've been," said Natasha. "Your part hasn't changed."

"…I guess not."

"He was as much a victim as anyone else," began Steve, but Clint stopped and held up one finger.

"Don't. Don't even. It didn't happen to you, you have no idea what it was like, and you don't get to fucking patronize me about it. Are we clear?"

"Clint—"

"No. I will do my job here, same as the rest of you, but that fucker is not going to compromise me again. The rest of you want to try and get to know what he's really like when he's not under mind control himself, fine. Your prerogative. Do your thing. He turns out to be a decent guy, great.
SHIELD will probably want to recruit him at some point. But he's not getting near me, and I'm not getting near him."

"Then how will you do your job?" asked Steve, his breath steaming in the chill air.

"From a distance. Same as always, Cap."

In a secluded room secured against all forms of surveillance, a conference was taking place. Only one person was physically present; all the other participants were there via encrypted video feed, with their faces obscured by shadow and their voices digitally altered.

"This being, this Thanos," one of them was saying; "how seriously do we take that threat?"

"If he was the leader who sent the alien, Loki, to invade our planet last time, then we've already gotten a taste of what he's capable of."

"The extraterrestrial encampment in Iceland is full of people who will protect Loki, if Thanos comes looking for him. And they've demonstrated that we don't have the means to stop them from doing whatever they want. If they decide their intentions are no longer peaceful toward us…"

"We have options."

On one of the screens, the silhouette of a woman shook its head. "We launched one nuclear missile already, and all it did was cement the Avengers together even more thoroughly."

"Iceland is mostly wilderness."

The only person physically in the room spoke up then. "Most of the world doesn't know this settlement exists. It would be seen as an unprovoked strike against an allied country. Other nations would retaliate, and our planet would be reduced to slag before Thanos even got here." Director Fury folded his hands in front of him on the table. "I trust we all recognize that this would be counterproductive to our goals."

The members of the World Security Council fell silent at that.

"I don't call you by your names," said Fury. "And I can't see your faces. But I do listen to the wind; that's what you hired me to do, and I do it well. I listen to the wind, and a little bird told me that at least two of you were replaced after the debacle over Manhattan. For you new folks, I will tell you now what I told your predecessors then: it was a stupid-assed decision. You launched a nuclear warhead against one of the most populous cities on Earth, willing to take out millions of humans in one blow in order to stop a few hundred aliens, before we'd even fully scrambled our military forces. The leviathan carcasses we recovered have been tested and found not to stand up to the standard artillery on an F-15, and they were certainly a hell of a lot less maneuverable than one. We could have had the threat contained within an hour if you hadn't chosen to interfere.

"So let me be clear." Fury leaned forward over his clasped hands, and made eye contact with each one of the people on their little video screens. "On paper, SHIELD might answer to you, I might answer to you, but in reality? The panicked reaction of a handful of bureaucrats is not something I am willing to tolerate a second time."

"You have tried to intimidate us before, Colonel Fury—"

"And you think I'm just blustering a lot of hot air, is that right?" Fury nodded, and tapped the screen of his tablet where it rested on the table. "If you would please check your messages."
There was a moment's pause, and then one of the council members demanded, "What is this?" The voice-masking technology could not entirely cover his agitation, nor the way emotion thickened his accent into something recognizable.

"What does it look like?" asked Fury calmly.

"GPS coordinates," responded the woman.

"As well as your full names, relevant bank account numbers, and enough other data to demonstrate to you that SHIELD knows who you are. We know where you live. And if you ever overstep your mandate to 'advise and recommend' again, we will find you, and give you cause to reconsider the wisdom of your choices." The director leaned back in his seat, folding his arms over his chest. "I trust I've made my point."

One by one, the video screens in the room went blank, followed by the message "Call Terminated".

In the silence of the now-empty room, Fury allowed himself a small smirk, before rising and unlocking the door.

Tony Stark was waiting for him in the corridor. "Well?"

Fury held out a hand. "Thank you, Mr. Stark. SHIELD will be sure to reimburse you for your consultation services."

"Meaning it totally worked."

"As a matter of fact, it did." They walked up the corridor a little ways before Fury added, "Keep an eye out for new faces in the settlement. It wouldn't surprise me if the Council were to attempt to send operatives in to try and remove Loki themselves."

"Even though they've been warned?"

"They've been warned against dropping a nuke on Iceland," Fury pointed out. "I doubt they'll just roll over and decide not to take any other measures."

"Yeah, I guess that is a little too optimistic," mused Tony. "In the meantime?"

"In the meantime, learn whatever else you can about this Thanos character, and see if Loki has any intel more recent than a dusty scroll."

The next time Loki was in the water, Tony showed up. This was pure coincidence; his schedule didn't always allow him time to stick around the village, but whenever he could be there, he by god spent time in the hot springs as much as he could. If SHIELD didn't like it, they could take it up with Ingirun and Herkja. Heh. Tony would pay to watch that confrontation.

Tony was focused enough on getting himself into the water that he almost missed it when he walked past Loki's little group where they were soaking. The prince himself was sitting up to his collarbones in his own pool, head tipped back against the edge and surrounded by women. Tony could almost envy him if he didn't recognize two of the women as his personal physicians, Eir and Runa. The expression of pained exhaustion on his face didn't actually lend itself to a partying atmosphere, either.

Well. It wasn't like Tony had shown up to bother him, anyway. Natasha could do that, or Fury if he felt like coming around—and again, Tony would pay to watch him clash with the healers again, too. Maybe the "need to know" information that Eir and Fury had talked about concerning this Thanos
character would become something the Avengers were allowed to hear about, too.

So Tony shucked his clothes and got into the water, heaving a contented sigh as the heat washed over him. He'd never been quite so grateful for the arc reactor's watertight housing, as he waded to a likely spot and sat down, letting the water come up across his chest and soak into his bones.

"What just changed?"

Tony opened his eyes to see the healers standing, turning around glaring at the springs as if someone had peed in the pool near their patient or something. "Who did that?" asked Eir, sharply.

"Whatever the intent, the effect is wonderful," sighed Loki, and both women turned back around to stare at him. From Tony's vantage point, the guy looked more relaxed than he'd ever seen him. He closed his eyes, then nodded. "The pain is completely gone. There is nothing disturbing my channels. I almost feel as if I might begin to heal, if this persists."

"Show yourself," demanded Runa, but then Eir put a hand on her arm. Her other hand was in the water, stroking back and forth as if searching for something.

"This isn't seidr," she said after a moment. "It nullifies magical energies, but not in any way with which I am familiar."

Tony frowned, and looked down at his chest. Thought about the Glowstick of Destiny, and "This usually works," and felt his eyebrows climb.

"Huh."

When he looked up, both women had turned and were watching him, now.

"It wasn't deliberate," said Tony. "But I think you're looking for me." Before they could order him around, he stood and sloshed his way across the pool to say hi. He couldn't help looking them over as he did, being as they were standing up and bathing suits weren't a thing among the Aesir, but once he got within polite distance he managed to keep his eyes above their collarbones.

"This device, what does it do?" Runa reached a hand out, but Tony stepped back out of the way before she could touch.

"It's a power source for a magnet, essentially," he said. "There are little pieces of shrapnel that would work their way in and destroy my heart, otherwise."

"And you cannot simply remove them?" Eir's eyebrows said a whole lot about her level of skepticism. "Barbaric."

Well, she wasn't wrong, but. "At the time and especially the place I was injured," he said levelly, "a magnet sitting in a hole in my chest was literally the only option that would have kept me alive. Barbaric or not, it worked. This," he went on, tapping the reactor housing, "is just a fancier power source, but apparently it does a little bit more than that, too."

"It does," said Loki. "But only when it is in contact with the water." The look on his face was the most restrained not-begging Tony had ever seen, but from the lines of pain on his forehead it was clear he wanted Tony to sit back down next to him.

It was even clearer when Tony did, and Loki appeared to nearly melt with relief.

"It is settled, then," said Eir. "You, mortal, will accompany Loki during his sessions here at the
springs."

"Uh, excuse me? 'Settled' would imply you actually asked if I would be willing, or even available. As it happens, and as I think you already know, I'm only here a few days a week." There was also the matter of wanting to hang out with the guy who threw him out a window. Yes, okay, it had already been established that Loki couldn't be held responsible for the stuff he did while mind controlled, no more than Barton could, but that didn't change the fact that whenever Tony looked at Loki, he remembered the feel of a hand around his throat and the sick sensation of freefall without a suit, and had a very vivid visual memory of the sidewalk below coming up way, way too fast.

Tony was working on it.

"We could arrange His Highness's sessions around the human's schedule," suggested Runa, as if Tony wasn't sitting right there.

"We could ask the human if he's even interested and willing," he reminded them.

Eir's skeptical face did not go away. "Your people have been wanting to interrogate His Highness for weeks," she said, "and after you tried to experiment on him while unconscious—"

"They did what?" said Loki.

"—you should be grateful we are even permitting any of you to so much as look upon him. Even the most gracious of your superiors would prefer to see Loki gone from this planet as soon as possible, and the fastest way to facilitate that is to speed my patient's recovery. Therefore, mortal, yes you will agree to accompany Loki when he comes to the hot springs to rest, and you will remain for as long as his sessions last. What you do with the rest of your time, I care not."

The thing that sucked was, she had a point. "Fine," Tony said, with a heavy sigh. So he sat back, and crossed his arms over his chest, and the healers went back to ignoring him, while Loki tried not to stare at him out of the corner of his eye.

And… cue the awkward silence.

Tony was damn near ready to try a lame pickup line on Loki, So, come here often?, by the time Loki actually spoke.

"Why did you offer me that drink, if I may ask?" Tony looked at him, skeptical, and he went on, "Since you claim we were not friends."

"I was stalling, mostly," said Tony. "Trying to warn you off. I tried to tell you your plan wasn't going to work."

"It wasn't?" Loki was studying his face intently. "Why not?"

"Because it was a stupid plan. That's what I told you when you went through your spiel."

Loki was blinking rapidly. "You're saying I managed to sabotage the attack," he said.

The healers were glaring at him, and Tony guessed that maybe they didn't want anyone filling Loki's head with stories about what he did and couldn't remember, but the guy looked like he needed a lifeline, so… "Yeah, maybe. Maybe you did." He shrugged. "I mean, the other option is that you suck at planning, tactics, and strategy…"
Loki's eyes crinkled in amusement instead of pain. "I assure you, I do not. Regardless of what you may have seen." He leaned back in the water and closed his eyes again. "It is good to know that I was able to resist him in some way, however small it may have been."

So yeah, Tony got to be Loki's personal…security blanket? Magical Faraday cage? Sensory deprivation therapist? Tony wasn't quite sure. From what Eir had told them back at the beginning, they'd brought Loki back to Earth in the first place because the flow of magical energy was quieter here and less of a strain on Loki's "channels", whatever those were. With Tony, that quiet was reduced to total silence, as long as Tony and his arc reactor were close by.

Tony didn't exactly want to make friends or anything, but he did end up spending a lot of time in Loki's company. He usually brought a tablet and tried to get work done, giving Pepper instructions over the phone when it came to SI, digitally signing off on R&D concept development, stuff like that.

After the first few times, when it became clear that Tony wasn't feeling conversational, Loki usually just shut his eyes and meditated. One of the teachers, Sibbe, often joined them, and the three of them hung out in the hot springs together, mostly not talking, or at least not talking to each other.

It should have been awkward as hell, but it was actually kinda nice. It had been awhile since Tony had met someone new who didn't immediately make some sort of demand on his time or expertise.

It took about a month, but as Loki regained his strength, eventually the other mortals in the village began to join him at the hot springs for his regular meditation sessions. He found it difficult not to like them, if only because their presence was associated with the complete cessation of pain for as long as Tony Stark and his nullifying device were present. But even so, mortals were generally a charming species; so vibrant, so young.

(One day, at the end of a session, Eir had stopped the mortal and offered to remove pieces of metal from within his chest, as repayment for what he was doing to aid in Loki's healing. Tony Stark had blinked rapidly for a moment, appearing very young indeed, before he'd recovered his composure and told her he'd think about it.)

The curly-haired one, Bruce, was the calmest one among them and the easiest for Loki to be around, out of the water; he asked few questions and kept his hostility over whatever Loki had done under strict control. It turned out that he meditated himself, as a regular practice, and shared with Eir and Runa and Sibbe some of his people's techniques. The similarities and differences were at least academically interesting.

The tall one, Steve, looked Aesir and had nearly Aesir strength, and he bristled with a restless energy that reminded Loki painfully of his brother. Assuming Thor would still wish to claim him as such. Loki did not wish to ask the mortal directly for fear of annoying him, but through Runa he learned that Steve's unusual strength had come from a potion and an experimental medical procedure, of the sort not often performed even in Asgard and virtually unheard of on Midgard. That alteration to Steve's makeup might have also contributed to Loki's discomfort with his presence; the other man felt abrasive, on a seidr level, and Loki was far too sensitive to such things now.

They had only one woman in their group, and Loki wondered if Midgard looked down on women becoming warriors as Asgard had before Sif. She was called Natasha, and she was not only beautiful, she moved with the grace of a deadly predator. Her looks aside, Loki found himself drawn to the stillness she cultivated, even while speaking or eating with the others. There was a core of silence around her that seemed never to dissipate, a readiness to act that never relaxed its guard. The
contrast between her and Tony Stark was marked, and entertaining to observe.

Tony generally refused to speak to Loki, but his interactions with the other mortals, and with his devices and the people on the other side of his communications, revealed a quick mind, perpetually busy, always thinking and innovating in a way that Loki found fascinating. It was a shame that he wanted nothing to do with Loki, and that they were only forced into close proximity on the orders of Lady Eir, but that was the other man’s prerogative and he was entitled to it.

For all his jitter and bounce, Tony Stark did not agitate Loki’s senses in the way that Steve did, although that may have only been because of the device he wore. The arc reactor, as he called it, caused such a profound nullifying effect on the ambient seidr in his vicinity that Loki found himself nearly dropping off to sleep on more than one occasion, simply because Loki could not feel anything irritating his channels.

And then there was Clint Barton.

He rarely came into Loki’s presence, and never alone, preferring always to have the other mortals surrounding him. He never spoke to Loki, and avoided even looking at him as much as possible.

Loki couldn’t blame him. From what little Loki remembered of the blue, and from what he’d managed to deduce over the past month as fragments of memory returned, the peace he’d shared with the archer had been a forced one, and a facet of the torture that Loki himself had endured. If the Titan had taken control of Loki’s mind, then it was a strong possibility that Loki had done exactly the same thing to Clint Barton.

That was unforgivable, and Loki did not know of any way to make amends to him that Clint might accept. The one option he’d considered was a protection against mental intrusions, but at present Loki didn’t have the ability to perform such a working himself. He’d suggest the idea to Lady Eir and Runa, and see if they would be willing to approach the other man, but Loki wasn’t sure they were capable of that sort of protection themselves. It might be that Loki was the only one with the correct set of skills to do so, but he was certain that Clint would never allow Loki such intimate contact with his mind, ever again.
Spring

Chapter Summary

Time passes and things change for the Avengers, and for Loki.

Chapter Notes

I'm having a hard time writing for this story, as I'm sure you've heard me complain before. I have sort of a "part two" that I want to get to, and this chapter was just going to be hand-waving a bunch of stuff so we could get there, but then words started flowing in a different direction. So at this point I'm sort of letting the story write itself until the second part is ready to make an appearance. I hope it's not too rambly. Unbetaed, which never used to matter to me, but my beta is freaking amazing and makes me a better writer, so... yeah. *sigh* Really don't know what I'm doing with this one anymore.

Months passed, and winter gave way to a beautiful Icelandic spring. There were no trees to burst into bloom, but the snow pulled back and the days grew longer with startling speed. The moss that grew everywhere seemed brighter, and birds were everywhere.

Loki recovered, as time went by; unfortunately, that was all that Natasha was able to learn, and was no more than the rest of the inhabitants of the settlement knew. She gathered that the bulk of his work was essentially psychological, when he wasn't meditating and trying to physically heal, and those sessions were spent in private with Eir or Runa. When he was well enough to walk on his own, he had a tendency to look about him with an air of tentative wonder that made him look younger than she would have thought possible. Every time one of the women bowed to him, or the children approached him (they were fearless little space Vikings, in Tony's words), his expression seemed as much baffled as regal, like the nobility was a mask covering his deep confusion that any of these people would care about him.

"We've told you how His Highness's identity was shattered," said Ingirun once, over drinks. "Eir says that Loki was raised to believe that his own species were monsters. He is baffled that we do not see him that way, even knowing the truth of his origins."

Natasha would never admit it to anyone, but she could relate. The team and the way they accepted her, the way Clint accepted her, despite knowing exactly who she was and the things she had done… it was disconcerting to face their regard, sometimes. If Loki had grown up with racist parents and then turned that hatred inward, it would have to be confusing to face people who didn't despise him as he'd been taught he should be.

Not much else happened in the refugee village, and eventually Fury offered to assign the Avengers elsewhere. Bruce opted to stay, still searching for the cure to his condition; of course Tony would come and go as he pleased, and Eir was not yet willing to give up what his arc reactor did for Loki's recovery. He and Bruce got along well anyway, so Natasha wasn't surprised that Tony would actually want to stick around, despite being forced to spend time with Loki.
Clint was torn, and Natasha could see the conflict on his face when the two of them were alone, but ultimately he decided he'd been gone from his family long enough. "There's other places I could be, better things I could be doing," he told her late one night. "And if things go to shit, Fury can always call me back. I'll be the one to put an arrow through that bastard's eye if he turns around and goes Dr. Evil on us again."

"And you still have some recovering of your own to do," she suggested. "Work that you can't accomplish when you see Loki every time you turn around."

Clint sighed. "Yeah, that too. I hate to turn my back on the guy, though."

"I get it," said Natasha. "It's hard to know which decision is right."

"And it's probably smarter for me to let Coulson or Fury make that call, right now. I'm still compromised," he said, barely audible and not meeting her eyes. "I'm still compromised, and I fucking hate it."

"Get your head on straight, and come back," said Natasha. "I'll be here."

And she would; she spun a story for SHIELD about keeping an eye on things and looking for subtle changes in Loki's demeanor, getting a better profile as he recovered, and that was true enough, but Bruce and probably Tony knew better. Her ability to sense magical energies was getting stronger, even though she herself couldn't do anything to manipulate them yet. The children's teachers all said that it often took as long as fifty years to get a decent handle on one's seidr, so she shouldn't really get her hopes up. It was hard to believe that most of these kids were actually older than Steve, and had been studying magic nearly as long as Natasha had been alive.

As for Steve himself… Natasha felt bad for him. He'd only been out of the ice for a few weeks before he'd been thrown back into fighting an alien invasion, and it was clear to her that he needed a better support network around him, now that the battle was over. He was definitely one of those soldiers who had brought the war home with him, and couldn't let it go. Not that she blamed him for it; he'd barely been given any time to adjust to life in this century, much less time to mourn his fallen friends and all he'd lost.

"If I'm not a soldier, who am I?" he asked her once, quietly, when no one else was around. "That's what Erskine's experiment was for, making soldiers. Now they tell me the war's over, but here I am, still… I've got this energy to burn, and nowhere to burn it. I can't sleep unless I run thirty miles before bed, or spar with the guys here until we're exhausted. And then in my sleep…" He stopped, shaking his head, but Natasha could guess the sort of dreams he might be having. "But I'm not a space alien, either," he said. "I can't stay here. I don't know where I'm going to go, though. Brooklyn, my Brooklyn, is barely there. I just know that I need to get away. Get my head on straight."

Him and Clint both, thought Natasha, but she didn't say it. "Have you thought about where you'll go?" she asked instead.

"I was thinking maybe DC," he said with a shrug. "Stay close in case SHIELD needs me."

"Just don't let them go thinking that they own you," she warned. "Don't be at their beck and call every time something comes up. You need to take time, and they're pretty good at getting people to dedicate all of themselves to their objectives."

Steve nodded, and actually gave her the side-eye with a wry smile. "I'd noticed. You plan on staying here till the Aesir go home?"
"Someone needs to keep an eye on Stark," Natasha replied, letting her eyes show her amusement. Steve chuckled. "And like Clint said, if anything else goes down anywhere in the world, Fury will call. I'll be there if you need me."

Steve nodded. "Thanks," he said, and she knew he was talking about more than just that.

Loki, although wrapped up in his issues and his recovery, was still observant enough to notice when Clint and Steve stopped showing up to dinner. "Your companions," he said one afternoon. "What happened to them?"

"We came here to assess whether or not your people, and you, were a threat to our world," said Natasha neutrally. "Since it's been determined that you're not, our superiors chose to assign them elsewhere."

He nodded, though there was a troubled expression on his face, a little furrow between his eyebrows as he frowned.

"Something wrong?"

"No," said Loki. "No. I had hoped to offer Agent Barton a gift—" He stopped at Natasha's raised eyebrow. "I suppose you think I am attempting to buy his forgiveness."

"Seems a little weird to give him something, out of all of us."

"Of course." Loki glanced away and back, looking for all the world like a bashful teenager, and Natasha was left to wonder how young he really was compared to the other people in the village. "What I did to him—what I remember, at least—was unforgivable. I had sought to offer him an enchantment that would render his mind immune to such tampering in future. But placing the enchantment itself may have been too… intimate, for him to tolerate. I cannot say that I would have been willing to face my former tormentor in such a scenario, myself."

"That's quite a gift," allowed Natasha, "but you're probably right. From what I know of him, Agent Barton wouldn't have been willing to accept it."

"Of course," he said again. "Even so… if you are in communication with him…"

"I'll pass on the word," she said. She wasn't sure if it was a lie or not.

So yeah, time passed. Spring came. Tony spent his time in the hot springs ignoring Loki as best he could. Loki, thankfully, seemed to be okay with that, especially on the days when he came in sniffling and red-eyed from whatever his counseling sessions with Eir put him through. Tony tried to imagine a shrink with her bedside manner and came up short.

To be fair, being around Loki wasn't actually all that bad. After a while, Tony stopped flashing back to free falling out his window every time he saw the guy, and he was surrounded by naked women all the time, so if nothing else Tony could enjoy the eye-candy. It was also, still, peaceful to be in Skýli, where no one expected anything of him except that he sit in a hot tub with his arc reactor and let Loki sit next to him.
So he got to watch firsthand as Loki’s "channels", whatever they were, healed up and allowed him to start working magic again. It was simple stuff at first, according to Sibbe, who had apparently appointed herself Loki’s new tutor while he recovered, beginner’s tricks and child’s play, but it was all beyond anything Tony himself had ever seen.

"Most humans do not have channels at all," Sibbe explained to him over that nut-flavored tea they all drank instead of coffee. "There is speculation that a human could live long enough to develop the channels for seidr, and that your shorter lifespans compared to us are what prevent you from accessing either your own seidr or the ambient energies around you. I know not whether such speculation has any basis in fact. Some humans do work seidr, which in itself is remarkable, simply because we are accustomed to it taking many years to develop a sensitivity to the flow of the energies within one's own body."

Tony couldn’t really do anything other than take that at face value. Which drove him a little nuts, but there wasn’t much he could do to test the hypothesis, after all. There were too many variables that he didn’t even have the equipment to observe, if Sibbe was telling it right.

SHIELD, which meant Fury, occasionally asked Tony if he got any information out of his sessions with Loki, but Tony was happy to tell Fury the answer was no. They were already getting intel from Loki directly in the sporadic interviews that he deigned to give them, anyway, as well as from the villagers themselves and from Black Widow’s observations. They didn’t need Tony pestering the aliens on top of that, and risking the diplomatic truce they had going on. If Loki were a computer system that they needed to hack, sure, that would have been one thing, but when it came to interviews and interrogations, Tony was more accustomed to being on the receiving end, complete with paparazzi photographers. He was perfectly content to leave Loki the hell alone and just enjoy the hot springs.

That didn’t mean they had no conversations at all, however; there was only so long that Tony could watch magic taking place before his curiosity got the better of him. But most of what Loki and the healers and Sibbe had to say went right over Tony’s head, which was… something of a novel experience, to say the least.

The rest was awkward small talk, because Tony couldn’t even bait a guy who had no memory of interacting with him.

So all in all, it was easier to just bring a tablet and try to get work done, and pretend the rest of them weren’t there.

He thought about Eir’s offer pretty frequently, though. To actually be rid of the shrapnel that was inching its way toward his heart would be huge, a nightmare erased. Getting rid of the arc reactor that apparently made him immune to magic attacks? That was a different proposition.

"I can leave the machine intact," said Eir when he consulted her, late one night after Nat and Bruce thought he’d gone back to New York. "Or, not entirely intact. Much of the machinery exists to keep the metal shards from piercing your heart, does it not? With the shards gone, you could modify the machine yourself to take up less space within your chest cavity. Your ‘arc reactor’, as you call it, could remain, without need for the rest of it."

"What kind of recovery time are we looking at?" he asked. "Because I can’t afford to be down for long."

"You are human," responded Eir. "It is impossible to say. Perhaps you would heal more quickly with our technology, or perhaps not. We would not know until we actually performed the procedure."
"Yeah, and that's another problem," said Tony. "I don't want anyone finding out about this. Especially not SHIELD."

"You do not trust them? Your own people?"

Tony sighed. "Long story."

"They would not hear of it from me," said Eir. "I do not know how such things work in your realm, but on Asgard the privacy between healer and patient is sacrosanct."

"Yeah," Tony said with a nod, "it's supposed to be that way here too. But I'm famous. Anything that happens to me is news, and people can be bribed to spread the word."

"You are not famous, as you say, in Skýli," said Eir, one eyebrow rising. "You are merely mortal. And we have no cause to speak to the rest of your people about anything that goes on here."

Tony took that in, and thought about it for a few days. He went home, did business, talked to Pepper and Rhodey both, and thought about it some more.

"Something's on your mind," said Bruce once, over lunch.

Tony took another bite of his fish—he was beginning to get tired of fish—and chewed. "Been thinking about letting the alien doctors look me over," he said finally. "Kind of a reverse Area 51."

Bruce blinked. "Have you made a decision yet?"

"Nope." Except he kinda had, and he was just waiting for someone to give him a reason not to go through with it.

"Want my opinion?"

Tony shrugged, not quite meeting Bruce's eye. "Sure."

Bruce ducked his head down until Tony was forced to look at him, and lowered his voice, seeming to understand that Tony didn't want this broadcast to all and sundry. "They're likely to have better facilities here than anywhere on Earth," he said, "and if you're going to put your health at risk, this is probably the best place to do it."

Tony took a deep breath—as deep as his arc reactor let him, these days—and let it out. "That's about what I was thinking," he admitted.

"I also think you should tell Natasha about this. She's already figured out something is up with you," said Bruce.

Tony shook his head. "She'd take it to SHIELD. I don't need them adding to my file," he said with distaste.

"I think you might be surprised," Bruce offered.

"Yeah. I've been surprised before. Not in the good way."

Bruce leaned in even farther, and lowered his voice a little more. "I promised her not to go into detail with anyone, but let's just say there are things she isn't sharing with SHIELD, herself. About her, and about me."

Tony couldn't help it; he started to smile. "Why, Brucie-Bear, are you telling me you've gone
native?" He added a ridiculous British accent to the sentence, just to see his friend huff a little laugh at him.

"Just taking advantage of what's here. If they can cure me... well, I'd be a fool not to try and take that opportunity if it's presented."

Tony still thought Bruce needed to embrace his Jolly Green Giant side, but that was a discussion they'd already had more than once.

"Anyway, the same applies to you," Bruce was saying. "If the opportunity is presented..."

"Yeah," said Tony. His fish was getting cold. "Yeah."

So he took the plunge, and said yes.

They did it late one night, after everyone had gone to bed except the healers. Tony stayed awake the whole time, and did his best not to panic over the memories of the last time he'd had strangers standing around his open chest cavity, except that they hadn't opened him up yet.

"You are doing well, Tony Stark," said Runa.

Tony swallowed, wishing just a little that Pepper was here to hold his hand. "When are you going to start?" he asked, trying and failing to keep the tremor out of his voice.

Runa smiled. "We've nearly finished."

Tony blinked. "What?" He hadn't felt much, just a tingling and tightness in his chest. He had that on bad days with the reactor anyway.

"Hold out your hand." He did, and she dropped bits of metal into his palm, pieces whose shape he recognized intimately from his own repeated scans of them. "Eir is searching your body one more time to make certain we have not missed anything. It is a little challenging because of the way your machine blocks seidr; we are working around that by only using seidr on that which does not belong in your body to begin with."

"You're serious." He blinked, rapidly, trying very very hard not to tear up in front of these people. The Aesir, in general, already thought humans were like amusing, somewhat slow children. He was not going to cry where they could see it.

"Take a deep breath, Tony Stark," said Eir.

He did. Inhaled to his usual limit, and then kept going. There was a twinge right around the core housing his reactor, but nothing else. He took the deepest breath he'd been able to take in years, and damn if the air didn't taste sweet.

"Very good. Again, and hold this time while we get the shapes correct... yes. You may exhale now. We are finished for tonight."

Unbelievable. Tony took another deep breath, letting himself relax for the first time since they'd started. "What next?"

"As we discussed," said Eir, "you will modify the machinery without our interference. Remove the parts that are no longer necessary. Tomorrow we will check your recovery, then remove the empty
housing and replace it with a smaller one which you provide, and regrow the bone where necessary. Depending on how well your body takes to the treatment, we may need to spread it across several days, or it may be done immediately."

"And that's it. It'll really be done?"

"Indeed, Tony Stark. You will be free."

Free. The word rang in his head for the entire flight home.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Changes are afoot; trouble comes to Skyli and to Asgard alike.

Chapter Notes

Updates to this story will still be sporadic, I'm afraid, but I thought I'd neglected it long enough. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

One spring night, there was a conference in the meeting hall, which Natasha happened upon almost by accident. She had been on her way to the hot springs, when she'd noticed Eir and Runa both heading away from the healing rooms and toward the meeting hall, moving briskly and talking in urgent, low tones amongst themselves. That was strange, because usually at least one of them was with Loki at all times. Natasha decided she could get her nightly soak later.

She was spotted as soon as she stepped inside, of course, but the Aesir made no move to bar her entry. They ignored her, instead gathering around a central table where several scrolls and books were stacked, and roughly a dozen women of different ages were alternating between paging through them, pointing out passages to one another, and… building something in midair out of magical energy. It looked almost like one of Tony Stark's holographic models, but what they were trying to simulate, Natasha had no idea.

"And you say it's been weeks since these disappearances began?" Ingirun was asking. "Why weren't we notified?"

"The first ones were walking between Vanaheim and Alfheim, and they did not tell us," said one woman. "I think they must have each believed that the other colony would say something, or perhaps thought they could manage the problem on their own."

"Or their dream walkers are blocked somehow," offered another.

"No," said Herkja. "I have checked, and the dream walkers are still able to communicate with no difficulties. It is possible that the travelers did not announce their departures, and so no one in the other realms knew to expect them."

"That would make more sense," said Ingirun. "Our travelers have been walking without any difficulty before now."

"So what has changed?" asked Eir.

"That is what we are trying to find out."

Natasha touched Runa's shoulder. "What's going on?" she asked, keeping her voice down.
"You know that we have means of traveling between the realms to communicate with one another," said Runa.

"Yes."

"It is a unique skill, which only a few women can learn. We depend on our travelers... but now several of them have gone missing, from more than one village."

That sounded bad. "How many have you lost?"

"We're still trying to determine that. We had about two hundred travelers, at most, divided among the various outposts." Runa turned away and added her voice to the discussion.

Natasha watched for a little while, as the women consulted their records and continued to build their simulation in the air above the table. It was a map of sorts, from what Natasha could surmise, only three-dimensional like the branches of a tree. There were nodes and endpoints labeled in the writing of the Aesir, but Natasha assumed that they were different realms and places where the seidkonur had gone after leaving Asgard.

She was still watching when Loki walked in; the room fell silent as the seated women stood, and all of them saluted or curtseyed to their prince.

For his part, Loki looked a little nonplussed to see them all gathered. "I was looking for Lady Eir," he said. "But I think something more important has happened."

"Some of our travelers have gone missing, my prince," said Eir, after a pause. "We are attempting to learn how many, as well as where and when."

"I see." He stepped up to the glowing map, frowning in thought. "These are the routes I have taught the travelers," he said.

"Just so, my prince."

"Is there a chance that any of them stepped off the paths?"

"We don't think so, my prince," said Ingirun. "None of them know the paths as well as you do, and none would be so foolhardy as to take a route that you had not taught them."

"Unless they were forced," said another woman, and there were general sounds of agreement around the table.

"But what would force them?"

"There are other beings that dwell within the branches," admitted Loki. He did not sound pleased to say it. "But for the most part they leave our kind alone. They are too alien for us to understand one another. Unless..." He stepped closer, and reached out to touch the map. It moved under his fingers, rotating and giving Natasha even more of a reminder of Stark's tech. "Do we know where the disappearances have taken place?"

"Only a few of them, my prince," said one of the women on the other side of the table. She reached up and gestured, and three of the branches began to glow.

Loki rotated the map until the three branches lined up along one side of the structure. With another gesture, he highlighted two nodes and a major branch that ran between them. Whatever he saw made him frown deeply; one or two of the other women gasped.
"What is it?" asked Natasha.

Loki glanced up, as if seeing her for the first time. "When I fell, before I came to your world, it was into a collapsing wormhole that ran between Jotunheim and Asgard," he said, indicating the two glowing nodes. "I ended up outside of the Nine Realms, among the Chitauri. Somewhere roughly... here." Another section of the air above the table began to glow, a green cloud just beyond the borders of the map.

Natasha saw the connection immediately. "The routes where the travelers have gone missing all line up along the edge of that space."

"We need more data to be certain," said Eir.

"But what we do have is already alarming," replied Ingirun. Eir nodded as if conceding the point.

"How many more travelers have we lost?" asked Loki.

"We're still gathering that information, my prince," said Herkja. "Once we know who and where, and when, we will be able to add to this map."

"See that it is done quickly," said Loki, and the women all bowed or curtseyed to him. It was a little jarring, for Natasha, this reminder that he was royalty and that the villagers would all defer to him if he so much as lifted an eyebrow in the right way. He didn't seem to abuse his power, too busy with his own recovery, but every once in a while, she would be reminded that it was there.

It was too easy to forget, sometimes.

"There was something you wished to speak to me about, my prince?" asked Lady Eir, and just like that, the moment was broken. Loki nodded and moved off to one side with her, and whatever was said between them, they did not share with her.

No matter. Fury would need to hear about this.

Asgard: the Realm Eternal. Home to beings once described as gods, nearly immortal and virtually indestructible. Possessed of the greatest civilization in the Nine Realms; the finest art, the bravest warriors.

In a life that could span five thousand years, a few months were as the blink of an eye; yet, in that blink, Asgard had begun to collapse. The Realm Eternal was in an uproar, all because its magic-users had fled the land rather than risk facing their king's fury.

Power flows continued to be disrupted; trade was at a virtual standstill. Services did not always reach the people who needed them most. There was no food shortage, not yet, but the people spoke fearfully of what the next season might bring, if the seidkonur did not return.

People spoke fearfully, as well, about Odin's failure to do anything to solve the problem. Months had passed, and so far as anyone had heard, no one even knew where all the seidkonur had gone.

Some spoke less fearfully, and with more anger, and their voices grew in number as the weeks passed.

There were a few who laid blame at Loki's feet, ever known as the trickster, the male who used
magic, the one who had attacked Midgard after shamefully trying to take his own life. These were
warriors, by and large, or those who had been bested by Loki and his cunning. They were generally
put in their place by Sif, and by Warriors Three and Thor, whenever they had opportunity to
overhear their mutterings.

Far more people laid blame at Odin's feet, and while they were hushed out of fear, no one stopped
their whispers.

It seemed as though matters would only grow worse until they came to a head, and then one day
something changed.

"My queen," said a handmaiden. "The healers request your presence in the healing wing."

"What is it?"

"They would not say, my queen."

The healers had little more information to offer. "She gives her name as Vigdis, my queen, and she
refuses to speak to anyone but you."

"What is her condition?"

"She was found badly injured near the temple, but no one knows how she came to be there. The
priests did not see anyone, but there are so few of them now…” The healer did not unbend so far as
to shrug in front of the All-Mother, but it was clear that she was no better informed than anyone else.

Vigdis was awake when Frigga entered her chamber. An attendant was crushing one of their now-
rare healing stones over an injury in her abdomen. They were surrounded by machines and devices
that would help Vigdis, but it was clear that her healing would take much longer than it would have
with seidkonur healers present.

"My queen," she said, her voice little more than a hoarse whisper. She sounded less as though she
were sick, and more as if she'd lost her voice to screaming at some point recently. "I am glad you
have come."

"Why do you not choose to speak with the city guard about your attack?" asked Frigga, taking a seat
at her bedside.

"I was not injured on Asgard," said Vigdis, and Frigga's eyes grew wide. The attendant took a sharp
breath, then at Frigga's look, curtsied and took herself out of the room.

"You are a seidkona," said the queen.

"I am, my queen."

"Are your people choosing to return now?"

"No, my queen. Not yet. It is not yet safe to do so. Less safe now than it has been in some time."

"What do you mean?" Frigga leaned forward, her hands clasped tightly together, and lowered her
voice. "Have you news of my son?"

"He recovers," said Vigdis, her expression shuttering. "More than that I will not say, out of respect
"Of course." It was disappointing, but still more than Frigga had hoped to hear. Her son was alive. Her son was recovering. "How came you here?"

"I am one of the few seidkonur whom Loki has taught to travel between the realms," said Vigdis. "I am not as skilled as he, but I help to carry messages and goods between the—" She cut off, her expression wary.

"I have already learned that the seidkonur are scattered across the Nine Realms," said Frigga. "I assume you were traveling between settlements?"

"I was, and my queen… I was caught. On the paths. Between the realms."

Frigga was not an expert on the paths, but she had thought that that was impossible. "Caught. By whom?"

"There were others caught as well; perhaps two dozen of us. I know not what may have happened to them, or even whether any still live. I only know that it was barely within my power to escape him."

"Escape whom, Vigdis?"

Slowly, painfully, Vigdis moved her hand to grasp the queen's wrist, and Frigga's eyes widened in surprise. No one ever laid hands upon the king or queen; it was a violation of protocol and propriety. Vigdis did not seem to care, however, as she wrapped her fingers around Frigga's forearm and squeezed. "Asgard must prepare. The Mad Titan moves against the Nine."

"The Mad Titan." Odin paced his study, looking caught between disgust and murder. Frigga had no doubt that if she had been any other messenger, she would even now be bearing the brunt of his anger for bringing him unwelcome news. "As if Asgard did not face enough of a threat from the other realms within the Nine."

It was true that Asgard's forces had already had to fend off incursions from Alfheim and Vanaheim, and Heimdall reported that the jotnar and muspels seemed to be preparing to move soon as well. So far, none of the attacks had led to much loss of life for Asgard, but they were nonetheless taxing to combat. Asgard had not been invaded in millennia, and the toll these skirmishes took against the morale of the people was more devastating than any physical damage they had managed to impart.

Warriors could not easily be healed without the seidkonur. Spent or damaged weapons could not as easily be replaced. Supplies could not be moved from place to place as readily. Communications were not as reliable. All the things that made Asgard a power to be reckoned with, even the warriors were beginning to see, had their origins in the magical noncombatants, the women and ergi seidmenn of Asgard, and the realization galled them.

"How are we supposed to prepare against such a threat with our forces crippled?" Odin asked. Frigga assumed the question was rhetorical. "If I find that the seidkonur have betrayed us…"

"I highly doubt that, husband," snapped Frigga. "The wisest among us are the seidkonur, and only a fool would think to ally themselves with the Titan—or even to believe he still existed, for that matter. And even if it were true that the seidkonur had betrayed us, would you expect them to have done so before you betrayed them?"
"I have done nothing to them," Odin tried, but Frigga would have none of it.

"Nothing except demonstrate to them your complete lack of understanding of their abilities. Your complete lack of respect for their service to Asgard. Your willingness to commit atrocities against them in your ignorance and anger."

Odin glared, but his expression slipped away from murderous and toward weariness. "You speak of Loki."

"Hm. Someone has to."

The All-Father sighed and moved toward his seat, dropping into it with less grace than Frigga was used to seeing. "Everything comes back to him."

"Everything comes back to how you mistreated him," Frigga corrected.

"I know."

Frigga raised one eyebrow, surprised.

Odin saw her expression and frowned. "I do know," he said. "You may assume that I have been willfully ignorant these past months, but I assure you, I have paid attention. Asgard crumbles. My remaining son still recovers from what that völva did to him. The son who is lost to me may be dead, for all I or Heimdall have been able to discern. The other realms test themselves against us, with the exception of Svartalfheim which is desolate and Midgard which is too primitive. And the source for all these catastrophes can be squarely laid at my feet. I do know, my wife."

"And what will you do to make it right?" asked Frigga.

"I can do nothing while the seidkonur continue to hide their presence from Asgard," said Odin.

"That is not true," said Frigga. "You could step down."

"In the middle of a war?" Odin stood again, turning his back. "Do you also wish for Asgard to fall, then?"

"Do not dare to accuse me of treason, when it is you who have wrecked this realm for the sake of your pride, husband." Frigga shook her head and sighed. "You have not even asked after the seidkona who lies in the healing wing, even now. Has it not occurred to you that she could carry a message back to her sisters, once she is recovered?"

"I am still debating whether or not to punish her," began Odin, and Frigga scoffed, the laugh far too bitter to contain anything of humor.

"Punish her. For what? For fleeing for her life? And what message will that send to the remaining seidkonur? You should be begging on your knees for them to return and restore our realm, and instead you once again think only of your damaged pride."

"She committed treason!"

"She left after you committed an abomination! Is fleeing for one's life a capital offense in Asgard, now? Is traveling to a safe haven treasonous? Does Asgard value freedom so little for its people?"

Frigga turned away in disgust. "I will continue to speak with Vigdis and learn what I can about her ordeal. If you are fortunate, I will share what I learn with you."
"As opposed to whom?"

She stopped at the door and looked over her shoulder at him. "My sister, of course," she said. "All the realms need to be warned. I will enjoin her to spread the word to all those she knows."

Chapter End Notes

My thanks and appreciation to all of you who have been patient enough to stick around and still follow this fic. You all, your kudos and your comments, mean the world to me.
"What do you mean, 'he's gone'?' Fury demanded.

Tony shrugged, while Natasha tried to school her expression back to neutrality. "I mean he was talking with Lady Eir and Ingirun and the rest about the missing travelers," she said, "and then his entire demeanor changed. We keep forgetting that as far as these people are concerned, he's the rightful leader of the entire colony. He's second in line for the throne in Asgard. When he found out that his people were going missing, he decided to do something about it."

And that something had been pretty impressive, she had to admit. For the first time, Loki had used his magic in front of her, outside of the hot springs and the team of healers that she knew always surrounded him there. He'd simply gestured, and an arc of green energy had crept along the edges of his clothing. His cream colored robe had darkened and changed its contours, until the alien prince stood before them in black and green leather, with gold accents. It was clothing that Natasha had immediately recognized.

"And so now the bastard has disappeared right out from under our noses," said Fury. He pinched the bridge of his nose, as if this entire discussion were giving him a headache. "I thought he couldn't use his magic."

"He's been recovering," offered Tony. "And it's been months since they first came here. No real surprise that he'd keep his actual progress close to the vest and away from us humans. Or that any of them would. The entire settlement knows we don't really trust them, and they don't trust us."

"For what it's worth, Lady Eir protested and tried to convince him to stay behind," said Natasha. There had been an argument that had lasted all of thirty seconds, before Loki had invoked his authority as prince. Eir had looked very surprised at first, then had bowed her head in acquiescence, and that had been that.

"And this guy exists to fuck with rules and common sense," muttered Fury.

But Natasha shook her head. "I don't think it was that. I think he genuinely decided that he was the only one qualified to go after his people and see what could be done to bring them back."

"And how has the rest of the settlement taken it?"

"Word has spread pretty quickly," she admitted. "The healers are on alert, and the people that they have in communications are keeping in touch with the refugee colonies on other planets."
"What I wouldn't give for some of that," said Fury, but Tony was the one to shake his head this time. "They communicate in their sleep," he said. "All that New Age mumbo-jumbo about astral projection or whatever. They literally share dreams and send messages back and forth that way."

Fury sighed. Natasha figured that the director knew damn well he’d already burned any bridges that would have otherwise allowed a SHIELD team in to learn more about how to do things like that, mumbo-jumbo or not. The best he could hope for was Natasha learning how to do more than see the energy itself, but then, that depended on her ever deciding to tell SHIELD about her newfound abilities in the first place. "How long has he been gone?" he asked.

"A couple of hours," said Natasha. "Apparently Loki can get anywhere in the universe in a matter of minutes; maybe an hour if the destination is far enough away on the kinds of paths he’s able to take. The others are starting to worry because they think he should have been back by now."

"An hour to reach another goddamn planet," said Fury.

"He never did need the cube," said Tony, just because he enjoyed provoking the director at every opportunity. Natasha managed not to roll her eyes at him, but it was a near thing.

"Yes, we figured that out, Stark, thank you." Fury sighed tiredly. "Keep me apprised," he said, then cut the connection.

Tony eyed her, curious. "You think this will be enough to get him to bring in Cap and Bird Boy again?"

"I don't know," said Natasha. "Time will tell."

Tony waited in the gathering hall with his tablet, going over the latest R&D specs that Pepper had asked him to review. There was enough there to keep him occupied for several hours, which was good, because it took a while for Loki to return. It helped that Kisping had brought him some hot tea and flirtation to keep him company while the hours passed.

Then there was a little tingle on the back of Tony's neck, and Kisping looked up sharply.

"What is it?" Tony asked, but he barely had time to get out the words before the air at one end of the hall shimmered and shivered and seemed to split open, and out stumbled Loki followed by three bedraggled-looking women, none of whom looked familiar.

The room went into an uproar. "Fetch a healer!" someone cried, and several people went to aid Loki and the women.

Loki held up a hand. "Fetch all of them," he said solemnly, and one of the men dropped his knitting on the nearest table and ran out the main door.

Discreetly, Tony turned back to his tablet and dialed Fury. "Loki's back," he said quietly, as soon as Fury's face appeared. "Thought you might want to listen in."

At the other end of the room, Loki and others were assisting the three women with him to sit down; they looked exhausted and much the worse for wear, their clothing ragged and their hair unkempt. Their skin was gray with unwashed grime. Tony had intimate knowledge of what prolonged captivity looked like, and he could see it on these three. Their expressions held a combination of
exhaustion and the kind of shock that numbed a person to all other emotion.

"Loki!" Lady Eir came briskly in, followed by Runa and several other healers that Tony had gotten to know during his own procedure. "Make room, make room," she said, elbowing her way past onlookers to get to the women more quickly. "My prince. Tell us what has happened."

"I found three of our travelers alive. Six others were dead. The rest, I could not find." Loki was standing tall, but there was a tremor to his voice that Tony couldn't recall hearing before. "Our suspicions are confirmed. They were in the clutches of the Chitauri."

There was a collective intake of breath, it seemed, before the room erupted into conversation once more.

"Enough!" snapped Eir. "Either help me move these women to the healing hall, or take yourselves off. Go gossip in the hot springs, if you must."

"Of course, Lady Eir," said Herkja. "Kjalvor, Bjorn, stay and assist the healers. Ingrid, gather the settlement. My prince, is there anything else you require?"

"Food. Refreshment," said Loki. "But see to the travelers first. I will rest in the hot springs and tell you what I know."

"Not before I have had the chance to examine you, my prince," said Eir.

Tony half-expected Loki to bristle at her tone, but instead the other man only inclined his head. "As you say, healer."

When Kisping sat back down beside him, Tony didn't even notice at first, too engrossed in the scene before him. The glow from his tablet lit Kisping's face as ze leaned over Tony's arm to see what he was studying. "Ah," ze said. "Your leader of the men who wished to examine us."

Fury did not look best pleased to have been discovered, but he covered it well enough. "I think you're already aware of why we continue to observe your encampment," he said.

"Of course," said Kisping airily. "We frighten you because you cannot control us. It is ever the way of men with power to fear what they cannot control. Why do you think we left Asgard?"

"Even allies on our world keep an eye out for each other, just to be safe," said Fury.

"Of course," repeated Kisping. "And we are not yet allies. I do not care that you watch us. Ingirun or Herkja might be annoyed that you were brought in, but I can see why you would need to be notified. The Chitauri threatened your world more recently than anyone else's, after all."

"I appreciate your understanding," said Fury.

Tony would have sat there a little longer, tried to listen in to what Loki had to say, but the healers were rounding up the prince and the other women and leading them all off to the healing hall. There would be no way for Tony to follow them in there. "Yeah, it's looking like they're off to the hospital, and the rest of us will have to go to the hot springs for more information," he said. "Want to stay on the line, or do you want me to give you the Cliffs Notes version later?"

"The last thing I need is a bunch of naked Vikings on the screen in my office," said Fury. "Keep me posted."

"You got it," said Tony, and swiped a fingertip across the screen to end the call.
Natasha and Bruce caught up with them on the way to the hot springs. "So, Loki's back already?" asked Bruce. "What has everyone in such a tizzy then?"

"He didn't come back alone," said Tony. "And the three he had with him… let's just say I recognize the look."

"The look…"

"From Afghanistan."

Bruce paused. "Ah."

"What is Afghanistan?" asked Kisping, stumbling over the unfamiliar word.

Tony took a deep breath, then went for flip. "It's a place," he said. "A different human faction, as you guys call it. A few years ago I was held prisoner there. I came out of it feeling a little bit like those ladies looked."

Kisping's eyes widened. "I see. I am sorry."

"They all went missing on the edge of what is presumed to be Chitauri space," said Natasha.

Tony just nodded and kept walking. "Confirmed. Loki said they were with the Chitauri when he found them. There were others dead, and others still that he couldn't locate."

"He went on a one-man rescue mission?" asked Bruce.

Tony's grin showed teeth. "What, it's not like I don't do that all the time."

"You have the suit," Bruce pointed out. "I thought Loki was still damaged from when Odin tried to take his magic."

"Looks like maybe he's recovering faster than he's let on," said Natasha.

"Or he said 'screw the consequences', and went even though he was still not a hundred percent," suggested Tony.

"You think he's that reckless?"

Tony considered that, as they passed through the doorway to the springs. "I think he cares about his people, and since they've rallied around him, and showed that they give a damn about him, he's going to be even more loyal to them, right back."

"You are correct," said Kisping, already beginning to remove zir outer robe. "We do very much 'give a damn' about our prince, and we will do anything in our power to aid him. It is only his due, after all. But his loyalty to us is why we would follow him, even over Odin himself, if we were forced to choose." Ze paused, considering. "In fact, we were forced to choose. That is why we are here, after all."

The hot springs were spacious, but even they could become crowded when the entire population of
the settlement filtered in, people stripping in the heat and damp and either climbing into the water completely, or sitting along the edges of the pools with only their shins and feet soaking. Even the children were here, their parents herding them together into one of the larger pools along the side of the enclosure. Two of them working together created a barrier of energy that blocked the noise of the children's voices and splashing, while the rest settled in, men and women alike.

There was not a smile to be found in the place, Natasha saw, and there was a buzz in the air that prickled along her arms and raised the hair there and on the back of her neck. Some of the younger seidkonur she saw appeared to be glowing faintly to her eye, their seidr stirred up in response to their agitation.

"What do we know so far?" asked Ingirun, as she stood before the gathered crowd. "I will be brief. As you know, several of our travelers have gone missing, from several of the different settlements we have scattered across the seven realms open to us."

"Seven?" muttered Tony, but Ingirun heard him.

"None remain on Asgard, so far as I know," she said, "and Helheim is the realm of the dead and is therefore barred to us. Seven remain, of varying degrees of hospitality."

"Right," said Tony. "Sorry to interrupt."

Ingirun's eyebrow twitched, but she went on. "His Highness Loki learned of the news earlier today, just as we were examining the evidence ourselves, and decided to explore the paths and see what he could find. He returned just recently with three survivors."

"Only three?" called one woman in the crowd, as others began to murmur among themselves.

"That is what he told us, before he went to be examined by Lady Eir," said Ingirun. "Three recovered… six dead. The rest remain missing."

"I believe the Chitauri are attempting to extract their ability to walk between the realms," came Loki's voice, from the entrance to the springs. He strode in purposefully, Lady Eir and some of the other healers in tow; everyone who was sitting rose to their feet as he entered, whether they were naked or not. When he was close enough, Ingirun curtseyed deeply to him and stepped aside to give him the floor.

"The Chitauri possess no magic of their own," he said, "being little more than drones for the Mad Titan's armies. However, their leader, The Other, is a telepath and a seer. And of course the Mad Titan is powerful in his own right, but prefers to rely upon machinery and technology to accomplish his aims. It is my belief that he is attempting to create technology that will mimic the ability to travel through foldspace, between the realms, so that he can bring his armies into Yggdrasil without need of the Tesseract."

"If he can do that, then war may be upon us," said Herkja.

"We cannot know that," said another woman.

"He could strike anywhere in the Nine," said a man, "and not even Heimdall could see him coming."

"That is only true if he has indeed managed to craft machines to mimic our abilities," said another.

"Nevertheless," said Herkja, "it is not safe to assume he hasn't. War may be upon us," she said again, and the crowd erupted into conversation, voices tense and rising in the echoing dome of the hot springs.
Natasha expected Loki to say something, but he only stood and waited, arms crossed in a pose too casual for her to really believe.

When it looked as if the crowd was not going to settle on its own, Loki finally raised his voice. "Unless," was all he said.

All conversation immediately ceased. Natasha and Bruce exchanged a look, both of them with raised eyebrows.

"You are correct, Herkja, that it is not safe to assume that the Mad Titan, or The Other, have not succeeded in crafting technology to mimic our ability to walk between the realms. You are also correct that if he has, he will certainly make use of that ability, sooner rather than later. War would be upon us, and we would never know the time or place that he could strike." He held up one finger, and smiled. "Unless."

"You have a plan, my prince?" asked Ingirun. The hope in her ordinarily calm voice was unmistakable.

"A suggestion, really," he said. "It puts us all at risk, and I will not unilaterally make that decision for you. I would hear discussion, and arrive at consensus, before we move forward."

The gathered women and men nodded, and settled in.

Loki took a deep breath. "It is simple, really," he began. "What is the easiest way to predict when an enemy will move? We entice him to do so, on our terms."

"You mean set a trap," said Tony, and there was a rustle of sound as everyone there turned to look at him. Apparently he wasn't supposed to interrupt when the prince was speaking.

Loki, however, only smiled. "Yes, Stark. That is exactly what I mean. We prepare for his arrival in a place of our choosing, and then lay bait which he will be unable to resist." His smile faded. "The Mad Titan will come to us, and we will do our utmost to destroy him."

"You described a risk, my prince," said Runa.

He nodded. "To do this thing would be to declare war upon the Titan, who is immensely powerful, without the warriors of Asgard to back us up. We may be able to garner some cooperation from the other realms where we have established sanctuaries, but apart from the children and those who must care for them, we would likely all be on the front lines of battle. I will not place you there without your consent."

"The Titan has already made the first move against us," said Ottar, and people around him nodded and made noises up agreement. "And the majority of us here may be seidkonur instead of warriors, but we are of Asgard nevertheless. We will fight."

"Can you?" asked Loki, seriously. "I know the men here will protect their women. But many of you are teachers, healers. Researchers and scholars. Volur. Your skills lie in traveling or communicating, or in transporting objects from one place to another. Have you the training, or even the proclivity, to enter combat?"

Kisping stood, clasping zir hands nervously. "My prince," ze said, "may I answer?"

Loki nodded.

"You are correct, my prince, that we are not traditional warriors of Asgard," ze began. "But by those
criteria—forgive me—by those criteria, neither are you, entirely. You have adapted your use of seidr for combat, and many of us have learned your ways to some extent or another." Kisping gestured, and a glowing blade appeared in zir hand for a moment before vanishing. "Yet the traditional warriors depend upon us, for just the skills that you have listed. For our communications and ability to gather intelligence, for our skill in transporting objects. There is no reason we could not all find ways to adapt those skills for use on the battlefield. Even the healers—especially the healers—would be formidable foes."

Natasha found herself nodding along with the rest of them. A doctor's knowledge of anatomy meant that they knew how to hit a person where it would hurt.

Loki considered Kisping for a moment, his expression thoughtful. "I had not thought any of you would embrace my methods," he said. "They are… unorthodox."

Ottar snorted. "So are we, my prince. And we are far better suited to unorthodox strategies than to charging in for a frontal assault against an enemy who outnumbers us."

"Are there any who are opposed to this strategy, then?" asked Loki. "There are details to be ironed out before it may properly be called a plan, but as it stands now, are any opposed?"

The seidkonur looked around at one another, but no one stood or spoke. "It would be good to communicate this to the other sanctuaries," said Ingirun, "just to be certain that we are all committed to the cause."

"I agree," said Loki.

"Question," said Tony, and Natasha rolled her eyes.

"Yes, Stark?"

"You mentioned a trap," he said. "And that means bait. Who are you going to put in that position?"

Loki only smiled. "Myself, of course."

Chapter End Notes

If you want to leave extra kudos, you're welcome to stop by my Tumblr blog and say hello.
So it's been... 9 or 10 months since I last updated. And this chapter is considerably shorter than the ones I've been posting prior to this point. It took quite a while for inspiration to come back to me, and this story is still my nemesis, but I think I know how to proceed from here to wrap up this behemoth and give you all a completed fic to enjoy.

"You mentioned a trap," he said. "And that means bait. Who are you going to put in that position?"

Loki only smiled. "Myself, of course."

Predictably, this inspired an uproar.

"My prince!" someone cried; Bruce couldn't see who spoke, but it sounded like Runa. "After all you have endured, you cannot mean to place yourself back in the Titan's clutches once more!"

Other voices rose in agreement, the clamor echoing throughout the dome until it began to hurt Bruce's ears. He took a deep breath, fighting for calm.

Loki let the noise rise for about half a minute before he raised his hand, and waited for quiet to descend once more. He got it within seconds, until Bruce could hear only the splash of water and the faintest echoes of the children's voices, behind their shield.

"I know the Titan's tactics, better than he realizes," said Loki. "And we have an advantage, in that he will underestimate me, and likely all of you by extension."

"What do you mean?" asked Ingirun.

"When I fell into the Mad Titan's clutches, I was already half-broken, and half-mad. My powers were never at their fullest strength while I was his captive. Before he turned me loose on Midgard, he believed me to have been completely broken to his will, and he was wrong. It is... not in my nature to be tamed," he added, glancing at the humans where they sat together. "Your people call me a trickster figure, a god of chaos. That description is not unfounded."

"Meaning what?" asked Natasha.

Loki only shrugged. "Meaning exactly what I said—it is not within my nature to be tamed. In a very real sense, I am chaos. Unpredictability. The third option, when presented with only two choices. It was inevitable that I would escape the Titan's clutches, however damaged I might have been when that finally occurred."

"You remember what you did here, then."

"My memories have been returning in pieces, gradually, yes. I do not have a complete picture of what transpired here on Midgard, and I suspect I never will, but I have more than I did when I first
awoke."

"And?" Natasha's eyebrow rose, and she looked to be in full-on interrogation mode, but Loki appeared unfazed.

"And I sabotaged the attack," he said. "I thwarted the Titan's attempt to make use of me, as is my wont." Loki's expression hardened briefly. "I am not to be used," he said, and there was a snarl in his voice that Bruce remembered too well from the attack last year.

"I can dig it," said Tony, and once again the people turned to watch him speak, though whether it was out of politeness or disdain, Bruce couldn't tell. "Look, I know to the rest of you Loki is the prince and you don't want anything to happen to him, but unless we have some sort of material object or strategic advantage to draw him here, live bait is the best bait. And Thanos would remember that Loki screwed him and didn't do what he was supposed to do, the first time he came here. He'll be pissed. It might be only a side goal, but he'll still want to teach Loki a lesson about what happens when you cross the boss."

Loki nodded. "Precisely," he said. "And as it happens, we do have more to draw him here. Midgard is ideally placed amid the planets which make up the Nine Realms. You are a nexus, in fact. Travel to any of those worlds, from any of them, passes through Midgard of necessity."

"If he gets Earth," Bruce said in realization, "then he has a foot in the door for any of the other realms."

"And he can cut them off from one another and keep them from establishing a united front against him," added Tony.

That was bad. That was very bad. When Fury had once called them "hilariously outgunned", he hadn't known the half of it.

"You are correct," said Herkja, and Bruce took a deep breath. That was… very bad, indeed.

"Hold the phone," said Tony, "you're saying you're not going to travel to one of the other realms and entice Thanos to attack there? You're deliberately going to bring him to our world again?"

"SHIELD won't allow that," put in Natasha.

"SHIELD may not have a choice," said Lady Eir. "Midgard is the primary nexus of Yggdrasil. If we throughout the Nine Realms wish to present a united front, as you say, against the Mad Titan, then drawing him here is the only option. Forces from all the other realms may come here easily to combat him. We may choose the terrain, but it must be Midgardian terrain if we are to have a hope of success."

"You want to plan an invasion of our world from other realms besides Asgard, and draw Thanos and the Chitauri here?" Tony started to laugh, but Bruce had known Tony long enough to recognize when he was being sarcastic and when he was showing genuine humor. "You can't be serious."

No one else joined in the laughter; Bruce hadn't really expected them to.

"The Mad Titan threatens all the realms, Stark," said Loki, and Tony shut up. "Whether he attacks your world first or last is immaterial. He will come, and he will obliterate your people in order to establish his own base here. And that is if you are lucky. If you are not, he will enslave you all, and make a spectacle of slaughtering your world's heroes, one by one." Loki took a deep breath and shut his eyes for a moment. "In any case, assuming he has machinery to allow him to travel foldspace—the paths between the realms—he will likely take the easiest paths to travel, and from Chitauri space,
those will most likely bring him here. I have no desire to draw the Titan to your world once more, but from a strategic perspective, we do well to expect him to come here anyway."

Tony's lips thinned and he crossed his arms, but he didn't say anything. No doubt, Bruce thought, he recognized the sense in what Loki was saying.

"Then our best chance against him is to unite the realms," said Ottar, "bring him to the terrain of our choosing, and defeat him before he is fully prepared to attack."

"That is my thinking, yes," said Loki.

"And that has to be here," said Natasha.

Loki nodded. "Ideally, this very island."

"This island is populated," Tony shot back, "with civilians who have no idea you even exist, much less the other realms."

"But this island is also where Skýli itself has been placed," countered Loki. "Each of the sanctuaries the seidkonur built has its own set of defenses, already established and ready to protect everyone who dwells within."

Natasha blinked and leaned over to whisper in Bruce's ear. "Their perimeter—the boundary marker stones," she said. "I could feel seidr in them but not figure out what they were for."

Now that was interesting, but Loki wasn't finished. "Skýli was designed to accommodate more people than currently dwell here," he was saying. "Its defenses can easily be bolstered, buildings can be hidden, if we bring the other seidkonur here. With the additional strength of their seidr, we can accomplish much to make this a defensible stronghold."

"You… do know you're sitting on a fault line and surrounded by volcanoes, right?" asked Bruce. "Not the best place to put a fort, if the terrain itself could destroy you on a bad day."

Loki smiled, and the expression had an uncomfortable number of teeth showing. "That was deliberate. You see, we have seidr, where your people do not, so you are naturally unused to thinking in these terms. But the volcanoes and fault line… let us simply say that they pose no threat to us."

"You can keep a volcano from going off?" demanded Tony.

"Not precisely, no; the inner workings of your planet are vast and powerful. But we can direct the flow of lava as we please. We can also dissipate the seismic forces of a moving fault line and prevent or at least mitigate the damage it would otherwise do."

Tony narrowed his eyes and said slowly, "We were talking about your defenses. What does your control over the fault line and volcanoes have to do with that?"

Loki's smile only grew wider.

Fury showed up in person to discuss his opinions about bringing the goddamn aliens to Earth yet again, not that he expected his presence to do a damn bit of good. Still, he sat at a table with Hill and Romanov on either side of him, and Loki sat opposite, flanked by the settlement leaders, Ingirun and Herkja.
"You are telling me that your plan is to throw the people of Earth under the bus and make us into your decoy," he began, but Loki only shook his head.

It was Herkja who answered him, though, eyes afire. "You will show some respect to our prince! We do you the courtesy of including you in our plan, mortal, but we are perfectly capable of carrying it out without your input."

"Thank you, Herkja," said Loki calmly, and the woman subsided immediately. Fury spared a thought to notice the loyalty this lunatic apparently inspired in his people; Romanov had warned him about it in her reports, but it was different seeing the effect in person. "Director Fury, I have no intention of abandoning the people of Midgard to the Titan's tender mercies. I have experienced his treatment of prisoners myself, and would not wish it on an enemy. Moreover, Midgard has shown me and my people hospitality by allowing us to remain here, relatively unmolested. I would not repay that by, as you say, using you as a decoy to cover our escape to another realm."

"I still don't see why this battle can't take place elsewhere," said Fury. "Earth has its own problems."

"So do all the other realms," Loki replied reasonably, "but Midgard is a nexus that leads to them all. If we hold the Titan here, we protect the entire World Tree from his predations. Moreover, I think it likely that his machinery will not permit him to travel to any of the more far-flung realms. Even if he is capable of doing that, he will be more inclined to take a clear, well-traveled path, assuming it to lead somewhere productive, than to wander aimlessly through foldspace and hope that he arrives at a worthy target. The paths leading to Midgard are the most well-traveled of all."

"Because we're a nexus," sighed Fury.

"Precisely, yes."

He was the director of SHIELD, the most covert intelligence agency in the world, operating outside the jurisdiction of most governments. Decisions fell to him that could mean the difference between life and death for hundreds of people on a daily basis.

This decision could mean life or death for billions.

"How long before you think he arrives?"

"At present, we have no way of knowing," said Loki. "However, once our trap is laid, I can reveal myself to his sight, and virtually direct his approach. I could conceivably time the Titan's arrival to the minute, if need be."

"Bold words, but I can't afford to plan Earth's strategy around a boast."

Loki smiled thinly. "You are thinking of Thor, not me."

Fury was thinking of every word they'd had out of Loki's mouth the last time he'd been spotted on Earth, but supposedly, that had never been Loki at all, only an act.

It was not in Fury's nature to trust blindly, but it also was not in his nature to ignore the evidence when it was staring him in the face. Paranoia was only useful to a point, and then it just led to stupid-ass decisions.

"I'll need to talk to several governments to get their cooperation and discretion before we're ready to act. That means I'll need time. I'd also like to convince the people of Iceland to evacuate, perhaps give them some warning that these volcanoes are about to erupt."

But Icelanders were just as insane as Hawaiians when it came to living near deadly natural features. "That may not be enough to get
them to leave, though."

"I understand," said Loki.

"I do not," said Ingirun, and beside her Herkja was nodding. "Why do you not simply tell the truth and warn the people that this will be the site of an invasion?"

"Because we don't want to trigger a global panic," said Fury dryly. "The last time we hosted the Chitauri, we were outnumbered and outgunned, and the people making the decisions panicked and threw a nuke at one of the largest and wealthiest cities on the planet. We do not want a repeat of that incident. If there's no portal, we have nowhere to throw a nuclear weapon to get rid of it."

Ingirun nodded soberly. "Leave that to us. If there is a repeat of such an incident, so long as we are informed in a timely manner, we can send such a thing into foldspace and be rid of it. Perhaps even target the Titan's forces with it, though I know not whether such a weapon would deploy successfully between the realms."

"Foldspace is strange," agreed Loki, and Fury had to resist the urge to gape.

"You're not worried about nuclear missiles," he said.

"Fission weapons," sniffed Herkja. "We have heard of them. We learn of such things in our introductory schooling, as children."

"Consider, Director, that our civilization is more advanced than yours, and that we have seidr at our disposal besides," said Loki. "To us, your most deadly weapon is inefficient and needlessly toxic. How can a conqueror make use of land that he has poisoned himself? It is," he shrugged delicately, "wasteful."

Wasteful. "You're not wrong," said Fury. He rubbed at his eyes and stood. "I need to speak to my people, get the ball rolling so that humans can be better prepared to participate in the defense of their world."

"Of course," said Loki. He stood as well, the women just a beat behind him. "We appreciate your willingness to work with us to defeat a common foe. It cannot be easy for you, and we recognize that."

Fury had to hand it to him, he did look a lot less like a torture victim now than when he'd first come to Earth last year. Whatever their healers were doing with him here in their settlement, it was working. And he acted less like a lunatic intent on conquering the world, but Fury knew better than to trust that; he headed an organization full of people who could act like their lives depended on it.

He, SHIELD, and the rest of the world would prepare to defend against invading Chitauri; they just would also prepare for collateral damage to the combatants of Skýli, should the need arise.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for staying with me through the delays! I hope the wait was worth it.
Preparations

Chapter Notes

So I checked, and it's been one year and eighteen days since I last updated this fic. Between this specific story being my personal nemesis, and switching to the Merlin fandom for a bit, inspiration was just... thin and hard to find. But I finally scraped together a few ideas, came up with a way forward, and managed to write a few thousand words for you. This chapter is shorter than many previous, and I'm not sure it's one of my best, but I've given up trying to make this fic amazing. I'll be happy if I can just make it complete and done with. :)

If you're still reading after all this time, you have my profound gratitude. Thank you.

So. Without further ado.

Things happened quickly, once the plans were agreed on; Bruce's head spun a little as he watched everything come together. Within the span of a month, the people of Skýli had notified the other realms both of the danger and the plan to combat it, and Aesir who had sought refuge on the other realms began filtering in. They traveled in small groups, and Loki often escorted them personally along the paths in "foldspace" to ensure their safety. Before long, however, the apartment towers where the Avengers lived were filled almost to capacity.

And it wasn't just Aesir that Loki brought, either. Around the meeting hall tables and the hot springs, Bruce met people who told him they were from Alfheim, Vanaheim, Nidavellir, and even Jotunheim, which was apparently a big deal for diplomatic reasons that no one really discussed with the humans. The Jotnar, with a few exceptions, were huge, easily nine feet tall, and when they arrived they were most often blue, with red eyes that reflected in dim light. As they adjusted to Iceland's climate, however, their skin changed so that they looked like especially large humans, with dark brown eyes and skin that ranged from brown to pale. Giants. Bruce wondered if the folklore on Earth that included giants mostly referred to them.

Loki seemed to avoid the Jotnar, at first. He was on good terms with the elves, who looked more alien than any of the other species to come to the settlement. The people of Vanaheim blended in so that Bruce couldn't tell them apart from either the other Aesir or the humans, and they welcomed Loki like a long-lost cousin. The people of Nidavellir were honest-to-goodness dwarves, like something out of fairy tales; about as tall as a short human, but twice as broad. They mainly kept to themselves, but were affable enough when approached, and seemed to be on good terms with the Jotnar. They treated Loki with wary respect, and were at least polite to the Aesir whenever they crossed paths.

The Jotnar, though, seemed to be something of a marvel for the other aliens. Bruce really wasn't quite sure why. They set up their enclave, joined in the gatherings at the hot springs, and even brought out musical instruments when the others were relaxing in the evenings. They fished the lake for food, and helped out in the farming domes. It took a few days, but the Vanir and elves eventually overcame their shyness and made overtures, and the Jotnar were receptive enough. But they and the Aesir took longer to overcome whatever barrier there was between them.

"The dynamics are sure interesting," Bruce remarked to Natasha. "It's like being on the school
"playground all over again."

"I wouldn't know," Natasha replied with a smile. "But it's clear that there was some kind of bad blood between the Jotnar and the Aesir, at some point."

"I wonder who started it."

Natasha shrugged. "It doesn't really matter, as long as they can play nice in the upcoming conflict."

"You are Loki."

Sibbe and Eir looked up from where they were tending to the prince to see a jotun standing before them. She wore her warm-weather skin, here in the hot springs, a rich olive with black hair and eyes; while her features were striking, her expression was difficult to read.

"I am," said Loki. "Though I am afraid you have me at a disadvantage."

"I am called Angrboda," said the Jotun. "And I have questions for you."

Sibbe looked between the two of them nervously, before offering a curtsey and backing away to give them privacy. Eir, however, was not so easily moved.

"My prince," she began, but Loki shook his head.

"It is all right, Lady Eir," he said. "I believe we were nearly finished with our session in any case, is that not so?"

"We were," she frowned, "but if it pleases my prince, I will remain. It may be that I can answer some of Angrboda's questions even better than you can."

Loki's eyebrow rose, but he nodded and made space on the shelf for the Jotun to sit. All the same, he was mildly surprised when she took the invitation and stepped into the water.

"What are your questions?" he asked, once she was settled.

"There is a rumor that you are Jotun," said Angrboda bluntly, and Loki went very still. "Hn. That is one question answered, then."

"Why is this important to you?" asked Loki.

"I wished to know if it were true that you are of our blood, and I see from your face that it is; but I also wished to know why you would attack our world, if this were so. And how you came to be on Asgard in the first place."

Loki glanced away, knowing that if Angrboda were at all observant, he was giving her a great deal of information just from his demeanor alone. "I grew up believing myself to be Aesir," he said. "And I was raised on stories of the valorous Aesir defeating the monstrous Jotnar. You may imagine my surprise when I learned otherwise—both about myself, and about your people."

Eir coughed, and Loki turned to see her lips pressed together in anger. "Odin lied," she said. "To a child with seidr, about that child's true identity. Surely you Jotnar know the danger in doing so."

Angrboda's eyebrow rose, though the rest of her expression was still and unreadable. "We do," she
The healer nodded. "He lied, wanting to cover his guilt for having stolen a Jotun child, yet he claimed later that he had saved Loki from death, by exposure or starvation. He found Loki near a battlefield, you see. Odin may also have intended to return him later, to rule over Jotunheim as a vassalage of Asgard."

"We would not have accepted him," said Angrboda. There was no heat in her voice, only an implacable certainty.

Loki licked his lips, and asked, "Even if we were to have returned the Casket of Ancient Winters?"

Angrboda took a deep breath. "There was rumor that Odin War-Bringer stole it from us, a thousand years ago. That this was how he ended the war. I knew it was lost. I did not know if the stories were true." She looked at Loki, and tipped her head thoughtfully. "It would seem that that was not all he stole from us."

"It was not," said Loki. "I only learned of my heritage when Thor went to make war upon your realm, not long ago." He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again. "A result of a series of poor decisions, in which I must confess I played a part."

"How did you learn?" asked the giantess.

"In battle," Loki explained. "I was fighting one of your—our—kind, when he grabbed my arm. We were both shocked when the touch did not burn me with cold."

"Instead you shifted to your cold skin," Angrboda guessed.

"Just so."

"May I see it?" she asked, and it was Loki's turn to take a deep breath.

"Why?"

"There is another rumor about you," she said. "Seeing your kin-markings will confirm or dispel it."

"Kin-markings," murmured Loki. "Is that what they are called?"

Again, Angrboda tipped her head. "There is much you do not know of us," she said.

"Does that surprise you? Odin kept my heritage a secret from me, my entire life. All I know of Jotnar is that they are supposedly bloodthirsty savages, ruling over a desolate world."

"Desolate, yes. But with the Casket stolen from us, I think you may be able to guess why."

Loki sighed, and held out his arm. "I cannot bring forth this cold skin of my own will. I don't know how."

Rather than grabbing his arm, Angrboda took Loki's hand between hers. "I would be happy to show you more of your heritage, if ever you decide you are ready to learn it." The cold spread from her grip and up Loki's arm; he closed his eyes against the sensation, not unpleasant but still strange. At Angrboda's swift intake of breath, he opened them again, looking up at her in her cold skin. The two of them were dark blue and light blue, hand in hand; when he looked down, however, the heat of the spring marked a boundary on his own flesh: he remained Aesir-pale below the water.

"Laufey's lost son," she said softly. "We had not thought that Odin would commit such an atrocity as
to steal the heir to the throne."

"Odin has committed many crimes for which he will likely never answer," said Eir, and Loki started, having nearly forgotten that she was sitting there. "We who are seidkonur are no longer certain that we will follow him as our king."

"That is the only reason we Jotnar were willing to come, when our volur spoke of their visions, and of your invitation," said Angrboda. She let go Loki's hand, watching as it shifted back to the warm skin with which he was most familiar. "But finding Jotunheim's lost prince will give us a reason to stay."

"The Titan is moving," growled Odin, "and we do not know where!" His counselors were useless. The generals wanted war that Asgard was unprepared to fight, and the nobles wanted to know that their wealth would be protected, now that they were uncertain Asgard had the strength even to protect herself from invasion. The recent incursions had been little more than test skirmishes, but Odin had no doubt the other realms had learned all that they wanted to about Asgard's present state of vulnerability.

The missing seidkonur had weakened Asgard to the point where almost any conqueror would consider her ripe for the taking.

Odin glared, and resisted slaughtering one of his council members to make a point only out of sheer effort of will. Half of these doddering old men did not even believe Thanos was real, much less on the move; the other half were either terrified to the point of uselessness, or else convinced that the stories of the Titan's might were overblown, exaggerated over millennia of tellings and retellings. None of them had anything useful to offer their king in the way of advice, or strategy, or tactics.

The missing seidkonur were as much to blame for that as everything else. There was no one here to show the council where Thanos's forces had last been detected. There was no one to offer suggestions as to his strengths and weaknesses, or known allies. There was no one to rein in the wilder imaginations or calm the blustering tempers of the rest of his council.

No, Asgard had been weakened indeed.

With an angry gesture, Odin dismissed the pack of fools masquerading as his advisers, glaring at them all until the room was empty. As soon as the doors closed behind the last man, he whirled away from the table with a snarl.

"Surely it cannot be as bad as all that, husband." Odin glanced up, surprised; he had not heard Frigga come in, yet there she stood, in the private entrance that led to the royal wing.

"None of the diplomats remain," said Odin. "None of the more useful advisers."

"They would have left with their wives," said Frigga calmly, "not long after you nearly murdered your son."

"I know what I did!" roared Odin, but the queen did not even flinch.

"You do now," she said. "Now that the consequences have come home to your doorstep, where you cannot avoid them or rationalize them away."

Odin growled. His wife had been completely impossible to reason with ever since Loki had
vanished. She would not see that Odin’s actions had been necessary, his hand forced by Loki’s actions. She would not allow him to escape the gravity of his error in judgment, bringing it up at every possible opportunity. He would almost have thought she were gloating, had she been any lesser woman; Frigga, however, was the epitome of grace and dignity, and had no need to play such petty games.

"Have you learned anything more from the seidkona?" he asked wearily. "Anything at all about the Titan?" He waved a hand in the air, and sighed. "Or from your… other contacts, on Vanaheim or elsewhere."

"So you admit we are useful," asked the queen, "even though our methods are distasteful to you?"

"I never found them distasteful, my wife, and you know it."

"Yet only now do you, and Asgard, value them as you should."

Again, Odin sighed. "Asgard is helpless without them. We have no means to prepare our armies, no one on the council with any intelligence, either about the enemy or within themselves, and no one to defend us should the worst happen and we be invaded." He huffed, glaring at nothing. "We cannot even repair the Bifrost and leave for safer ground."

"You have the Tesseract, should you require it to evacuate the people," she pointed out.

"And using it would be a beacon to the Titan himself," countered Odin. "It would draw him here just as surely as if we were to invite him."

Frigga nodded, drawing closer. "What will you do?"

After a long moment, Odin’s eye closed, and his shoulders slumped. "I don’t know."

It was a surprise when Frigga’s hand landed gently upon his shoulder; she had not touched him in all the time since Loki had first been injured, since even before his disappearance. "Vigdis is recovering," she said, "and tells me that if she were to be brought a map of Yggdrasil, she could identify a general region where the Titan caught her and her companions. Perhaps then Heimdall could direct his gaze more closely to that region, and find him."

Odin turned, meeting the queen’s gaze. "That is a greater lead than we have been given so far; now if we knew where the seidkonur were hiding, we might be able to persuade them to return, and Asgard would be defensible once more."

"I do not know where they are, and Vigdis will not say; however, I am beginning to discover where they are not." When Odin’s eyebrows rose in question, she went on, "Heimdall tells me that a settlement in Vanaheim recently revealed itself to his sight, and another on Alfheim. They are virtually empty, but for a few women and a disproportionately high number of children, but their buildings are of Aesir construction."

"Empty, you say."

"I believe, and Heimdall agrees with me, that the seidkonur were staying in these settlements until recently, but have since relocated. There are now no areas on either realm that are hidden from his sight."

"And there remain hidden areas on the other realms?" asked Odin.

"It is difficult to tell what is hidden before it is revealed," Frigga reminded him, "yet there are areas
where his perception does not penetrate as deeply, or from which his gaze seems to slide away. They are on Nidavellir, Jotunheim... and Midgard."

"Midgard." Odin's eye widened in realization. "Thanos will go there."

"Are you certain?"

"The Tesseract was last seen there, and it is the primary nexus by which one may access all the realms of the World Tree. If the Titan has any sense of strategy, he will strike at Midgard."

"Then we must be prepared to defend her; do you not think so, husband?"

The king pressed his lips together in annoyance. "We cannot defend what we cannot even reach." He stepped away from Frigga, thinking, then returned. "Is there a way to reach these seidkonur on the other realms, now that they have been revealed?"

"Why do you wish to do so?"

"If we cannot persuade them to return to Asgard and defend their homeland, perhaps we can warn them that the Titan is moving."

Frigga actually smiled, then, though her expression was only darkly amused. "I think, given Vigdis's condition, the seidkonur already know that, husband," she said. "It is quite likely that we of Asgard are the last among the realms to know, not the first."

Odin scowled, and turned away.

Vulnerable, indeed.

It was a little weird returning to Skýli after being away, thought Steve; so much had changed just in the past few months. He couldn't swear to it, but he thought there might be new buildings added to the little settlement, to accommodate the increased population, and the population itself was absolutely fascinating. Aliens from other worlds. The Aesir were alien, too, Steve knew that, but they didn't look it; seeing elves and dwarves and giants was a whole other ballgame, and he had to stop himself from gawking like a small-town yokel. They were people, not a sideshow attraction.

Loki was back to full strength, and traveling off-planet whether SHIELD liked it or not. Children had been evacuated to an entirely different realm, under the prince's personal supervision, taking paths that the others couldn't and keeping them hidden from every form of surveillance that they could think of, both magical and mechanical. All that remained now were a few thousand seidkonur and their families, some of whom were more traditional warriors that Steve would be happy to fight beside on the battlefield.

"Good to see you again, Cap," said Clint, when they crossed paths. "Been back long?"

"Just got in this morning," he replied. "You?"

"Last night. It's nice being immune to jet lag, I'll tell you that much."

Steve smiled, holding the door open for the shorter man as they entered the apartment towers. "We're having a strategy meeting tonight, right?"

"Yep. Hot springs," said Clint. "The meeting hall is for officers and squad leaders after, and we're
invited to that, too, but the hot springs are the only place big enough to hold all of us now that the rest of Asgard's magic users are here."

"And a few others, from the looks of it," said Steve.

"Yep. According to Nat, Loki was more respected on other planets than he even realized. Personally, I doubt the guy's that modest. But when he put the call out to gather the Aesir on the other realms, the other realms decided they wanted in on the action too."

Steve shrugged as he climbed the stairs. "The way they tell it, this Thanos guy is a threat to all of them. It makes sense that they'd want to help fight him, rather than leave Asgard to their own devices." He sighed, and went on, "I just wish the fight didn't have to take place here."

"People higher up than me made that decision," said Clint. "Me, I'll just shoot who they tell me to shoot. After what the Chitauri did to New York, I won't mind getting some of our own back."

"Can't argue with that," said Steve.
The hot springs were full to capacity that night, people from all over the galaxy gathered to discuss how they were going to lure Thanos into a trap, and hopefully destroy him. The Avengers were there to represent the humans, and Fury had shown up too, although he flatly refused to take his clothes off.

"Naked aliens," he muttered, while Natasha fought a smile, "were not in my job description."

"You get used to it," she said, then smiled anyway at the expression on his face.

There were no longer any children in the settlement, so the springs that were usually reserved for their use were now filled with delegations from these other worlds, grouped by realm and planet. Their voices echoed in the domed building, reverberating back and forth as they spoke among themselves, and Natasha thought she could feel the tension building as they waited for Loki to arrive. Certainly there was seidr present, glowing to her new sight and flickering in the corner of her eye as aliens gesticulated or tried to emphasize a point in their discussions.

*You get used to it*, she repeated to herself, and it was mostly true. She just hoped that in a battle, those flickers wouldn't prove to be the distraction that got her killed.

Fury settled on a bench along one wall, watching as some wispy thin being ambled past, its hair floating despite the ambient humidity in the dome. That would be a representative from Alfheim, if he remembered his briefing correctly. Behind him, or her, or it, a pair of the biggest people Fury had ever seen were chatting, paying no attention to him as they headed toward one of the springs, and peeling off clothing as they went. Easily nine feet tall. According to Banner, these were called Jotnar and came from Jotunheim; according to SHIELD's expert on Norse mythology, they were the enemies of the Aesir, making Fury wonder what they were doing here.

Or maybe not; "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," and all that. Thanos was a bigger threat than Loki had ever been, after all.

Finally Loki arrived, with his entourage; the Aesir in attendance all stood as he entered the dome, and the echoing voices fell silent until all Fury could hear was the light slap of water against stone. He raised an eyebrow at how visibly Loki had changed in the months since Fury had last visited. The other man looked… healthy, for lack of a better word: no longer sallow and exhausted, still lean but no longer gaunt, and he strode with purpose rather than leaning on his attendants for support.

With a wave of their hands, several Aesir and others sent glowing lights up toward the ceiling, flickering across the entirety of the dome; the lights interlaced in intricate patterns before fading.
away, and the echoes that had made it hard to hear clearly faded away to nothing. Fucking magic. Fury was pretty damn sure sound dampening wasn't all that they could do with it.

Loki moved to the opposite end of the largest hot spring, were a low dais had been shaped into the stone, and stepped up. Rather than a throne, or any other kind of chair, he made a little gesture, and a cushion appeared at the same time that his clothing flickered and changed, until he was wearing only a light robe. He sat cross-legged on the cushion, nodded once, and all the Aesir sat back down again.

"We all know why we are gathered," he said quietly, but whatever the people had done to dampen the echoes also let Fury hear him as clearly as if they were sitting next to one another. "I will not waste time with a long speech. The Titan is on the move; he seeks the Infinity Stones as his longterm goal, and in the short term no doubt wishes to punish Midgard, and myself, for our defiance of his last sortie. Our goals, then, are to stop him here before he gains a foothold to the rest of Yggdrasil, keep the Infinity Stones from his grasp, and if possible, destroy him.

"To that end, we will lay a trap for the Titan and his forces, a race of parasitic drones called the Chitauri. We will lead them here to Skýli, a battleground we have prepared to fight him especially, and we will do everything in our power to crush him utterly.

"As you know, no trap works without bait; and as the humans have said, live bait is the best bait. That bait will consist of myself and a core cadre of magic users and warriors, making the settlement look underpopulated and defenseless, while the rest of you are masked by illusion and shield spells. I must emphasize, we will be the initial target of the Titan's wrath; his forces will be concentrated on capturing me, and either capturing or destroying everyone who is in that cadre with me. Therefore I will only accept volunteers, a total of three dozen, to be part of that force. Speak with your leaders, if you wish to volunteer, and they will convey your names and strengths to me in the officers' meeting that is to follow this one."

There was some murmuring and muttering among the gathered aliens, then one of the Jotnar sat up. "A trap, no matter how well baited, is useless if we do not spring it," she said. "Where will you array us? And when will you bring us to bear against the Titan's forces?"

Loki nodded briskly, seeming to approve of the question. "We must appear to be weak until the Titan has committed fully to his attack," he replied. "You will be hidden until a signal is given via thought-speech. I will be the one to give that signal, and it will likely come later than you expect. I mean to wait until the Titan is thoroughly convinced of his victory before we spring our trap on him. If I am killed, however, or my ability to communicate is stripped away, then the responsibility for signaling our counterattack will fall to Ingirun."

"So we need to keep you alive and out of his grasp," said a dwarf woman. "You must appear weak, and yet be protected above all else. You have information he would destroy us all to reach."

Loki acknowledged that with a thoughtful tip of his head. "I fear that the trap will not be convincing enough to entice him if we do not lay the best bait we have. And that, like it or not, is me. My skills at walking between the worlds, my intelligence on Asgard and Midgard's strengths and weaknesses; you are correct, all of that would be valuable to him. I do know that we take a great risk, but I fear that anything less will cause the Titan to choose another target, elsewhere on Midgard, where we are not prepared to defend."

"And how will you mitigate that risk?" asked the Jotun.

Loki smiled.

"How do you feel about glaciers?"
The session went on, questions and answers flying back and forth, and Fury had to hand it to him, however grudgingly: Loki was a decent strategist. He knew the terrain, knew how to take advantage of it, knew the strengths of his people and how best to deploy them. There would be no lack of communication, that was certain; every station had triple redundancy to make sure messages got through and maneuvers could be timed to the second. There was only one problem, becoming more apparent as time went on and no one else mentioned it.

"You've got plenty of ground troops," Fury called out over the hubbub, and the aliens fell silent to turn to him. "You've got surface-to-air attacks planned out, and the numbers and materiel to pull them off. But they're stationary emplacements, from what you've described. The last time you were here, the Chitauri could fly, those little two-man scooters. Your ground attacks might take out the slower-moving hive queens, but the scooters are gonna be too agile for you."

"I had thought of that, Director, yes," said Loki calmly. "And it also occurred to me that the humans would want to be part of this battle, defending your home planet in ways that you were unprepared to do before. If you are willing, I would place you in charge of the air-to-air combat tactics. After all, you already have the Man of Iron, and I rather doubt I'll be able to keep him grounded no matter how that might fit into my plans."

"Damn right, Sparky," said Stark. "Even if all you have me do is provide air intel and communications, you need me up high more than you need me on the ground."

"Just so, Stark."

Sitting next to Fury, Rogers frowned. "Air-to-air," he said, half to himself. "The planes in my day would have been too slow or too fragile..."

"The ones we have now are too fast," said Barton, picking up the thought. "By the time they're ready to engage the target, they'd be a hundred miles past it. We have a handful of quinjets that would do the job, but they're so damn classified I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to know they exist."

But Stark was smiling indulgently at them both, and Fury was reminded that, despite how much of an asshole he might be, the man knew weaponry and its capabilities better than almost anyone else on earth. "Please," he said. "I have two words for you, and those words are 'Apache' and 'Viper'."

Agent Romanov blinked. Then she smiled, and Fury raised one eyebrow at the positively smug look on her face. "How would you like to add in a squadron or two of Kamov Black Sharks?" she asked, and Stark looked at her with pure wonder.

"Natashalie Rushmanov," he said, "are you telling me you've got dirt on some Russian general who owes you a favor?"

"All it'd take is one phone call," she said with a smirk. Then she turned to Fury and stopped smiling. "The real question is, would we be willing to violate NATO treaties just to up our firepower for this fight?"

"I think 'planetary defense' overrides international treaty," said Fury slowly, "but I'll have to run it past the World Security Council just to be sure."

"The sooner you can inform us of what you can bring to bear, the better," said Loki, and Fury fought the urge to scowl. "But if you are able to provide sufficient firepower and coverage for our fighters on the ground, that would improve our plans even further."
"We can definitely do that," said Stark, before Fury could even open his mouth. When Fury leveled a glare at him, he shrugged. "What? We can. Whether it's US, EU, or UN, we can bring it. Air support will keep these aliens alive, and personally? I look forward to wiping out entire swathes of Chitauri on the ground before they can even get to the settlement, but I'll take what I can get."

"Some of those Chitauri must reach the settlement before the counterattack can begin," warned Loki. "And I will not permit the famous impatience of the Midgarders to ruin a carefully-crafted strategy. Failure here will not only see our own troops destroyed. Entire realms will be lost to the Titan's rampage. To suffer such a defeat only because of one man's hubris..." Loki's expression darkened, until his expression resembled something Fury had seen before, in his first attack against Earth. "I will not permit that to happen, no matter what I must do to stop you."

Fury could respect that. After all, he felt the same way, about the dangers of these aliens turning against Earth once the battle was over. "We can keep ourselves in check," he said dryly, then waited while Loki studied his face carefully.

When he nodded, a sigh of relief swept the dome.

"What of the might of other realms?" asked someone. Fury couldn't see who it was from his position. "Will you permit more troops from other realms to aid in this battle, if it becomes necessary?"

Oh hell no, thought Fury. He took a breath to answer that, but Loki beat him to it.

"I am afraid that we are all who may come to defend this world," he said. "Midgard is a sovereign realm, and we are only here on the humans' sufferance. There are also ancient treaties between this world and the others of Yggdrasil, which we will violate the moment the battle begins. And on top of all that, those without seidr are harder to transport through foldspace... and the Aesir warrior class have proven recently that they cannot be trusted to listen to a seidmadr's wisdom in any capacity, nor to respect our skills. I would protect our strategy from that same hubris I have already mentioned, by leaving this battle to those whose skills I can trust."

"We are few in number," the person responded.

"Yet great in power," countered Loki. "And the humans will make up the numbers that we lack."

"We already put a dent in the Chitauri last year," said Stark. "We can do it again."

Fury kept his face impassive, nodding in reassurance when the aliens turned to look at them, but internally, he could only hope Stark was right.

Thor was much humbled after his encounter with the völva, the details of which he still refused to give away. "I was taught a lesson," was all he would say, no matter how Fandral and the others pressed him.

That was fair enough, as far as Sif was concerned. He was entitled to have a few private thoughts from time to time, prince or not. Sif had a few private thoughts of her own, after all. Her brother, Heimdall, had quietly indicated that things might be coming to a head regarding Loki's disappearance, and she had, equally quietly, begun preparing for battle. The Warriors Three looked at her curiously when she showed up to the arenas in full armor, but they joined in and sparred with her readily enough.

There was not much else for them to do, after all, except wait for an incursion when other realms
attempted to encroach on Asgard's borders. They could not leave, with the Bifrost still broken and no repairs underway. They could not entertain themselves in the city, when so many of its members had gone missing, power flows fluctuated, and people spoke in worried tones that grew louder every day. They were not counselors and did not have the temperament to spend all day wondering where Loki had gone and if he and the other seidkonur would ever return.

Heimdall seemed to think that Loki was still alive, even though he was unable to see the second prince. According to him, there had been settlements on nearly all the other realms, hidden from his sight, that had been revealed only recently, one by one. They were of Aesir layout and architecture, and populated by mere handfuls of Aesir seidkonur and their families. One by one, Heimdall was examining them and ruling out where Loki might still be hidden.

Sif wasn't terribly surprised when she went to visit Heimdall, and saw him frowning out at the starry abyss. "Midgard," he said as she approached, and she nodded. Everything in recent years had seemed to come back to Midgard. It had been easy to dismiss the place as a forgotten backwater, until one looked at a map and realized that it was actually a protected nexus on the World Tree. A backwater, but only because no one except the mortals was permitted to go there.

It would be the perfect hiding place for someone like Loki, Sif thought. None of the humans would have the skills to see through his illusions. An entire settlement of seidkonur could hide there, if they wanted, just as they had established themselves on the other realms.

She watched the sky alongside her brother for a few minutes, content with his silence. She had thought Heimdall was done speaking to her, as he was a man of few words even when he was not troubled, so it nearly startled her when he spoke again. "The Titan is moving," he said, and her eyes grew wide. "The Chitauri have learned how to use foldspace."

"The paths between the realms?" asked Sif. "The ones only Loki and the seidkonur could use?"

Heimdall nodded.

"Loki."

"Is not with them," said her brother.

"No, but he was," she replied. "Odin and the others will be quick to accuse him of giving them this knowledge." Had he? Would he? Loki had always guarded his secrets jealously, from what Sif remembered.

"More likely, it was taken from him," said Heimdall. "Or the other seidkonur. But yes, I fear you are right. He will be blamed for their movements."

"Where do they go?" asked Sif. Then she stopped herself. "What other seidkonur?"

"A woman returned to Asgard recently, and was taken to the healing wing," he said. "She revealed to the queen that she had been traveling between the realms, between the hidden settlements of seidkonur, when she was captured by the Chitauri. They put her to torment, until she was able to escape. She claimed to have been one of several Aesir captives."

"They tortured her for her ability to walk between realms," guessed Sif.

"I fear so," said Heimdall, and Sif's stomach tightened.

"They could do much with that knowledge," she said.
"Indeed. The Chitauri possess no seidr of their own, but there is a possibility that their master could create machinery to mimic it. He could travel foldspace and attack anywhere, if he but learned how such a thing could be done."

Sif took a deep breath. "Does the king know of this threat?"

Heimdall considered. "The queen knows. She will make him see."

_Are you sure about that?_ she wondered, but chose not to ask aloud. The king's temper had grown ever more volatile of late, and it was impossible to predict what he might do. "And Thor?" she asked instead.

Her brother was silent long enough that Sif turned to study his face, only to find a tiny smile hiding there. "I am sure he will learn of it somehow," he said, then looked at her out of the corner of his golden eyes. His smile widened when he caught her look of realization.

"Thank you, brother," she said.
The battle begins

Odin was alone in the throne room, and had given orders not to be disturbed; he wanted no distractions while he wielded the enchantments woven into the throne of Asgard, allowing him to see and hear all that mattered of his kingdom.

Everywhere he looked, he saw the impact that the seidkonur's disappearance had wrought: not even an eighth of the population had vanished, and yet those who remained were floundering, struggling to maintain systems that had been managed and supported by the seidkonur for centuries. Effortlessly, Odin had thought; but it was clear that that effort, however little it may have been, had been unappreciated, taken for granted, while they had still lived here.

Odin sent his gaze across the kingdom, watching his citizens who remained, listening to the things spoken in whispers and the things spoken more loudly; the rumors, the speculation, and what secret thoughts his populace might have that they were willing to speak aloud.

The most concerning whispers were those claiming that perhaps Odin had ruled long enough… that perhaps the only way to appease the seidkonur and volur and all the rest, the only way to earn their forgiveness and entice them to return, would be to place Thor, or even General Tyr, upon the throne. Or even Loki, if he yet lived, or some other seidmadr or seidkona. Here the talk grew less certain, the whispers quieter, but everywhere the king turned his gaze, he met some variation on the theme: Odin was no longer respected, only feared. Odin had ruled long enough. Odin would not be able to earn the forgiveness of the seidkonur and their families, as long as he remained upon the throne.

It was vexing.

More so, because he had begun to suspect that the whispers might even be right.

"My king."

Odin tightened his grip on the armrest of the throne, pulling himself back out of the swirling enchantments. Only a few would dare to disturb him after the orders he had given. Blinking to clear his sight, Odin looked down from the dais and saw Heimdall, kneeling before him. Heimdall, who rarely left his post, and then only at dire need.

"What is it?"

"The Chitauri are moving, my king. The area of space where they dwell, beyond Yggdrasil's borders, is no longer veiled from my sight."

The Chitauri. Foot soldiers for Thanos, according to Vigdis's testimony and what Odin had seen of them a year prior, when Loki had seemed to be leading them. Odin took a breath, feeling a chill settle in his stomach. "And what did you see, when they revealed themselves?"

"They have left their home world, or what passes for it, and reappeared on the edges of Yggdrasil. They possess machines whose function I could not at first discern… and then I watched as they activated these machines and disappeared once more, onto the Secret Paths, the branches of Yggdrasil, where my sight cannot follow."

Odin struggled to keep his expression calm. "The machines allow them access to the void between the worlds? That which the seidkonur call foldspace?"
"So it would appear, my king."

"You will keep watch, Heimdall, and inform me as soon as you know their destination. If Asgard is to be attacked from the branches, we will have little time to prepare."

"If it please you, my king, I do not believe they are coming to Asgard. Their machines only allow them to use the paths for a short time before they must reappear in regular space. They rest, recalibrate the machinery, and allow its energy to recharge before they use it once more. I cannot see the entirety of their path, but after several such jumps, their trajectory is clear enough."

"And what do you believe is their destination?"

"Unless I am mistaken, my king, they make for Midgard."

Odin convened the council quickly, commanding that Frigga, Thor, and the recovering Vigdis attend as well. Together they watched as Heimdall plotted the Chitauri's course through the cosmos, jumping hundreds of light-years at a time before pausing to recharge their machines.

"How is this possible?" asked one counselor.

"The Titan captured seidkonur who were traveling between the worlds," said Vigdis. "I was one of them." She was tiny, and pale, and still obviously in pain from what had been done to her. "He bled our secrets from us, no matter what we did to resist him."

The other counselors gaped, then began muttering among themselves, voices rising in agitation. "The Titan?" exclaimed one of them. "Surely not!"

"Do you think him a myth?" Vigdis snapped. "Then you are a fool. I looked upon him with my own eyes." Her eyes welled with tears and she looked away, visibly fighting for composure. "I will never forget how he smiled."

"Then I suppose this is your fault," sneered a man. "You and your sorceress sisters. If you had not left Asgard—"

"Enough!" Frigga rose to her feet, glaring at them all. "The seidkonur would not have left Asgard if it were not for your collective desire to make an example of Loki. Your prince, for all the respect you showed him. Odin committed the deed, but not one of you spoke against it. Do you still wish to waste everyone's time, trying to figure out where to place the blame? Or would you prefer to solve the problem that lies before us?"

"What forces does he bring to bear?" asked Thor, in the ensuing silence. "And where are they headed?"

"I believe Midgard, my prince. But as to their forces—"

"If they gain Midgard, they will have a foothold to the rest of the World Tree," exclaimed another man; Heimdall nodded, and the counselors began to talk over each other yet again.

"There is hope," said Heimdall into the rising panic, and everyone fell silent to listen to him once more. "As I was saying, their forces are much smaller in number than we originally feared."

Odin frowned. "How can this be? The mortals were able to repel their first attempt at invasion, only
a year before, but if the Titan wishes to punish them for their insolence, he will certainly bring a massive army with him," he said. "Fleets of ships, at the very least. He could attack from orbit, where there are none to defend."

At this, Heimdall smiled grimly. "Then he must have a different objective, my king. The paths between the worlds are not accessible to the great mother ships of the Chitauri. Only a living creature may go there, carrying only objects smaller than themselves. Is that not so, Lady Vigdis?"

"It is a known fact among those of us who walk the paths," she replied with a nod.

"I count ten living leviathan ships, bearing in their bellies the machines that allow them to cross foldspace. They also carry about five hundred foot soldiers apiece. Chitauri drones." Heimdall's gaze went distant and unfocused, then he added, "There is a small elite squad of aliens of varying species surrounding the Titan himself, but other than that, I think the humans will have little to fear. With such a small force, the Titan must have some other objective rather than obliterating their world."

"He will want the Tesseract," Odin predicted. "It was last seen there. He may not know that we have it. He must believe that if he goes to Midgard and captures the Tesseract, he can open a portal and allow the remainder of his forces through to conquer the realm."

"Five thousand troops," mused General Tyr. "That is barely enough to take a small city. He must have a target in mind… he must know where he can find either the Tesseract itself, or those who last held it."

"Loki," said a counselor. "He knows Loki is there."

All eyes turned then to Vigdis, who drew herself up in her seat, but did not speak. Her eyes were defiant.

"Come, Lady Vigdis," said Frigga. "You have protected him well, but I believe the time for such secrets has passed."

There was a long silence, but finally Vigdis lifted her chin and said proudly, "The Titan does know where to strike. My prince has made sure of it."

The ensuing uproar put all the previous bickering to shame, as the counselors stood and shouted over one another, shaking their fists, threatening Vigdis or demanding of Odin that he punish the traitor prince once and for all.

Odin let the racket build until it became clear that none of them would quiet even long enough to let the queen speak in her son's defense, then he struck the butt of his spear against the floor. The reverberation rang through the room, making the walls tremble, and causing the counselors to wince and grab their heads.

"Enough," said Odin. "You squabble like children and waste my time. If you wish to be dismissed from this council for uselessness, then by all means continue. Otherwise, you will be silent."

One by one, the counselors sat, glancing at one another nervously, although one or two still reserved sneers for the wounded seidkona.

"Vigdis. You will explain."

For her part, Vigdis seemed unafraid of the king, and only appeared even more defiant. "There is little to explain, my king. All who know Loki are familiar with his tactics."
"Tactics?" asked Thor. He looked as though he wanted to say something else, but bit it back at the last second. "What tactics do you mean?"

"When a warrior hunts, he quests for his prey, chases the beast down, corners it, and battles it until one or the other of them is dead," said Vigdis contemptuously. "A show of strength and a lust for bloodshed and glory… and also a waste of time, energy, and resources. Very often a waste of life itself. And yet the mighty warrior will mock anyone who finds another way. Loki, like any practical person, *always* uses another way."

"Yes yes, and what way is that?" said someone.

Vigdis sniffed and looked down her nose at them all. "When Loki hunts, he finds the trail of his prey, reads the signs, and finds a good place to wait. He need not chase the beast, for it will eventually, inevitably, come to him. And then he will kill it. No battle. No fuss. No prideful quest for glory. He simply gets the job done." She smiled coldly, the expression sitting strange on her delicate features. "The people of Skýli know that the Titan is coming. In fact, they have made sure of it. Now they need only wait… and then they will kill him."

"You speak of the Mad Titan," said Odin. "A foe who has destroyed entire realms in the past."

"It is hubris to think you women will be able to accomplish what the warriors of countless realms have not," scoffed a counselor, but Vigdis only shook her head.

"His *armies* have destroyed entire realms," she said. "His ships. His weapons. And yet, he travels to Midgard with almost none of them. He is as prideful as you are, and as complacent, and that will be his undoing, just as it was yours."

The SHIELD helicarrier glided silently through the air about ten miles off the coast of Iceland, some ten thousand feet up, cloaked by its own technology and by alien magic. They were far enough away from Skýli that, if the predicted attack actually came, they would not be seen, yet close enough that their squadrons could engage in less than a minute.

Fury stood on the bridge, comm link in his ear, hands clasped behind his back, waiting. The days had grown longer quickly as Iceland moved from winter to spring, but it was still about ninety minutes until sunrise would reach the Aesir settlement. According to the Aesir, the attack would come before that, while it was still dark. Fury wasn't so sure, himself, but then he and the rest of the planet lacked the tech—the *magic*—that the Aesir had. Loki seemed fairly confident of the timing, and all the aliens, every last goddamn one of them, were backing Loki's prediction.

He had disappeared for a while the night before, to the point where Fury could feel his blood pressure going up, before reappearing in the meeting hall. He'd looked disheveled and half-mad, broken, and a chill had gone up Fury's spine; and then, with a wave of his hand, Loki's clothes had rearranged themselves, wounds disappeared, and his expression had relaxed into something much… saner. He'd noticed Fury staring at him, and grinned.

"They've taken the bait," he'd said. "And they're following the trail laid out for them."

"Did they see you?" asked one of the Aesir, an enormous man with braids in his beard and along each temple.

"There was no need to reveal myself."
Fury had spoken up then. "Are you sure this isn't too easy?" he asked. "Are they following your trail because they're stupid, or because they're onto you?"

"They are following my trail because their machines do not allow them to explore the paths between the worlds as I can. They can only travel routes that have been, hmm, I suppose you would say 'marked' by those who have gone before. They see a trail with many tracks, and assume it will lead to their destination—which they know to be true, because of the prisoners they took. However, they are blind to the lesser-known paths, and have no choice but to come to us along the route I expected. We may as well have laid out a trail of breadcrumbs for them to nibble as they go."

"How quickly do they come?" asked Ingirun.

"They must pause, and fall out of foldspace, to recharge their machines every so often. However, if they continue at their current rate, they should arrive in approximately eight Earth hours."

So now, here stood Fury, with Hill by his side and a roomful of technicians watching their monitors all across the bridge. Waiting.

It was a good thing Fury was a patient man, when times called for it.

The sky was just beginning to grow light on the helicarrier's horizon when a technician spoke up. "We've got bogeys incoming. Large, sir, consistent with the leviathans from last year. I count three, but they're appearing out of thin air. Five… eight… ten… ten, no more incoming at this time." With a few taps on the technician's screen, a holographic map sprang up in front of Fury's console. He could see the glaciers and volcanic peaks of Iceland's terrain, as well as the alien village. Something about its location was off, but Fury didn't have time to dwell on what; the leviathans were in loose formation and making straight for the settlement.

"Ready squadrons," he ordered; a voice in his ear responded immediately.

"Not yet, Director." Fucking Loki. Not for the first time, Fury wondered why they were all deferring to his command and not SHIELD's. It was the humans' planet, after all.

"They're barely a half mile out," Fury reminded him.

"They are exactly where we want them to be. I say again: Do not launch squadrons until I give the signal."

The leviathans seemed unable to hover in place, because they banked and glided gracefully in the dark, rather than stopping completely. On the map, hundreds of tiny dots began to descend from the bellies of the great beasts, while other, larger dots zipped out and forward, making for the settlement at speed.

"They've got hovercraft," he said into the com. "Computers count five hundred targets. That will be another thousand Chitauri, headed straight for you."

"I won't be worried until I see the Titan with my own eyes," replied Loki. "For now, just watch."

It wasn't as if Fury had much of a choice.

The hovercraft skimmers formed up into units of ten before banking around the settlement. It was still dark out on the ground, so any recon they hoped to perform would have to rely on infrared technology, or the alien equivalent. Or, hell, maybe they could see in infrared frequencies naturally, Fury didn't know. They swept around the village along both sides, converging on the opposite side before dropping their passengers and returning to the leviathans.
It was a tactic Fury recognized: the Chitauri would send in this preliminary force of five hundred soldiers, and while the village was occupied with fending them off, the remainder of the army would march in from behind them in a surprise second wave. Fury knew that the skimmers made almost no sound in flight; if the people inside Skýli hadn't known to expect them, this attack would have come as a complete surprise.

Still, Fury had to check. "Are you seeing what we're seeing?"

"Affirmative," came the reply. "Just wait. The trap is almost sprung."

Yeah, Fury hoped Loki knew what the hell he was talking about. "Give me satellite imagery," he ordered, and the view on the map shifted, splitting in two so that the holo-radar was moved up to the corner. The satellite image zoomed in, resolved, and zoomed in again, until Fury could make out individual buildings, and the figures creeping around them in the dark. Something about the landmarks was off… Fury was sure of it, but he couldn't pinpoint what was different.

Five hundred Chitauri moved slowly into the village, getting into position behind corners and in the narrow gaps between buildings.

There was a pause, and Fury found himself holding his breath.

At a signal, the soldiers kicked in doors and began firing weapons through open windows, spreading through the streets… and Fury saw no counterattack. The Aesir were doing nothing. It was like they weren't even there.

Like they weren't even there …

Fury realized what was off about the village, in the same instant that every building there shimmered and vanished in a haze of golden sparks.

He felt his eyebrows climbing, and managed to keep himself from asking "What the fuck" aloud. It would seem Loki hadn't shared his full strategy with the humans after all, or at least, hadn't gone into detail about just what "cloaking and decoys" would fully mean.

The Chitauri shock troops, all five hundred of them, were standing fully exposed on top of a glacier, roughly twenty miles away from where Fury knew the village actually stood; even the terrain had been disguised under an illusion. Now they looked about themselves in obvious confusion, hoisting weapons and looking for someone to shoot, but there was no one there.

Until the ice split apart, and about three hundred Jotnar came leaping out of the crevices, flinging sharpened ice at the soldiers.

Fury wouldn't have expected that to do anything to the Chitauri armor, but the images were clear as the ice pierced straight through, coming out the backs of the soldiers black with alien blood. The Chitauri returned fire, and a few jotnar fell, but the ice of the glacier would shift and form around the Chitauri's feet, and spikes would launch straight up from the ground to impale them where they stood.

In less than two minutes, the would-be shock troops were at less than half their strength, and the jotnar began wading in to their midst, ice weapons forming directly on their skin as extensions of their arms. They were twice as tall as the Chitauri, and apparently strong enough to punch through their armor with their sharpened ice. If that failed, they simply grabbed the aliens in both hands and lifted, breaking necks and spreading cold through the bodies, until what they dropped back to the ice would literally shatter on impact. Sometimes they threw the frozen bodies, knocking over more of the
Chitauri soldiers and then falling on them to destroy them.

"That's going to be hell to clean up," muttered Hill.

"Hover skimmers inbound," called a technician.

Fury turned away and tapped his ear piece. "What's the word?"

"Not yet," Loki replied. "This is only the first wave. I will not have our true strength revealed until they have fully committed to the attack."

"You don't want air support for the jotnar?" he pressed.

"Look again, Director," said Loki. The amusement was clear in his voice. "They are already away to safety."

And indeed, when Fury turned back around, the cracks and disruptions to the glacier had all been healed, erased as if they had never been, and the jotnar themselves had disappeared… presumably into the ice itself, if Fury had to guess. Only the hundreds of alien corpses offered any proof that a battle had just taken place.

"Sir," came the technician's voice, "another… village has just appeared, about five miles from the previous coordinates."

"How far from the original coordinates?"

"I… I'm sorry, sir, but I can't tell. That data was just here a few hours ago, but it's not in the computer now."

"Sir?" Agent Hill was staring at him, eyes wide.

"I am merely protecting our true location from being discerned," said Loki, "should the Titan have a means of accessing your machines."

"If he has a way to 'access our machines', we're fucked," countered Fury.

"I will not let that happen," replied Loki. "But I do take precautions with my people. Surely you can understand that."

He didn't like it, but yeah, he could damn well understand it.

"I assure you," Loki continued, "once this is over you will be able to locate the true village once more."

The Chitauri leviathans banked and began to move toward the new decoy; the foot soldiers had no choice but to either jog the distance themselves or wait for a skimmer to pick them up.

They had already lost a tenth of their strength, falling for the first decoy; Fury wondered whether repeating the tactic would even work.
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